

An Eerie Kind of Dream House

Published Tuesday, June 1, 1999, in the San Jose Mercury News

Internet riches fund purchase of 'haunted castle' in hometown

BY MIKE CASSIDY

Mercury News Staff Writer

DREAM house. Nightmare house.

Call it what you want. Michelle Heimburger calls it hers. Here she is 25 and already realizing her life's dream. She's always wanted to own a castle. Not just any castle, but Franklin Castle. And now it's all hers. OK. So it's not perfect. It's in Cleveland, for one thing, and Heimburger lives in Redwood City. And it's haunted. Something about a 19th-century owner hanging his daughter and butchering a servant girl in the place.

'Then there was that whole thing with maybe the Nazis who were machine-gunned down', says Heimburger, adding that that was long ago.

But as any Realtor will tell you, sometimes a motivated buyer can look past the little things. Heimburger was motivated. Ever since she was a kid in Ohio, she's been fascinated by the 26-room, four-story sandstone near downtown.

'I sort of became obsessed with it,' she says, 'and it sort of snowballed from there.'

She'd visit on trips back to Ohio. She noted the Realtor's name. She e-mailed him. The owner wanted \$425,000. She offered \$325,000. He countered \$350,000. Sold.

Yes, this dream has to do with the Internet boom. Two and a half years ago, Heimburger left Ohio to work as a Web surfer at Yahoo Inc.

'The same day I was about to take the worst job of my life,' says Heimburger, who shares her Redwood City rental with three others, 'my friend called me from here and said, 'Why don't you move to San Francisco and work at Yahoo?' And I was, like, 'OK.' '

Another fortune born. With the job came stock options. Yahoo's stock soared.

'I was amazed at the amount of money she made,' says Heimburger's father, Al, 49, a mail carrier from Ashland, Ohio.

Al Heimburger is brimming with pride, though he misses his daughter. He makes the 60-mile trip to the castle regularly and has a to-do list the length of the Cuyahoga River.

'As far as the house goes,' Al says of Michelle, 'yes, she's always wanted it.'

Now having it, it seemed appropriate to celebrate. And so, Saturday, under a full moon, she hosted a bash, something of a monster mash, at the castle. Most of Yahoo was invited. No, they didn't all come, but some serious partyers did.

'Anyone at the company who wants to fly to Cleveland to a party,' she said, 'I want them at my party.' Besides her 900 or so co-workers, she invited 300 from outside the company. She even invited the Cleveland Indians.

Yes, it's hard living so far from the home she loves. She's yet to meet the spirits roaming the halls of her house. But she'll visit every other month. And she'll sleep there. And with luck, one day, one ghost will at

least say 'boo.'