

**Written by: Thressea H. Boyd**

## **E.R. Barber House is Full of Celebration for its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

The Barber House was built in 1915 by E.R. Barber, a businessman, entrepreneur, and inventor. Designed by local architect Lloyd Barton Greer, the house is astonishing in its design and admired for its intricate details.

A prime example of neoclassical architecture, the Barber House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1980. The building's exterior features linteled windows symmetrically spaced around the house and six Ionic-style columns on the front porch. The interior is equally impressive and features wainscoting, crown molding and three fireplaces on the first floor. The dining room ceiling is adorned with concentric rectangles featuring 60 small lights integrated with a wood beam. The second floor features five spacious bedrooms, including a large sunroom over the porte cochere.

A March 5, 1915 article in the *Valdosta Daily Times*, stated, "The framework of the residence of Mr. E.R. Barber on Ashley Street is nearly completed and one can get a good idea now of what a handsome structure it will be. It is to be modern in every respect and will be the first residence in Valdosta to be equipped with an electric passenger elevator."

Though the elevator was never installed, the house was designed with a shaft so that an elevator could be installed at a later time. The house did feature other modern conveniences including a baseboard vacuum system, which did not become commonplace in American homes until several decades later.

Barber lived in the house until his death in 1965, at which time the house became the property of his daughter, Ola Barber Pittman. She loved the house and even fought the federal government to protect the family estate. Shortly after acquiring the house, the General Services Administration sought to obtain the site for additional parking adjacent to the new U.S. Post Office and Federal Building. Pittman was vehement in her efforts to save the family home from being demolished.

Pittman died in 1977, after spending the last two years of her life in a nursing home. In her will, she bequeathed the Barber House to the "citizens of Valdosta" with detailed instructions that the government should not gain control of the property.

As reported in a 1981 *Valdosta Daily Times* article, the property was left in trust for the community, with the purpose to "provide a place where persons may come and sit, reflect and think in an atmosphere of beauty and solitude."

It was several years after her death before a decision was reached regarding how the house could be used by the citizens of Valdosta, as directed in her will. Jimmy New, local banker and

executor of Pittman's estate, worked with members of the community to first get the house in a presentable condition and then find a suitable tenant.

### **A Labor of Love**

Before the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce was approached about moving into the historic home, many hours of work had to be completed to get the house cleaned up.

Local architect Richard Hill enlisted fellow local members of the Southwest Georgia Chapter of the American Institute of Architects to remove overgrown shrubs and foliage that overwhelmed the outside of the house.

"We brought chainsaws so that we could cut down the bushes and shrubs," said Hill, "we wanted to at least clear a path to get in the house."

Members of the Valdosta Junior Woman's Club began the challenge of cleaning the interior of the house.

Gelaine Foster, then chairperson for the Valdosta Junior Woman's Club Community Improvement Project, grew up in Valdosta and thought the Barber House was beautiful and believed it was worth saving.

She approached members of the club to take on the project and help restore the house to its original grandeur and glory. "I showed the ladies a lot of pictures from the outside and everyone seemed interested."

Foster, along with other club members visited the house to determine the amount of work required. "When we got to the door on the side and unlocked it, we literally could not get in and had to push our way through."

Foster describes the unbelievable amount of papers, books, and trash that was blocking the door and filled each room.

"I thought they were going to bolt," Foster laughs, "and I even considered it."

The women were not swayed by the massive job that awaited them and quickly developed a plan to recruit assistance.

The inside cleanup efforts proved to be a lengthy project and volunteers spent considerable time cataloging all the books and magazines and boxing up items that were later sent to the Lowndes County Historical Society to be placed in the archives.

“We had to determine what was valuable and what was trash,” said Foster. “She [Pittman] was an avid reader. I remember that she had the first issues of National Geographic. I also remember a book of etiquette rules for young ladies.”

Foster noted that working on the weekends to clean the house took approximately two months and was all completed by volunteers. “We didn’t pay a penny to anyone,” she said, “if we needed something we could always find someone to help us out.”

“The project had a lasting effect on future historic preservation work in Valdosta,” said Hill, “it ignited a need for restoration and preservation of other homes in Valdosta.”

Hill recalls that it was during those Saturday afternoon cleaning sessions that the idea of establishing a group to protect historic homes in Valdosta was discussed.

“The cleanup was really the genesis of the Valdosta Heritage Foundation,” Hill said. “Through the Heritage Foundation we were then able to work on other projects including the Roberts House and Converse-Ferrell home.”

Foster, who later served as the first membership chairperson for the Valdosta Heritage Foundation, agreed that the Barber House project had a positive lasting impact on the community’s historic preservation efforts.

Now more than 35 years after the community came together to save the Barber House, Foster feels a deep sense of pride in the work that took place.

“When I step into the Barber House today I am in awe of the beauty that was brought back,” she said, “I saw it at its worst, and now I see it at its best.”

### **A New Home for the Chamber of Commerce**

Once the Barber House was cleaned up, finding a suitable tenant that was willing to invest in extensive renovations was next on the agenda.

The Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce was approached about moving its offices to the Barber House.

Although the goal was to restore the house as close to its original condition as possible, the years had not been kind to the property. There was extensive deterioration to the exterior and interior, vandalism, and general repairs that needed to be completed.

Hill managed the restoration project and said that great care was taken to preserve the architectural integrity of the house.

For example, the original light fixtures were carefully removed and restored. Wallpaper patterns were selected to match as closely as possible to designs associated with the 1915 era. Also, many pieces of furniture that belonged to the Barber family remain in the house today.

“The vision was to return the house to its original state,” said Hill. “So many people in the community came together, donating their time and financial resources to get the house restored to its historic glory.”

Hill noted that the majority of contracting work was completed by Amos Construction Company, and many local craftsmen and architects also provided their services and resources for little or no charge.

The Valdosta-Lowndes Chamber of Commerce began operating from the beautifully restored Barber House in 1981, where it has remained for the past 34 years. Each year more than 2,800 visitors, chamber members, and citizens come through the doors; hundreds of newcomers receive information about the Valdosta and Lowndes County community; and more than 500 business owners and budding entrepreneurs receive assistance from the SEEDS Business Resource Center.

The Barber House is a historic treasure and is described by chamber officials as the “front door to our community,” presenting a positive first impression to those visiting Valdosta and Lowndes County.

The Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Barber House on Thursday, Oct. 15, 2015, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., and the cost to attend is \$100 per person. Funds raised from the celebration event will go toward the “Investing for the Next Century” campaign to help provide the financial resources needed to continue maintaining the Barber House for another century.

For more information on the Barber House celebration, contact the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce at 229-247-8100 ext. 211.

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