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The House That's So, So . . . Mary

By NEAL KARLEN

EVAN and NAOMI MAURER had no idea they had bought a house haunted by a celebrity ghost when they moved from Michigan to Minnesota. Never mind that the spirit of Mary Richards was the friendliest specter since Casper; the spooking began immediately. "This house, Mary's house, turned out to be Minnesota's version of Graceland," Mr. Maurer said recently. "Who knew?"

Among those who might have known were the many millions who had seen one of the infinitely rerun episodes of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," the epochal situation comedy that ran on Saturday nights on CBS from 1970 to 1977. But the Maurers were experts in high art, not pop culture. They were unfamiliar with Ms. Moore's portrayal of Mary Richards, a 30-ish single woman who worked in the newsroom at fictional WJM-TV in Minneapolis and lived in an apartment in a quirkily majestic turreted white Victorian house.

The couple chose the house shortly after Mr. Maurer was named the director of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1988. The Maurers, who had been art historians at the University of Michigan, loved the 1892 white Victorian home in the city's fashionable Kenwood neighborhood.

"It was perfect," Mrs. Maurer said of the three-floor, 9,000-square-foot edifice, which came with 13 rooms, plus two kitchens and six bathrooms. "The realtor did say something about the house having been shown in the opening shots of each episode of 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show' and that this was where Mary supposedly lived."

That news failed to intimidate or impress the Maurers.

"It meant nothing to us," Mrs. Maurer, 48, admitted. "Neither of us had ever seen the program. We really don't watch much television."

So the Maurers and their sons, Noah, now 17, and Aaron, 11, moved in -- unawares,

until the last moment, that it was a shrine to a television icon. The news came in T-shirts, from friends, showing the house with an arrow pointing to the third floor and the words "Mary Slept Here."

Indeed. For the first several years, the opening montage showed Mary leaving the home, as well as several exterior shots of the Palladian windows and iron balcony outside her apartment. Since the show began, thousands of pilgrims have sought out the house on Kenwood Parkway for a peek at where Mary -- and for several seasons her wacky neighbors, Rhoda Morgenstern (in the attic apartment, in reality a crawl space) and Phyllis Lindstrom (their landlord, downstairs) -- lived.

The Maurers first met the unexpected on moving day, when a van stopped in front and 12 people climbed out. As the Maurers ate breakfast on the porch, the visitors arranged a camera on a tripod for a group photo on the lawn. At a signal, the visitors threw caps into the air, just as Mary did downtown at the start of each show. Then they trundled back into the van and took off.

Tour buses, 30 a day in the summers, carried gawkers. "At first we were very regretful that we'd bought the house," Mrs. Maurer said, "but what could we do?"

Mr. Maurer recalled the time when two women were surprised when he told them Mary never really lived there. "But that never has a bearing on people's feelings," he said. "To them, this house is sacred."

Still sacred, it seems, even though Rhoda, Phyllis and, yes, even Mary -- taking her letter "M" with her to her new high-rise -- each eventually moved out of the house.

Ms. Moore understands the draw of what she calls Mary's "reality house." While she never stepped inside -- the interiors were filmed in Hollywood -- she still fondly remembers her scenes in front. "The outside of the house was so warm, cozy and soothing," she said from New York. "As the nest of all these characters who invaded people's hearts, the house was going to receive similar affection."

Still, Ms. Moore remembers some bad vibes. The woman who lived there when the show was first broadcast "was overwhelmed by the people showing up and asking if Mary was around," Ms. Moore said. When the producers returned for fresh footage several seasons later, she said, the owner "had by way of retribution draped huge 'Impeach Nixon' signs all over the house."

It was hard for the Maurers to relax inside their fishbowl. Working in the yard, Mr. Maurer, 50, took to pretending that he was a groundskeeper who didn't know answers to questions, like whether Mary still had her "M" hanging on the wall.

A couple of years ago, the Maurers painted the house taupe, but Mr. Maurer said the change was made for esthetics, not camouflage.

Part of the third floor is now Mr. Maurer's study, and the window in front of his desk looks much as it did in Mary's apartment. As on the show, a raised platform drops off to a sunken floor space. On the right, where Mr. Grant wrote a drunken missive to his wife on the first show, is Mrs. Maurer's painting studio. To the left, where Mary had famously terrible dinner parties, is a fireplace.

It is sometimes perilous, Mr. Maurer said, to work at the area from which Mary used to peer in search of her arriving dates, 90 percent of whom were drips. "Once I was sitting at my desk writing," he said with a laugh, "and I heard someone yell up to me from the lawn, 'Hey, Mary, you got a haircut!' "

But the Maurers have come to appreciate the house. One moment was when Mr. Maurer and Aaron happened upon the first episode of the show, when Mary moved in.

"In some ways, it's like we're caretakers living inside a monument," Mr. Maurer said. "Mary is a myth, but myths have great power. They answer questions, and they set up value systems. There's something in the Mary ethos that's very important to very many people. She's the greatest mythic hero from this region since Paul Bunyan."

The house is a lure for those invited to the many functions the Maurers hold related to the Institute of Arts. It isn't just the home's grand ground floor, which can seat 120 for dinner; the exquisite mahogany staircase leading to the second-story living quarters, or even the family's art collection. Rather, it is the ghost of Mary Richards. No matter how snobby an esthete may seem, Mrs. Maurer said, "everybody loves to come here, get a look inside and say they've been to Mary's house."

Mrs. Maurer's change of heart occurred "because there is only so long you can stay irritated at something that's so continual," she said.

"Living here is a wonderful way to insure you get prompt service," she added. "If you tell the electrician or plumber you're in the Mary Tyler Moore house, they somehow get to you very promptly."

