

LANSING—EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN, MONDAY, JUNE 29, 1964

NOW SERVES AS COMMUNITY CENTER IN VERMONTVILLE

Early Opera House Days Recalled

By WILLIAM J. DUCHAINE
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VERMONTVILLE — Election campaign oratory always reminds Ray Hawkins, 78, of the first political rally he attended at the old Opera House where he now serves as custodian.

"That was back in 1896," said Vermontville's well-known native son, whose great-grandfather, Jay Hawkins, came here in 1836 with the pioneer band of settlers from Castleton, Vt.

"The speaker was Washington Gardner, a Michigan congressman," Hawkins continued. "He was a Republican. I'm sure of that because I remember he was laying stress on the importance of the gold standard."

The gold standard was the strong plank in the Republican party's platform in those days.

William Jennings Bryan, the silver-tongued orator from the Platte, had advocated the free coinage of silver at a fixed rate with gold while he served in

the U.S. Senate from 1891 to 1895.

Bryan wrote the free silver plank in the party platform at the Democratic national convention at Chicago in 1896. He was nominated as the Democratic party's standard bearer at that convention, only to lose to William McKinley in the presidential election that fall.

CENTER OF ACTIVITIES

The Vermontville Opera House, which was built in 1893, long has been a community center, although it's not the entertainment house it used to be.

The first floor now houses the public library, with its sizable stacks of books and magazines, and the fire station, with an ambulance, tanker and two pumpers.

There's also a museum piece stored there. It's the old hand pumper, which is brought out for display at celebrations such as the annual Vermontville Maple Syrup Festival.

The second floor still has the

old theater stage and balcony. In the early days the Opera House was the scene of one-night road shows, stock company repertories, vaudeville movies and home talent programs.

"I saw my first play in the old Opera House in 1897," Hawkins recalled. "It was 'Ten Nights in the Barroom.'"

THEATER SETS SOLD

The stage still has the old curtain, which depicts a colorful scene from Naples. There were the Main Street scene and other typical "oleos" of the vaudeville days, but they're gone now.

Hawkins said the sets were in the way so they were sold to Bill Slout, who was active in the Grand Ledge playhouse before he went into television in Hollywood.

Bill's father, L. Verne Slout, who died in 1955, was born in Vermontville and began theatrical trouping around the country in 1915. He returned to Vermontville in 1921 to stage his first show and then went on the road with it.

In 1935, Ora Ackley joined the Slout troupe after playing in musical comedies in the west.

Verne and Ora were married, and for years they delighted opera house and tent show audiences with their portrayal of those corny but lovable characters, Toby and Orrie. When they retired in the early '50s, the Slouts let down the curtain on the last of Michigan's tent shows.

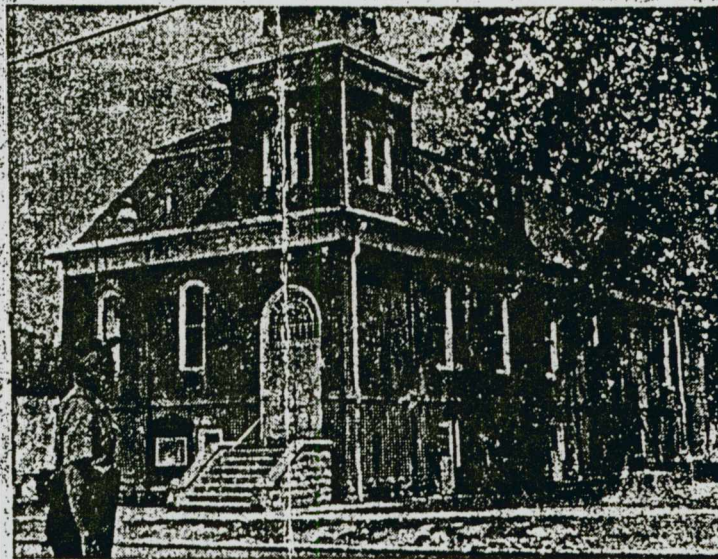
NOW MEETING HALL

Now the old Opera House is used as a meeting room for the Boy Scouts. An accordion class practices once a week, and sometimes some group puts on an entertainment or some other social event. It's also a meeting hall for the officers and trustees of the village and township, which jointly own the building.

Hawkins farmed until 1923 when he moved to Lansing to work for Motor Wheel. He moved back to Vermontville eight years later, but continued to commute to Motor Wheel until he retired in 1954.

He's not exactly retired, however. He is active in civic and political affairs, having served on the village board in the past.

At present, Hawkins is treasur-



OLD OPERA HOUSE — Ray Hawkins stands across S. Main Street from the old Vermontville Opera House, built in 1893. (State Journal Photos)



MAILBOX AND SYRUP CAN ON PUMP — Ray Hawkins is treasurer of the Vermontville Maple Syrup Festival Association. The maple syrup can is his advertisement for the festival.

er of the Maple Syrup Festival Association. He advertises his interest in the festival with a maple syrup can hanging from the mail box, mounted on an old pump, in front of his home at 292 S. Main St.

And, in addition to his job as custodian at the old Opera House, Hawkins "moonlights" as a subscription agent for scores of Michigan newspapers and national magazines.

On his periodical subscription business card, he has a line:

"Phone before 9 a.m. or after 5 p.m."