

The earliest known photograph of the Milroy house was taken in 1898.

Restoring the Milroy House

Situated at the corner of Eleventh Street and Heights Boulevard, the imposing Milroy house has, since the 1890s, been a landmark of the Houston Heights. The home of John Milroy, one of the original developers and mayor of the Heights from 1899 to 1907, the house remained in the Milroy family, passing to a daughter who resided there until the 1970s. With the death of Helen Milroy on March 1, 1979, the fate of the three-story Victorian structure, sadly delapidated and in need of extensive repair, was uncertain.

Since the spring of 1980, however, the Milroy house has taken on a new image. Due to the efforts of its new owner Alan Bies, the Milroy house, now being restored, has come to symbolize the revitalization of the Houston Heights. As the fall of 1983 witnessed one of the bleaker moments in Houston's "progress" with the demolition of the B.A. Shepherd Building, the city's last remaining example of high Victorian Gothic architecture, Alan Bies's story of preserving the Milroy house may provide some timely and needed inspiration.

The following interview with Alan Bies and his business partner Steve Boehck took place on July 29, 1983 in the dining room of the Milroy house. The interview was conducted and edited by Thomas H. Kreneck and Deborah A. Bauer.

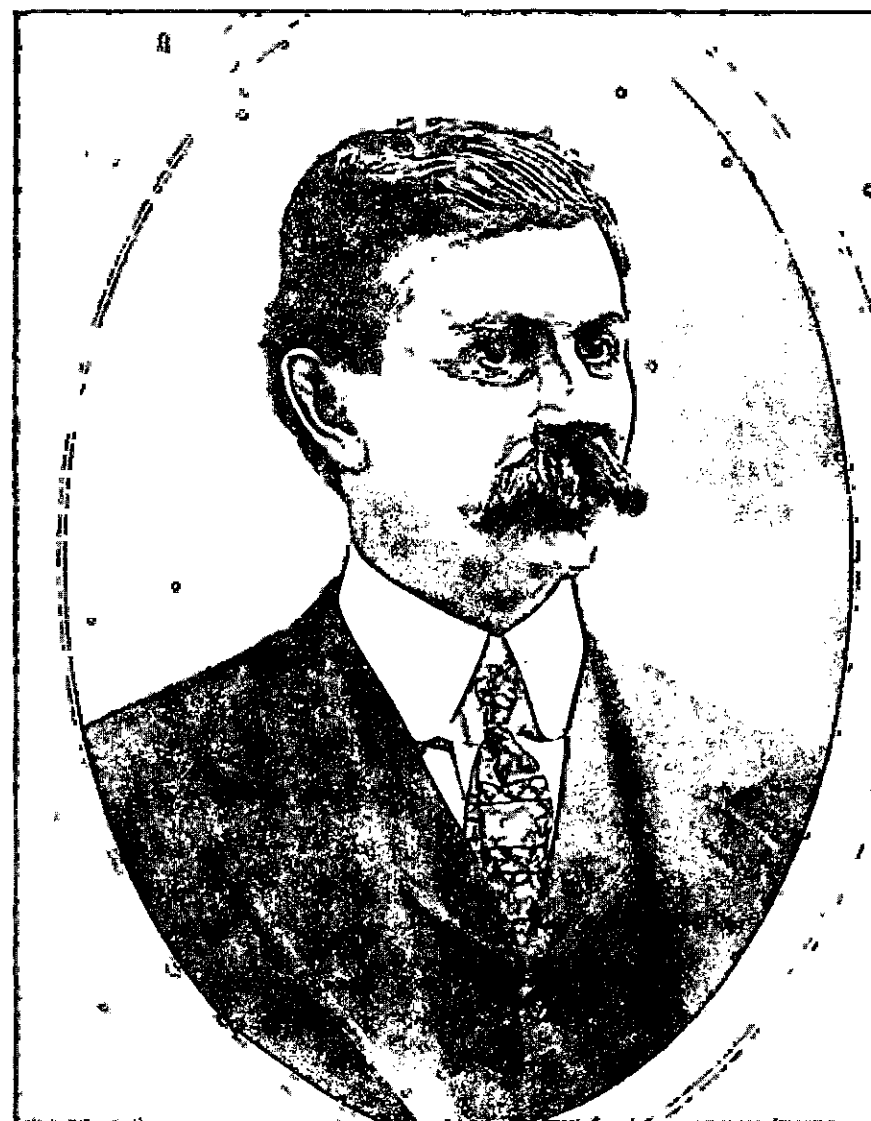
Q: How did you become interested in owning and restoring the Milroy house?

AB: When I was young, I used to like the big houses on Heights Boulevard. I especially liked this house and the Cooley house. They were at that time the most interesting houses and of course the Cooley house was torn down in the mid sixties, so this was the only super house left on Heights Boulevard, and almost in the area. I shouldn't say super because there are a couple of very nice houses left, but this was, I felt, the best house. It's probably the best frame Victorian house left in Houston, you know, gingerbread type house. There are some fine Greek Revival houses and that sort of thing but as far as a real hard-core Victorian house, this is probably the nicest one.

