

# Restoring the past

## Historic Ramsdell Building becomes Manistee's newest inn

History's shadows linger longer in Manistee than in most places.

Besides having a main street that's listed on the National Register of Historic Places, this shoreside town is freckled with Victorian-style mansions and grand old buildings that have stood proudly through a century or more.

Wealthy 19th-century lumber barons mined Manistee's lush surrounding forests for their fortunes, and left behind a legacy of architectural masterpieces reflecting their civic pride.

Chief among them was Thomas J. Ramsdell, a lawyer, banker and entrepreneur who was responsible for helping to construct a variety of public structures, including Manistee's famed Ramsdell Opera House.

Ramsdell conducted his business from a handsome four-story granite and red brick building on the corner of River and Maple Streets, in the heart of Manistee's downtown. Spending what was then considered to be a "fortune" of \$55,000 to construct the structure in 1891, Ramsdell used the building for offices and his Ramsdell Building quickly became a Manistee landmark. Although the dark red exterior

of the building remained the same, it frequently changed functions over the course of the next 100 years. Office space occupied the upper floors, while the lower

floor housed a drug store, children's apparel shop and restaurant.

Enter the Alexander sisters. Jane Alexander Reynolds and Shirley Alexander Galloway spent their early childhood in Manistee, playing in the shadows of those grand old buildings.

As adults, they often returned for summer visits. Once they reached retirement, the two eventually decided to return to their hometown.

They purchased a home together, and three years ago opened "Leila's," a woman's dress shop, on the ground floor of the Ramsdell building.

When building owner Gerry Pitcher approached the sisters for ideas on how to best utilize the three upper floors, the Ramsdell Inn vision was conceived.

"The building lend itself perfectly to an upscale hotel," Reynolds said. "The rooms were still there, and the beautiful 14-foot ceilings and woodwork were still intact."

Along with its prime downtown location, the Ramsdell building had preserved much of its histori-



cal splendor. Still, bringing their vision to reality took more work and time than Pitcher and the sisters had anticipated.

"Just getting all the mechanicals to comply with the building's historical design requirements was difficult," Reynolds recalled.

(Because of the building's historical designation, installing an elevator wasn't required.) But Pitcher was dedicated to the project, and painstakingly renovated everything down to the last detail.

"He did it the way it was supposed to be done, and didn't cut any corners," Reynolds said.

The Ramsdell building's main lobby offers clues to its heritage as one of Manistee's first banks. A large brass vault door covers most of a back wall, and inside the vault — where lumber barons once stashed their cash — is a gift shop. Above the vault is a large original mural painted by T.J. Ramsdell's son, Frederick Ramsdell.

Virtually untouched, the canvas hid behind a false wall for many years before being uncovered in

the building's restoration. Using symbolic representations of figures and items to capture Manistee's history, the mural received wide acclaim when it was first unveiled, according to an 1892 excerpt from The

Manistee News Advocate: "To many people it will doubtless stand for the highest attainment of art. No person should refrain from enjoying its beauty any longer than circumstances

may require."

With a maximum occupancy of 20, the Ramsdell Inn relies upon a unique sense of history and place to draw guests. Each of the inn's eight rooms has its own name and distinctive furnishings, plus 21st-century amenities like private baths, lush linens and robes, phones and cable TV.

Local interior designers Rogene Fischer and Kathy Nacco of Bittersweet Interiors were able to successfully blend the influence of a light, airy cottage without minimizing the rooms' historical splendor.

"We didn't want it to be a heavy Victorian feel," Fischer noted.

Four rooms include fireplaces,



while the spacious Tower Suites offer a lumber baron's eye view of downtown Manistee, the river channel and Lake Michigan through rounded corner windows. One of the Tower suites actually served as T.J. Ramsdell's office, with much of the original oak woodwork, fireplace and windows intact.

"You can see why Mr. Ramsdell liked it here," observed reservations manager Jan Gavlinski, surveying the spacious Ramsdell suite. "It's almost like he never left."

Since the inn's grand opening in late April, Gavlinski and innkeepers Reynolds and Galloway have been busy fielding phone calls from people across the country who have visited the inn's Web site.

But it's not just out-of-towners who want to stay at the inn. Reynolds is surprised at the number of local residents who choose to have houseguests stay in their Manistee homes while the Manistee hosts check in at the Ramsdell Inn.

Corporate and business groups have also been using the inn's stately lobby or tower suites for small meetings.

Restored to a level of splendor which would make T.J. Ramsdell proud, the Ramsdell Inn continues to carry on the tradition of history coming to life in Manistee.



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

**Above: The Ramsdell Inn's lobby is highlighted by a mural painted by T.J. Ramsdell's son, Frederick, above the safe. The safe door will now serve as the gift shop entrance. Right: The Ramsdell building was built in 1891 and has been used as office space, a restaurant, a drug store, an apparel shop and now an inn. Below left: The Harbor suite on the third floor offers both a sleeping area and living area for guests. The room features a sitting area overlooking River Street and downtown Manistee. Below right: The Century bedroom at the inn features a sculpture that reminds patrons to relax.**

