ON JULY 8, 1953, a massive mudslide plowed into the home of John Riordan. Although it wasn’t completely destroyed, the house sat vacant for the next six decades. That’s when Glenn Odegard bought it, restored it and furnished it with push-button lights, a 1917 Victrola phonograph and an 1881 wood-burning stove. If you’re interested, he’s taking reservations.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY

Neil Riordan wanders through his childhood home with equal parts nostalgia and wonder. “This was the living room, and it’s pretty much the same,” he says. “Our phone was right on that wall. The fact that so much looks the same is remarkable, but more remarkable is that Neil can walk through the house at all.”

Sixty years ago, his parents escaped just before a landslide filled their home with rocks and mud. Then it sat, vacant and deteriorating, for nearly 60 years. “Eight or nine years ago, we had a big family reunion in this area,” Neil recalls. “We all walked up here by the house. Every-thing was pretty much the same,” he says. “Our phone was right on that wall, right where that phone is.”

EIGHT OR NINE YEARS ago, a landslide took out the whole west side of the house, including the bathroom and the sleeping porch that had been the boys’ bedroom. John Sr. and his wife stayed with their daughter down the hill before moving permanently to California. They never set foot in the house again. Phelps Dodge didn’t attempt to restore it. “I left when the job was over,” John Jr. recalls. “That’s when the mine finally closed and Jerome became a ghost town.”

IN 1997, a local group bought 11 houses on Society Hill from Phelps Dodge, each member obtaining title to one lot. The owner of the John Riordan House put it up for sale but otherwise left it to deteriorate. Odegard saw it while on a day trip to Jerome. “Sitting at the Haunted Hamburger, I looked up, and I saw the ‘For Sale’ sign on the abandoned house,” Odegard recalls. “Curious, I drove up and looked at it.”

A fifth-generation carpenter, Odegard had been going to Jerome since 1977 and loved the town. The location of the house, a double lot with expansive views of the Verde Valley, appealed to him. He walked on the roof and saw the siding and exterior were still good, the framing still intact. He thought he could work with it. But he had little idea what he was getting into. “No insurance company offers homeowners insurance on a building with no foundation or floors on the side of a 30-degree-sloped mountain,” Odegard says. Logistics were another challenge. Large trucks couldn’t make the hairpin turn up the narrow road. Lumber was dropped at the Jerome Grand Hotel and brought up by pickup. Construction scrap went down the same way. It took one and a half months to clear out the dirt, which had to be dug by hand. The mudslide had also shifted the house about 10 inches out of square. It had to be realigned using a system of straps and come-alongs, with four people ratcheting the house into alignment inch by inch. The most challenging part was replacing the floor, which involved lifting the entire house up on stilts. At one point, the house shifted 30 degrees and threatened to fall off the blocks. “That was one of the scariest parts,” Odegard recalls. “A mudslide almost wiped out the house in the same month 60 years before, and the rainy season was again upon us. There was the potential of our house collapsing and sliding down upon the meticulously restored and occupied home 25 feet below. When we poured the concrete, I slept like a baby for the first time in two months.”

The Riordan Family discovered the renovation while preparing for John Jr.’s 85th birthday. Looking for a photo of the house to put on her father’s birthday cake, John Jr.’s daughter found Odegard’s website and called the number listed. The Jordans gave Odegard details that helped with the restoration and filled in missing pieces. Odegard didn’t know a sleeping porch and bathroom had ever existed on the west side, but it explained artifacts he found there: a bottle of Old Spice and a shaving mug, medicines and eyedroppers, Army figurines and a toy car. Hearing the stories behind these things motivated Odegard to document and preserve the home’s history. He also wanted to share it with others, to create a place where people could come, stay and experience life as it was in the late 1800s, when the home was built. He furnished the house with artifacts that people could use: push-button lights, a 1917 Victrola phonograph with 78 discs and an 1881 wood-burning stove with cast-iron pots, among other things.

Odegard admits the house is the worst investment he’s ever made, but adds that restoring it was the most rewarding thing he’s ever done. For Neil and John Jr., the project represents the restoration of the childhood home where they cast Army figurines, mirrored sunbeams at their friends from the roof and made target practice of the Victorian detailing. “We had a wonderful, wonderful life there,” John Jr. says. “It was a great place to grow up.”

GLENN ODEGARD

OpPOSITE PAGE: The John Riordan House sat vacant and decaying for more than a half century after a devastating landslide. ABOVE: After Glenn Odegard’s extensive renovations, the house reopened and is available to rent.