Q: How long ago did you first spot it?

AB: Probably when I was three years old. We used to drive down Heights Boulevard every morning to take my dad to work and I'd just go crazy when I saw these houses.

- Q: And this was one of the houses that you saw?
- AB: Yes, I always liked this house, although I really wanted the Cooley house more.
- Q: What happened to the Cooley house?
- AB: It was just torn down. There was no interest in these kinds of houses back in the sixties, so many of them were torn down.
- Q: Do you remember when they tore down the Cooley house?
- AB: Yes, I went to the demolition sale. I walked up in front, just as they hollered to stay clear when they threw the whole top of the cupola down on the ground. So we walked in and then just left because it was really sad. That was a fabulous house.
- Q: What block on Heights Boulevard was it, do you remember?
- AB: On the corner of Eighteenth and Heights. That's the site of a park now, Marmion Park.
- Q: When was the Milroy house built?
- AB: The Milroys moved into it in 1898. We figure it was built shortly before that.
- SB: The Heights was first developed in 1893, but I don't think there was any actual house construction at that time. This house was probably built somewhere in the period from 1893 to 1898. I imagine this house took about two years to build since it has a full basement and things like that which are unique features for a house in this area. That basement is the reason we think this house was designed by a northern architect and the fact that the Milroys themselves were originally from New York.
- AB: We found a lithograph in the house of the Milroy family's home in New York and there are some similarities. There's a cupola on top very similar to this.
- SB: It was a practice in Victorian times if there were house plans to roll them up and put them in the newel post of the stairway at the time of completion of the house. We completely dismantled the newel post looking for the house plans, but we haven't found them yet.
- Q: Who were the Milroys? How many were associated with this house?
- AB: There were the father and mother, John and Nellie Milroy, and then two daughters and a son—Margaret, Helen and Hamilton. Those were the five that lived in the house.
- Q: What happened to the children, did they marry and move away?



John A. Milroy came to Houston from New York in 1893. In 1898 he moved with his family into the house on Eleventh Street and Heights Boulevard which became known as the Milroy house.

AB: Helen didn't, the others did.

SB: She was the oldest. John Milroy, the father, died in 1917 and Helen took over her father's real estate business. He had been mayor of the Heights when the Heights was a separate community from Houston. Then the other daughter married and moved to Hawaii. Hamilton, who was the youngest, was born in this house in 1898. He went to Yale in Connecticut, graduated from there, came back and worked for Cameron Iron for about a year and a half. But he had met a girl while he was in Connecticut and he left his job here, went back there and married her, stayed there and started his own business, a rock crushing equipment business.

Q: Was it just the house itself or the Heights in general that interested you?

AB: No, I liked the Heights. I liked it and then I didn't like it when it sort of went down. We could have bought the Cooley property very inexpensively, but the Heights was such a mess at the time. I guess everybody felt that way.

Q: During the sixties, you're saying?

AB: Right, but I do like the Heights. It's not a pretentious place by any means. It's a very relaxed and nice atmosphere.

Q: When did you first start thinking seriously about buying the house?

AB: In 1978, I believe. I was visiting with some friends. I saw on the wall a picture of a fabulous Victorian house and I had always had this tremendous interest in houses. So we started talking about it, and they said it was her family's home in Nacogdoches. But she said that in Navasota there was a house that was almost identical for sale. So when I came home that night I mentioned it to my mother and dad. The next day they drove up to Navasota just to find this house and look it over. They found several houses there that were for sale pretty reasonably and so almost every other day they were on a trip somewhere looking for houses. You know, it was amazing. They were finally down in Wharton and found a nice old house that was going to be torn down to put a street through. So we went down there and looked at it, my dad bought it, and he and a friend dismantled it. And it wasn't just a small house, it was a big, three-story house. We thought possibly we could obtain the Cooley property and build the thing back and make some changes to it, so it appeared like the old Cooley house somewhat. It wouldn't be just the same thing, but it would be a very similar house to that as far as the porch and the shape of the house went. But we could never make a deal on that property. Finally, the man kept raising the price he had in mind to sell the property till it got to where what he

wanted just for that property, for three lots, was close to what they wanted here for four lots with this same house on it. So we said, this is ridiculous we might as well try to buy the Milroy house.

Q: When did you come to know that the Milroy house was for sale?

AB: My mother had met Helen Milroy some time ago. She found out that she was residing at St. Anthony's, a Catholic nursing home, and she went to visit her one day. They talked a while and Helen said she would never sell her house as long as she was alive, but when she died it would be handled by Texas Commerce Bank.

SB: We had heard rumors that the house would be torn down upon her death. Rumors were floating around all over town about this house, even that it was haunted. Somebody said that Helen's son — she didn't have a son — then somebody said her nephew said that the house was haunted. He was the one who was going to inherit it, and he was going to tear it down immediately on her death.

Q: Did they ever get specific about the hauntedness?

