

NORTH WILSON ROAD x DURHAM

This Canada

New life for a grand old lady

By Ken Becker

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Today it's tough to find anybody in town who was against it. Most people remember it as a contentious issue that had neighbors slamming doors and shouting over the back fence at one another. But opponents now are extraordinarily hard to pin down. Either a lot of minds have been changed or there are a lot of extremely selective memories in Cobourg, Ontario.

Take Boyd Hendry, the reeve, a big ex-footballer who owns the men's shop on Cobourg's main drag, King Street. It wasn't that long ago that Boyd was the project's most virulent critic on town council. Now Boyd says, "Victoria Hall? There's no way I wanted a gracious old building like that torn down."

Ask Jack Heenan. He's the mayor, has been for the past 19 years; chosen all but once by acclamation. Even enemies admire the way Heenan can sit on both sides of the fence at once without appearing to be on either. A few years ago, when the debate was swirling around Victoria Hall, it was quite difficult to figure where Heenan was sitting.

Now, there's no doubt his worship has caught the drift. "With our country threatened with division," he says, "there's no better way to keep us together than with historic pride. Victoria Hall has that meaning now."

And Bob Wilson, the deputy reeve: "I grew up with Victoria Hall like most folks around here. It was nothing spectacular, just an old building. We called her 'the Old Lady of King Street.' Now I see what she stands for, how she reflects the character of our town: graceful, slow."

All over Cobourg it's the same. The 11,000 residents seem to have found a cosy seat on the bandwagon now that Victoria Hall is nearly restored to its 120-year-old elegance; now that more than \$3 million—already making it the most expensive private historic restoration project ever in Canada—has been spent; now that the municipal offices inside evoke an 18th-century charm with 20th-century conveniences; now that the exquisite deep-well courtroom, a replica of the Old Bailey, gleams with polished wood, and features two Wyly Grier portraits and a perfect restora-

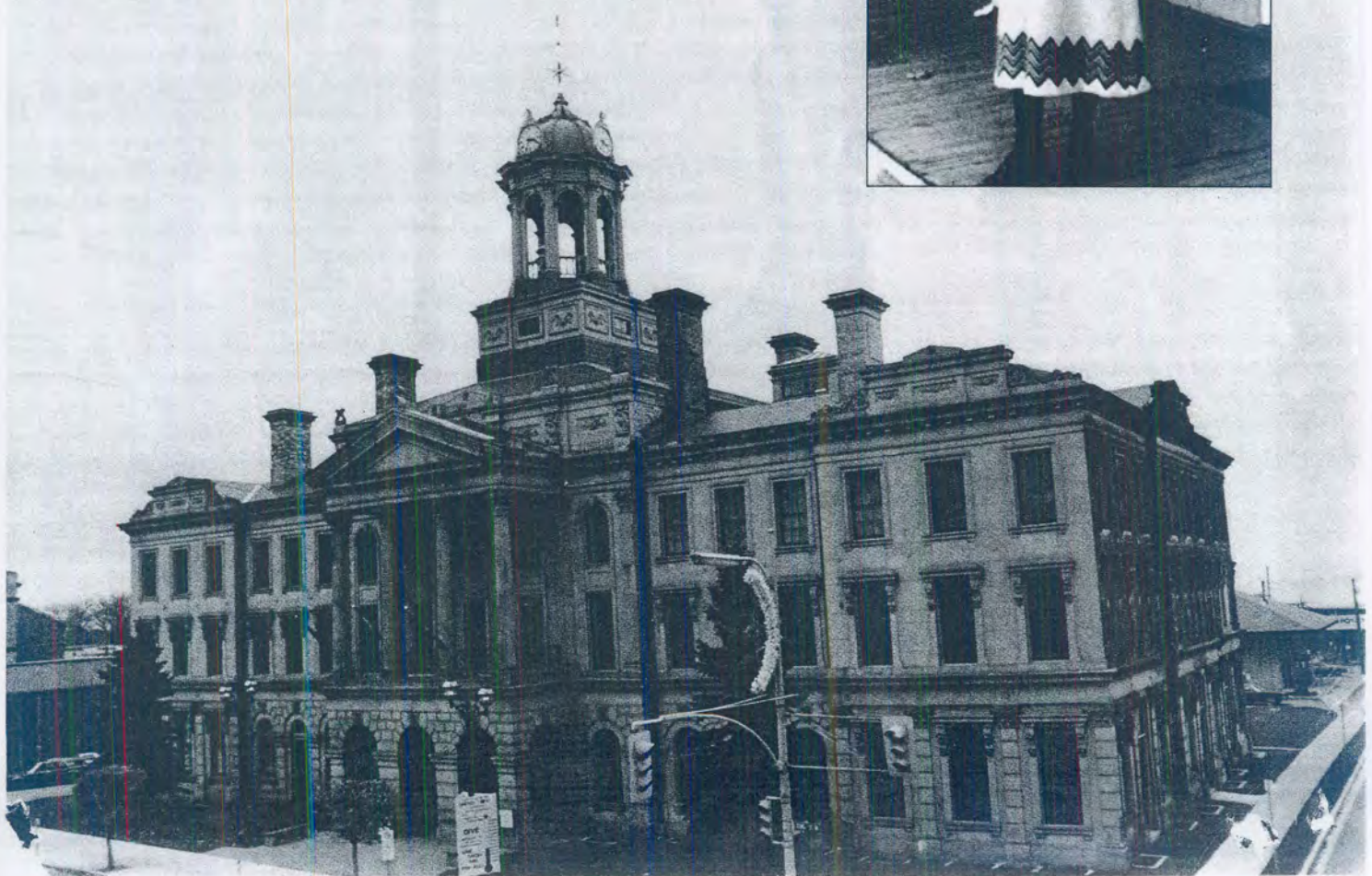
tion of the lion and unicorn coat-of-arms mural behind the bench; now that the art gallery and the meeting rooms are open; now that the clock tower, 120 feet above King Street, serves as a beacon all over town; now that a decade-long project sees its completion in 1980. This quaint town on Lake Ontario, 75 miles east of Toronto, smells a renaissance: first civic pride, then tourist dollars.

