

Illinois Villa – The F. J. Lewis Estate

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Illinois Villa - Undated

Frank J. Lewis and his first wife Alberta started coming to the White Lake area from Illinois in the summers and in 1922 started building the house that would become Illinois Villa.

Francis James “Frank” Lewis was born in Chicago on 9 April 1867, to William Francis and Ellen (ne Ford) Lewis. He was raised on the family’s Illinois farm along with his siblings.

Frank desired to become a physician and he studied intensely in that profession until 1883, when at the age of 16, Frank left school, put his career plans on hold and went to work to raise money to help support his family. By the time Frank was 20 years old, he had acquired a good business sense. He learned the roofing trade from an uncle who he worked for in Omaha, Nebraska.

He met and married his first wife, Alberta Dilley on 3 Mar 1889 in Woodbury, Iowa. They had seven children: Charlotte (1889-1920); Jerome (1892-1968); John (1895-1977); Joseph (1899-1931); Josephine (1902-1996); James (1911-1965); and Thomas (1918-1978).

Returning to Chicago he set up the F. J. Lewis Manufacturing Company, a plant that manufactured tar, paving, and roofing products. It was not unusual to see him scale rooftops to instruct workmen on the proper installation of the materials that his company made.

Sadly, Frank's wife Alberta died on 13 March 1923, before their summer home in Whitehall was completed. She had been instrumental in the founding of the Big Sisters for the purpose of assisting friendless young girls in Chicago.

Frank's business, however, continued to flourish during the 1920s and he & his son John soon began the development of a 400-acre tract of land called Fair Elms Estates and began to build 2,000 homes.

In 1927 Frank sold the F. J. Lewis Manufacturing Company and retired from business life at the age of 60.

In 1928, five years after his first wife died, he married 40-year-old Julia Mildred Deal on 12 November in Pima, Arizona, with whom he had two more children: Philip (1929-2012) and Edward (1932-2016). Julia was also involved in many charitable organizations and founded both the Illinois Club and the Illinois Club of Catholic Women for which the Illinois Villa was later used.

Illinois Villa was started around 1929 as a summer institute for members of the Illinois Club for Catholic Women by Chicago philanthropist F. J. Lewis and his wife Julia Deal Lewis. It was located on the property of their summer lakeside estate.

In the 1930's, F. J. Lewis founded the Lewis Memorial Maternity Hospital in the vacant Lakota Hotel memory of his first wife Alberta and their daughter Charlotte.

Between the 1935-36 season, the Villa underwent extensive remodeling. Twelve private rooms were added to the main building and additional cabins were built along the lake trail. Mrs. Thomas J. Conner was the proprietress of the Illinois Villa which had many steady guests in the inn and cottages. It appears that the Illinois Villa was being used by the Illinois Catholic Women's Club as well.

In January 1946, Frank J. Lewis purchased Melody Farm, a country estate built by the late J. Ogden Armour, of Lake Forest, Illinois, at a reputed cost of \$5,200,000. The purchase price was approximately \$400,000. The estate adjacent to Lake Forest consisted of 846 acres and an Italian Style Villa. The house, known today as Reid Hall, is on the campus of Lake Forest Academy. Lewis also purchased the 17-story Tower Court Building for \$500,000 cash, for use by Loyola University and the Illinois Club for Catholic Women.

In July 1946, The Muskegon Chronicle had an advertisement appear under the heading "Lake and Resort for Sale" – Popular and attractively furnished resort hotel, established clientele filled to capacity, well located between Lake Michigan and White Lake, opposite White Lake Golf Course, near Yacht Club. Write Illinois Villa, Michillinda, Michigan." Lewis ended up not selling at that time.

In July 1948, redecorating of the Villa took place which included interior painting. Mrs. Conner continued to manage the Villa through the 1950s. It appears the last time the Illinois Villa was open to the public was around 1958.

During his lifetime, Lewis was also Vice President of the Catholic Charities of Chicago, a Knight of St. Gregory, doner of the Lewis Science Hall at St. Ambrose College in Davenport, Iowa. He also served as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

In October 1955, the Frank J. Lewis Foundation gifted the 18-story Kimball Building, located on the southwest corner of Wabash and Jackson Blvd., to DePaul University.

In July 1959, it was reported that Mr. & Mrs. Frank J. Lewis were enjoying their summer estate. Mrs. Thomas Connor was a guest of the Lewis estate. The Jesuit Order of Priests from Chicago were also using the Illinois Villa for their summer vacations.

Frank J. Lewis died at his home in Palm Beach, Florida on 21 December 1960 at the age of 93.

The Chicago Daily News on 14 June 1961 reported that Frank J. Lewis left an estate worth \$20,017,000 according to an inventory filed in probate court. His will left about \$1,500,000 to relatives and friends. The rest was to go to Roman Catholic Charities and Educational Institutes.

Following his death, the Frank J. Lewis Foundation made a million-dollar donation to the University of Notre Dame for the construction of a residence for graduate teaching nuns. This allowed the nuns to study full time during the regular school term.

Julia continued with her welfare work before passing in Palm Beach, Florida on 27 December 1966 at the age of 78 years. Frank and Julia are buried in Calvary Catholic Cemetery in Evanston, Illinois.

In August 1981, the former Lewis Estate was advertised for sale as a unique summer home that had been restored to its original elegance. Located near the golf course and yacht club on a large lot, it had 150 feet of lake frontage and plenty of privacy. The one-of-a-kind property was available for \$125,000.

In 1986, the owners of the former Lewis cottage were having it moved back about 140 feet from the edge of the eroding Lake Michigan bluff which had come to about 15 feet from the front of the home.