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The Obama connection

■ Kempton home was built by his ancestors.

By MEGHAN DURBAK
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On the Web:
Information on the house can be found at www.Dunhamhouse.com

KEMPTON - Shawn Clements couldn't wait to escape the hustle and bustle of daily life in the city. Seeking quiet and solitude, he moved to Tipton County and purchased an old farm house that he's spent the past few years restoring.

"You want to talk about irony," he muses.

That old white farm house has brought him anything but solitude. About two years after moving to the small town of Kempton, Clements learned the previous owners were Barack Obama's ancestors on his mother's side.

Clements' life hasn't been the same since. His house has become a local landmark for passers-by and out-of-town residents to get a glimpse of Obama's ancestral home. Clements has taken a break from his restoration project for a few days to witness Obama's inauguration and an inaugural ball today.

"With my kind of unique tie to it, it seems only fitting to be there," Clements said.

"I just want the experience," he admitted, saying "you don't turn down an invitation to the Inaugural Ball."

When he returns, Clements will once again refocus on the house that changed his life so dramatically. He also put together a team that is helping him restore and preserve the house. He'll be once again ready for a stream of visitors.

"If they don't stop by the house or knock on the door, I get phone calls, e-mails, a lot of questions from all over, 50 a week or more. (People) drive by and take pictures," he said.

A group of individuals helped him create a Web site featuring photos of the house. Obama's visit, background information and attempting to answer various questions.

Clements also became active in Obama's campaign, although he was cautious about vocalizing his political views. He said the house should stand out regardless of the political ties.

Clements said he was unaware of the house's ties to Obama when he purchased the home. A historical preservationist, he just wanted to see a 100-year-old building restored to its former glory.

His love of history led him to researching the former owners of the house located at 709 S. West St.

His house was built on property owned by Obama's

great-great-great-grandparents on his mother's side, Jacob and Catherine Dunham. The Dunham family was one of the first pioneer families, coming to Tipton County in 1847 or 1848, and also was a leading family in the Democratic party. William Riley Dunham, who built the house, served in the Indiana legislature as a Democrat.

By May, the Obama connection to Kempton was public knowledge. Clements was receiving phone calls and visitors on a daily basis. People stopped in front of his house to get pictures.

Among those visitors was the Illinois senator himself, now the president-elect. Obama, his wife, Michelle, and their two daughters arrived on May 3, so they could see their ancestral roots.

"I certainly didn't know he was going to come out," Clements said.

It's a moment Clements will never forget.

"I was the one that got to greet them as they got off the bus. His wife and the kids got off the bus first. It was quite a sight, the rock-star tour bus, with Secret Service," Clements recalled.

"I didn't get that awe, rock-star moment with him. I saw a guy about my age, a man doing what he thought was right. I saw a husband and really loving father who was just great with his kids," he said.

"He came up to me and said 'Hey man. How's it going? Just call me Barack. Tell me about the house.'"

Clements said some attention has dwindled, although it may pick up again now that Obama will officially hold office.

There are several options for the former Dunham household.

"I may have to move out of there," he said.

He's considering turning it into a museum or nonprofit. Regardless of whether life returns to some degree of normalcy or not, Clements wishes Obama well hoping the economic conditions will improve. In the meantime, he'll turn back to his job of historical preservation and hope locals make the most of this historic tie.

"The best thing I could come up with is to let the house do what it's done for 100 years; let it serve the community," he said.

Clements gets a close look

■ Kempton man finds himself right in the mix at inauguration.

By MEGHAN DURBAK
Tribune staff writer

Shawn Clements stood less than 100 yards away as the 44th president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, delivered his inaugural address.

The Kempton resident could hardly believe he was witnessing one of the largest events in history, the swearing in of the first black president.

"It was everything I thought it would be and more," Clements said.

Clements said his personal connections were able to get him a close spot to Obama as well as invitations to various balls and events.

"I had very good seats," he said.

Even with the great seating, Clements still had to be cleared by security. He arrived on the National Mall around 6 a.m. "It was a very long morning. It was pretty much a four-hour process getting from point A to point B," he said.

Dressed in a suit and wearing an Obama pin, Clements joined more than a million people gathered to celebrate the inauguration.

"The crowds were just amazing," Clements said.

Clements could see and hear the people surrounding him crying, clapping and shouting

for the candidate who promised to bring about "change."

"People were really moved," he said. "It was a real good feeling to see. People were really polite and happy."

Clements discovered his home was built by Obama's ancestors on his mother's side.

Following this discovery, Clements received a May visit from Obama and his family. He later became involved in the campaign, making phone calls and holding meetings in his home.

Clements wore the same suit he met Obama in and a pin of Obama as a young boy with his mother to commemorate his special tie to the president.

"I've had such a tremendous time," he said.

While witnessing the inauguration was the highlight of his trip to Washington, Clements also had the opportunity to meet the secretary of state designate, Sen. Hillary Clinton.

"She was a very nice, tiny lady - very nice, very cordial. I got to say hello, wished her well, got to take a picture with her," he recalled.

He also met Bruce Springsteen in person and watched Sunday's inaugural concert featuring Springsteen, John Mellencamp and U2, among others.

"You can't cover the gambit more than that," he said.

Clements said he plans to stay in the capital until Thursday so he can attend a few more events and meet more individuals. When he returns he'll focus on restoring his home - Obama's ancestral home - in a way that may open the house up for tours in the spring.

For now, he's just grateful to return with memories that'll last a lifetime.

"My head is swimming right now," he said. "It's the whole wow factor."



Shawn Clements
Owns home Obama ancestors built