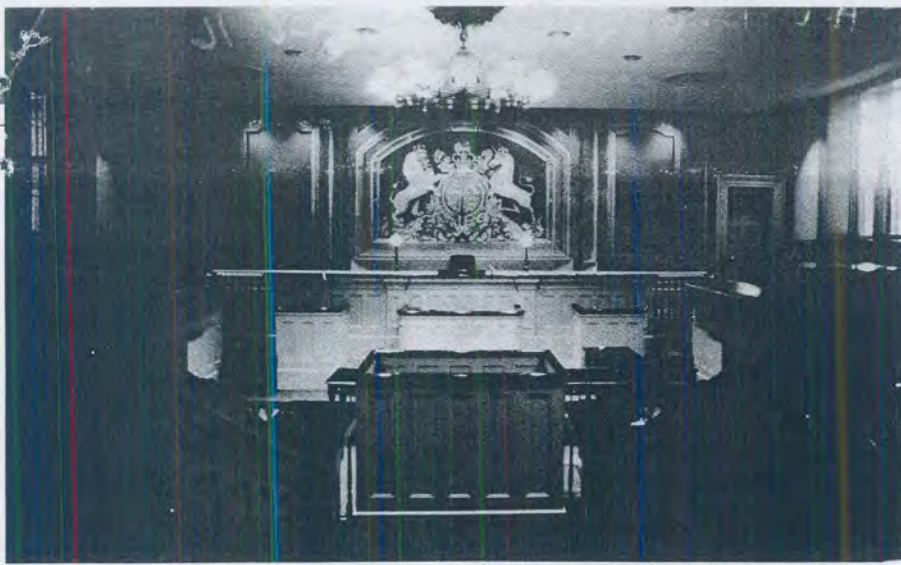
"Don't let anybody tell you different-

Victoria Hall and Fisher (top): 'Thank God this is the campaign to end all campaigns'



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA BECKER





Interior, Victoria Hall: shifting sentiment

ly," says John Taylor. "The town was dragged kicking and screaming all the way." Taylor has the scruffy look of the intellectual. He's tall and angular; neither his clothes nor hair seem to fit properly. He has left town now. He packed up at the onset of winter and moved to Penticton, British Columbia, to set up an art gallery. Taylor was the first executive director of the Society for the Restoration of Victoria Hall, and there was never any question in his mind that the building had to be saved. Art and history and beauty *must* be preserved.

Taylor used to go into the local schools and give art-history lessons. He would show the kids a closeup slide of a beautiful stone pediment topping four Corinthian columns and ask them where they thought the building was located. "Some would say Greece, others Italy or France. When I told them it was their own Victoria Hall, designed by Toronto architect Kivas Tully, done right down the street in the late 1850s, they'd just gasp. When you live with something you can't see it."

