

Town hall thrived thanks to volunteer's dedication

COMMUNITY Jan 06, 2011 Peterborough This Week



Lili Kennedy created this drawing of the Sunderland Town Hall as it appeared in 1906. - Lili Kennedy / courtesy of the Sunderland and Dist

The original Sunderland Town Hall was a wooden frame building built at the north west corner of Church and Water streets in 1871, soon after the Toronto Nipissing Railroad came to town about 1868.

By 1906, Sunderland was a rapidly growing community and there was a definite need for a larger new brick building. The building committee included Reeve Dr. J. Frank Lavery, Charles Junkin, and George Turner, the township treasurer. George Turner was also the architect and construction supervisor.

An insurance map from 1910 shows that the Town Hall was also used for a farmer's market on the first floor and as an opera house on the second floor. The hall roof was made of steel shingles from the Toronto Metallic Company and Joseph Thompson provided the black ash lumber for the framework.

Edward Payne was paid \$14 to draw the 28,000 bricks by wagon from the Sunderland train station up River Street to the town hall site. James Dusto sold 40 loads of gravel and George St. John 214 loads of gravel at 10 cents per

wagon load for the walls and foundation.

A furnace was installed in March 1907. Robert Charter, who was a furniture dealer and the undertaker provided the wooden chairs. Those original chairs from 1906 in the balcony still have a wire hat rack underneath.

Many of the windows in the hall have a Romanesque style with round brick arches at the top. The main attraction on the south side is a round Gothic Style Rose Petal window. Inside the second floor has a vaudevillian stage and a large balcony with a brass railing. The ceiling is covered with pressed metal printed squares and a huge antique brass chandelier lights the hall.

Downstairs, the building had a clerk's office and a jail with two cells. These cells were often the temporary home for poor travelers passing through town during the Depression years.

Here on the main floor on Tuesday nights in the 1920s, farmers would bring eggs, vegetables, butter and a whole variety of other products to sell and trade. Over the years, the building was the site for council meetings, plays, fund raisers, dances, a library, school concerts and banquet hall. Local librarians included Mona St. John, Bessie Oliver, Pearl Miller and Jean Christie.

This was the social centre for the town. Here Evelyn Johnson and her family, Bessie Oliver, and Iva Fallowdown provided the entertainment to a packed house. During the war years, concerts were held to raise money to support the troops overseas. Flossie and Emma Oliver often made attractive costumes for the numerous concerts.

The King Edward Masonic Lodge of Sunderland ran many dances and euchre games here. The upstairs was a perfect dance floor and some of the callers for the dances were Jack Young, Hewitt Thompson, George McMullen and Jack Snooks.

In 1922, a cenotaph was erected on the southeast corner of the Sunderland Town Hall to honour the veterans of World War One. Later in 1945, Col. George Arthur Welsh, a veteran of two wars, officiated the ceremony to recognize those who died in World War Two.

For over 50 years now, this historic hall has been the site of the Sunderland Lions Music Festival and this service club has provided funding to renovate and restore the building.

In 1992, a Town Hall Preservation and Restoration Committee was set up to raise funds to upgrade the hall to modern standards. Now there is a hall management board that works with the Township to keep this artifact of history in great shape.

In 2003, work began to install a wheelchair access elevator and washrooms so that it can now be enjoyed by everyone in the community.

In 2006, the Township of Brock and the Sunderland Historical Society presented a heritage plaque to celebrate 100 years of community service that this building

has provided. Also in the front hallway a historical mural was painted by Linda Cunningham to document in colourful images the rich legacy that has gone on in days of yore in Brock Township and Sunderland.

Much care and dedication of service has gone into maintenance of this building over the years and it was all the result of thousands of volunteer hours. It is often said that you have a better understanding of where you are going if you know where you came from. That is why it is so important to preserve these heritage sites.

Larry Doble is president of the Sunderland Historical Society. He thanks Jack Gordon for the information in his book "The Green Pastures of Old Brock" which provided much of this background.