

Rockledge, Homer (Winona County)



IT WAS A COMMANDING house befitting a dramatic site. The man-made splendor of Rockledge stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the natural beauty of the Mississippi River bluffs near Winona. The house gave focus to the exceptional landscape, and the landscape framed the remarkable house. Each counterpointed the other and, in the process, the allure of both was heightened.

Rockledge was commissioned in 1912 as a summer residence by Grace Watkins King and her husband, E. L. King. She was the daughter of the founder of J. R. Watkins Company in Winona, originally a manufacturer of medicinal liniments, and he would rise to become president of the company. The Kings were wealthy adventurers with a penchant for international travel and big game hunting in Africa. Although their architectural preferences were less exotic than their taste in travel, the couple's expectations were abundant—as was their budget.

For the Kings' residence, Chicago-based architect George Washington Maher designed nothing less than a Prairie School masterpiece. He elegantly composed all 10,000-plus square feet of space under a low-slope, red tile roof giving the house a sense of earth-bound permanence and invulnerability. As was his preference, Maher repeated a motif, in this case the tiger lily that bloomed on site, in the design of all interior elements including furniture, fabrics, and even the family's silver service. No expense was spared nor detail overlooked in the creation of a singular, harmonious work of art for the Kings and their family.

In the end it would be a family member, E. L. King Jr., who destroyed the house. Rebuffing pleas from preservationists, he had the home demolished shortly before his death in 1987. Today—unbefitting a house conceived as



Rockledge, about 1950 (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

a unified work of art and architecture—Rockledge lives on in bits and pieces in museums and private collections across the country. Only the river bluffs bear witness to the memory of its magnificent whole.

—Jane King Hession

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