

Hidden away in boxes and barns — or merely hanging in sumptuous plain sight — the gorgeous chandeliers and fixtures of the Uptown Theatre have been vacationing these past few years in Barrington Hills.

They have been cared for by an eccentric but loving crew of collectors, restorers and guardians, rescued from avaricious thieves and the neglect of a convicted slumlord as if they were evacuees rushed to safety from a war zone.

And — on Tuesday of this week, under the careful eyes of most of those who have cared for them for so long — they all began their journey back to Uptown, Chicago, home.

We were there to watch.

The story of how the Sanfilippo Estate, the family home of Jasper Sanfilippo, a hugely successful American businessman, a nut magnate who turned proprietary shelling techniques into a business with 2018 net sales of \$889 million, came to help save the treasures of the Uptown is a fascinating one.

You first have to know that the Sanfilippo Estate is not an ordinary home, even by the grand standards of Barrington Hills. Sanfilippo, 87, is a collector of automatic mechanical instruments, but the word “collector” does not do justice to the scale of his world-class acquisitions, which now occupy several buildings on his estate, nor the level of restoration in which he has invested, which is dazzling. When his collecting was at its peak in the 1990s, Sanfilippo defined mechanical instruments very broadly, collecting pipe organs, fairground ticket booths, steam engines and locomotives, slot machines, stereoscopes, mutoscopes, vending machines, calliopes, a carousel, player pianos and impossibly complex lighting fixtures — brass arms and internal beading polished to a shine.

(And he has a bar, rescued from a brothel in St. Louis.)

The Sanfilippo Estate is not a public museum, but it is well known locally and frequently opens its doors to charity fundraisers and for concerts in its grand private theater, home to an 8000-pipe, 1927 Wurlitzer, one of the largest pipe organs in the world. To those who love historic theaters and cherish their decoration, it is known internationally as one of the best private collections in the world.

But this is an Uptown story.

When the late Louis Wolf and his partner, Kenneth Goldberg, bought the theater from the Plitt movie chain after the Uptown's 1979 closure, it was clear to preservationists that the new landlords did not intend to restore the building. Wolf's modus operandi was to let historic buildings fall into disrepair, usually because the land was expected to increase in value. All kinds of horrors were being discussed for the Uptown following its closure to the public as a concert venue. Somebody wanted to install an indoor go-kart track. Someone else wanted to turn it into a mausoleum. As all this chatter went on, thieves were already seen entering the building — indeed, according to Bob Boin, a civil engineer and longstanding Uptown volunteer, some of the Uptown's fixtures already were showing up at local salvage stores, where volunteers would proceed to buy them back, and then store them in their homes.

The volunteers decided something had to be done after what has left.

It so happened that an Uptown-loving engineer named Curt Mangel was working at the Sanfillipo estate on the restoration of a steam engine. The Friends of the Uptown, both upper and lower case, decided that Mangel should approach Sanfilippo about quietly moving as much as possible to Barrington Hills.

Where it could wait for a happier time.

Although he was not there Tuesday and couldn't be reached for comment, if there is one hero in this story, Mangel (who now lives in Philadelphia where he tends to a pipe organ called the Wanamaker inside Macy's City Center) is that hero.

And thus, in 1992, the group persuaded Wolf (who did prison time for tax evasion) and Goldberg that they could write off the value of the chandeliers and other decorative elements if they donated them to a non-profit. And Mangel and the other Uptown caretakers enlisted Sanfilippo's cooperation in an agreement to return the items when — or, more accurately if — the theater was restored.

On Tuesday, that process began.

The Uptown's new owner, Jerry Mickelson of Jam Productions, was there for the first time. So were employees of Farpoint Development, Mickelson's partner in the restoration. So were employees of the Chicago-based Schuler Shook, a consultant on the renovation. So were restorers, historic theater specialists and several members of Mickelson's staff. So was Lisa Sanfilippo, Jasper's daughter. So were the Uptown's longtime caretakers, such as Boin and Jimmy Wiggins, who spend the entire day grinning from ear to ear.

All were agog at the size and abiding beauty of the main chandeliers, as restored by Sanfilippo's staff. "The people that do this," Jimmy Wiggins, an Uptown volunteer whom Jam eventually hired said, "do it because it is in their heart. How wonderful that they have a place to do what is part of their soul."

The Uptown's main chandelier hangs in the entrance hallway of the main Sanfilippo building. Few visitors would know its provenance. Until now. It is soon to come down — but Greg Leifel, the caretaker of the collection pointed out the obvious to a visitor: "we have other chandeliers to take its place."

Indeed they do.

Over the course of a morning, the group looked for wall scones and light fixtures, finding some inside boxes in a workshop, others looking yet more beautiful than they ever first appeared. All of the originals are returning, and, where there are missing fixtures, they will provide a template for fabricators to match the precise original appearance.

Everyone is aware that all of this was almost lost.

“If it had not cost \$8.4 million to demolish the theater,” Mickelson said, “they would have knocked it down. It was that cost that saved the theater.”

Why so much? Rapp & Rapp, the Chicago firm that designed and built the Uptown were known, in the words of Boin, for “overbuilding their steel.”

There was so much steel in the Uptown that conventional cheap demolition methods could not be used. Hence the price tag, at which Wolf and Goldberg balked. “You couldn’t punch a pillar in a Rapp & Rapp theater and then watch the roof collapse,” Boin said.

“Thank God.”

The weather was awful. But this still a day for taking inventory, and giving thanks and a day that neither Wiggins nor Boin nor Mickelson nor, most likely, Sanfilippo, ever expected to come.

[Read the story on ChicagoTribune.com](http://ChicagoTribune.com)