

LOSS IS A BLOW TO EX-FIRST LADY

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It was Norma Matheson's daughter who first called her with the news: The Governor's Mansion was burning.

"We both cried," Matheson said. "That building is so much a part of Utah, but it's also a part of me. My daughter was married there. Wednesday's fire that gutted much of one of Utah's most historic landmarks came as a devastating blow to Utah's former first lady. It was Norma Matheson, after all, who oversaw the 1978 renovation of the structure and its return to glory as a governor's residence.

"That place says something about our history," she said, her voice breaking with emotion. "It is a lovely, gracious place that stands as a symbol of what Utah has been and still is."

The mansion - originally called the Kearns Mansion - virtually teems with Utah history. It was originally completed in 1902 by Park City silver-mining magnate Thomas Kearns - a self-made millionaire by the time he was 28.

Kearns, a colorful and oftentimes controversial figure in Utah history in his own right, brought in architect Carl M. Neuhausen to build a mansion on South Temple (then Brigham Street) that would rival, if not surpass, those of the other mining magnates in the West.

Kearns spared no expense in building the \$250,000, 28-room structure, which featured six baths, 10 fireplaces, an all-marble kitchen, a bowling alley in the basement, a ballroom on the third floor, a billiard room, two parlors, two dining rooms and three vaults for his copious wealth and wine stock.

"Thomas Kearns wanted a place of distinction on an important street where all other homes of distinction had been built, where he could bring friends from all over the country and entertain them with a degree of dignity," says Jay Haymond, grants manager for the Division of State History.

According to Matheson, the mansion is likely the only remaining example of French Renaissance architecture left in the state.

"The most incredible thing about it is the variety of woods and the carving of the wood," Matheson said. "The detail of craftsmanship was incredible. It was a challenge for refinishers. All the wood had been imported. There was Russian mahogany in the dining room, English oak, French oak. The design is unique and the materials are unique.

"As I understand it, the main staircase is gone, and that was built with French oak. The forests aren't even standing where that wood came from. That staircase can be replicated, but it can't be duplicated."

Matheson also feared the loss of the unique plaster work on the ceilings of the mansion. The plastering technique has become a lost art since the mansion was built.

Also lost was a rare form of curved glass windows. Firefighters had to break out several of the windows for ventilation. "The glass was amazing," Matheson said. "It was a half-inch thick. There is nothing like it today, and really I doubt it can be replaced."

Added Max Evans, director of the Division of State History, "you can never really restore something like the Governor's Mansion. It is a devastating loss to the whole state."

One unique characteristic of the mansion that may have helped limit damage was fire retardant measures built into the structure. "When they were doing the electrical wiring on the interior

walls (during restoration), the electricians complained because of brick firebreaks on the interior of the walls," she added. ``They had a heck of a time drilling through. I hope that was advantageous to the situation today."

Restoration of the mansion is expected to take from four to six months and cost \$1 million to \$1.5 million, said Neal Stowe, director of the Division of Facilities, Construction and Management. Crews will use historical photographs of the interior of the structure to replicate as much of the original condition as possible.

But will the mansion be repaired? ``There's no question about it," Matheson said. The mansion is, after all, a slice of Utah history.

After its construction in 1902, the mansion was an opulent showpiece of high culture in Utah. After Thomas Kearns, who served as a U.S. senator from Utah, died in a 1918 car crash, the Kearns family stayed in the mansion until 1937 when it was turned over to the state, which then turned it into a Governor's Mansion.

The first Utah governor to reside there was Henry Blood, followed by Herbert Maw and J. Bracken Lee. The mansion became the home of the Utah Historical Society in 1957, and in 1978 renovation was begun to restore the grandeur of the mansion and its status as a Governor's Mansion. The renovations were completed in 1979, and Norma and Scott Matheson took up residence there. They were followed by Gov. Norm Bangerter and, earlier this year, by the family of Gov. Mike Leavitt.

The mansion is one of two of its stature remaining in the state. The other is the David Keith mansion a block west of the Governor's Mansion. Ironically, that mansion was gutted by a similar Christmas-season fire in 1986.

The Keith House, as it is called, was subsequently renovated and became the headquarters for Utah millionaire businessman Ian Cummings.

The fact the Keith House has regained most of its former grandeur comes as little consolation to the scores of people who invested their hearts and souls in the 1978 renovation of the Governor's Mansion.

Norma Matheson expects to be part of the new restoration project. She is, after all, on the Governor's Mansion Foundation Board. ``But even if I wasn't, I would want to be a part of it anyhow," she said. ``It's part of my life."