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'With a bed and breakfast, you never meet a stranger'

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HENDERSON, Ky. — Some might question the soundness of opening a bed and breakfast next to elevated railroad tracks that carry heavy train traffic across the Ohio River.

But there have been no sleepless nights for a philosophical Mary Elizabeth Priest: "If you have a problem and you can't fix it, you feature it!"

So far, only two guests at the L&N Bed and Breakfast that she and husband, Norris, operate at 327 N. Main St. have complained about the passing trains.

Most guests are like Cheryl and Raymond Mackey of Shelbyville, Ky. Each August they rent the front upstairs guest room whose blond four-piece bedroom suite was sold in 1939 for \$125 by Alles Bros., a longtime Henderson merchant.

"We get the full impact of the train," says Cheryl Mackey. "First you hear it coming, then it gets right by the house ... and rocks you to sleep."

The Mackeys are among the thousands of street-rodders (owners of souped up pre-1949 cars) who'll be at this



VINCENT PUGLIESE / Courier & Press Coy Owen, right, prepares a chess pie for her guests while granddaughter Taylor, 3, looks for food. Owen was preparing lunch at the Victorian Quarters in Henderson. Owen owns and runs the bed and breakfast. The house, which is filled with antiques, was built during the Civil War.



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weekend's Frog Follies in Evansville. They found the L&N (\$75 a night, including breakfast) several years ago after tiring of what Mackey says are Evansville's jacked-up hotel room rates. He has a '37 Chevy coupe, she has an award-winning '32 Dodge.

"We love that (L&N) to death," says Cheryl Mackey, referring to the personality of the two-story brick house — its stained glass transoms, original oak staircase, dining room table with pie-crust trim, sliding pocket doors and claw-foot bathtubs.

Train memorabilia is scattered about, including railroad lanterns atop a refrigerator, a 1969 train calendar, wall prints, old model trains on fireplace mantels and a front door whose locomotive design was specially made by an Evansville stained glass company.

But it was the discovery of L&N doorknobs that gave the Priests a name and theme for their B&B after they bought the house in 1995.

Built in 1895 by Irish immigrant John O'Byrne, the dwelling was one of many condemned in 1931 to make way for new elevated tracks across the river. At the 11th hour the railroad company decided to use it as a boarding house for its workmen.

The Priests think railroad crews took the home's elegant brass doorknobs, replacing them with stock L&N stamped doorknobs from the stockpile.

"Now, look which one's worth more," says Mary Elizabeth Priest.

Because the Priests (married 42 years and in the insurance business) live next door, the L&N's guests are invited over each morning. "We have the most interesting breakfast table in town," quips Mary Elizabeth.

The Priests look forward to the Frog Follies. "It's our biggest weekend each year," says Mary Elizabeth. "I just wish Evansville and Henderson would have more activities (for the street-rodders)."

During World War II the house was divided into efficiency apartments for wives of Camp Breckenridge soldiers, which made it easier to convert to a B&B. Guests range from visiting doctors (whose healthy eating habits rub off) to a young Kansas City family who visit relatives here each December and celebrate Christmas at the L&N.

Henderson's other bed and breakfast, Victorian Quarters on the riverfront at 109 Clay St., offers suites (with kitchenettes and gas-log fireplaces) for \$85 to \$95 a night.

Guests get a journal to write in, a robe and free rein in the back-yard pool and hot tub.

Sometimes owner Coy Owen's 3-year-old granddaughter greets guests, but usually it's Owen, a woman in her 40s who's a jack of all trades.

Not only does she race stockcars, she sandblasted and tuck-pointed the Civil War-era, Italianate house after buying it at an auction in 1985.

"Sandblasting was the easy part," she laughs, noting she spent years renovating the house and acquiring furnishings she believes rival those at the Reitz Home in Evansville.

"With a bed and breakfast, you never meet a stranger," says Owen, noting some people want a romantic getaway, others a home away from home.

Right now she has her hands full because she's raising her 7-month-old grandson, Quentin. His room is the one with the crib next to a half-canopy bed and Martha Washington-type dresser.

Owen, whose husband formerly was in coal mining, grew up in downtown Henderson, surrounded by parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

Her grandmother was an artist who taught her woodworking; her grandfather taught her about farming and repairing houses; and her father was an executive with Evansville's Karges furniture who gave her an appreciation for fine furniture.

"I rat around ... find things before they wind up in antique shops," she says.

She began collecting angel prints, many from the 19th century, after her 15-year-old son, Jeremy, was killed in a traffic accident two years ago.

The house is both a lesson in Victorian living and a conversation piece. A violin belonged to a relative whose wife played the drums and later carried his cremains around in her drum case.

A Gone With the Wind lamp lights up to show Niagara Falls. There's a Lincoln bed, hidden drawers, unusual chandeliers and a Victorian gold fish bowl holder from the 1830s.

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