

Zions church conversion restoring our heritage

BY MAGGIE PETRUSHEVSKY
The New Tanner

Recycling takes on new meaning when you visit the old Bethel Presbyterian Church at Marsville, on the Fergus-Orangeville Road.

Converting the former church into a residence was an investment to Sally and Jefferson Mappin of Erin and a job for Acton's Peter Zions of Peter Zions Construction Ltd. The results however, look more like a labour of love for both parties.

The red brick church as built in the early 1890s and ceased to be used in 1997. When the Mappins first saw it just over a year ago the hymnals and prayer books were still in place.

"It felt as if they just walked out the week before," Mrs. Mappin says. "Nothing was disturbed. It was just as they left it."

The couple, who had already worked with Zions in restoring an old farmhouse near Mono Mills, decided to buy the property but ran into their first snag when they couldn't get clear title. The property was originally sold to the church by Robert and Sarah Ann McGowan in 1871 with the provision the land be returned to their heirs should the property ever cease to be used as a house of worship.

When the church couldn't track down McGowan heirs, it was decided to put a limitation of the provision and proceed with the sale. Then the Mappins started negotiations with East Garafraxa Township council to re-zone the site from institutional to residential. Since it is only a small municipality meetings are only held monthly, Mrs. Mappin says, so it seemed to take a long time to finish up all the details.

What really caught the couple's eye was the size of the structure.

"We wanted to keep that open feeling," Mappin said. "The mistake most people

make in these renovations is either to close in too much for a second floor or not to close in enough. We decided to leave a lot of open space."

To get a second storey, they added a master bedroom and loft-style, railed sitting area, and converted the steeple to an ensuite off the bedroom.

Downstairs is almost entirely open concept except for a tiny pantry between the kitchen and dining room and a small bedroom or office off the main entry.

Century old Bethel Church

The floor sloped down towards the pulpit at the front of the church originally. Since that would never suit any homeowner, it was changed to three levels stepped down towards the back door.

As a result there is a vestibule with an original church pew where occupants can sit to change outdoor shoes, a huge living room separated from a family room or breakfast nook by a step and railing, a kitchen area separated from the family room by a peninsula counter and a formal dining room separated from the kitchen by a tiny pantry and from the living room by an archway. The other corner off the main entry is the small enclosed bedroom-office-or whatever and a bathroom.

"We didn't want to be too specific in how the rooms were set up," Mappin said. "You never know how someone else will want to use the space."

A rear entry behind the former pulpit has been converted to a deck over a walk-out basement door.

In total the main floors offer at least 3,000 square feet of living space. Then the basement has another "2,000 square feet at least" which could be used for a seniors apartment, rental apartment, workshop or whatever. Mappin says.

The floors were redone to even them out. The old church kitchen will get some conversion to create a laundry room but it could also be completed as a full kitchen and the back door opens onto the rear yard.

