

*The Seventh Street Ghost*

"For Rent" read the big metal sign in the front yard of 229 Seventh Street. It was my habit to drive by the house at least once a month to make sure it wasn't about to be bulldozed. I never expected to see a "for rent" sign in the yard.

This was the house where Sherwood began writing fiction. It's where he lived with his first wife Cornelia. It provided the backdrop for the earliest memories of his three children, Robert, John and Mimi. It was a Saturday morning in late November. Leaves covered the front lawn and filled all the empty spaces between the branches of the overgrown bushes. In the windows, curtains and blinds were in disarray. Were it not for the house's brightly colored newer vinyl siding, one might mistake it for a haunted house.

Having grown up in Lorain County, having gone to college for two years in Elyria and having majored in English at another local university, no educator ever told me of Sherwood or of his six years in this house. Even the county historical society had little information about it. Here was, for me, a home of grand historical importance

nearly ignored by those who should be fighting for its life.

Being a homeowner, I of course was not interested in renting the property. The house had been converted into an up/down duplex and the upstairs was now vacant. I jotted down the phone number and hurried home to call the owner to arrange a visit.

"When would you like to see it?" Sherry the owner asked. "How about Wednesday afternoon?"

"Sounds good. I'll be there about two o'clock."

"See you then," she said.

When I opened my planning calendar to write down the appointment, I realized that Wednesday was Nov. 28 - the anniversary of Sherwood's fateful walk down the railroad tracks. Wednesday seemed like it was a lifetime away.

The day came. I skipped lunch and left work at one o'clock. Even though I paced myself to get there, I was still 15 minutes early. As it turned out I was actually 20 minutes early because Sherry and her husband were five minutes late. When they arrived, I waited still in the car until they walked up the driveway, talked to a neighbor, untangled their keys and tromped up the wooden steps to the second story entrance at the back of the house. Looking at

my watch I waited exactly one minute before getting out of the car.

Here it was, November 28, and I was making my way up the stairs to set foot in the house Sherwood lived and wrote in 89 years before. Sherry and her husband were inside the door in the landing when I entered.

"Hi, I'm Will."

"Hi, I'm Sherry and this is my husband Tom."

"How do you do?"

We walked up more steps, what had been the stairway from the first floor to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, I saw that what were originally the bedrooms of the Anderson home were now a kitchen, bathroom, living room and bedroom. The walls were all painted white. The original woodwork, though painted brown, was intact. Even the original beveled glass windows in the master bedroom were in place.

"And here's a room that could be another bedroom," said Tom pointing to a door adjacent to the stairway we had just come up. "Wanna take a look?"

The attic. The room that Sherwood used as his writing retreat had a dusty smell and steep steps. I climbed them nervously. My heart was in my throat.

At the top of the attic stairs was a ghost of the days the Andersons lived there. This room was now a makeshift bedroom with painted-white paneling nailed up but across the room a door hung ajar.

The old door separated the room from a storage area.

"Mind if I look in here?" I asked.

"Not at all," Tom said.

The door squeaked noisily as I carefully tugged at the knob. Sunlight filtered through a column of dust before the room's only window, which looked out over the street from the highest point of the house. A feeling of decisiveness took over. I suddenly felt in charge - smart and slick.

To my right was another door nailed shut with dozens of nails.

"What's in there?" I asked Tom.

"Don't know. I've never been in there."

I walked up to the door and looked in the space between the door and the jamb. Blackness.

"I'm looking at this place for my brother," I lied.

"He has five kids and they need lots of space. If that could be a bedroom, that would help."

"Nah. I don't think so," Tom said.

"Then I don't think this place is big enough," I said.

"Let's go down."

At the foot of the steps that go from the driveway to the upstairs entrance lies a concrete pad framed with wooden planks. This was a remnant of Sherwood's screened porch. He built it as a place to write in the summer when it was too hot in the attic.

For a November day, it was getting hot. I said goodbye to my hosts and decided to walk the tracks toward Cleveland to get the full Sherwood-in-Elyria experience.

With my winter coat unzipped and the sun shining brightly, I felt satisfied. Overall, it was good to see that the house had not been gutted or modified significantly. Even the broken sandstone sidewalks looked good to me. And getting to the railroad tracks seemed even more alluring.

Finding a way onto the tracks posed a challenge. Underpasses now make the tracks nearly inaccessible to pedestrians. An incline near the entrance to Engelhard Chemical was the best way up. Engelhard now rests on the site of what was once Anderson Manufacturing.

Wearing hiking boots and toting the camera I forgot to use in the house, I made my way up the steep grade. I hadn't walked 50 feet eastward when a freight train rumbled by. When the train passed, perhaps 50 feet from where I stood, I saw the place where the tracks crossed the Black

River. Reaching the bridge, I looked northward. I discovered the source of Sherwood's words in the note he left for Cornelia when he walked out of his Anderson Manufacturing office on November 28, 1912:

"There is a bridge over a river with cross-ties before it. When I get to that, I'll be all right. I'll write all day in the sun and the wind will blow through my hair."

From that bridge, reflected in the muddy waters of the Black River, shimmers the former site of Anderson Manufacturing.

One hundred feet down the tracks was enough for me. I had things to do at home. I went home hungry, however, maybe because I hadn't eaten lunch or perhaps because the Seventh Street ghost stirred me.