

COMMUNITY

BIRD, TREE & GARDEN CLUB BIENNIAL HOUSE AND GARDEN TOUR • 12 TO 5 P.M. TODAY, THROUGHOUT THE GROUNDS

At 36 Scott, a suspect tenant remembered

MORGAN KINNEY
STAFF WRITER

On Wednesdays, Alan Nelson guarded the sugar. He was 8 years old and in the service of his aunt, the hostess at the Presbyterian House, who'd warned him about an eccentric, middle-aged woman named Martha Sterrett.

His duty during those summers in the early 1950s was limited to afternoon social hours. Visitors from across the grounds were invited to fill their souls with conversation and cookies; the particulars varied from house to house, but the Presbyterians offered sugar cubes to guests, who typically selected a cube or two to sweeten their tea.

Sterrett, on the other hand, was known to abscond with a purse packed with cubes, otherwise filled with treats taken from different houses.

When the time came and, despite his fiercest glares, Nelson – the “shortest boy in his class since first grade” – failed to intimidate Sterrett. The cubes continued to disappear.

Nelson's aunt eventually solved the problem by switching from cubes to granulated sugar. The thinking was, apparently, that Sterrett would be less apt to stuff fists of sticky crystals into her purse as she made her rounds.

But sugar theft was perhaps the most trivial charge against Sterrett, who lived in the cottage at 36 Scott – one of the dozen homes featured in the Bird, Tree & Garden Club House and Garden Tour starting at noon today. Rather, Sterrett's fame peaked in 1922, when she was widowed by the contents of a package from an anonymous sender.

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“It came by special delivery in a large paper box, wrapped with brown paper,” read the original Oct. 29, 1922, story from *The New York Times*. “Inside the large box were two smaller ones, each containing a piece of golden cake with white icing.”

Later reports clarified the golden cake was, in fact, devil's food, but its impact was unambiguous: Walter W. Sterrett ate one piece of

*There are 12 houses on today's tour.
One once was home to a notorious maybe-murderer.*

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Today's BTG house tour means about 1,500 visitors will shuffle through Sterrett's former home, which has passed from hand to hand to reach its current residents, Roger and Suzy Conner.

Some of the masses will be Chautauquans, but most are home and garden enthusiasts bused in from places such as New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and even Toronto.

Nelson, a former BTG president, usually participates in the biennial tour as part of the bike patrol which crisscrosses the grounds, directing people from house to house. But, at 72, he gave up the patrol this year to be one of the house guides. He and his wife were randomly assigned to 36 Scott.