SB: There were a lot of rumors. Helen never married and she lived in this great big house by herself after her mother died which I guess was in about 1927. She was a business woman. She took over her dad's real estate business and that's how she supported herself. She was especially in her late years something of a recluse, didn't allow anybody in the house or have too many friends other than friends she had had much earlier in life. There just became an aura around the house that something bad was going on simply because there was nobody that really knew what was going on. In actuality there wasn't anything going on.

AB: My mom confronted Helen with all these stories and she said absolutely not, she didn't want the house torn down. She loved that house more than anything and that's why she wouldn't sell it as long as she was alive.

Q: Approximately what time was this when your mother made contact with her?

AB: It was in the winter of 1978. Helen died March 1, 1979 and the house came on the market late in 1979.

SB: First of all the bank wanted bids on the house. They had a price in mind, but they didn't say what it was. They wanted us to make offers. Then all of a sudden they came back with the price of \$295,000 with no terms, cash within a couple of days acceptance, which made the house inaccessible to 99.9 percent of the population.

- Q: Were there quite a few bidders?
- AB: I don't think there were a whole lot of people. One of the problems was that the house was not listed with a real estate agency because the bank did not want to pay the real estate fee even though the Milroy family was anxious for the house to be sold to somebody who would keep the house and restore it.
- SB: And love the house.
- AB: Yes, that was the Milroys' first concern. But the bank fooled around so long with their no terms and \$295,000 that finally the time approached when estate taxes were due. The house could have been taken over by the government and sold at auction. When we told Hamilton Milroy how this deal was being handled, he was visibly shaken because they had no idea what was going on down here.
- Q: So what was the resolution of that? How did it proceed from there?
- AB: Well, finally I just made an offer on it with some terms that weren't great for me but what we felt would probably be acceptable. And the bank accepted it immediately. One phone call, they accepted the terms and we bid earnest money on the house and submitted a contract.
- SB: There had been a contract earlier on the house the same year, although the guy couldn't raise the money.
- AB: I was happy when the fellow got a contract on it because then, I thought, I can just put this out of my mind. I don't have to worry about it constantly.
- SB: Marcella Perry was simultaneously working on a deal through the Heights Association. They wanted to buy the house and just open it up as a museum, but they weren't going to pay the asking price and the house needed massive work.
- Q: Was the family insistent on it being bought and restored?
- AB: The family wanted that, they wanted the house saved because this house was always very important to the Milroy family. But they were up in Connecticut and didn't want to live down here. They wanted it saved, but yet it just reached the point where something had to be done with it. No matter what was done with it, the deal had to be completed because of the tax situation. I don't think anybody there had money to pay the inheritance tax on it.
- Q: During the sale of the house was there a possibility of the house going the way of the wrecking ball?
- AB: Oh, I think definitely so.
- SB: The Heights Association had spent something like \$2,000 of its own

- money to get the house listed on the Texas Register and the National Register in some attempt to try to preserve the house, to intimidate anyone who might buy it from trying to tear it down. Although really there was no real protection for the house.
- Q: When did you actually buy the house?
- AB: In May of 1980.
- Q: Was there a sizeable downpayment?
- AB: Yes, \$72,500. I had to borrow the money from several friends and then sell some of my music machines at an auction. I only had about \$5,000 of my own when I started the project. It was almost impossible to do it. It was very discouraging.
- Q: Was the house listed on the register then before you moved in?
- AB: All the groundwork had been done and then after I bought it, it was dedicated through the Texas Historical Commission and then I think a little later on in the year I received notification that it had been accepted for the National Register. But we knew that was all in the works.
- Q: What was in the house when you got it?
- AB: It was all furnished. You could move right into it, and live just fine. A lot of antique things. There weren't many things that were really super, but most everything was old and nice. We sold some of the things out of it because we didn't think we could use them, but we still have a lot of things in the house that were originally in it. It was great though because coming into this house, you'd be taken back in time. It was a valuable experience. In a way I sort of hated to disturb it because for two weeks, I'd come here and I'd just be in a totally different world. Just really something.
- Q: What kind of condition was the house in when you bought it?
- AB: Structurally it was pretty sound but cosmetically not too good. The roof was just a disaster and if it hadn't been for the extreme pitch I'm sure a lot more damage would have been done to the house. You could stand anywhere in the attic and look up and see the clouds, birds flying by and such. So the roof was in very bad condition. Just the shingles, the structure of the roof was like brand new in almost every case. Near the chimney though the shingles had completely disintegrated and water had poured in and the whole ceiling had fallen out of the middle bedroom and then it continued down along the chimney into the basement. We'd been in the house several times after a rain storm before we bought it, and there was a lot of water in the basement.
- Q: What's the story of getting it reroofed? It's an awfully high roof.

