

A touch of class

Opera houses to be restored

By ERICA WOOD
Lansing State Journal

In the early 1900s, the cultural and social heart of many Michigan communities was the opera house.

In 1990, those houses are becoming the focus of efforts to bring back the past — and make it work for the future.

In Grand Ledge, Vermontville and other small towns throughout the state, residents are working hard to restore opera houses — multi-functional buildings that in their heyday often served as theaters, dance halls, meeting places and school gymnasiums.

Both Grand Ledge and Vermontville recently got Michigan Equity Program grants to help finance renovations that will turn the buildings into community centers.

This year, the state Legislature appropriated \$2.1 million for the equity program, said George Durak, director of the Local Services Division of the Michigan Department of Commerce.

"Opera houses are very appropriate for this program because of their cultural and historical emphasis," he said.

It also helps bring a community back to its roots.

"The Opera House was our social life in Grand Ledge," said 84-year-old Ann Ewing. "Saginaw was just a dirt road then, and it was rare to make a trip in to Lansing. The entire family would go into town on Saturday night for dances at the Opera House."

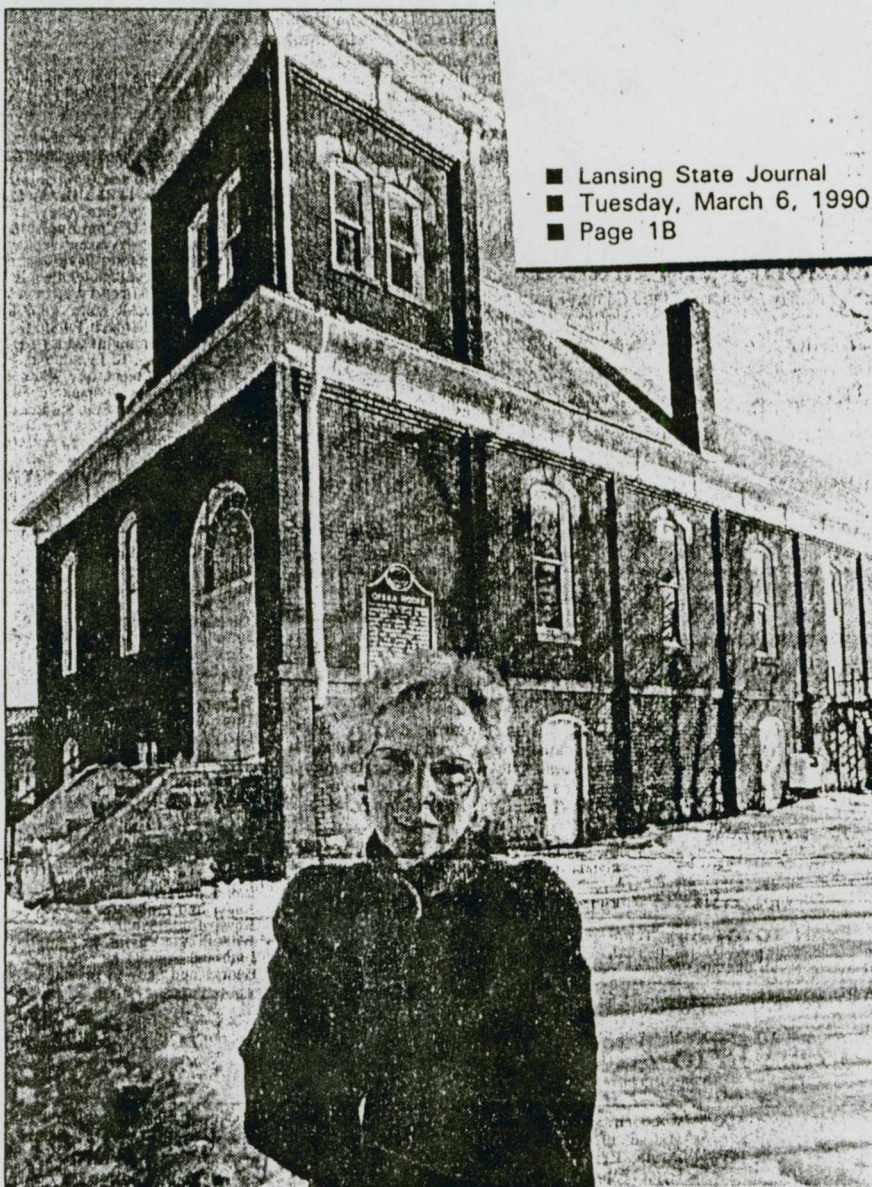
"Sometimes the traveling medicine shows would come through, selling bottles of colored water to cure anything. But they especially claimed it was good for tapeworms. They would set big gallon jugs filled with tapeworms at the front of the room, and then everyone would buy a bottle just in case," she said.

For Ewing, the aging building is a fond reminder of the days when Grand Ledge was a thriving resort community, and tourists from all over Michigan enjoyed the sandstone ledges, riding riverboats on the Grand River and visiting the Opera House.

In Vermontville, the opera house's role was just as strong.

"They showed silent screen movies there when I was a small child," said 74-year-old Hildred Peabody. "That's how I learned to read. I loved the silent movies so much, I had to learn to read the subtitles."

Grand Ledge will receive a \$20,000 grant for exterior restoration of the Grand Ledge Opera House, built in 1884. The Opera House Authority, formed to oversee the project, has obtained \$50,000 in matching funds.



■ Lansing State Journal
■ Tuesday, March 6, 1990
■ Page 1B

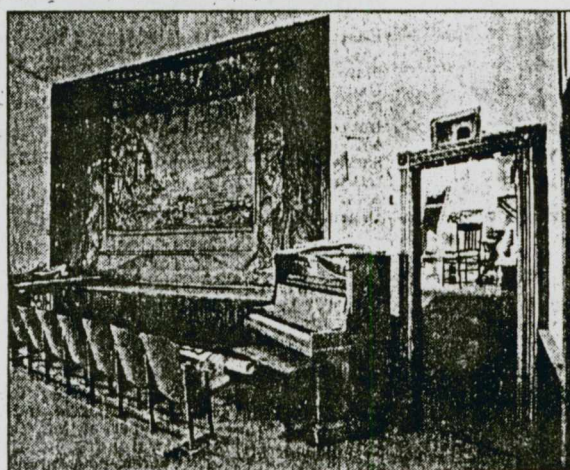
Hildred Peabody, a member of the committee to restore Vermontville's historic Opera House, learned to read as a child watching silent movies there.

When it's finished, the building will house Chamber of Commerce offices and a visitor information center. And it will serve as a community center, said Opera House Authority President David Wade.

"It's in a very nice spot right on the Grand River," he said. "We plan to have six areas with double doors opening out onto outside terraces. The outside will be landscaped and eventually we hope to have a boat dock."

The village of Vermontville will receive a \$25,000 grant for interior restoration of the Vermontville Opera House on South Main Street, believed to have been completed in 1898. The total project cost of \$35,000 includes the \$25,000 equity grant and \$10,000 in matching funds.

"The Opera House means a lot to the older residents here," said Sue Villanueva, Vermontville village president. "It holds a lot of fond memories for them."



The front stage and entrance to the stage area in Vermontville's Opera House will be renovated. The curtain is an original from the opera house's heyday in the early 1900s.