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Obama's ancestral home focus of documentary

By Megan Graham
Tribune staff writer

KEMPTON — Indiana history buff Nelson Price relaxes in the sunny former master bedroom's sitting room of Obama's forefathers, looking out on the acres of land that once belonged to them.

The author of Indiana history books and the host of Indianapolis-based radio show Hoosier History Live!, Price has followed the story of this house closely since he first invited the owner, Shawn Christopher Clements, to speak on his show. Now, as he's being interviewed for "A Single Root," a documentary about the house, he's basking in generations of rich Indiana history. Price is certainly in his element.

"I think the Dunham House is an example of how doing a house history can change your life," he said during his interview with documentary director Steve Zukerman. "Look at what's happened: Shawn buys this older home without realizing it has connections to a rising political star and then the star becomes president of the United States. This becomes, in my opinion, a historic site."

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Clements bought the home nearly 10 years ago, before Obama became a senator and a household name. He started researching the home's history when an elderly woman knocked on his door and told him the history was an important one. As Obama gained popularity, the Chicago Sun-Times ran an article on the politician's family history, and Clements discovered the link between the former senator and the house he had purchased. The house, built by William Riley Dunham sometime in the 1880s, sits on the land purchased by Jacob and Catherine Dunham, Obama's fourth great-grandparents on his mother's side. William Riley Dunham had been a member of the Indiana General Assembly, and legend says his acquaintance Grover Cleveland spent a night in the Dunham home. President Obama visited the home while campaigning in 2008.

Clements is currently working to grant the home status of a National Historic Landmark. After buying the home, he says he spent nearly half a year cleaning it out. Basic rewiring had to be done; he says it's "amazing" that the place hadn't burned down. Now, the owner is using his expertise to get the home in shape. Items, like Cecil Dunham's sitting chair, are slowly finding their way back home as family members help in the effort.

Clements has been working to restore the house, but the endeavor has been expensive and time-consuming — especially with the increasing popularity of the house.

"Nothing takes a toll on a house like a thousand people coming through it," he said.

The house will be the focal point of the documentary, with the extensive family history weaving through more than a century of time.

"It's a simple story," Zukerman said of his documentary. "It doesn't require us getting really fancy with it. The message itself is what sells it. It's a good story."

John Kleiman, the film's executive producer, reconnected with Clements to do the project. He said he had read about Clement's latest endeavor and gave his old friend a call.

"I told him, 'I think we can make a movie out of what you've done,'" Kleiman said. "I could not believe that someone hadn't already done something on it. It is the ancestral home and lineage of the president's mother. You didn't have to hit me over the head to convince me that this could be a worthwhile project."

Though Clements said he'd been approached to do other film projects, there had never been the right person to do it. That is, until Kleiman connected him to Zukerman, who runs Soapbox Entertainment, a Los Angeles, Calif.-based production company.

"This is who we were waiting for," Clements said.

Zukerman said he hopes to have the film finished by mid-October so it can be shown in screenings in time for November's election.

"I think a lot of Hoosiers are shocked when they find out that there's this connection to Barack Obama here in Tipton County, Indiana," Price said. "We associate him with exotic places like Hawaii or Indonesia or Chicago, not Tipton County, Indiana, right out in the middle of the prairie here."

Kleiman said the team hopes to wrap up filming in the next eight to 10 days. They'll interview everyone from the last Dunham child to grow up in the house to Kokomo Mayor Greg Goodnight, who is a distant ancestor of Catherine Goodnight, Obama's great-great-great-great grandmother.

"I love history," Goodnight said. "I love the history of our country, and I think we should do what we can to preserve the historical knowledge of any and every president."

Kleiman believes the house will soon be even more of a point of pride and tourism for the community.

"I think that at some point in time, the Obama family will be back to visit the house again," he said. "I would also hope that we become an important part of the economy here."

Above all else, Clements said he wants the documentary to represent the house's rich history, and hopes that people will not disregard it because of their feelings about Obama's politics.

"Whether you voted for him or not, whether you like him or not, he's still the president of the United States," Clements said.

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interesting history to have to see pictures of the old place!

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