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^ Thor Budzinski helped to restore the wooden window sills at Gillette Castle. Photo by Betsy Wittmann. Story, page 12.

> Kim Capodiferro shops for fresh flowers at the farmers' market held three times a week on La Salle Road. Another photo, page 9. Photo by Lisa Brisson



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Neighbors

Budzinski restores the woodwork at Gillette Castle

by Betsy Wittemann

William Hooker Gillette, Hartford native and famed Victorian actor, was one clever guy. Not only did he decide on a quirky stone castle on the banks of the Connecticut River as his retirement home, he designed it himself, down to the built-in furniture and even the hand-carved wooden hardware that operates more than 47 doors and 80 windows.

Gillette Castle in Hadlyme is part of a state park, open to the public again this summer after a three-year shutdown for restoration. West Hartford resident Ihor Budzinski did the hand carving to restore window hardware, wood sills, parts of lamp fixtures — even two carved cats on top of the outdoor pavilion's roof — at the castle.

A master carpenter, Mr. Budzinski is on the staff of Kronenberger & Sons Restoration Inc. of Middletown, the 56-year-old firm chosen to restore the castle's interior and exterior.

Visitors touring through the unusual structure — open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. through October — may not be able to tell the difference between the original and the restored wood fixtures. If so, that's a source of pride for Mr. Budzinski and the entire restoration team.

Said Jim Sabith, project supervisor for Kronenberger, "If someone says, 'It doesn't look like you did anything,' that's a great compliment. That's what we're trying to do."

Mr. Budzinski, who grew up in the town of Ternopol in the Ukraine of Polish parents, is the third generation in his family to be a fine woodworker.

"My grandfather was a cabinetmaker and wood carver. So was my father," he said, while showing a reporter around the castle recently.

At the age of 18, he went to school for graphic design and followed up with a three-year apprenticeship in wood carving.

Actually; said Mr. Budzinski, now 38, "I carved ever since my father would let me use the tools. You have to be very careful. They are sharper than surgical tools."

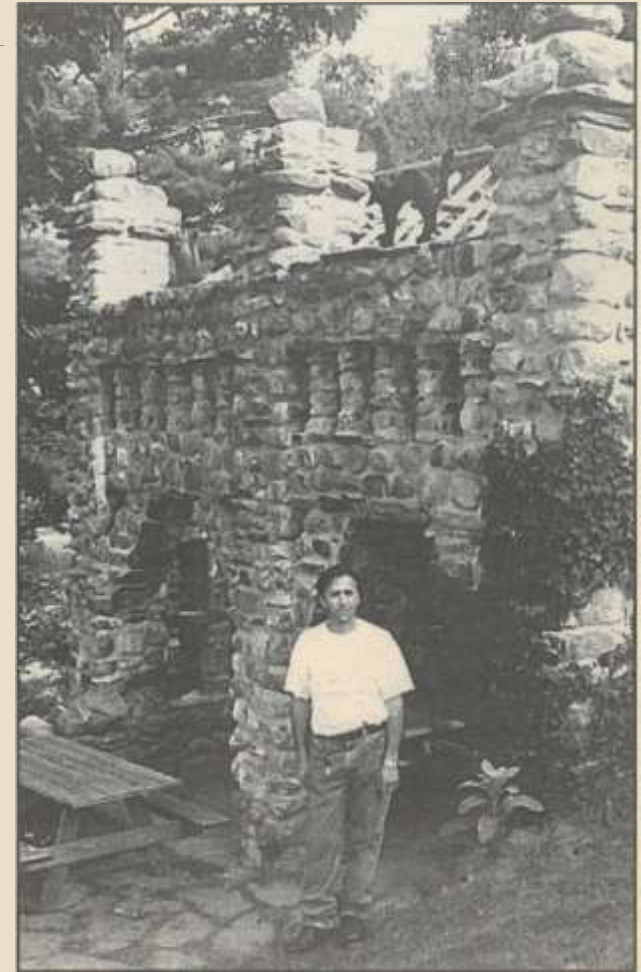
The master craftsman came to the United States a dozen years ago. He brought his wife, Maria, soon afterward. They live with their son, Steven, a student at Aiken School, and daughter, Kristina, a preschooler, in the northeast corner of town.

