

Hanks and Clark operate tea room, interior design firm in old house of many names

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of stories about unusual or out-of-the way places in Marion and Washington counties. Readers are urged to suggest other spots for our roving reporter.

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Special writer

The old house—just six-tenths mile west of Lebanon's city limits—is known by many names.

Some local folks still call it the Rankin house, after the family that occupied it from 1893 through 1941.

Others know it as the "Honky" Gray place, after the long-time Marion County politician who served as county clerk for 20 years and lived there from 1941 until his death in the 1970s.

Civil War buffs know it as the place where Confederate cavalry raider John Hunt Morgan supposedly spent the night before his raid on Lebanon on July 5, 1863, while his men camped in the yard.

Its builder and original owner was David Shuck. After the Civil War, the home was purchased by Thomas Spalding and his wife Mary Wathen. Their daughter, Annie, married W.L. Rankin in 1893.

The present owners, Jim and Sheila Hanks, moved there in 1977, "that terrible winter when everything froze and broke and we had to move out a while," said Sheila Hanks. "I have a T-shirt that says, 'I survived the winter of 1977.' When we moved here everything was covered with thick carpeting, heavy drapes and Venetian blinds. We ripped it all out and soon discovered why they needed all that padding!"

Today the old residence is not only home to the Hanks family, but it also hosts "Tassels," the tea room Hanks and her partner, Margie Clark, operate intermittently.

In addition, Hanks bases her interior design firm, "The Hill," in the house.

"It's enough for two retired women," Hanks laughs.

The narrow front portion of the house, facing the Campbellsville Highway, was built in 1843, said Hanks. This section consists of a



front entrance hall and a large room to the west. A stairway rises from the entrance to a large bedroom and a smaller bedroom, which may have been merely a landing when the structure was built.

The rear section of the house is even older, possibly as early as the 1790s, said Hanks. She explained the early date by noting the brick cornices on the rear section. "I visited Bardstown and all the houses with brick cornices go back that far," she said.

The worn wooden floors in the kitchen support her contention.

The front room is crammed with antiques and accessories Hanks has picked up at auctions and trips to decorator shows in Atlanta. It's all for sale.

"This is not a museum!" said Hanks.

In a pinch, the showroom can double as an annex to Tassels, the tea room which is set up in the sunroom behind the old entrance hall.

The room is light and airy, the eastern wall all windows above a stone. The walls are brick, painted white.

Hanks and Clark had intended to operate the tea room several days a week. But state officials told them that if they opened "regularly and routinely," their business would be considered a restaurant and subject to tighter regulations, including required al-



SHEILA HANKS

terations to the building.

"We asked them what we could do with this facility," said Hanks. The result was Tassels, a tea room that serves "no more than 51 times a year."

Luncheons and dinners are available to groups by reservation. Hanks described the food as "traditional American cuisine, with a Southern flair." The standard menu features a choice of appetizer, a main course, and a choice of dessert. Main course offerings are either a "hot chicken delight with Mandarin orange salad and fresh bread" or "country ham on biscuits with asparagus casserole and apple salad."

An additional vegetable dish is served with dinners.

Clark will also prepare other menus at the request of customers "if she thinks she can do it. She's a perfectionist," said Hanks.

Seating for 24 is available in the tea room, with room for another 20 in the front room. Luncheons are \$10 per person; dinners are \$13.

When Jim and Sheila Hanks moved to the house, their children were then in high school. "They lived here long enough to love it," said Hanks.

The children helped her restore the dwelling.

One of their first projects was ripping out the ceiling above the kitchen, leaving only the old wooden beams that stretched from one brick wall to the other. The result is a light and expansive

room that gives a view into an upstairs den.

A drafting table sits next to the kitchen's western window.

A long business counter creates an aisle the length of the kitchen. Now that the children are gone, the couple often eat their meals perched on stools next to the counter.

Hanks explains her philosophy of renovating old houses. "Restoration is great but it's not practical. I want to retain the character but make it livable. We've tried not to add on anything outside."

Hanks began fixing up old houses when she and her husband purchased the old Putnam property on Lebanon's North Spalding Avenue (now owned by former County Judge/Executive Merriell Mattingly and his wife Opal).

"It wasn't the thing to do when we started," said Hanks. "People would ask if we couldn't afford a new house. I told them we could have had two houses for what that one cost!"

When they moved, Hanks brought along some fixtures from the Putnam place: the large mirror above the triple sink (surely one of the most elegant kitchen fixtures in a Kentucky business), and the business counter now in their kitchen which came from the Putnam's grocery and butcher shop.

She also pulled a mantel from another house on Spalding Avenue, the home of Lebanon dentist Dr.

Smith. That smoke-blackened wooden mantel now trims the stone fireplace in the Tassels sunroom.

In 1989 Hanks quit her book-keeping job at Southern States to return to school at Louisville Technical Institute to study interior design and architectural drafting. "The kids were gone and I figured if I was going to do this, I'd better get started."

She finished her associate degree program in 18 months with a perfect 4.0 average. "I was proud that after 30 years I could still buckle down and learn. The hardest part was driving in the Louisville traffic."

After completing Lebanon High School, Sheila Hanks enrolled at Kentucky Wesleyan College. She later transferred to the University of Kentucky to major in home economics.

At UK she lived in the home management house with Martha Layne Hall of Shelbyville, now known as Martha Layne Collins, Kentucky's first woman governor.

She and her husband Jim Hanks moved to Lebanon, where she taught six years in the Lebanon and Marion County public schools and then spent ten years as part-time secretary at the Lebanon Methodist Church while her children were growing up. After that, she worked at Southern States for another ten years.

"Once I hit 50—and I had already lived through those two terrible winters—I declared I would live forever!"