

Vermontville's Opera House gets early spring cleaning

Elaine Gilbert

The picturesque Vermontville Opera House in the heart of the village will be receiving some special attention this month in a three-phase clean-up project being undertaken by three local organizations.

The Opera House, registered by the state as a historic site, was once the hub of social gatherings at the turn of the century.

Today, Vermontville residents still use the building as a library and for township meetings, elec-

tions, and an occasional play but, many want to see more activities staged there and are willing to help get the building in shape for more extensive use.

That's what the clean-up projects in February are all about. The Vermontville Historical Society, the Maple Valley Drift Skippers Snowmobile Club, and Vermontville Girl Scouts and Brownies will be participating.

The first phase got underway Saturday when members of the Vermontville Historical Society

gathered at the Opera House to take stock of the items that have been stored in the building and to make determinations of value and sort out "junk."

On February 17th, the snowmobile club members plan to meet at the Opera House and haul the heavy unwanted items to the dump.

The Vermontville Girl Scouts, under the supervision of their leaders, will arm themselves with cleaning supplies on February 24 and wash windows, clean the woodwork with special oil, and

sweep the floor at the Opera House.

Vermontville Township Clerk Bobbi Hoefler points out that the project is an excellent example of community interest and pride in the building.

She notes that the township had been thinking that it shouldn't allow the building to be used for activities by organizations until a complete cleaning could be undertaken. But with the enthusiastic volunteer spirit of the organizations, the cleaning will be accomplished and the groups will be able to use the Opera House for upcoming events.

The snowmobile club would like to hold a dance there and the Girl Scouts and Brownies want to have a rummage sale there to raise funds to help send six scouts on a trip to Mexico.

The local historical society and others are interested in preserving the heritage of the Opera House more extensively than clean-up projects, but a renovation of the building's interior probably will depend on whether a federal grant can be obtained.

Hildred Peabody, a historical society member, said, "The building should be used more, but it needs to have more work done soon."

Twice, attempts have been made to apply for a matching funds grant that would allow for needed renovation, but both tries have been futile.

However, Mrs. Hoefler said everyone is hopeful that the grant will become a reality in the future and an



Vermontville's Opera House has played an important community role in the past and still promises to be the center for increased activities in the future.



Members of the Vermontville Historical Society and township officials admire a sketch of the Opera House as they gathered in the auditorium Saturday. From left are Bobbi Hoefler, Fred Frith, Dorothy Carpenter, Hildred Peabody, Robert Todd, Martha Zemke, and Ruth Shepard. The oil painted canvas curtain can be seen in the background.

application will be filed again.

Several members of the historical society noted Saturday that the stage needs a new floor, interior doors need work, and that an addition of a sink would complement many activities. Also the paint on the walls and ceiling of the auditorium is chipped and peeling in many places.

The Opera House holds a wealth of heritage of early

Vermontville life. The text on the historical marker, dedicated last April, indicates part of its proud history:

"L. Vern Slout and his players, one of Michigan's oldest tent companies, gave first and last performances in this opera hall..."

The two-story red brick building also was the scene long ago of stock shows and medicine shows. In the '50's, free movies were shown, and exhibits staged as well as other community activities.

According to newspaper accounts historical society members have clipped for a scrapbook, the original opera house structure was destroyed in a fire about 1896. The present building was completed in 1898 with the village funding the first story and the township the second level.

Thanks to the generosity of three merchants back then, the large stage with wings, curtain, and scenery was included in the building.

The oil-painted canvas curtain, painted in the 1890's, is still in use in the building today.