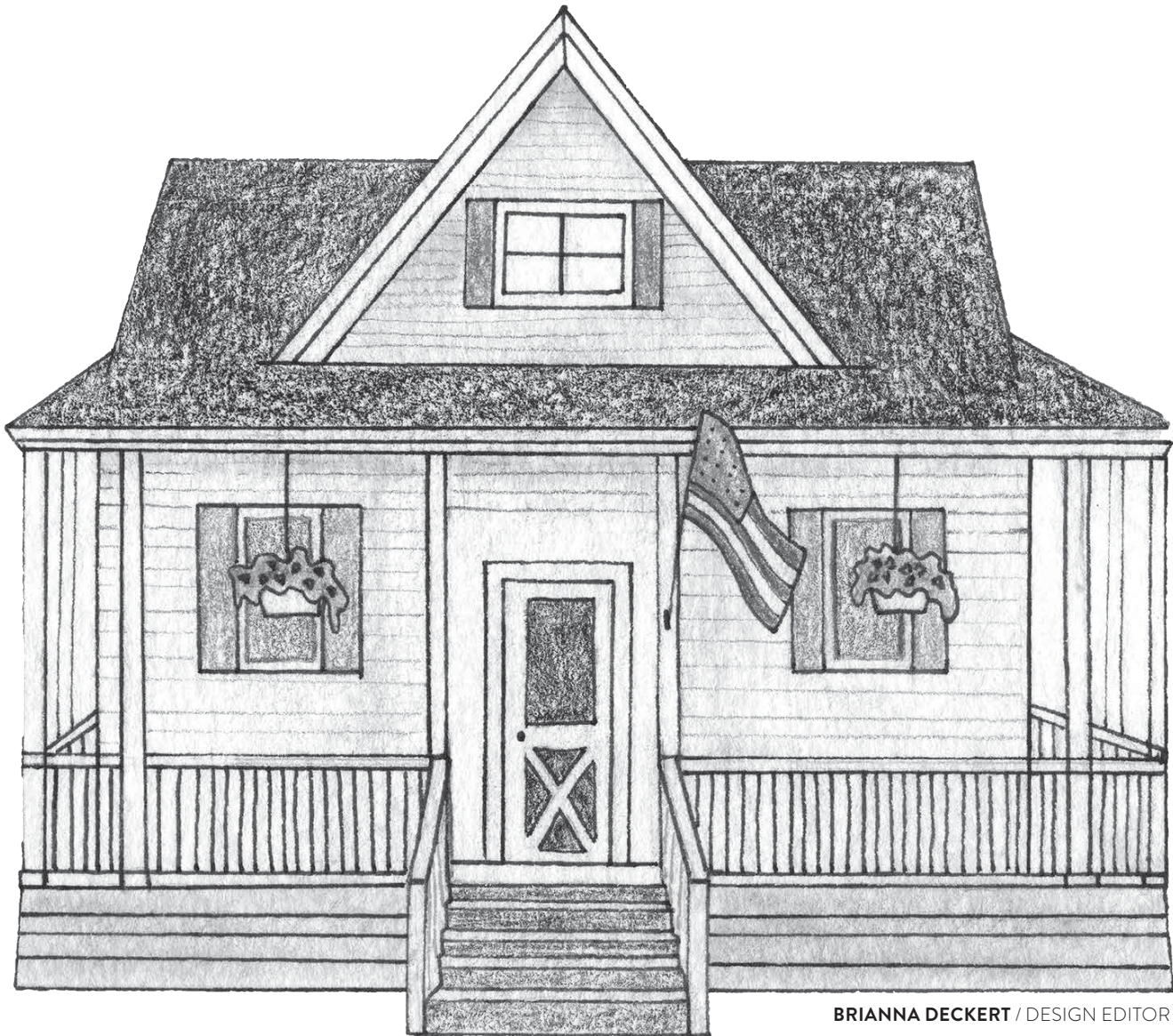
He will read the provided script and offer his own limited experience with the cottage. However, he admitted there's not much he can add now that half a century and a handful of owners erased the “little white cottage” Nelson associated with Sterrett.

The Conners added a 9-foot extension to the back of the house, which is currently painted in a vibrant palette of yellow and blue, inside and out. The original pine floors remain below white beadboard ceilings, now juxtaposed with elements the Conners added, such as the birdhouse fashioned from one of Suzy Conner's ice skates hanging on the front porch.

But up the stairs and to the right is “the Devon room,” where commemorative horse show posters line the walls of a bedroom. The Conners visit Devon, Pennsylvania, every year to attend its famous horse show – the same Devon, Pennsylvania, where two Sterretts lived and one Sterrett died.

Roger Conner said the Sterrett connection startled them: “When we heard that Walter Sterrett, her husband, died of arsenic poisoning in Devon, we thought, oh my God.”

“Cue the ‘Twilight Zone’ music,” Suzy Conner said.



BRIANNA DECKERT / DESIGN EDITOR

Conner Cottage || 36 Scott

cake and died; Martha Sterrett ate the other piece of cake and survived.

A protracted investigation followed, and experts discovered traces of arsenic and bichloride of mercury in Walter's stomach. Those poisons were likely mixed into the cake's icing, undetectable to taste.

Sterrett was immediately a suspect in her husband's death, and papers as prominent as the *Times* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* chronicled developments. Readers learned Walter was an accountant at Price Waterhouse in Philadelphia, although the couple lived in Devon, Pennsylvania, one of the city's main line suburbs. Both Sterretts were about

40 years old, and the couple never had children.