AB: We got bids from probably four or five roofing companies. Finally we got a bid from one fellow who seemed to know what he was talking about and was very reasonable, I thought, for redoing this roof. They did do a very good job so his roofers were good. But my dad met the first crew of men here I think the second day after I bought the house and they got up on the roof and wandered around, came down and had a conference under the magnolia tree. They told my dad they were not going to reroof this house under any circumstance and he owed them fifty dollars for coming out there. He ran them off and called the roofing contractor. The contractor said he'd get another crew out here several days later that would do the job. They reroofed it and it didn't take them horribly long. But there was some work that had to be done. The front porch was completely termite eaten. The roof on the front porch was in terrible shape. So when they took off the roof, we had our carpenter there working on that at the same time they were working up above and there were a lot of massive flare-ups. One guy from the roofing company and the carpenter were very antagonistic and it was just a constant battle between these two guys.

Q: One was getting in the other's way?

SB: Yes, the roofers were anxious to just cover up all this rotten wood by putting wood shingles on top. The carpenter was very conscientious and wanted to replace all the rotten studs.

AB: Whenever the carpenter would turn his back, the roofers would run down and nail shingles. So we had a couple of battles here.

Q: You went with wood shingles?

AB: That's what the house originally had. The original roof, I think, had cypress shingles and then it was reroofed probably in the thirties. So this is the third roof that's been on the house. It's always had a wood roof and that's what we wanted. Actually the wood roof and a composition roof cost the same amount of money because they were going to have to sheet this roof with plywood.

SB: We did have the shingles treated. They're fire-retardant.

AB: Steve cut all new fish scale shingles for these little awnings on the house, and then we had one of the roofers come back and do that just on his own.

Q: What other than the roof was significantly wrong?

AB: The siding was in terrible shape because it hadn't been painted in many years and it couldn't be nailed back down. First of all you couldn't drive a nail through it. You had to drill through it. Then

when you tried to nail it down it would crack in half because most of it curled up so badly. We even tried wetting the boards. When they were soaked, they'd nail down but when they were dried out they'd split. So we had to almost completely re-side the house. We didn't have to re-side under the front porch and some on the north side but we used identical material or very close to it.

SB: Possibly the original siding was cypress. It was not available anymore.

AB: So we used yellow pine.

Q: Where did you go to get the siding?

AB: We found it at Jones Lumber. We found a few other sources for it but they were so unreasonable.

Q: What was the first step you took after getting the house? Did you hire an architect or a contractor?

AB: No, the first thing we did was put a roof on it, instantly. It had to be done immediately. Every time it rained hard, a lot of damage occurred. And then we hired two carpenters for about six months. After that was done, we started doing everything ourselves because I just haven't had the funds to have anybody else do anything, other than just those carpenters and that was it. It's just a big project, but I put a tremendous amount of money in it the first year. You can see it's still not done by any means but at least it's safe now from collapsing or from too much water damage.

Q: What were the succeeding steps?

AB: While the roof was going on, we had a carpenter replacing siding. We had some guys scraping paint off. As the carpenter would put up siding, then my dad would put primer on to protect it. And probably for the first month, Steve and I were completely busy trying to get some things sold to pay back the downpayment on the house.

Q: Was it difficult to find qualified people to work on the place?

AB: Yes, really so. At the time I didn't want to get a contractor that just brought in a crew of people to start knocking holes in this and that and doing a lot of bad things. So before I bought the house, a friend of ours who's a carpenter was interested in hearing about getting the house. We hired him and right immediately after we bought the house. I think we took about two weeks to go through things in the house and enjoy it, then we started.

Q: Did you have any building experience in your family?

AB: No, not really. My dad worked for Humble Oil Company, later for Exxon, but he was always very mechanical, could do just about

anything with his hands.

Q: What role have your parents played in this project?

AB: Quite a role, to say the least. They've been tremendously supportive of this. In fact, they sold their house in Garden Oaks because I needed some money. I couldn't have gotten this place without my parents and Steve. Everybody worked very hard, put a lot into it.

Q: At this point, how much money have you spent on the house?

AB: We've probably spent around \$100,000 and done just almost all the work ourselves.

Q: That's after the cost of the house?

AB: Right, but I think one of the greatest costs in something like this is labor and we only had really six months of any help and that was on the exterior.

Q: Has most of the work been on the outside?

AB: The outside needed immediate help. We wanted to get the exterior in order before winter came and as I recall we had some bad weather that winter. The following spring, it flooded.

SB: The house had original central heat with a furnace downstairs, but that was originally a coal burning furnace and then it was hooked up to burn natural gas. The gas meter downstairs looked like a meter for a hotel. The gas company came and removed it and the man told us it would cost about \$2,000 a month to crank that furnace up. But in the thirties, Helen had run gas lines on the outside of the house, pipes just right up the sides. Holes were drilled into the walls and gas jets installed so all the rooms had individual heating. But when we restored the outside, we naturally didn't want these gas pipes running up outside the building so we removed all that and then the winter came along and the big furnace was not functional enough to crank up and we had removed all the gas jets from all the rooms so we were depending on heating the house through the fireplace and one gas jet in the kitchen.

AB: We had purchased air conditioning equipment in 1980 I believe and we thought we'd have it installed by wintertime but we never got down to that point. That was a tremendous job, getting this house air-conditioned because of all the things to consider. We didn't want to just make a big mess, lower the ceilings and do things like that would detract from the house.

