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Is the Empire Schoolhouse a goldmine or a Pandora's box?

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The clock is running out on the old Empire schoolhouse. Built in 1901, this architectural marvel has been gathering dust and slowly disintegrating for the last 35 years in what may be the village's most important crossroads commercial location.

Sitting on five lots at the gateway intersection of Highways M-22, M-72 and downtown Front Street, the 10,000 square-foot structure remains on the market, for an asking price of \$399,000. The tract is zoned in such a way that almost any commercial or residential use would require the specific approval of various public bodies.

The village's Master Plan, last revised in 1998, refers to the building as a major community asset that should be preserved. Mechanisms must be identified to convert the vacant building to a semi-public community center for arts, theater, music and probably a senior activity center, the plan says.

To be paid for by whom? Best estimates are that the building has maybe a year or two before it will have to be bulldozed out of existence. Can it be restored? The present cost of renovation, conservatively put at one million dollars, discouraged a number of recent prospective buyers, who were hoping to attract government financial assistance by exploiting its historic significance.

At last week's community forum sponsored by the village planning commission, the problem did not rank among the leading concerns on the minds of residents. Many citizens appear resigned to the removal of the building and uncertainty as to the future of the site.

Students walked through the school doors for the last time in 1968, the final phase of the Glen Lake Community Schools consolidation authorized in 1956. As in many other parts of the country, consolidation seemed unavoidable. The high school graduating class in 1954 numbered only two students.

In lots of places, surplus classroom buildings were hastily replaced by administrative offices, video stores, fast-food dispensaries, condominiums, whatever made economic sense.

In lots of places, but not in the village of Empire, for a combination of reasons. The story of the old schoolhouse begins in 1899 when the previous building burned. Empire's population numbered 609 then, compared to 378 in the last census. Harve Wilce, the manager of the lumber mill, insisted on a new top-quality four-room school of the best virgin white pine. He knew that a good school would attract the skilled workers needed for the mill. The technologically advanced hot air circulating system made efficient use of the bell tower chimney. Great tall windows provided excellent classroom lighting.

All four high school classes shared one large room, the seniors closest to the windows, the freshmen furthest away. The high school basketball team, known as the Pirates, started playing at the town hall in 1913. WPA funds paid for a gymnasium addition in 1932. Joann Harriger, who still lives in the Empire area, remembers her master carpenter father, Joe Dhuyvetter, building the gym. While a student there, Joann helped out in the cook's shack where lunches were prepared alongside the building. An old machinery storage shed, moved from several blocks away, added space for shop classes. In 1941 the Boynton school was brought in from its location on the Benzonia Trail near the Empire airport to become a separate kindergarten.

Beginning in the late 1930s, students were bused in from rural elementary schools. The availability of federal financial aid partly explains why it was temporarily renamed the Empire Agricultural School.

From time to time the school lost and then regained its state accreditation. The main problem appeared to be the limited academic course offerings in a curriculum that also included agricultural courses. Students might be taking both Latin and animal husbandry in the same semester. A few families in the village sent their children to out-of-town schools for what they believed would be better preparation for college.

Teachers and other personnel were kept busy at the Empire school. The janitor, Bill Hinstock, also played the piano for school assemblies and dances.

Graduates who live in the area have fond memories of their favorite teachers. For Alice Coppens (class of 1940), it was Myron H. Vent, who arrived in 1938 fresh out of the University of Chicago and intent upon a cultural renaissance. He wore a different suit every day, brought a briefcase to school, and gave a course in manners, she remembers. He organized a glee club, taught us ballroom dancing, and had us writing poetry. The school newspaper in that period was called *The Emperor*, the title of a Roman emperor.

Alice went away to college, became an army nurse in the Pacific in World War II, and married Vance Diggins. After their retirement, the Digginses settled in Empire, where he is a member of the planning commission. Myron Vent stayed two years, then left for another job.

High school enrollments continued their decline in the postwar years, bringing about the consolidation with Glen Arbor, Maple City, and Cedar/Centerville. Now, instead of bringing students from the Burdickville area to Empire, the buses were running from Empire to the distant site between Burdickville Maple City.

