

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Paige Paulsson

IT'S GOOD TO TALK TO YOU, PAIGE. I HEAR YOU'RE A NEW MOTHER. CONGRATULATIONS.

Thanks. My little guy is a dream and my pregnancy was great, even though it wasn't planned. Some of the best things in life are surprises, right? Marty was born within the first year of our marriage, while I was working at the Laird Mansion Museum as docent-archivist and in the thick of my graduate studies. And my farmer-groom Danny was right in the middle of seeding. Deadlines took on a whole new meaning!

I'LL BET. WHAT WAS YOUR THESIS SUBJECT?

Wow, that's a rare question; people usually avoid it. As a historian I live and breathe research and, in fact, you could say I've been obsessed. The published title is *Victorian Architecture as Domestic Expression of Typology in the Home Life of Moses David Melchizedek Laird*.

WHAT A MOUTHFUL. BUT I CAN TELL THAT THE TOPIC STILL EXCITES YOU.

Yes! It's been such a pleasure to immerse myself in another time, another world. MDM Laird had great influence as the founder of the town that Danny, Marty, and I live in—Kirkton, North Dakota, Pembina County, pressed right up against the Canadian border.

MDM's roots were sunk deep in the Red River Settlement just north of the 49th Parallel, as he was the son of Scottish missionaries who'd immigrated to the colony in the era of steamboats, smallpox, and the Indian Wars. MDM's father sent him down to Saint Paul to study at the oldest university in Minnesota, but he didn't stay there long, pushing back up here to Dakota Territory. Geography played an important part in MDM's story and in the wider story of the Great Plains and its Native population. He made a difference in this part of the world as philanthropist, local magnate, famed bachelor, and true Renaissance man.

SOUNDS LIKE HE WAS A REAL PIONEER OF THE WEST.

He was! But those facts can get pretty dry. What really fueled my passion and got my heart racing was the deliberate meaning I seemed to read in everything that MDM touched. That's why I loved my job as a guide at the mansion. I was surrounded by his symbolism.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY SYMBOLISM?

MDM's home is full of his personality—the thumbprint of the creator showing on everything. His designs incorporate a square-within-square motif, a pattern repeated from the layout of the grounds and inner yard to the outer structure of the house, the blueprint of its interior, its decoration and furnishings. So many details about the mansion museum point to some deeper meaning—that's a very Victorian trait. For example, the armrests of the library chair are carved in the shape of a dog, an emblem that stands for loyalty. Custom-woven upholstery features the sweeping swallow that signifies a return home. And all over the mansion—on fireplace mantle pieces and doorway lintels—he inscribed snippets of meaningful poetry or mottos or sayings.

Lots of clues about the Laird Estate piqued my attention, but I just couldn't seem to find the key to the code. And in the end—when I did figure it out—it was a secret that no one before me had discovered. In fact, my findings are being published in a top-tier scholarly journal!

CONGRATULATIONS! WHAT AN HONOR.

Thanks, but it's not due to any brilliance on my part. Last spring when my final research was due, I was really stuck! I'd read, probed, and scrutinized—all my brains fully engaged for, like, twenty hours a day. I thought that if I just worked a little harder, I'd solve the enigma and reach my goal of complete knowledge about MDM. For example, at one point near the end, I was sure that some original letters coming from the museum up in Canada held the answer I was dying to find. But I just couldn't put it all together. A very human element was missing. And that's when Libby came along and set the investigation afire so that I finally got it all worked out.

RIGHT, SHE AND SYBIL CAME FROM THE TWIN CITIES FOR YOUR VERY LAST GUIDED TOUR OF THE MUSEUM.

Sybil! (Laughs) I'd forgotten her name, as I saw her only the one day. What a character! And really quite inappropriate, given the mixed ages of my tour group. She was all over the eighth-grade teacher and I was mortified for his students. But Libby was a different sort altogether—I could hardly picture them as friends. Libby fascinated me from the moment I saw her.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT LIBBY THAT INTRIGUED YOU?

"Intrigue" is the right word. She first approached the museum by email anonymously—pretty cloak-and-dagger. I had no idea at the time the answers she would offer on the day of the tour. When I met her, nothing really tweaked at first—she was just an attractive middle-aged woman with high cheekbones and tawny complexion. But was I ever in for a surprise!

HOW SO?

Well, first of all, she was really quiet and very, very attentive. By the way her eyes lit up and the few questions she asked, I could see she noticed many small points that escaped others. Every step of the way in each room we toured, she became slightly more agitated—or maybe I should say intense. And then the last part of the tour opened the floodgates to my understanding. Hers, too. Libby tells me now—you know we've kept in touch, right?—that she finally discovered her definition of "home." She'd been restless and found reprieve that day in the mansion.

SO YOU'RE NOT ACTIVE IN ACADEMIA RIGHT NOW, PAIGE?

Let's say I'm taking a sabbatical. Not that I don't still read voraciously, though some of my primary sources are now board books. (Giggles) The mystery of the mansion solved might eventuate in further studies for me; I always planned on pursuing a PhD. But my priorities refocused once I understood what family really means, what it meant in MDM's life, and what incredible influence parenting exerts. For now, I'm content. We'll see what the future holds.