SB: Plus we wanted to have a split level system where we could just use one section at a time so the whole house wouldn't have to be heated or

cooled because it's a fairly good size house. The rooms are not that many but they are all large-scaled rooms with high ceilings.

Q: So the heating and cooling have been a more recent addition.

AB: Just about a year ago we got the system where it was semi-operable and we've learned quite a lot about air conditioning. We finally had to resort to doing all our own repair work on the units because it seemed like everybody who came here made a bigger mess than before.

SB: We installed heat pumps which are reversible cycle air conditioning for heating purposes in the winter. The reason we did that was because the size of the space available to us to install units and since we wanted to keep it on a floor by floor basis. If we had gas heat, we required that much more space to put the furnace in plus you had to have venting for the furnace.

AB: And too I wanted to avoid having a gas furnace upstairs in the house.

Q: Is it more difficult to heat a house like this or to cool it?

SB: It's easier to cool. We have vents at the top and the cool air goes down but the hot air rises. With these high ceilings you can heat the house and hot air will go right up to the ceiling very quickly. This house has so many windows that are not very weather tight that if you get a strong north wind, the windows start rattling and you can feel the cold air come whistling right through the wall.

Q: Did you lower the ceilings at all?

AB: Just in the kitchen, we lowered it about a foot, and in the central hallway upstairs about a foot to install the duct work.

SB: But the ceilings are eleven feet. When you drop them one foot to ten feet, they're still considerably high. Most people, when they look in the kitchen, can't tell that we've dropped it about a foot.

Q: Did you have to close off any areas, deal with any special problems on the air conditioning?

AB: We built an archway keeping the same look as the interior for the location of our unit. If we'd put one unit in the basement and one unit on the third floor, we could have eliminated a lot of problems, but we did not want to have a big, old, ugly air conditioning unit in the basement and we wanted to keep the third floor free to finish it. So that's why we did it the way we did. It was a much more expensive installation, doing it that way.

Q: Is that an instance of trying to keep the restoration true to the outlines of the house?

AB: I think so. We've tried to do that everywhere, not destroy anything that

was important to the house, or change the house much at all. There were a few things that we had to give up like the kitchen there. We wanted a useable kitchen.

Q: Did the kitchen have a wood burning stove?

SB: It did in the 1890s. In fact you could see where the original wood burning stove had burned little grooves into the floor. Later, Helen had gas put in.

Q: So what you have now is a modern kitchen?

AB: Right, which has an old flavor and I think would be acceptable for just about anyone.

SB: We used wainscoating around the aisle, we put on simulated Corian marble which looks like old marble, but yet is a useable thing. We have an old kerosene chandelier from the 1890s plus we put wooden door panels on the refrigerator and the dishwasher so it doesn't look blatantly like a stainless steel kitchen.

Q: When you moved into the house, how did she have it lighted?

AB: It was a sad situation. There was one chandelier in the dining room which was from the fifties. In the kitchen there was a fluorescent light and a little light in the butler's pantry. In all the other rooms downstairs except for the front hall and those two sconces you see on the front wall, there was no other lighting except floor and table lamps.

SB: Really not even much of that or very few plugs. The house did have original electricity and plumbing.

AB: In fact we were eliminating some of the original wiring from the 1890s last week. This whole house has to go along in stages because when you are living in it, you can't just tear everything up, have a crew of people come in here and start wielding a sledge hammer and knocking out walls to put in wiring and things like that. It has to be done very carefully. Just like the air conditioning. After we designed what we wanted, they told us where we should cut the holes and how big they should be for the vents. We did that very carefully. It took practically a week working all day long to cut the holes for this floor and the second floor.

SB: This is lath and plaster on the walls. It's hard to deal with.

AB: We were very careful and did as little damage as we could. We'd start to cut through in a spot and if we determined that there was a structural member there that we didn't feel we could remove, we'd have to change things up. It was quite a project. For instance, one hole they made the duct work one-eighth of an inch larger than it was supposed to be. One of the installation men just took a hammer and started beating on the

wall and he knocked big hunks of plaster off. Needless to say, that sort of thing was traumatic for Steve and me because we had worked on this thing so hard not to make a big mess.

SB: Well, the same thing with the wiring. In all these walls between the studs are what is called a fire barrier which is either a one by four or a two by four framing which means that studs go all the way from the ground floor to the attic in one piece. If you don't have these fire barriers between the walls in case of a fire since there's no insulation or anything, the house would go up like a chimney. In order to prevent that, in between each stud on both the first and second floor they put what they call fire barriers.

AB: And that stabilizes the house tremendously too because the studs can't move.

