

Executive mansion: home or political tool?

By Jim Nowlan

Gov. Bruce Rauner promises to renovate the leaky Illinois Executive Mansion with his seemingly limitless wealth—and to live there as well.

Better to utilize the mansion extensively for social events for the political class, especially when the lawmakers are in town, but continue to live in Chicago, where the action is.

The undistinguished Italianate, brick, 16-room mansion was built in 1855 during the governorship of Joel Matteson (who apparently tampered with a jury to avoid prison for cashing in \$300,000 in state script that had already earlier been redeemed).

Entry into the building is from under a low-ceilinged portico, which darkens the entry way. A spiral staircase leads up to airy, sunny public rooms that are furnished tastefully in 19th Century style of the era of its construction.

There is a large, long dining room that can serve 30 or so, I am recalling, for formal dinners but is used more frequently as a buffet table. Beyond the dining room is a modest ballroom with small stage that would be perfect for musicales, but is rarely used in that way.

Behind all is a separate, private 7-room apartment where governors Edgar and Ryan and spouses lived.

Since recent governors have not lived in the mansion, it is instead rented out to all but maybe convicted felons for shindigs of all sorts.

Jim Thompson often used a small, cozy office on the ground floor for meetings with staff. The abstemious Jim Edgar, a good governor but reserved socially, did not use the mansion much, or maybe politicians simply didn't want to go there for dry events.

George Ryan, also a good governor, made great use of the mansion for lively socials, dinners and parties.

I still recall fondly one end-of-legislative-session party Ryan hosted. Lobbyists, lawmakers and the media were in a partying mood, and the early summer evening graced the indoor-outdoor event.

Much of the crowd was on the crescent-moon drive leading to the mansion; the booze was flowing liberally. George was moving easily from one appreciative gaggle to another, chuckling about how he managed to squire this or that piece of legislation through the General Assembly.

On the portico above, a wailing Dixieland band was tootling such greats as the Tin Roof Blues. I felt as if I were playing a part in a movie about legendary Louisiana governor Huey P. Long of the 1920s.

A lot of political business gets done, or at least started, in settings like this.

Ryan kept the mansion so busy that I especially remember one evening cocktails-and-buffet event. My cocktail napkin was damp, which I mentioned to a waiter, harried as he was to get drinks to all who were waiting.

"We're so busy here," the waiter responded as he rushed by, tray of drinks in hand, "that we have time to wash'em (the napkins), but we don't have time to dry'em."

Yet actually living permanently in the mansion in 2015 is a different thing.

First, the political action is in Chicago. That's where the elected officials, key staff, agency directors, media and money are resident.

I am on a state commission. We meet once a month. Eleven of the 12 meetings each year are in Chicago at the shabby Thompson Center; the other is in our state capital (this year, all 12 are in Chicago). That's how it goes in Illinois state government.

The new governor would be best advised to use the mansion frequently when the General Assembly is in session, for gatherings small and large with lawmakers and deal-makers.

Most legislators are of the aspiring class. They want to be perceived back home as prominent and influential.

The perquisite of being invited to the mansion for parties of the sort only a billionaire like Rauner can throw means a lot to a legislator, especially when he or she recounts it back home to folks in the district.

(A fan of performing arts, I suggest weekly cocktail events at the mansion, to include a break in the socializing and deal-making for 30-45 minutes in the ballroom to hear accessible musical programs by small aggregations from Illinois' many fine college and university music departments.

(I think, for example, of the excellent Camerata Woodwind Quintet from Western Illinois University, the lilting sounds of the Caribbean steel drum band from the distinguished University of Illinois music school, and the great big band jazz program at Northern Illinois.)

The mansion can be a highly useful tool in the political life of Illinois. It doesn't have to be a permanent home.