

**COE HOUSE 1975**  
**Grass Lake Home to Live on as Gathering Spot**  
**By Marion S. Grattan**  
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One established custom in the Coe house, 371 W. Michigan, will survive the conversion from private to public ownership.

Through the years, the house on the southeast corner of Michigan Avenue and Wolf Lake Road has been a gathering spot for family reunions and holiday celebrations.

When it becomes the Grass Lake Area Historical Society Museum, it will continue to be a gathering spot.

Although Mrs. Archie H. Coe, who has lived there more than 35 years, still has possession, the historical society is in the process of buying and restoring the structure.

Neighbors and relatives of owners, past and present, pieced the home's history together through their remembrances.

Henry Vinkle, an implement and hardware dealer, built the house in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Sandy yellow bricks manufactured in a village plant on the north side of Michigan Avenue were used for the exterior of the two-story square structure with a one-story wing. Windows and doors were arched and porches sheltered the two front doors and the two side doors.

Front doors led to the parlor and the sitting room, and the side doors to the dining room and kitchen. Two small bedrooms were on the first floor and two large ones on the second. Floor boards were white pine and ceilings were 10 feet high.

Sometime later the kitchen wing was widened with the addition of a storage room. Interior brick walls were left unfinished.

In 1886 Vinkle sold his hardware business which was located in a store on the north side of Michigan Avenue, to E. J. Foster and moved to California. Eventually, the business grew into a furniture store, relocated across the street, and is now Foster-Davies of Michigan.

Foster's daughter, Ruth Foster, 317 E. Michigan, said her father didn't buy the house. Vinkle wanted to include it in the deal and she doesn't know, nor do other area residents recall, who lived there for the next 20 years.

In the early 1900s, Mr. and Mrs. H. H. Mellencamp Sr. bought the house. Their great-granddaughter, Mrs. Earl Fransted, 316 Griswold, Jackson, supplied information for the next chapter in the Coe house history.

Her grandparents emigrated from Germany, traveled by train from the coast across country to Manchester and walked the rest of the way to their new farm on Orban Road. Mellencamp Lake, just east of Little Wolf Lake, is their stamp on that area.

The pioneer farmers raised a family of seven sons. Mrs. Mellencamp made all their clothing in the early years. Later, these jobs were taken over by a bootmaker and a tailor who stayed with the family while doing the work.

Mrs. Fransted recalls visiting her grandparents after they had retired and moved to the Grass Lake house. "I remember sitting down to the table to eat," she said. "and he said

the blessing before the meal and she said it after the meal. It wasn't a short blessing, it was just whatever they felt."

These meals were served on a dining room table which extended to seat 12 persons. "I have that table," Mrs. Fransted said, "and I'll give it to the museum when the house is ready for it."

Two of her uncles were school teachers who came home in the summer with their families for reunions. For those occasions, and for holiday gatherings, the front parlor, separated from the sitting room by double doors, was opened.

Grandchildren staying overnight slept upstairs. When the trains went by on the tracks across Michigan Avenue from the house, Mrs. Fransted said the bed would rock.

The kitchen was the center of more memories. Mrs. Fransted remembers always seeing a granite coffee pot on the back of the wood-burning range. "Grandma had a two-gallon crock of sugar cookies."

When called for the interview, Mrs. Fransted was baking sugar cookies. "I have always wanted my grandchildren to have just as good cookies when they come to my house."

Mellencamp was a carpenter as well as a farmer but his granddaughter thinks he retired from both occupations when he moved to the village. He walked downtown everyday, she said; he was interested in everything and active in the Methodist Church.

Downtown he probably saw his son Floyd who became president of the Farmers State Bank. Floyd was one of the employees locked in a backroom during a robbery in 1920, which led to a shoot-out with Jackson County sheriff deputies at Wolf Lake. One deputy was killed, another wounded, and the four convicted gunmen spent the rest of their lives in prison.

The senior Mellencamp passed away the same year and his wife shortly after. Both were in their mid-80s. Their funerals, as was the custom in those days, were held in the family home.

Mrs. Fransted's recollections of the house ends there. The property was in an estate and she doesn't know if the house was occupied or vacant for the next two decades. Of the 12 Mellencamp children, she is the only one living in this area.

Like the Mellencamps, the Coes left a farm when they bought the sandy yellow brick house in 1939. Coe was a guard at Southern Michigan Prison who did painting and paper hanging on the side.

Two of their eight children were still in school. They, too, scattered with the exception of Hubert Coe who lives at 5200, Vandercook Lake. His wife has a double interest in the house. Her uncle, Loyal V. Reynolds, married Fannie Mellencamp, a granddaughter of the former owners.

The Coes converted one of the downstairs bedrooms into a bath, the first in the house, and used the parlor for a bedroom. More alterations were made when the upstairs was remodeled as an apartment for a Coe daughter and her husband.

Current plans are for the museum director or caretaker to live in the apartment reached by outside and inside stairways.

Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Coe remember the family gatherings—the Sunday dinners, reunions, holidays and his parents' 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary—in the house.

"Mother is a real good cook," they said. She used to bake bread, rolls, pecan rolls and pies, her daughter-in-law said, and never used a recipe.

For Christmas she made lebkuchen and schnitzbrot. “All the grandchildren used to get excited about visiting there,” she said. There are 23 and 15 great grandchildren.

Among the senior Mrs. Coe’s interests are prose and gardening. She has written a story of the early years of her life and has a collection of proverbs. One of her daughters had both printed in book form.

“She always had lots of house plants.” Her daughter-in-law said. “In the summer she had beautiful flowers in the yard. Standouts, in her years of active gardening, were begonias, petunias, iris, hollyhocks and a bush of dark purple double lilacs.

An extra toot of a whistle on the train going by the house used to signal the family that Harold Katz, Mrs. Coe’s brother, was the engineer on the run.

For a number of years, residents of the future Grass Lake museum had grandstand seats for watching the interurbans. They could see them on the lines in front and in the back of the house and they could watch passengers come and go at the Wolf Lake Road depot behind the house. The two lines competed for the Jackson-Grass Lake traffic.

The Coe House will have a Jackson County Bicentennial historic structure marker. James W. Zuleski, chairman of the heritage committee placing the plaques, said the house-museum will qualify for the distinction.