Outside the castle, on the roof of a stone pavilion that originally was used as the station stop for Gillette's miniature train, are two stylized wood cats, one painted black, one gray. Mr. Budzinski fabricated them in the studio of his home, using architectural drawings that gave him the concept for what he was to do.

Gillette, it is said, loved cats, and had more than a dozen in residence during the years he lived at the castle from 1919 until his death in 1937. Mr. Budzinski said he likes cats, too, and enjoyed the challenge of making true-to-size drawings and then translating them into large pieces from cedar.

He used a carver's mallet to get the rough shape, refining the features and design with the use of "about 10 chisels." Each cat took about eight hours to carve, he said.

Mr. Budzinski was just as challenged in the



Ihor Budzinski stands alongside the recently restored outdoor pavilion at the castle. He carved the arched black cat seen on the roof out of cedar.

restoration of some of the oak hardware in the castle, especially that on the diamond-paned windows. Over the years, the windows proved to be particularly vulnerable to moisture that was retained and conducted by the fieldstone walls.

Whole sections of wood, and even a couple of

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wood window sills, rotted out. All had to be restored or replaced.

Most of the windows, except, for a few that are out of reach, are operational. The system by which they are opened is ingenious, with a heavy wood latch used to release the window, and a second wood hinge by which the opening can be adjusted to three different widths.

"I've never seen a system like this before," said Mr. Budzinski. "It is entirely his (Gillette's) design."

Virtually all of the woodwork in the castle, including heavy overhead beams, has a dimpled effect to make it look old and rustic.

To get that effect, Mr. Budzinski had to chisel the oak into what he referred to as a "beehive pattern." He then had to replicate the individual hardware pieces prior to their being stained and oiled to match the originals.

A workshop was set up at the castle and Mr. Budzinski spent about two months there doing the fine carving.

"Oak is very hard to carve," he said. "It is about the hardest wood you find in this part of the world." Yet the more challenging, the better.

"I love to work with different materials and designs," said the artistically trained Mr. Budzinski.

His education taught him not only to be a master woodcarver, but to do gold leafing, plaster restoration and other architectural restoration.

On Center Church in Hartford, where he did another job with Kronenberger, Mr. Budzinski did "a lot of stenciling and gold leafing. I gold-leafed the cupola. I restored intricate plaster moldings."

He also worked on the Mark Twain House and, recently, on the Harriet Beecher Stowe house, both in Hartford. But one of his favorite jobs may have been the mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford.

"I really liked that job. I did a lot of plaster moldings. I made my own drawings," he said.

Mr. Budzinski said that in order to get the piece exactly right, he sometimes does "period research." He is much happier when he has "a little piece of the original. I can re-create it much, much easier."

He praised the original woodworkers at Gillette Castle.

"They were very, very good," he said.

It is known the castle was built by the now-defunct Hartford firm of Porteus Walker, whose employees also did the interior carving of furnishings and hardware.

During the period of time that the castle was being restored, the workmen from Kronenberger wondered about the wood built-in bar that Gillette used to provide drinks for his many guests before dinner.

It had an ingenious locking system so that people couldn't help themselves when their host wasn't around. Mr.

Budzinski found that two simple pegs were the key to opening the bar.

One had to be removed before the bar could be opened. A second one had to be inserted into just the right hole on one side of the piece in order to activate it.

The only problem: there are several "false holes" into which the peg fits

"You have to know exactly which one will work it," he said, demonstrating the system. It took a master woodworker to figure it out. **WHL**

"Oak is very hard to carve. It is about the hardest wood you find in this part of the world." Ihor Budzinski