





PHOENIX RISING

**FIRE ONCE RAGED THROUGH THE HOUSE.
BUT WITH CAREFUL RESTORATION—AND LUCK—CAROL
O'BRIEN'S FAMILIAL HOME SURVIVED**

By *Margaret Bauer* Photography by *Jay Baker*

Morning sunlight beams through arched windows into Carol O'Brien's airy parlor, highlighting a plush couch and soft chairs in a creamy white and aqueous blue. A sleek, reflective marble fireplace and porcelain lamps anchor the room's perimeter. In this house, earth, air and water are all well represented—but fire is kept carefully in its place.

In October 2006, the home nearly went up in smoke, with a massive blaze blackening the interior so extensively that photos taken the day after resemble negatives. Those windows left unbroken by rescue crews were coated with thick soot; furniture throughout the home was blistered and charred. Today, Mrs. O'Brien points through east-facing windows to the house next door. "Those windows over there—see how they're marked?" she says. "Those windows actually cracked from the heat, it was that intense."

Her neighbor thought he was hearing gunshots. "Then he saw the flames shooting over the deck," says Mrs. O'Brien. "And all I heard was 'Get up! Get out of the house! The house is on fire!'" Mrs. O'Brien and her son escaped only thanks to her neighbor's quick intervention.

But what kept this University City house from collapsing was its solid, 18-inch Missouri brick construction and concrete floor—improvements made standard starting in 1918, when the Maryland Terrace Association mandated replacing all cedar siding in the neighborhood with brick or stucco. Built in 1924, the Italian Renaissance-style home was among the first in the area, and Mrs. O'Brien's parents, its fourth owners, purchased it in 1952 for a sum of \$26,000.

The home's restoration would ultimately cost more than \$705,000, with contractor Steve Plant of Paragon Certified Restoration overseeing the arduous yearlong effort. It was an immense project, with plumbing and wiring to be updated, walls to be rebuilt, leaded transom windows to be re-created, crown moldings to be stripped and remade. New smoke alarms were another definite priority: "Now when one goes off, they all go off," says Mrs. O'Brien.

In restoring the home, Mr. Plant and Mrs. O'Brien made an effort to mix the old with the new. A flat-panel TV adorns the mantel above the brick family room fireplace; a sleek new phone hangs on the wall above a dark wood secretary in the corner. Antique pieces are still coming back from Woodard Cleaning and Restoration



Services, where much of what was deemed salvageable was sent in the days after the fire. “You can’t replace some of the things,” says Mrs. O’Brien. “But a lot of the stuff, you look at it and think, ‘Well, it could be me.’”

The dining room’s mirrored cabinets are fully stocked with restored pieces, including Belleek Irish china and pitchers originally imported for the Planters’ Hotel, a downtown landmark owned by her husband’s great-grandfather, Joseph Girardi, in the 1800s. (Remarkably, many of these pieces may have been twice tested by flame, as the Planters’ caught fire in January 1883.) Many furniture pieces from the hotel were restored as well, including the blue-and-white china lamps in the parlor, several contoured Baroque chairs and a few exquisitely detailed chests—as well as Mrs. O’Brien’s mother’s solid dining room table.

Upstairs, an antique three-quarter bed and its accompanying step stool also survived the flames. What didn’t fare so well: the home’s original Tiffany lamp. “The story is that Louis Tiffany asked my husband’s great aunt to marry him,” says Mrs. O’Brien. “He’d given her a huge, huge lamp—but that went in the fire.”

Mounted on the living room wall, however, is a small glass-doored cabinet with an equally fascinating provenance: It originally belonged to her uncle, Tommy Hayes, a key member of Illinois’ Cuckoo Gang in the 1920s. “He

started out as a runner—you know, gambling—and worked his way up. My grandmother said that they used to come and raid the house when they were looking for him.”

A few of the photos that made it through the fire are also displayed in the cabinet—among them a photo of Mrs. O’Brien’s grandfather, a Wellston saloon owner, and her uncle, Leo Hayes, a Missouri Democrat who served as Wellston’s mayor for more than two decades. Beer glasses from her grandfather’s saloon and coasters with the O’Brien coat of arms are stored nearby.

The stone-floored reading room encloses what was once the home’s front patio. The home’s second flat-panel TV resides here, accompanying two built-in display cabinets that house additional treasures: antique Thorens music boxes, European wood toys and two hexagonal glass boxes bearing blooms from her mother’s 2004 funeral. Astoundingly, these survived the fire untouched.

The parlor and foyer are bridged by two striking rugs, which represent a little luck o’ the Irish for Mrs. O’Brien. “Those are my Marshalls and T.J. Maxx rugs,” she says. “My sister sees the small one at Marshalls and goes, ‘This would be *perfect*’—but we couldn’t find any other like it. Then we went to T.J. Maxx, and *there’s* the runner. I thought, ‘There’s no way I’m gonna match it, that’s perfect.’”



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The tightly winding staircases in this two-story home are the originals, restored along with the furniture. A maid’s staircase turns sharply upward, tucked away near the kitchen, while the main stairway’s dark wood banister curves down to the entryway more gracefully, with twisted white-painted iron balusters interspersed with intricately wrought-iron flowers ending in a windswept floral finial.

The restoration also allowed Mrs. O’Brien to fix some layout problems that had plagued the residence for years, reversing several last-century renovations her father had made. In the kitchen, she raised the ceiling to its original height and nixed a tiny half-bath, restoring the original wet bar and a swinging butler’s door into the dining room. On the second floor, two awkward bathrooms and misplaced closets were redesigned to close off one side of a shared bath, add a shower and remove extra closet space. And in the living room, heated floors and between-the-glass blinds were added, and a fireplace on the east wall was moved to the room’s northeast corner, lending the room a new focal point.

From soot and ash, Mrs. O’Brien’s house has been reborn. 

