

Obama family homestead: Fixer-upper now subject of documentary

An old home and a man's hope to keep a dream alive

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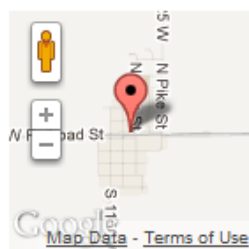
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KEMPTON, Ind. -- Four years ago, hope was high in this Tipton County town of 332 residents.

A farmhouse, vacant and neglected for at least two decades, was suddenly a historic jewel. Its new owner, Shawn Clements, a contractor who happened to be a history buff, had discovered through genealogical research that the fixer-upper was the homestead of Jacob and Catherine Goodnight Dunham, great-great-great-grandparents of President Barack Obama.

Obama created a stir when he visited the home while a candidate in 2008, a press bus in tow. "The Dunham homestead," he said, exiting the campaign bus and gazing at the house for the first time. A handful of locals had gathered, including a long-lost cousin.

After Obama was elected president, it seemed to Clements and to others in the area as if the sky were the limit: They discussed the possibility of historic re-enactments featuring Dunham impersonators, massive tourism driven by the popular, first-ever black president --

there was even talk at the Chamber of Commerce of mounting a push for Obama's future presidential library.

It was quite an outpouring, especially considering the county is a bastion of Republicanism. Voters there hadn't gone for a Democrat for the presidency since 1964. In 2008, they went for Obama's opponent, Republican John McCain, 4,452 to 3,250. (Not to mention Kempton's black population is less than one-half of 1 percent; the long-lost cousin said Obama was probably the first black man she ever met.)



Shawn Clements bought this Kempton home several years ago. He discovered it was owned by ancestors of President Barack Obama. / Kelly Wilkinson / The Star

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But since then, the Dunham house's momentum has slowed. Clements, whose original plan had been to turn the house into a bed-and-breakfast, is confident a new documentary about the house will renew the buzz. But to use an election-year cliché, the house is not much better off than it was four years ago.

Its original pine floors have been redone, and its furnace has been replaced. Some Dunham descendants donated a few family antiques,

such as a woman's vanity from the 1940s and a framed composite of Indiana Medical College at Purdue University's Class of 1906. Among the class members: brothers Wilbur and Grover Dunham.

Clements supplemented these with some of his own family's belongings.

The spacious, high-ceilinged house is nearly empty. Several women's groups have held luncheons there, including a nearby Daughters of the American Revolution chapter. But only one class of schoolchildren has stopped in for a tour.

A couple of summers ago, Clements planted a garden on one of his three acres with the intent of giving his bounty to local people in need. "Tomatoes, pumpkins, lettuce, onions, green beans, cantaloupe, potatoes -- everything but corn," he said. "I thought it'd be easy to give away free food." It wasn't. Clements said he contacted each of the county's township trustees but none showed any interest, and Clements got wind of his produce being referred to derogatively as "Obama food." He ended up hauling it to Indianapolis to the Julian Center.

Down at Kempton's one lunch place, the Breeze Inn bar, the consensus is that the link between Obama and the Dunham house is "a stretch," said Kim Rawlings, a farmer and businessman. Rawlings told the story of a doctor in the nearby town of Goldsmith who supposedly, on the sly, patched up members of bank robber John Dillinger's mob in the 1930s -- and how that story is surely baloney. "Some people here look at (the local Obama connection) the same way," he said.

"I think a lot of it's politics," Clements said. "If it was Ronald Reagan's ancestors, I think you'd get a different reaction."

Perhaps the coldest shoulder given to the old homestead came courtesy of the Indiana Historical Bureau, the people who dole out roadside historic markers.

Clements applied for a marker on two counts. The house goes to the roots of an American president. And the Dunhams, who built the house in 1849 and occupied it until 1969, were substantial people in their own right. They were doctors and teachers and big farmers, and one even served in the state legislature.

The historical bureau batted away both arguments in early 2009, shortly after Obama was sworn in as president. The Dunhams weren't big enough, the historical bureau said -- Indiana has had thousands of doctors and teachers and state representatives. Nor can the Obama factor be considered because he continues to draw breath -- a person has to be dead 25 years to get a marker, according to the state's criteria.

What about Richard Nixon's mother? Clements asked, referring to a marker erected in Jennings County in 1969 about her birthplace.

Dani Pfaff, marker program manager, told Clements then, and told The Star recently: "Our marker program has changed since the late 1960s," and markers are harder to come by. Today Nixon's mother would be out of luck.

Clements, 44, bought the house a decade ago. A few years into the rehabilitation, he discovered the Obama link and switched gears. A bed-and-breakfast might still make sense, he said, but he feels obligated to take more care that his repairs are historically accurate. When Clements learned of the Obama link, for example, he immediately ceased work on a faux marble bathroom with walk-in shower.

Clements has not only devoted the past 10 years of his life to the house but also his own resources. He lives there alone, enjoying views of Indiana's flatness -- from three sides he looks out onto horizons and, from the fourth, the town of Kempton -- and sometimes wondering if it's worth it.

He said he has invested about \$100,000 in the house, all the money he has. And the place still needs a new roof. A new well is needed, too -- the old one is running dry.

Clements is not defeated. The documentary film "A Single Root" was shot last month at the house and tells the story of not just the Dunhams and Obama but of Clements.

"I hope I'm able to help," said John Kleiman, an acquaintance of Clements with some show business experience. Kleiman wrote and co-produced the low-budget (roughly \$600,000) 1988 karate movie "Pushed Too Far." It was filmed entirely in Kleiman's hometown of Greenfield, starred Claude Akins and flopped, the production company ending up in receivership.

Kleiman is the executive producer of the Dunham house documentary and hopes to sell it to a major network for airing in the next few weeks. "We're still sniffing out the best home for it," he said. "I think it's a pretty strong film. We did something like 18 interviews," including one with Clements.

"Shawn looks at this house as his destiny, as what he'll be remembered for," Kleiman said.

There is nothing in writing, but Kleiman said that if the documentary makes money, he will give some to Clements so he can make further improvements to the Dunham house.

Clements can only hope, and he does hope. "But whatever happens," he said, "the main thing is, this house is better off now than when I found it."

Call Star reporter Will Higgins at (317) 444-6043.