

Opera House fund gets \$1,000 boost from Lions, Continued from front page

and aerobics lessons, wedding receptions, as a polling place for elections, for community dinners and awards banquets, and as a center for youth programs.

"We believe these uses for

the Opera House are good, worthwhile ideas, as long as they serve the community as a whole," said Mulvany. He added that there would be supervised rules and regulations to ensure the proper use

and longevity of the opera house.

Interestingly, many of the suggested uses parallel some of the original activities held in the building. Peabody enumerated several of these in telling the Lions the fascinating history of the Opera House.

She recalled the days when silent movies were shown in the Opera House every evening and twice on weekends. She also remembered the free Saturday night dances during the Depression era.

"They were something to look forward to," said Peabody, a lifelong resident of the community.

Another opera house event in that era of economic downturn was a weekly local talent show, where the lucky winners were awarded boxes of groceries donated by Vermontville merchants.

Peabody recalled the boxes of goods lining the front of the Opera House stage during the performances. Those who did not win groceries were given 25 cents as an award. For that amount, one could then buy two gallons of gas, she noted. Admission to the show was free.

"People were so hard up then," added Peabody, that they were willing to participate for the chance to win food or a small amount of

cash.

Peabody told the Lions that the present Opera House was completed in 1898. Construction on it commenced after a fire two years earlier had destroyed Vermontville's original Opera House, located north of the present structure on the approximate site of the present-day Carpenter's Den. Cause of that blaze was never learned, but it occurred after a large evening gathering.

One of the more startling stories Peabody told was of attending an event at the present Opera House many years ago, looking out of the north window and seeing a large cross being burned at the site of the present-day Ken's service station. This was the work of the Ku Klux Klan, which was active in this area in the 1920s and 1930s.

Elections, official meetings, high school graduations, roller skating and many other events were held in the old Opera House. It was here that Vermontville's famous Slout Players got their start.

Peabody mentioned the existing stage curtain, purchased over 50 years ago.

"Our long-range plan is to restore this old, rare curtain," she said.

Peabody recalled that paintings on the roll-up curtain and stage scenery were done

many years ago by a genial Mr. Hitchcock, an itinerant painter who came from Chicago and was well received in the community.

"One memory triggers another," Peabody told the Lions. "I could go on forever." She added that "there has been a lot of very good entertainment at the Opera House and there will be again."

She said the Vermontville Historical Society has been pushing for restoration of the building for many years.

Villanueva, who with Peabody and Village Clerk Sharon Stewart, was instrumental in obtaining the grant to restore the Opera House, said Peabody has been working to get funding for the project for the past 25 years. She said that to obtain the recent grant, the trio did extensive paperwork with the help of Eaton County's Planning Department, and then Peabody hand delivered the grant application to the state last Oct. 27. On Jan. 31, word was received that the grant had been approved.

Economic benefit to the community was stressed in the grant approval, said Villanueva, and they were required to use local contractors. Darryl Hale handled the electrical work and Tom Brandenburg did the drywalling.

Mulvany explained that an original idea to install drywall over the existing side walls did not work out because the old walls were too "wavy," causing a difference of up to four inches from top to bottom. Instead, a combination of wood and metal was used to create straight, free-standing walls.

Villanueva gave recognition to the village and township, each of which provided \$2,500 for the project, and to the countless volunteers who donated hours of in-kind labor and the many individuals and organizations whose gifts have helped cover costs not provided for in the grant.

She said she was delighted with the generous check given Tuesday by the Vermontville Lions.

Mulvany said 80 percent of the electrical work is done, the balcony is being restored for its intended use, drywalling is done, and the original woodwork has been stripped and restained to its original color, a medium maple. In addition, eight roof vents have been installed to prevent condensation buildup in the attic.

Villanueva said she and Peabody are working on another grant application to replace the opera house roof because of a persistent leakage problem.

Work yet to be done includes final sanding on drywall seams, painting of walls and ceiling, replacing window trim and wainscoting, sanding and refinishing floors, painting the stage floor, and replacing the front doors. Handmade of oak, the set of double doors will cost \$1,600, said Mulvany. Impressive chandeliers and sconces will illuminate the interior.

Long-range improvement plans include installation of a lift for handicapped accessibility, new bathroom facilities and furnace and air conditioning.

Friends of the Opera House are planning a Nov. 11 open house to celebrate restoration of the historic building.



Hildred Peabody told the history of the Opera House and of its many uses over the years. She recalled the days of the Great Depression when local people competed in talent shows there as a means of putting groceries on the table at home.