News reports pegged “jealousy” of multiple varieties, including Walter's possible extramarital affairs, as a potential motive for the poisoning. A prominent theory was that Sterrett mailed the cake herself in order to disguise her supposed plan.

Detectives and journalists interviewed neighbors, who said the Sterretts were largely unassuming. Postmasters tracked the package to its origin – “Penn Square Station, in this city,” the *Times* reported. Much effort was devoted to finding the typewriter which produced the box's address label. Even so, the leads died, Sterrett's alibi checked out and she

was never indicted.

Nelson coincidentally attended college with someone named Jim Sterrett in the early 60s who told the tale of his great uncle from Philadelphia who died of arsenic poisoning. It didn't take Nelson long to connect the dots.

“He said his great aunt lived at Chautauqua, and she was Martha Sterrett,” Nelson said. “There was a very strong suspicion in the Sterrett family that she did it.”

Sterrett moved from Devon to Chautauqua after the incident and lived alone year-round in her cottage. Beyond sugar, she was known to steal food and odd items from different porches. Certain people began to

joke that if you lost something in Chautauqua, you should check for it at 36 Scott.

Nelson said someone described her as akin to the dour woman in Grant Wood's “American Gothic” – tall and thin “with no style whatsoever.”

Sterrett died in 1965 and left the cottage to her sister, who lived in Mayville. Her roughhewn headstone sits in Chautauqua Cemetery – the name flanked only by a set of engraved daffodils.

“Honestly, I see it as a very sad, tragic thing,” Nelson said of Sterrett's solitary life. “If she did do it, she should have gone to jail. If she didn't do it, she lived a very sad life.”

Edison's first visit to Chautauqua

ALEXANDRA RIMER
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

The Miller Cottage played an important role in the courtship between Thomas Edison and Mina Miller that eventually resulted in Mina accepting Edison's marriage proposal.

In January 1885, while Mina was attending school in Boston, she met Edison for the first time when she first visited the apartment of her friend Lillian Gilliland, whose husband was a business associate of Edison. The editors of *The Thomas A. Edison Papers* have not found any correspondence mentioning that Mina had actually met Edison in January while visiting Lillian. That is not surprising given that, at that time, Mina was secretly engaged to George Vincent, the son of the co-founder of Chautauqua. But, in an interview many years later with a reporter, Mina stated she was first introduced to Edison at a friend's house in Boston but recalled only that he was a nice man and, at that time, she thought she would never see him again.

In May 1885, Mina received a letter from her friend Louise Igoe, who was also friends with Lillian and

who later married Mina's older brother. In her letter, Louise passed along an invitation from Lillian to come to visit her at her beach house in Winthrop, Massachusetts. Mina later recalled in an interview about her summer trip to Winthrop that Lillian had invited her go there for a week, she had written to her father asking him for permission to go, and while she was there, Edison had come to visit.

While traveling to Winthrop, Edison had purchased several journals for a diary to record his thoughts during his visit, which he believed were going to be read aloud to the other guests at Winthrop who were in a position to repeat what they heard to Mina. Throughout those journals, Edison indicated how highly he thought of Mina and her physical beauty. Edison's daughter Marion later recalled in her memoirs that, while traveling with the Gillilands in early 1885, Edison had concluded that “he wanted a home, a wife and a mother for his three children and asked Mrs. Gilliland, who lived in Boston, to introduce him to some suitable girls.” The Gillilands seem to have arranged Edison's stay at Winthrop to intro-

duce him to them, including Mina. Thus, parts of the diary could read as a courtship document directed at Mina.

