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Iowa's Wedding of the Century

Terrace Hill, her Des Moines home, was simply the grandest mansion ever built on the prairies. Here heiress Beulah Cooper Hubbell married a Swedish count in 1899, in an event so lavish it was called, "the wedding of the century." Come to a gala re-creation of that Gilded-Age wedding, a party, benefiting the mansion, that captures all the period spectacle of Beulah's beautiful day.

"Terrace Hill was never more magnificent than last night," wrote a reporter in 1899. "Brightly lighted and embowered with flowers and greenery, it was a very palace... The bridal party formed at the landing of the great staircase and came down the steps to the strains of the Lohengrin march."

One hundred years later, musicians struck up the wedding march in just the same way. The bride descended, a vision in her puff-sleeved satin gown beaded with pearls and silver, ostrich feathers adorning her veil, her sevenfoot train gracefully guided by a young ring bearer in white.

"Of course no vows were enacted at our party," says Dottie Butts, president of the Terrace Hill Society, which works to preserve this treasure-filled home and planned every detail of the event. "Instead, our 'bridal party' – all related to Beulah Cooper Hubbell – received guests under the great chandelier of the drawing room, the spot where Beulah spoke her vows."

The elaborate chandelier, flashing with more than fifteen hundreds crystal prisms, is just one of the marvels of Terrace Hill, built in 1869 in the Second Empire style. Here, members of the wealthy Hubbell family dwelt from 1884 until 1971, when they gave the mansion, now the governor's official residence, to the state of Iowa. For Beulah's gala centennial, close to a hundred descendants and relatives came from far and wide, bearing heirlooms and mementoes, and turning the fund-raiser into a wonderful family reunion.

How does one recapture a single event of the past? No member of the local press had been invited to Beulah's wedding. But one, masquerading as a foreign diplomat, managed to sneak into the affair and describe its every lavish detail. "Thank goodness he did," says Dottie, "because it enabled our committees to envision the event, the decorations, even the flowers on the staircase."

"Descendants of the groom brought with them the original wedding license, and we had it on display." –Dottie Butts, president, Terrace Hill Society.

Lanterns lit the garden paths, quantities of lilies and roses filled the splendid rooms of the mansion and nodded near twinkling candles on tables under the tent. On the arm of her handsome Count Carl, played by his grandson, the bride glided from table to table, graciously greeting everyone. After a year in the planning, Beulah's storybook wedding was unfolding to laughter and music under the stars. It seemed as if the Gilded Age had never left Terrace Hill.

"When we weren't sure how something was done at that time, we researched it and, well, maybe we embellished a bit too," admits Dottie Butts. For example, because Faythe Dornink, the talented courture seamstress who created the wedding gown, could see only the back from blowups of Beulah's wedding photo, she studied period gowns at

London's Victoria and Albert Museum— “ which inspired the beaded floral leaf design on the front,” she says.

Roses topping the five-tiered wedding cake, opposite, created by baker Lola Lovejoy of the Lovejoy Cake Shop, were echoed by real ones scattered on a lace cloth in a sumptuous display awaiting the couple's cutting. For the hors d'oeuvres, left, and dinner menu, however, the planners parted company with the past and opted for delicious, contemporary fare by Chef Ricchard Grace.

Governor and Mrs. Thomas Vilsack, the current thirf-floor residents of Terrace Hill (the spectacular first and second floors are open to the public for tours”, were the hosts in lieu of Beulah's own successful father, railroad and business magnate Frederisk M. Hubbell, a man of whom it was said, “He never lost his head or his money.” Among the household treasures he had inventoried in 1900 were “forty-eight lue and gold dinner plates.” In the mansion's dining room, a survivor from that set was on display, along with other beautiful pieces of ancestral Hubbell china, opposite, and a superb collection of antique silver napkin rings.

As dancing in the tent went on through the evening and music drifted over the lawn, Beulah's extraordinary childhood home stood alight on its hilltop for another “wedding of the century.”