Where Taylor saw rightness, a lot of people in town saw only self-righteousness. He was an outsider, originally from Toronto. It was their hall more than his, to do with as they pleased. When, in 1971, an engineering study condemned Victoria Hall as unsafe—its rotting beams threatened collapse—and closed it, some townspeople thought, good riddance. Now they could get those additional parking spaces, or build a new hockey arena. The war was on: the culture-vultures versus the jocks.

Says Cedric Haynes, current president of the restoration society: "There's never a ground swell of support for something of a cultural or historic nature. But a small and dedicated group started this thing and finally gained the support of most of the town." The publisher of the *Cobourg Daily Star*, James Johnston, was a supporter from the beginning. "It's been a big effort to get the

locals in on this," he says. "It took a long time. But I'll tell you this: Victoria Hall would have been a parking lot long ago if not for Lenah Fisher."

Lenah Field Fisher's house sits on the west end of King Street. The front porch has been captured by vines, determined, brambly stocks which also have attacked the roof and threaten to strangle the chimney stack. Still, at 150, the house hardly looks its age. And neither does Lenah. Most people figure she's nudging 80; ask her and she'll say: "I'm 101 and if you believe that you're a darn fool. If you don't, you know it's none of your darn business."

She lives with her maid, Bernice, and a Weimaraner puppy named Chancellor von Cobourg. She's a tiny woman, under five feet. But her posture is correct and her handshake firm. Her grandfather John Field ruled over most of the east end of town in his day. He was around when the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, came to Cobourg in 1860 and dedicated Victoria Hall in his mother's name. John Field owned the house next door to Lenah's and rented it for a while for \$8 a month to the Koerber family. The Koerbers' daughter, Leila Marie, went off to New York and Hollywood and made quite a name for herself: Marie Dressler. Lenah, from the stories told her by her grandfather and father and from personal experience, can recite most of the town's history, knows its famous sons and daughters.

In 1937, after years of Marie Dressler's fans peering in her windows, Lenah opened the house next door as Dressler House, a restaurant which still operates (though Lenah sold it in 1974). Many vacationers visited Cobourg in those days (the Rochester-Cobourg ferry stopped running in 1949). Lenah says some 12,000 people ate in her restaurant every summer. "And they all asked the same thing: 'When are you going to do something about that beautiful old Victoria Hall?'"

The building was in a terrible state of disrepair. No one knew at the time that the beams had been rotting since it was built. Lenah recalls reassuring Governor-General Vincent Massey in the concert hall one evening that the National Ballet was getting more bounce because of the "sprung" dance floor. Actually, it was buckling. The 300-seat concert hall was a death trap.

Widowed in 1956, Lenah went into politics, a one-issue campaigner: save Victoria Hall. In 1959 she was elected to town council. That same year, she travelled to Ottawa, cashed a few political IOUs and, she says, "By crackie, by the next council meeting there was a letter saying Victoria Hall had been named a national historic site." For 16 years she served on the council and fought for the restoration of the hall. After the genuine 1971 engineer's report it became a real battle. The building having been named a national historic site, and later a provincial landmark, Ottawa and Toronto were all for restoration. But they demanded matching funds from the town. Enough money came in initially to start restoration. In 1972, Ontario Premier William Davis came to Cobourg to give the project his blessing. That helped. The next year, Queen Elizabeth did the same. That helped some more. Sentiment began to shift.

In 1974, Ced Haynes, retired army colonel, retired corporation president, took over the fund-raising. A man of strong physical bearing and a straight shooter, Haynes looked like someone who knew what he was doing. Toward the end of this year, more than \$1 million in private donations had been poured into the project, more than \$3 million over-all. Another \$1 million would do it—restore the concert hall, fix its "sprung floor" and clean the facade. "Thank God it's almost over," Haynes was saying in late November, bracing for the last round of fund-raising. "Thank God this is the campaign to end all campaigns."

When the restoration society first went to Marie Hall to donate money, she said, "Sure I'll give you all you need—to blow it up." Hall, who runs the jewelry store on the south side of King Street, has lived in the town all her life, as her father did, after his father came to Cobourg from Ireland. "It's my town," she says, "and it's my town hall. But dammit, for 100 years the council didn't do a damn thing to preserve it and then they suddenly wanted millions to fix it up. I was mad." This year, after seven years of holding out, Marie Hall gave Ced Haynes a cheque for \$1,000. ♣