When Bill and Marlene Howe moved to Abilene two years ago they knew they were getting a remarkably attractive house but they weren't entirely prepared for how nice people are. Marlene's brother, who was visiting recently, returned from a bike ride and in spite of the flat terrain said it was the hardest ride ever.

"Every person I passed waved at me," he said. "I don't have that problem where I live." Sometimes Abilene is so wonderful it's exhausting. But the Howes are willing to take on that challenge.

"We had always wanted to retire to a small community and have an old Victorian home to work on," says Bill. "That was our dream."

Their home, at 615 NW 3rd, fit the Howes' dream nicely. It appears to have been built in 1879 by Alfred W. Rice, mayor of Abilene. A profile of Rice in 1910 describes him as "a fitting example of American pluck, pertinacity and ability": president of Abilene Wholesale Grocery, vice president of Citizens Bank, president of Rice-Johntz-Nicolay Lumber, and a stockman.

He built a house to suit. The heavy, carved wooden front doors and sweeping wraparound porch suggest money was no object. Inside, the parquet living room floor, exceptionally high ceilings and extravagantly carved stairway railing reinforce the message. Plain did not appear to be a decorating option.

The Howes landed in Abilene by chance.

They started dating in high school in Racine, Wisconsin. After college, Bill had his sights on a career in journalism but when offered a sales job with International Paper (which sells newsprint) he took it. In 1982 he was transferred to the Kansas City area; he and Marlene bought a house in Shawnee. Bill embarked on a second career as a chaplain. They loved it there.

"The house we came from was built in the '70s," Bill says. "You know, just regular old woodwork."

Then their son met and married a woman from Manhattan.

"They wanted to buy a house but they thought they could get more house for their money in Abilene," Marlene says. "We said we wanted to come look too while they were looking at houses."

There were several to see, but it was this one that made the biggest impression.

"We walked into the house and everything was awesome," she recalls. "The pocket doors really got me. I've always wanted pocket doors."

The house had been vacant for more than a year, and while it had outstanding features, they weren't necessarily in good condition.

"I've always done the work in our houses myself," Bill says. "We're really close to having redone everything."

They pulled carpet, sanded and stained floors, re-finished the parquet floor using a hand-held orbital sander, and repainted extensively. They replaced the acoustic tile in the dining room with a tin ceiling.

The house has been changed by its various owners over the years. Photographs show the roof line has been changed. The kitchen was added, and then an activity room and loft were added in the mid-1970s. When Mel and Toastie Racy owned it in the 1980s (note: the home Toastie Racy owns today is also on this year's tour) they created a bedroom on the first floor for their oldest daughter.

But for all the changes, the house retains a strong historical feel. The steam heat has long since been replaced by conventional climate control but the radiators remain. The one in the dining room is unusual – it has a glassed-in compartment that served as a bread warmer.

The Howes' interest in history (Bill is a descendant of William Howe, commander-in-chief of British forces during the American Revolution whose mother, he points out, was the illegitimate half-sister of King George I) is evident throughout the home.

But the thing the Howes seem to like the most is the community.

"The cool thing about Abilene is that people are so nice," says Marlene. "I have met only one cranky person."

"We love it here," agrees Bill. "We love the community, our church, our friends, our home. Everything about it."