

One of  
Hunt's recent  
stops was with a contingent of  
Hastings County Historical Society members.

"The tour people are quite impressed," he reported. "It's an historic structure ... We know that Vernon and Irene Castle danced there, and they were the originators of ballroom dancing."

Vernon Castle was a military aviator stationed at a nearby training facility in the First World War, Hunt said. The theatre is known to have been popular with airmen in both wars.

Naylor sold the spacious building to Stan Merek, who in 1947 converted it to a movie house, playing films starring Charlie Chaplin and animated starlet Betty Boop. Posters of those two characters still remain on the building's outer front wall.

Naylor died at age 57 in the early 1950s. The movies stopped running in the early 1960s. Shaune Lucas, another Deseronto councillor, became the eventual owner.

With the society now actively working to preserve and restore it, there is a buzz of excitement around the building — as indicated the blazing white-and-red "sold" signs on the walls.

"We'd had so many obstacles along the way that it was hard to believe it had actually happened," said Noni McMeeken, artistic director of the Deseronto society. "It truly was a good feeling."

Public interest was high when the society opened the theatre on a weekend just after the purchase.

"People would stop and say, 'I've been driving by this building for 20 years and never knew what went on inside,'" McMeeken said. "Of course, if you look inside, you realize nothing (happened)!"

She and husband Don, the society's

president, said the building is believed to have escaped demolition at least twice.

"It's actually just a shell," Noni said. "Structurally it's been declared sound."

After the society formed, members soon began fundraising by holding an auction, yard sale, raffles, and seeking supporters.

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forward who were founding benefactors," said Don, adding the group will also be pursuing grants.

"The plan is to explore the possibility of obtaining grants to be able to start to refurbish the theatre," Don said.

"Everybody who comes and looks at the theatre thinks, 'Whoa, how are you ever gonna do that?'" he laughed.

"There's about six to eight feet of mud in it," Don said. Noni explained the earth was put there to sop up water from flooding in the building. It has become a hard-packed, cracked floor that must be removed. The collapsed balcony sits below the dirt.

The exterior looks much as it has for years, but aside from its sturdy stage, the building will need extensive work.

"We figure (it will cost) about \$3 million, so it'll be a tough go," Noni McMeeken said. Yet they still have a vision.

"When you stand in this hall you can just picture the place filled with all these airmen yelling and hooting with all the vaudeville shows that were there," said Noni, who added part of the society's job will be reintroducing the concept of live local theatre to Deseronto-area residents.

"I see it as a Stratford beginning," said Noni. "I feel that somewhere out there we have these very talented people, and maybe they can help us make it a centre for the arts."

This Friday, May 27, the building will be open around 4 p.m., with local dignitaries arriving for a photo opportunity around 4:30 p.m. An invitation-only reception will be held at 5:30 p.m.

Currently joining the McMeekens on the executive are Russell Cassidy, André Boisvert, M. Barb Thompson, and Ian Miller. Executive members are hoping to recruit some experienced helpers. Don said an engineer and someone with fundraising experience would be huge assets for the group.

If you'd like to help, call the McMeekens at 396-6078 or 396-2913.

I. Kellerman

May 21/05

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Main St. Deseronto - Naylor's Theatre

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