

# Times-Republican

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February 29, 2024

## Marshalltown's Big Treehouse

Thank you for 4 decades of support for my Big Treehouse fantasy, hobby, and passion. My name is Mick Jurgensen and I "lived" The Big Treehouse for all of my adult life.

Nestled in the historic grove of Burr Oak trees east of Marshalltown on Shady Oaks Road was a unique construct named The Big Treehouse. It was my hobby that I began building in the early 1980's while I attended college. Almost immediately, it enthusiastically drew attention. Let me tell you why this was so.

My family including my mother Judy Jurgensen, my grandmother Mary Gift, and grandfather Robert Gift were supportive and helped with construction. Together, we got started by finding supplemental ways and means to earn funding to buy the lumber and materials. We had no idea that the small 10' x 12' patio attached to a small Maple tree would begin such a journey. By the end of the first summer, the treehouse had grown to two levels... but wait, we were just getting started!

Over the next 40 years, the maple tree grew quickly and the treehouse grew with it to become a 13 level, five story structure with well over 5,000 square feet of floor space. Each year my family and I would dream of what would come next to enhance the treehouse. My professional work was teaching school, attending graduate school, and serving as a school principal. Virtually every moment I was available, I returned home to Marshalltown to get the work done.

The treehouse was an open deck structure with beautiful green leaves and tree branches that served as beautiful walls and ceilings. The treehouse was electrified for use at night. It had telephone service, television, and a substantial kitchen. Two raised walkways were constructed to access the treehouse from the north and the south.

Over 150 feet of beautiful flower gardens were along the walkways and decorated several levels of the treehouse. Hanging flower baskets adorned the entire 400 foot walkways.

The gardens were all fed by an automatic watering and fertilizer system. The fresh smell of flowers on a warm summer day was amazing.

A specialized music system played mountain music. On the walkways were sights and sounds of Shady Oaks including a raccoon, cat, squirrel, train bridge, a Lincoln Highway era rainbow arch bridge, and a covered bridge museum. Steps connected the levels of the treehouse so that the climb to the top was made easy. Guests enjoyed ringing a large train bell when they reached the top. To exit the 55' high treehouse, a spiral staircase was built in the early 2000's to help people move from the top level of the treehouse back down to the walkways with ease.

From almost the very beginning, people wanted to come and experience the Big Treehouse. The phone began to ring off the hook. My grandmother began to organize small guided tours and people loved the experience so much that they began to donate funds for the upkeep and growth of the treehouse. There were large bus tours as well in the mix. My mom, my wife, and I helped with those large tours. The last of the funds helped to pay the cost to remove the treehouse December 15, 2023.

Not only did the treehouse receive local attention but it attracted statewide and national attention long before there were television shows about treehouses. Through the years, I was a guest on over two dozen morning radio shows from coast to coast and even from Alaska and Europe. Television guest spots were frequent and even the Discovery Channel made a feature about the treehouse.

I built it and people came! Visitors arrived by different modes of transportation: On foot, horseback, bicycles, and motorcycles, and in cars, vans, trucks, limousines, RVs, and both school and chartered buses. One time hot air balloons landed in the meadow across the creek.

Visitors from every state, Washington, D.C., and 57 countries came to discover the Treehouse magic. The countries were Austria, Australia, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan), Czech Republic, Chile, China, Columbia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Honduras, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kuwait, Laos, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands (Holland), New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Norway, Panama, Poland, Russia, Samoa, Scotland, Singapore, Slovakia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, Uruguay, Venezuela, Wales, Germany, and Yucatan.

The visitors ranged in age from a few days to 96 years, and they came from all walks of life: governors, architects, business professionals, clubs (service and social), bankers,

doctors, educators, exchange students, farmers, homemakers, lawyers, ministers, retirees, and children.

I have always been proud of the positive attention the treehouse brought to my hometown of Marshalltown. The treehouse put Marshalltown on the map competing with other major attractions across Iowa and the midwest in literally hundreds of books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles. Each year a guestbook was filled with thousands of names. Quite a few of those people stayed overnight in Marshalltown and virtually all enjoyed Marshalltown restaurants, stores, and attractions.

Sadly, It took both a pandemic and a derecho storm to bring all this positivity to a halt. It was left neither practical or even possible to restore the treehouse after the storm. Personally, I am left having to learn how to live my life without the treehouse.

I want to thank the hundreds of Marshalltown people of who brought generations to visit year after year, both county and city governments, media outlets such as the Times-Republican, our Chamber of Commerce, the former Visitors and Convention Bureau, and our Shady Oaks neighbors who tolerated all the commotion for so long. Most of all, I want to thank my family for their participation and support through the years. Finally, I want to thank my brave wife Liz Fischer-Jurgensen who had quite a surprise when she learned that she was about to marry a guy and a treehouse in 1992.

If you want more information about the treehouse and historic Shady Oaks (since 1925), you can still visit [www.bigtreehouse.net](http://www.bigtreehouse.net) or leave stories about your tours through the treehouse on the “Memories of Marshalltown’s Big Treehouse” Facebook page.