SB: But it does present a problem when you go to run some wiring. You can't just dangle a wire down through the stud. You have to find out where the fire barrier is, drill a hole there, actually cut a little piece out and then fish the wire through and the fire barrier's not necessarily in the same place between each stud. They were put in randomly. So we have to run a tape down there, sort of feel around where it is, then measure it on the outside, take a drill, drill a few holes till we actually hit the stud. This house could probably be rewired in a day easily by several good electricians but when you have to fool around with all this, it could run into weeks. There again when you hire someone, they are interested in their aspect of the job. If something's in their way, they just take a hammer or hatchet and knock a hole in there and run their wire anywhere. Then it's up to you to get a plaster man in here and repair the mess they've made in order to get their job done.

Q: In the restoration that you've done, thus far, what's the most problematical and costly thing?

AB: I don't know, everything seems to be. This type of thing fights you every step of the way.

SB: There are so many unknowns.

AB: You need a part, a special screw or something and you go to the hardware store and look through five hundred different sizes and the exact thing you need just isn't there. We have a little machine shop and we make a lot of stuff we need because it's just not available. There are many of these restoration companies that are selling stuff today to restore with, but a lot of things are just not available.

Q: There's been a minor tempest in a teapot that I would like to address here and that was the tempest over the color.

AB: Oh yes, well we feel a little better about it because we've seen some houses being restored that have this same color scheme.

Q: What did the house have originally?

AB: The original color from what we can tell was sort of a cream going into a slight yellow, very similar to the color we painted the trim on the house. The body of the house was painted that with dark green trim and I think the next time it was painted, the body of the house was painted dark green and the trim was painted custard colored and later on painted white. I wanted the house to still stay in a green color because everybody knew the house as the green house for many years and so we painted it this color which was sort of a compromise.

Q: How would you describe this color?

AB: It's a light green, sort of antique green.

SB: We did have it specially mixed. We went to James Bute which was an original paint company in Houston and they were interested in the project. They worked with us on developing that color and sold it to us at cost. It was not one of their premade colors, it was custom made for us.

AB: We felt that this was a color scheme that we could go with on the house that sort of represented a lot of things in the past. We used the dark green for the accent colors in the windows and things like that. So I think our color is fairly good for the house. The paint's been very good too. We've had it on for three years now and there's been no problem with it. We prepared the surface pretty well to start with and we used good paint. All these houses that are being restored around, after a year the paint's coming right off.

Q: Did you use an oil based paint?

AB: No it's a latex.

SB: There's two schools of thought on that. Although the majority of the siding had been replaced, I'd say at least two-thirds of it, they recommend the acrylic as opposed to the oil. Some people say you need the oil because it penetrates the wood, helps keep it from drying out. Others say you get better protection from an acrylic. One thing we did have to be careful about was most of the old paint was lead based paint which is dangerous to work with. We've been finding in scraping the upstairs woodwork that was originally just varnished and then painted over many times, it's quite a problem.

AB: Horrible job. It's dirty and nasty and with the lead dust, you worry about how much you're inhaling day to day.

Q: At this point in your restoration, what's a more advanced part, the downstairs?

AB: Well, I think the downstairs is a lot more advanced but there's a lot of things upstairs that have been done that you don't see like wiring, plumbing and things like that that are hidden. The first interior project we had was the kitchen. That was the first thing because my mother was cooking on a hot plate and in an electric skillet. It was insane.

SB: We were talking about unforeseen problems that develop. We were enthusiastic about working on the kitchen since it was such a hardship to be shuffling between the little butler's pantry and the makeshift kitchen in the music room. So we decided we were going to get busy and get the kitchen done. Then we determined that the plumbing in the upstairs bathroom had to be completely redone. Well the only access to that is through the ceiling in the kitchen and actually all that plumbing work had to be done before we could drop our ceiling in the kitchen and do our duct work. And then we determined we had to remove all the old cast iron drain pipe that had rusted through in spots. We thought it would take a couple of days to get all the pipe out of there and it ended up taking a week. You know that's the kind of thing we've been running into. We're not exactly experts in the field of restoration, but we've done enough work on antique things to have a rule of thumb on what it takes to do something. In most cases it has taken about twice as long as what we've estimated to do a job.

Q: That's a rule of thumb then, twice as long?

SB: Because there are so many unknowns involved. You look at a job and it looks simple and straightforward. By the time you tear it apart, you run into all kinds of problems you didn't even think were there at the time of planning it out. And that's generally been the case in everything we've done.

Q: At the time of this interview what are the major things yet to be done?

AB: We need to complete the electrical, we want to add a couple of bathrooms to the house. We haven't done any decorating to speak of. A lot of these are expensive projects. We have some things to do on the exterior. We need to finish working on the foundation of the house. We need a fence for security. Originally the house had a fence around it and we want to put a fence back.

Q: Had there been any vandalism on the house?

AB: We talked with Hamilton about that. He said that there were several instances of break-ins here, but I don't think they were anything of note. This house has really sort of been protected against a lot of bad

things. For five years it just sat there uninhabited and nothing very bad happened.

SB: Although they did have a groundskeeper who had a key to the house, but he was only in here a few hours a week.

Q: What was the story of the papers you found?

