



Whiting gift will continue to give even though the home is now closed

Ever since he built the 16-room house at Tremont and Oak streets in 1902, Edward S. Whiting had a larger purpose for the home.

In 1926, Whiting invited a group of friends to a meeting in his parlor one evening. They listened as his attorney explained how after the deaths of Whiting, his wife Charlotte, and sister Abigail, the last of the immediate family, and with no children, his entire \$250,000 estate would be placed in a charitable trust to support a home for "aged women" in his stately residence.

His wife and sister died in 1927. Whiting died in 1931, at age 87, and what was known for 82 years as the Whiting Home for Elderly Ladies opened in 1932 with 10 apartments for women over 65. "This was during the Great Depression and Social Security," said Bill Good, longtime member of the board of directors which oversaw the home and the trust which supported it, consisting mostly of investments and farm land.

In those days, when the man and breadwinner of the family died, the surviving widow was often left with little or no means of support. Whiting's home was intended to provide those women with a roof over their heads and needs met. Basically, a boarding house of which there were once many in Kewanee, residents shared meals served in a common dining room and relaxed in a comfortable parlor which contained shelves full of books. The house had a staff person on duty 24-7 to prepare meals, and do the shopping and cleaning.

Fast-forward to 2014 and "the changing times," as Good puts it, had caught up with Whiting Home. Until eight or nine years ago, Good said, the home had nearly full occupancy and, at times, a waiting list. But, with changes in health care and more senior living options available, fewer and fewer women were living in the home.

In his initial presentation, Whiting expressed hope that local churches would take an interest in the home and assist with support. That never happened. Last spring the board made the decision to close the home and, according to instructions in Whiting's will, transfer the estate to another non-profit charitable trust.

The last full-time resident was Betty Novak, a member of the board of directors for many years, who lived in one of the apartments before moving to a local nursing home where she died in the fall of 2013. In selecting an heir to the estate, the board chose the Kewanee Rotary Foundation, the non-profit charitable arm of the local civic club. When the transfer is completed, it will mean an additional \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year to be distributed among the more than 20 community organizations supported each year by Rotary ranging from the Kewanee Senior Citizens Center and Salvation Army to Boy Scouts and scholarships to high school students, according to Doug Irwin, Rotary Club treasurer. The club now distributes \$16,000 to \$19,000 a year with proceeds from an annual appreciation breakfast and other sources. The amount will now expand three-fold meaning donations to current recipients could increase, and the club may be able to add some recipients who couldn't be included in the past.

"The Rotary Foundation will be able to continue Mr. Whiting's original intention of serving the community," said Good.

In addition to hoping churches would support the home, Whiting hoped other citizens of Kewanee would be inspired to leave property for the endowment of the home in their wills. Few, if any, did, but Irwin said, in addition to the Kewanee Rotary Foundation, there are many worthwhile non-profit charitable foundations locally. These include the Kewanee Schools Foundation, Black Hawk College East Foundation, Kewanee Hospital Foundation, and others, which do good work in the community. Irwin urged local residents to keep them in mind when making plans for their estate.

The Rotary Club offered the house to several other charitable agencies who provide services to people in the community but all declined due to the property's accessibility issues. The historic house was then put up for sale and found its way into the hands of a young family from Sheffield with three small boys, who have big plans for their new home.

For the first time in its 112-year history, the rooms will ring with the sounds of children's laughter and sight of toys spread across the carpeted parlor floor where Whiting announced his plan. Even though the 16-room house is no longer a part of that plan, his estate will continue to serve both seniors and youth, alike, in the community.

"The Kewanee Rotary Club, through its charitable foundation, will now be able to do so much more thanks to Mr. Whiting's gift. We will be able to continue his legacy of service to the community," said Shane Kazubowski, Rotary Club president.

Saturday's column will deal with the Whiting family history and a one-room schoolhouse south of town which bore their name.