

The Manchester ENTERPRISE

109 East Main Street, Manchester, Michigan 48158 • (734) 428-8173

Vol. 137 Number 38

Thursday, June 28, 2001

Living out a dream at the historic Manchester Mill

■ *New mill owners plan to involve themselves in Manchester community*

By Marsha Johnson Chartrand
Associate Editor

"This realizes somewhat of a fantasy for us," Karl Racenis says of his recent real estate purchase.

Explaining that he and his wife Pat have often vacationed in Goderich, Ontario in an old mill restored to a country inn, he said that at first, waking up in the Manchester Mill feels like living on vacation.

"But then I look around and there's a thousand and one things to do," he says cheerfully.

Racenis became the owner of the historic mill on Main Street as of June 1, culminating nearly a year-long project that had become a fantasy of a lifetime.

"We've visited Manchester for a number of reasons over the past 20 years," he explains. "As a professional engineer, I've had occasion to do business in this area, and had eaten lunch at the Black Sheep Tavern, Haarer's or Dan's River Grill."

So when the couple wanted to go someplace different for a unique meal or a drive in the

country, the road often led them to Manchester.

"We have been to a half-dozen or more chicken broils, the community fair, and other events in the community for the past few years," he says.

"We'd eat dinner and stroll down Main Street and walk by this building, saying 'that would make a great ...'"

Last summer while Racenis was in town he saw a real estate sign posted. Not sure whether it was for a real estate office in the building or a "for sale" sign, he jotted down the number and made the call.

"I got Don Limpert on the phone, and he told me, 'I'm a realtor, I own the building and I'm selling,' and it went forward from there."

The phone call sparked a process that began last fall. A structural engineer was brought in and an environmental inspector and things started to get more serious.

"We came to terms with Don," Racenis says. "Then we got a bit delayed over the winter; things took longer than we expected."

"We found out that the property required a more thorough title search because of the complexity of the dam and the

island. These things fall outside the normal scope of commercial buildings.

"On June 1 we finally shook hands, and here we are."

As an engineer and a chemist, the couple was not entirely prepared to foray into commercial real estate, but they are learning quickly.

"One thing we had never imagined, because we're not into antiques, was the use of this building as an antique mall," Racenis says. "But it is an appropriate application for the building, and as we come in here initially we find it is a pretty good usage."

Racenis plans to maintain use of the building pretty much as it is now, and says he has no plans to trade it into anything different.

"But as far as idle speculation, the sky is the limit," he says.

Currently he is focusing on bringing his engineering business out here from its current location in Livonia.

"I'll have a nice office overlooking the river," he says with enthusiasm.

The couple also plans to live in the mill, in an area that has been renovated into a residential flat.

"Pat lived above her parents' florist shop in Caro growing up," Racenis says, "so this is sort of coming full circle for her."

"It's more convenient," she says, "especially when there is so much to be done."

The couple's current home in Livonia is directly across from a newer shopping center, and they particularly appreciate the quiet atmosphere with which they'll be surrounded in Manchester. So they are making it a priority to move their home and Karl's business here.

"This location here is below street level," Racenis says, sitting in the flat, "and it cuts down on the noise. Besides that, you're wide open to the beautiful view of the river."

The foundation of the mill has been in the same spot since 1832, and Racenis is quite interested in the history of the building. While he was considering its purchase, he did a lot of research and study at the library and between real estate documents and the environmental study developed a chronological history for the mill.

According to "Manchester's First Hundred Years," the mill actually pinpointed the location of this village. The River Raisin

Photo by Marsha Johnson Chartrand
Pat (left) and Karl Racenis recently have purchased the historic Manchester Mill.

furnished the power for the surrounding businesses.

"When John Gilbert, who platted the area, sold the mill property to Stephen Fargo there was

a stipulation: The property was to be used for a flouring mill," the history states. "This mill was to receive water power from the

See DREAM — Page 2-B

DREAM

Continued from Page 1-B

river."

The mill has burned to the ground twice during its long history, both times rebuilt on the original foundation. Both flour and feed have been ground by giant turbines, one of which is still located in the lowest level of the mill.

A three-inch loose-leaf notebook holds the varied information that Racenis has collected on the mill.

He has toyed with the idea of eventually using the turbines to generate power in the mill once again. He would like to spruce up the island at the base of the dam and in the future may restore a bridge to provide access, perhaps for weddings or other special events.

In the past few weeks, the

Racenis have begun to come to grips with the fact that they actually own the mill.

"Don Limpert has been tremendously helpful," Racenis says. "He's shown me things that he was working on, introduced me to people who can help."

Limpert bought the mill in 1981 from the Mann family and the milling operation closed shortly thereafter. It currently houses mostly antique shops, but Village Hair Forum, its first tenant, remains in its original location.

Both Pat and Karl Racenis already feel an affinity for the small town atmosphere they are finding in Manchester.

"We're both from small towns, originally," Pat says. "When we were younger we couldn't wait to get out of there, but now we have a better idea of what we were missing."

Coming from the metropolitan

Detroit area, the couple was concerned about how they might be regarded in the small community.

"When we first started looking at buying the mill, we realized that it's a central, visible trademark of Manchester," Karl says.

Would they be regarded as interlopers, they wondered?

They now say they needn't

have worried.

"The reception has been terrific," he continues. "We feel very strongly, this is a historic building, and a central landmark."

"We want to contribute to that, and perpetuate it rather than doing anything different."

"It needs to remain the landmark that it is, and it has a lot of potential to stay that way."