

# Cobourg launches a crusade

By JOHN SCOTT  
Globe and Mail Reporter

COBOURG — A national campaign to raise \$1.5-million to restore Cobourg's 110-year-old town hall to its original grandeur has been launched by a citizens' group.

One of Ontario's more imposing public buildings, Victoria Hall is in danger of collapsing because dry rot has been eating through the timbers that support its upper floors.

The fungus was discovered a year ago when several beams under the floor of the hall's opera house were exposed. Workmen, trying to strengthen the floor, noticed the rot at the ends of the hand-hewn timbers.

Work was stopped, the upper portion of the building closed to the public and building consultants brought to look over the hall. It was designed in the Palladian style by Toronto architect Kivas Tully and officially opened by the Prince of Wales on Sept. 7, 1860.

The consultants' studies took almost a year, and when the engineers and the architects submitted their reports the enormity of the problem and the cost of restoration astounded town councillors.

Figures batted about at that time to save and restore the hall varied from \$250,000 to \$1-million.

"We knew that we couldn't raise that kind of money in Cobourg alone," Mayor Jack Heenan said. "Even if every man, woman, and child in the town donated \$10 we would only have \$100,000, and this wouldn't be enough to even get the project started."

For a while council was at a loss.



Corinthian columns were feature of Cobourg's 110-year-old town hall in days of hitching posts and unpaved roads.

in the house that was the birthplace of Marie Dressler. She is also a woman with a great love for anything pertaining to Ontario's history, and adamant in her determination to save Victoria Hall.

Mrs. Fisher recruited to her cause the rest of council and John Taylor, a Toronto artist and director of the Co-

able seats or a floor that could be raised and lowered."

When the building was constructed the ballroom had a coved ceiling and a supper room at the back. The ceiling was taken down when the opera house was installed in 1890. The supper room is now part of the janitor's apartment, sealed off from the opera house.

the corinthian columns supporting the outer arch are the most beautiful I've ever seen."

Built entirely of Cleveland free stone, the building was started in 1856 and completed four years later. The initial cost was estimated at \$25,000 but it actually took \$110,000.



Mayor Jack Heenan said. Even if every man, woman, and child in the town donated \$10 we would only have \$100,000, and this wouldn't be enough to even get the project started."

For a while council was at a loss. The upper floors remained closed and the power was turned off. To many it looked as though the Grand Old Lady of King St. was doomed to be torn down and replaced by a parking lot.

That's when Lenah Fisher stepped in. She is a town councillor and the owner of another of Cobourg's famous landmarks, the present-day restaurant



Lenah Fisher

ing to Ontario's history, and adamant in her determination to save Victoria Hall.

Mrs. Fisher recruited to her cause the rest of council and John Taylor, a Toronto artist and director of the Cobourg Art Gallery. At their insistence letters began to flow from the office of town clerk Bryan Baxter to officials in Ottawa outlining the problem and asking for assistance. All the letters received polite rejections.

At this point Mr. Taylor suggested that a Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall be formed and that people all over Canada be asked to contribute to the cause. Tuesday evening this society was born in the courtroom of the hall, when more than 50 people pledged support to the campaign.

The society plans to raise funds through walkathons, dances, souvenir trade, door-to-door canvassing and, it hopes, a province-wide lottery. It also hopes that publicity will bring in donations from across the country.

"We might even sell non-negotiable shares in the society," Mr. Taylor said. "Our first objective is to raise \$200,000. If we can get this kind of money in the bank then we can proceed to hire a financial director and call for tenders on the first phase of the work."

He said this would probably involve tearing out the whole interior of the middle part of the building and rebuilding it in its original Georgian style.

Radiators that deface many of the walls would be covered and a modern elevator, hidden behind partitions, would carry people to the opera house.

"We would also explore the feasibility of changing the opera house back to its original use as a ballroom," Mr. Taylor said, "perhaps by using remov-

the ballroom had a coved ceiling and a supper room at the back. The ceiling was taken down when the opera house was installed in 1890. The supper room is now part of the janitor's apartment, sealed off from the opera house.

Restoration of the building would take 5 to 10 years, Mr. Taylor said. He said \$6-million was needed to restore Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall, which is similar in style.

"This building is far superior to St. Lawrence Hall. The stonework on the front of the building is more intricate and of a much finer workmanship and



Cobourg Mayor Jack Heenan

Built entirely of Cleveland free stone, the building was started in 1856 and completed four years later. The initial cost was estimated at \$25,000 but it actually took \$110,000.

Just over the main entrance are carved the national emblems of the United Kingdom, the rose, the thistle, and the shamrock. Sharing this space is a large bearded face which forms the keystone of the arch.

Inside the foyer, little remains of the original building. The old pine floors have been ripped up and replaced by modern tiles of black and white. Several of the beautiful arched windows that faced out on to King Street have disappeared from the entrance into temporary offices the town had built in both corners of the foyer.

Mr. Taylor refers to these as "rabbit hutches" and says when the building is restored they will be gone.

The town has maintained offices in the two wings of the hall ever since it was built. These would remain in the building, Mr. Baxter said. For many years the police department was also located in the hall, but it moved out eight months ago when the town's armories was purchased from the federal Government.

The opera house had been used regularly by the Port Hope-Cobourg Drama Society until it was closed last year.

"We know where we are going," Mayor Heenan said, "but we don't know how we are going to get there yet. I do know, though, if we hope to keep this country together we're going to have to stop tearing down our historical buildings and replacing them with modern structures of brick and glass. These old buildings are our history, and once they are gone our history is gone."