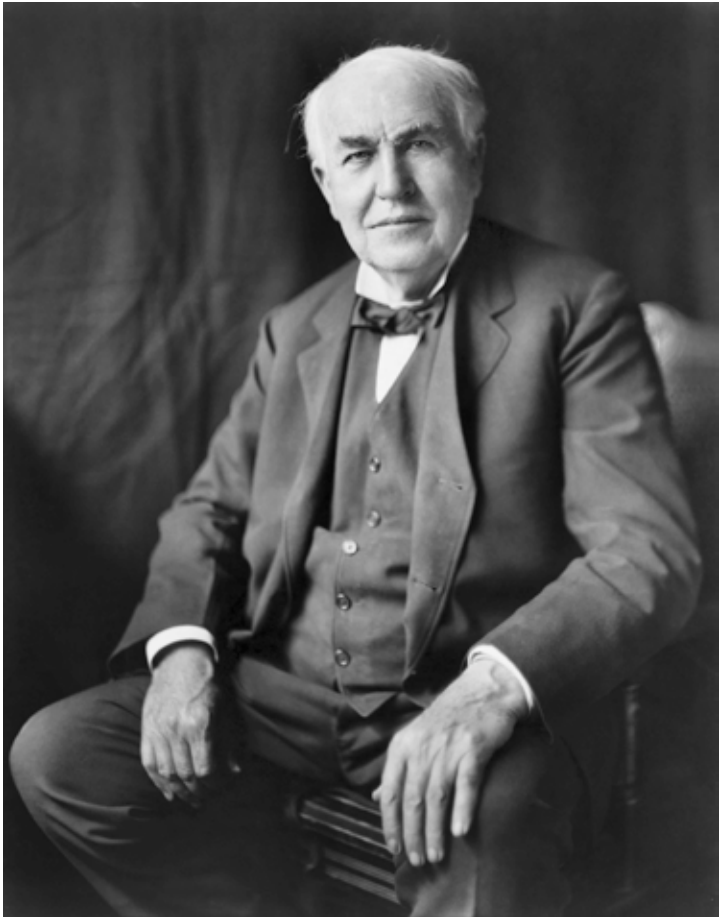
The diary entries make clear that Edison courted Mina with the same doggedness and persistence that he employed in finding the perfect filament for the light bulb. Indeed, he was so overt that there was no doubt about his intentions. For instance, after writing that Louise was reading a love letter from Mina's brother Robert, he observed that he too might have to start a post office romance as well.

After Mina left Winthrop, Edison made clear that he needed to see once again the woman he called the “Maid of Chautauqua” when he wrote his secretary on Aug. 11 that he was going to Chautauqua with Marion and the Gillilands. That was Edison's first time visiting the Miller Cottage. Well aware of the impression he needed to make on Mina's parents, Edison spent his time there speaking with her family. One fruitful discussion topic may have been that both Mina's father and Edison had been included in a recently published book on famous inventors called *How Success is Won*. At the conclusion of

his visit, Edison invited Mina to join him and his party to the White Mountains in New Hampshire. By agreeing to the trip, Mina's parents must have been impressed with Edison.

While they were in New Hampshire, Edison famously proposed to Mina in Morse code. As Mina later recalled in a newspaper interview, “One evening, after spending the day on top of Mount Washington, we were sitting around the hotel in the foothills. Mr. Edison wrote down for me the Morse code characters and by the next morning I had memorized them.” A little while later, Edison tapped out a “sacred” message, said Mina, which was “one of the steps that led to our marriage.” Edison's daughter Marion later claimed to have witnessed Edison tapping the code in Mina's hand, after which Mina blushed and nodded “Yes.” Thus, Edison's visiting with Mina and her family at the Miller Cottage was likely the catalyst to his New Hampshire marriage proposal to Mina.

Alexandra Rimer is an assistant editor on the Thomas Edison Papers staff at Rutgers University.



THE HISTORY OF MILLER COTTAGE

In January 2016, the Chautauqua Foundation acquired the Lewis Miller Cottage, a National Historic Landmark.

To learn more about the Lewis Miller Cottage or how you can contribute to an endowment providing for its future care and maintenance — having your gift matched 100 percent for a limited time only — please contact Dusty Nelson, director of gift planning at foundation@ciweb.org or 716-357-6409.

There will be a limited number of Foundation functions this summer on the cottage grounds. There will not be any public sessions as the cottage is not prepared for this type of usage.