Versel Butts Harriger, Joann's brother-in-law, took advantage of an opportunity to buy the old school. Many of the fixtures, including the chalkboards and the bell in the tower, were removed and sold. He told me last week that he had two options in mind at the time: One was to assemble the crew that would tear down everything but the gym and use the lumber to build houses. The other was to obtain a liquor license and operate a poker palace in the building. Before doing either, he got disgusted with the vandalism and sold the property less than two years later at a profit.

For much of the school's active life, there was a tavern on the corner across Front Street next to an icehouse for keeping the beer cold. Parents were less concerned then about shielding their children from objectionable adult influences than they are today.

A third owner acquired the school building before it was sold again in 1978 to the present owners, Nick and Ruthie Hoffbauer. The Hoffbauers are retired teachers who now live in Carmel, Ind., a suburb of Indianapolis, except when they are visiting Empire and living in the former kindergarten annex. Like so many others, Nick Hoffbauer's family was introduced to the area on vacation trips when he was a child.

Ruthie told me that she and her husband, who now operate a hot air balloon company in Indiana (The Above and Beyond Balloon Co.), bought the property because of its distinct architecture. She said they intended to move to Empire, renovate the building themselves, and establish retail shops. But family illnesses interfered with their plans.

In a rezoning application last fall, the Hoffbauers said they also considered converting the gym to a theater. Over the years, they said they had even bought 150 theater seats. We are just too far away to make it happen, they said. Their request to have the entire property zoned commercial was denied by the planning commission. Vance Diggins said the commission wanted to retain some control over the eventual use of the property.

When I talked to her by telephone, the Hoffbauers had just returned from a brief visit to Empire, where they rested mowing the schoolyard and trying to keep up with the essential maintenance. The lower windows are boarded over now. Much of the interior wainscoting is gone. The flagpole in the yard leans precariously to the northeast. The original cedar shingle roof was replaced long ago by asphalt shingles. Entire sections of the roof are beginning to crumble.

Doug Manning, who attended the school as a boy and now lives near Glen Arbor, represented the owners as their real estate agent for three years until last year. They are tired of coming up on vacation and working for two weeks, he said. Their financial security is tied up in this beautiful old white elephant. Manning said the Hoffbauers don't have money for a new roof. At first, the owners resisted razing the building and subdividing the lots, but now they are desperate to recover their investment.

The several transactions that occurred after the school was closed are indicative of two abiding interests among the local descendants of many of the immigrant families that homesteaded the land here many years ago. The first is buying and selling real estate. For many of them this is a form of gamesmanship as well as business as they try to ride the wave of rising values. The second, of course, is the exceptional community pride in their heritage. Both elements were evident in the years of reluctance to adapt the school site to some other purpose that might prove costly.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could go back to each village having its own elementary school, mused Brian Price, executive director of the Leelanau Conservancy, which has been instrumental in making the northern approach to Empire more attractive. A more realistic use for the building, he conceded, would be as food courts, pubs and the small retail outlets that the Hoffbauers visualized. Some of the previous plans that fell through would have combined shops and apartments.

This is the one remaining architecturally significant structure in the village, Manning remarked. It speaks to an Empire of a bygone era. At the entrance to the village, it reminds you of why Empire is even there.

If the building has to be leveled, he estimated the value of the land beneath it at \$350,000. What then? What if the pieces are carted off to the dump pile?

What then, Manning ominously predicted, is a strip mall of pole barns colored puke green with red trim.

The location is not without its handicaps. The Michigan Department of Transportation's plans for an underground storm water disposal system at the intersection call for an 80-by-40 foot easement back from the corner. This would severely limit the off-street parking essential for a restaurant, theater, or many other commercial ventures. And although the country is famous for its scenic vistas, the auto repair shop across M-22 is not one of them. Residential use would be problematic, as well, because of the difficulty installing adequate septic facilities.

The outlook seems bleak. It would make a lovely community center, one voice spoke up at the village forum. If the village had unlimited funds, council member Edwin Simpson said rhetorically, the village could buy it. But that is not about to happen, and feasible ideas are hard to come by. Whoever hopes to restore the old schoolhouse, observed Butts Harriger, his a voice of experience, had better have lots of money and courage.

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