An antique oak dining table is a family heirloom and the social hub of the kitchen. The family's calendar is a reclaimed chalkboard. Milk glass light fixtures and classic, flat-paneled cabinets in a natural cherry finish add authentic touches.

A love of history and an abundance of family memories fueled the renovation of this classic Merriam Park home.

BY KRISTIE L. GREVE  PHOTOGRAPHS BY KAREN MELVIN
“Have we got a deal for you!” The words still echo in Phil Gerlach’s head. When his parents offered to sell him their family home—a large four-square house built in 1904—Gerlach readily agreed. He had fond memories of growing up in the Merriam Park home in St. Paul. The family struck a deal and he moved in. Then reality hit.

The three-story home had weathered significant changes over the years. Gerlach’s parents had converted the single-family dwelling into a boarding house in the 1950s. Only one six-panel door remained—the sole remnant of the home’s original grandeur. Gerlach and his wife Cathy Perrone found themselves wandering the neighborhood, studying its turn-of-the-century character. “Then we’d go home and look at that door, imagining what the original home must have looked like,” says Perrone.

Inspired, the couple decided to fully restore the property and started with a restoration of the first floor. Its centerpiece is a gourmet kitchen, designed to nurture another lifetime of memories.

Gerlach and Perrone faced a number of challenges, says Rosemary McMonigal of McMonigal Architects in Minneapolis, who designed the space. The existing kitchen was dark and cramped, with very little work area. The homeowners wanted more light, more workspace, more storage, and a seamless flow between rooms. They also wanted to preserve the architectural character of the house.

McMonigal worked with Joe Urbanski of J&D Builders in St. Paul to build an addition on the back of the house, overlooking the yard. The new kitchen is housed in this addition.

The original kitchen’s space was reconfigured to accommodate a full bathroom, accessed from a private hallway. A butler’s pantry was restored between the kitchen and dining room. There was even room for yet another small storage room, creating a special kitchen pantry.

There is now more than 18 feet of work space in the new kitchen. The honed granite countertops are of a timeless gray-green shade. Classic, flat-paneled cabinets
in natural cherry wood stretch to the ceiling. A white-oak floor matches the restored wood floors throughout the home.

The homeowners discovered samples of the home's original woodwork under the front porch that helped them replicate the original wood trim. They also haunted salvage yards to find tall, narrow doors from that same bygone era.

Even the appliances have old-fashioned charm. The built-in refrigerator has shallow shelves, putting everything in easy reach. A separate freezer was installed at countertop height, a concept Gerlach's father had introduced into the home years earlier. The six-burner stove has a gas cooktop and an electric oven.

The kitchen furnishings are a cherished part of family history. Gerlach and Perrone chose to include a 100-year-old pedestal oak table that belonged to Gerlach's great aunt. Then they added an eclectic group of chairs that his father had refinished years ago.

"When I was growing up, the center of our family activity was in the kitchen," Gerlach says. "We wanted to re-create that social setting. Now we can entertain guests while we prepare food, and everyone can take part in the fun."

Another special treasure is the large, old-fashioned chalkboard that dominates one wall. Gerlach and Perrone hauled this gem out of a University of Minnesota dumpster. Now it's an indispensable part of their family routine, serving as calendar, grocery list, and daily notebook.

McMonigal was impressed with the owners' interest in preserving the home's historical character. "They had a clear vision of what they wanted to accomplish and have put a lot of energy and enthusiasm into it," she says. McMonigal's own family has fond memories of the house.

"Her parents and my parents were friends," Gerlach says. "Our dads met in high school and stayed in touch, so Rosemary's parents often visited. We still hear the stories about some of the parties that were held in this house."

If Gerlach and Perrone have anything to say about it, this home will have many more stories to tell.

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The new kitchen was designed to let sunlight in from three directions, and the honed-granite countertops keep the space light.