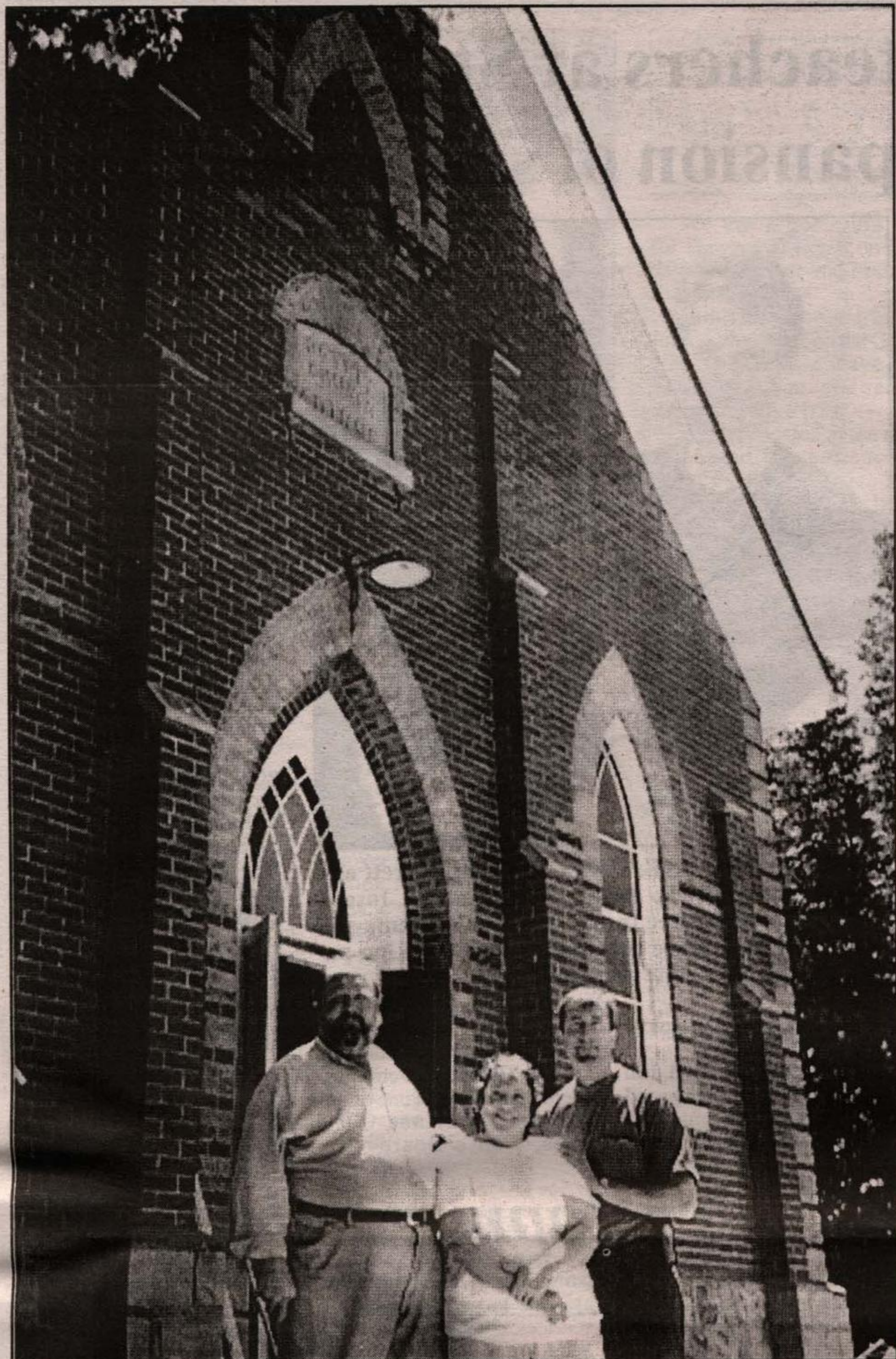
One of the most appealing aspects of this basement is the fact all the windows are above ground creating a high, airy, bright space as large as many full homes.

Given the property's age it already has mature trees, hedges and lawns with which a new owner can set about planning future landscaping.

It was decided to keep the arch-topped stain glass windows on the main floor but a couple of new windows were cut into rear wall with matching arches. The cost of matching glass to the original windows would have been prohibitive, Mappin says. Future owners however, could easily create the look of those originals with window stencils.

Upstairs too, modern building codes required the installation of a shield so that residents cannot accidentally fall through the top of one of the windows. It was decided to make those shields of plexi-glass in order to let in the light and preserve the decorative touch of the glass. A couple of modern, working windows were also cut into the wall for ventilation. In the living room a modern propane fireplace was added along one wall to add character.