AB: I knew that they existed and actually Bart Truxillo brought that to our attention. When we came and viewed the house the first time, it was obvious there was just tons of stuff like that. In the hallway there was a stack of books and all the ledgers that we gave you. Just lots of stuff, every drawer loaded and file cabinets everywhere.

SB: Since John Milroy was the mayor of the Heights and also one of the original developers of the Heights, there were a lot of original land records as far as sales of lots and that sort of thing which had been maintained by Helen after his death.

Q: Well, it's a fundamental Heights real estate collection. What made you decide to give it to the public library?

AB: That was one of the first things I was thinking about, what to do with all that material. Originally, I thought maybe I'd give it to the Heights Association and leave it in care of the library here in the Heights, but then you contacted me almost immediately after I closed the sale on the house, I think it was like two days after I closed on the house, you called me. I thought that would obviously be the best place for it. There might still be some things in the attic. There's still a chest up there that might have some papers in it.

Q: What did the family decide to keep from the possessions?

AB: Not a whole lot. They gave some things out of the house to some of Helen's friends, they made a present to the caretaker. They took the silverware which, I think, was not in the house but in a vault downtown, and they took some family pictures.

Q: Have you learned anything about the Milroys just by being in the house?

AB: They were very intelligent, educated people. Very well read as you notice from all the books. Just no end to the books. I don't think they were extremely wealthy. They wouldn't have lived in this house if they were super wealthy, but they were pretty well off.

SB: We noticed one thing about the construction of the house. Nothing was spared as far as strength or quality of materials or anything like that, but this house did not have the extremely elaborate chandeliers and decorative cabinet work and this sort of thing.

AB: Of course, this was the country then too. This wasn't downtown Houston. This was a ways out.

Q: How did this house compare to the other big houses on Heights Boulevard?

AB: I think it compared pretty well. I think that there were a couple of superior houses. The Cooley house was much superior to this house.

SB: Actually, I think only the Cooley house was vastly superior. If you look at original Heights brochures on the qualities of living in this neighborhood, this is one of the prominent houses shown as is the Cooley house and half a dozen others. Some of them were commercial locations. In fact we were looking at that the other day and determined that out of all the structures pictured on that original flier right around the turn of the century, this house and Bart Truxillo's house are the only ones still in existence. But obviously this was considered one of the preeminent houses of the neighborhood even at that time. Generally the major Victorian houses of Houston were right in the downtown area. Houston was a relatively small town then. Since the city has mushroomed into the place it is today, ninety-nine percent of all its original architecture especially residential has been destroyed. However, we've gone through a lot of little towns that were virtually undisturbed from the time they were built and this house compares favorably or is even superior to a lot of the Victorian architecture that you see.

AB: It's really sad. You go to Galveston or San Antonio and that's all you see are super houses one right after another but here there are just a few. I'd like to stand out in the front yard and watch people drive by and see this house. They just look at this house. You know, it is really something out of the ordinary.

SB: It's unfortunate too that the Heights being a separate little area and could have been very well preserved went through a period of great decay in the fifties and sixties and as a result massive damage was done to the neighborhood as a whole as far as its original character.

AB: Especially the boulevard.

SB: The boulevard was the jewel of the neighborhood. Not all but a good majority of the wealthier people had very lovely Victorian homes along the boulevard. And now I'd say at least fifty percent of it is gone and a lot of what's left has turned commercial or is being used as rent property.

Q: What do you think the future of restoring houses in the Heights is going to be?

- AB: I think the Heights has a fantastic future because of its proximity to downtown. I can be downtown in ten minutes from here provided there's no train or something.
- SB: That's one of the things that does worry us though, the property value of the land itself has gotten so high that in a lot of instances it no longer becomes feasible to redo the little Victorian cottage. You have to pay so much just for the land underneath it that a lot of people think they want a much bigger house than that.
- Q: What type of person does it take to restore a house? Did your business lead to an interest in restoration?
- AB: Oh, I think definitely. We are in the antique music box business. We deal in and restore antique music boxes. When you start acquiring all these antiques, you have to have a place to show them or keep them. And they just don't fit into a modern house. I mean physically some of the pieces don't fit, like the big orchestrion in there. It's over ten feet tall.
- Q: You've got to have high ceilings.
- AB: Right and I always thought I'd like to have a house where I could have that machine in. When we got this house there was still only one place in the whole house it would go.
- Q: What have you found are some of the problems associated with living in a historical landmark?
- SB: It's like living in a fishbowl.
- AB: A lot of people feel they have a right to the house. That the public does have a right to it, I think to a certain extent is true. But to this day, I haven't received any help from the public. In fact in many cases anything that I've done has just been a struggle to get done. I've wanted some help with something or information, there's always somebody there just trying to be an obstacle.
- SB: One of the problems is that people look at this house to begin with and they think right off the bat well those people must have a lot of money to even tackle a project like that or even think about a project like that which in this case is not the case.
- AB: That's the truth.
- SB: And everything we do has to be very well thought out as far as where we spend the money because it's a very tight budget to pay off the house and to do the proper kind of restoration we want.
- AB: It goes very slow too and you know we've had criticisms about some things we've done — like the paint — which has been discouraging.

