

By Jean Giambrone

1835 House Built of Mud In Penfield

In the six years since they rented the little house at 1000 Whalen Rd., Penfield, Mr. and Mrs. Lindsey Embrey have hosted a parade of historians and archeologists.

The historians, in most instances, have recruited the archeologists to see if they can find a way to keep the house from "falling apart" — and yet maintain its original structure. Little by little, the Whalen Road house is eroding.

But then, what's to be expected of a house that was constructed 138 years ago, its walls made simply of clay drawn from a nearby creek, straw and water?

EMBREY SAYS THESE ARE the materials used to construct an adobe, but that he feels in the true sense of the word the Whalen Road place, presently owned by Seeler Construction, is not an adobe, but literally just a mud house. Adobes, generally speaking, are made of mud of mud and straw.

But history says that William Gorse, who built the simple house in about a year,

starting in 1835, built plank forms the dimensions of the house, 25 feet by 40 feet, each length about a foot high and 18 inches wide. Then he rammed the mud mixture in the full length and when it had dried sufficiently to be self-supporting, lifted the forms up one level and packed in another load of mud.

He dug out the cellar first, lining it with fieldstone. He used the trunk of an old tree as one support, and a fieldstone cistern as the other. Embrey's wife Ginny, a bookkeeper for Seeler, says their six-year-old daughter, Jody, wants to know why the cellar floor can't be swept to make a play room.

"I'd sweep forever," Ginny says, pointing out that the basement floor is still original dirt.

AS THE WALLS TOOK SHAPE, Gorse laid floor joists and poured another layer of mud on top, thus creating the form. He wound up with two stories, but each floor was more like one huge room centered by a fireplace wall with front and

back openings on the main floor, and another opening in the sleeping quarters on the loft-like second floor. The fireplaces were for both heating and cooking.

Embrey, a town councilman in Penfield, a substitute teacher in the town's school system and a student at Brockport State where he is working on his masters degree in history, says the house is one of the few of its type in this part of the country and thus many consider it a landmark.

Other houses believed to be built in true adobe style are said to be standing in the vicinity, but they have been long since protected by a protective cover over the mud. Some time ago an attempt to protect the Whalen Road house with stucco failed

when the stucco wouldn't adhere.

HISTORIANS HAVE BEEN HOPING archeologists would find a way to preserve what's there and build up the house so it would be in its original form. "One scientist even dug out a sample of the walls to examine its exact content," Embrey says. If the reconstruction could be carried out, the cost today would be monumental, it has been said. And Gorse did it just for the cost of his labor.

Embrey says complete restoration would probably include ripping out partitions and plaster to get to the original interior walls which Gorse had given a thin plaster coat of clay, then white-washed.

Partitions were put in at various times, including when

the building was used as an office on the former Brown Brothers Nursery Co.

THE YOUNG EMBREYS, each Penfield residents before their marriage, first rented the house "because the price was right." Since then they have become enthused by the building itself and done some decorating in an antique vein.

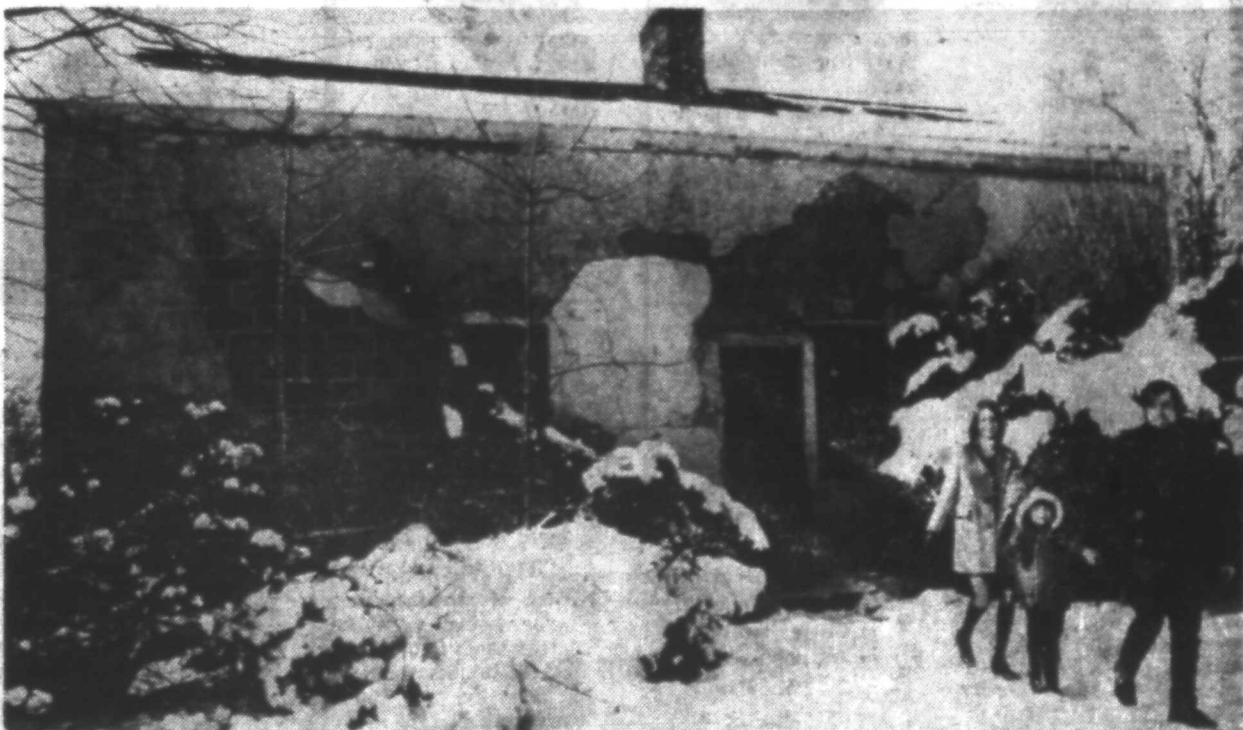
"When the time comes and we have to move," Ginny Embrey says, "I know we're going to feel terrible. We'll want to carry on in the antique line now, though. We keep looking and adding things that are old that we can always use in another house."

OVER THE LIVING ROOM FIREPLACE, the Embreys

have a collection of primitive kitchen utensils. They also have a few tables they've bought on antiquing junkets, then refinished. New — but looking very much as though it belongs among the old treasures — is a long black walnut dropleaf table, one of three Embrey's father, Harry Embrey, had made from a tree cut down in the backyard of his Penfield home.

The Embreys have been clever in camouflaging a living room wall opening that was a reception window in the nursery office. Embrey boarded it up, then the couple covered it with a collage made from covers of very old magazines and ads.

THE PARTITION ALSO (Please turn to Page 2C)



Mr. and Mrs. Lindsay Embrey and daughter Jody in front of their rented home on Whalen Road, Penfield. Original walls were made of mud poured into wooden forms. Portion at left was rebuilt with concrete blocks.