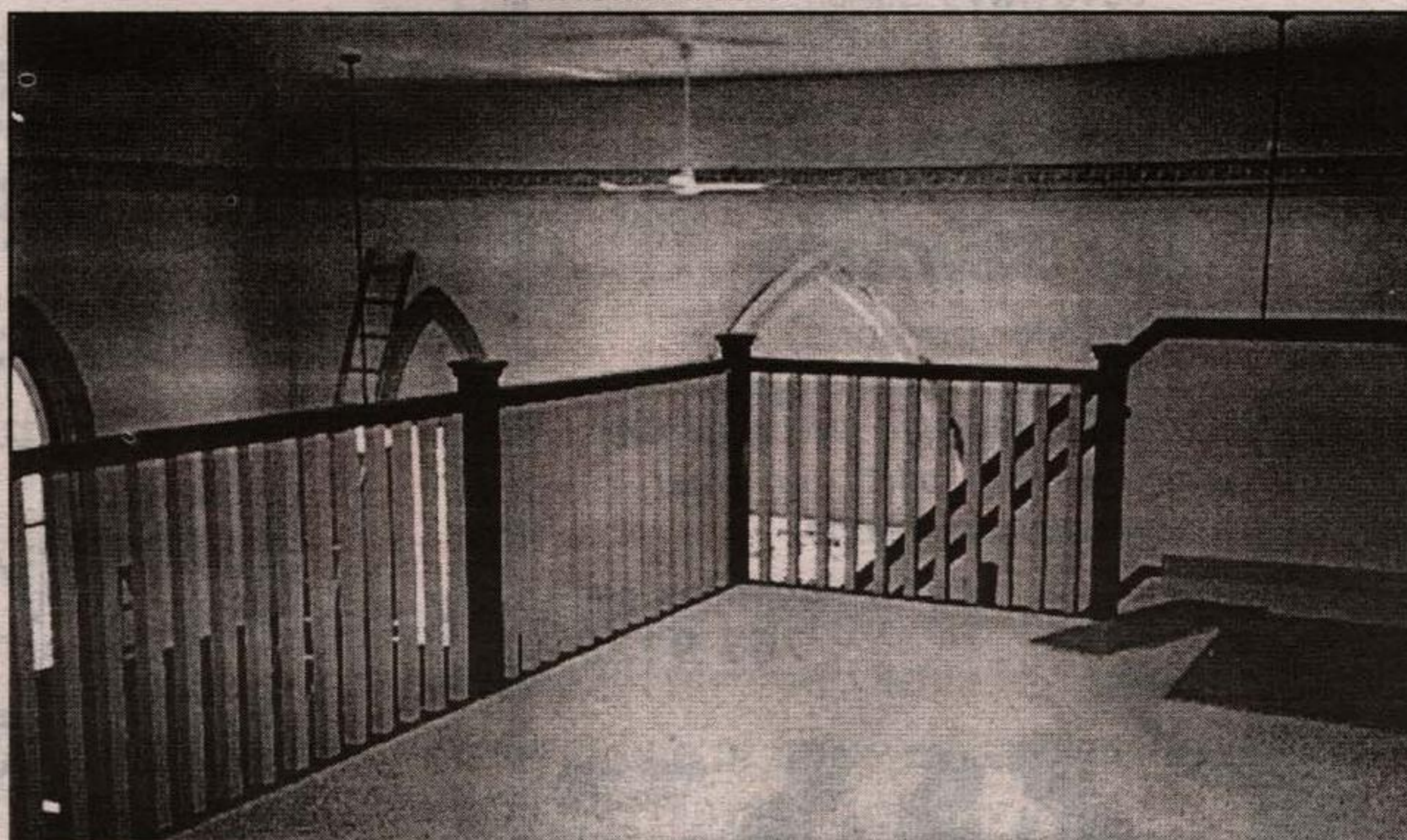
Zions says his company tackles one or two renovations such as the old church each year. When this job is completed he has a Quebec log cabin in pieces for rebuilding on a site in Mansfield.



PROJECT COMPLETED: Jefferson and Sally Mappin of Erin hired Acton contractor Peter Zions to convert the old Bethel Church at Marsville into a family residence. It's the second restoration project the couple has undertaken with Zions. -Maggie Petrushevsky photo



FINISHING TOUCHES: A darker shade of paint around the arched, stained-glass windows emphasizes their shape. The family room area is separated from the livingroom by a half wall and the original wainscoting has been retained throughout the main floor. The wooden floor, still covered by drop clothes, is stepped down in three sections towards the rear of the building.



OPEN LOFT: An open area adjacent to the master bedroom and ensuite could be used as an office, a library or just another sitting area. In designing the second floor for the church they were careful not to enclose too much, so that it took away from the spaciousness of the original structure said owner Jefferson Mappin. The high ceiling was a feature of the building and they wanted to keep it much like cathedral ceilings are incorporated in some new homes.