- Q: How do you feel about the positive publicity, like the house being on the cover of the yellow pages?
- AB: Oh, I think it's fabulous. Somebody would call up and want to bring a music box over to be repaired and he'd ask for directions, and I'd say 'Look on the front of the yellow pages, there's a picture of the house.' It was really a neat thing.
- Q: What are the satisfactions of restoring a house like this?
- AB: Well, I think personal accomplishment in doing that kind of work and I think it's really great to be able to do it yourself. You can learn so much and when it's done you can say, I did that. That's a wonderful sense of satisfaction.
- Q: Has the reality lived up to the dream of when you were a child?
- AB: Oh, I think so. If it would go faster I would be a lot happier.
- SB: The biggest problem or disappointment is the slowness.
- Q: What do you feel you've contributed to the community? Do you feel like this is a contribution?
- AB: Oh, I feel it definitely is because it's brought something more to the Heights, more publicity to the Heights, and I do think every time somebody restores a house here, more people do it. They take more pride in their own house.
- SB: It's a contagious thing. Although we've noticed a problem. Some people have taken these houses and completely gutted the interiors and added ultracontemporary furnishings which are completely incompatible with their original Victorian state. Why take a house that was built in 1895 or in the early 1900s that has a charm of its own and completely gut it and make the interior into a house that was built in the 1980s with the most ultramodern look about it. I mean why do that. If you want that kind of thing, why take an old house and do that to it, why not just build a whole new house?
- AB: A lot of people forget or don't realize these houses are an art form. They really are. They are something that shouldn't be fooled around with too much because, you know, it's the wrong thing to do. I think that's why the federal government and the city are taking some interest in at least preserving the facades of these buildings.
- Q: Do you think it would be good for people to see history like this sitting on the city block?
- AB: Yes, absolutely.
- SB: Especially for Houston since there's so little left.

AB: There's a certain amount of people who couldn't care less about anything like this. But for people who have an interest, I wish they could have had the experience of going through this house the way we did when we bought it. That was a fantastic experience for all of us.

SB: It seems like in Houston there's such an insensitivity to Houston's past, not just from a residential architectural standpoint but from any kind of historical standpoint. The general trend is that nothing should stand in the way of progress and therefore we will completely eradicate any remembrance of our past and build a new skyscraper or whatever. I think that really is a shame. Some people have no interest in history but a lot of people do. It's interesting to know where you came from and what things were like in a much simpler time. When these houses were built around 1900, Houston was a small city of about 40,000 people. That's a relatively small community compared to less than a hundred years later when it's grown to almost 2 million people. The pace of life is just unbelievable compared to that point in time when things were leisurely and people took a lot of pride in what they did. You know there was just a whole different attitude about life in general. Things were laid back. I think everybody should look back at the past and know where the city came from and not that it just mushroomed out of the bayou one day.

AB: Even though I'd like to see more old structures, I'm very proud of Houston. You don't realize it until you go to a city like Dallas. Everybody is Dallas this and Dallas that and you sort of get defensive of Houston.

Q: Was there ever a point when you thought this house would do you in?

AB: I still think that, but I've gotten a little bit more relaxed about it. But that is a problem. It's very discouraging and you just think that sometimes. One time there was an article in the newspaper about the Heights and this woman called me and started asking me questions and I was in a depressed state about something and so we were discussing it and she just fed on this little bit of discouragement that I had. I guess I gave her that impression. I really didn't mean to, but I guess I did. It can be very discouraging and you can just think there's no end to this, it's just never going to get done.

SB: Although the glimmer of hope is we get some little project finished and it's just an elation.

AB: It's a real shot in the arm. Our main problem is we just haven't had the money to pour into it. We still have to take care of our business in order to pay bills and then nothing gets done. Money goes out to to pay bills and the house doesn't get restored. I would say anybody who is



Steve Boehck, Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Bies, and Alan Bies in front of the restored exterior of the Milroy house.

considering this type of thing to really think about it very carefully unless they have some money because it's hard when you have to pay a lot for a place to start with and you have this restoration. I can see where if you weren't familiar with working with old things, it could actually destroy your life.

SB: Another thing is if you cannot do the restoration in its entirety before you move in, it is extremely discouraging to live in it. I think you can generally say that redoing an old house is twice as much work as starting from scratch.

Q: For various reasons, though, restoration jobs are often done by middle-class individuals. What is the general advice both of you would have for the middle-class person who does not have a great amount of money?

AB: They have to get themselves in the right frame of mind. It's not going to happen fast and they can't get discouraged.

SB: If they're not handy about doing a lot of things themselves, I would discourage them from attempting it.

AB: One of the really terrible things that happens in a case like this is that people will get a house and they will not do it properly. They will do something really bad and destroy some part of the house, either the interior or the exterior. They don't have enough money to do it right, and enough patience to wait till they do have the money to do it. There've been a lot of places just ruined. We've had to say well we don't have enough money to do this now. We just have to wait until we do and we can restore the house properly.

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