

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Lolland Schoolhouse Renovation Project

Personal Experience

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PATRICIA CUMMINS

Interviewed

by

Michelle Blum

on

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INTERVIEWEE: PATRICIA CUMMINS

INTERVIEWER: Michelle Blum

SUBJECT: restoration done, historical society, personal experience

DATE: December 2, 1983

B: This is an interview with Patricia Cummins of the Mahoning Valley Historical Society for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Poland little red schoolhouse renovation project, by Michelle Blum, at the Arms Museum, on December 2, 1983, at 10:00 a.m.

A group has found a building or a site which they feel has some historical value, before any physical or actual restoration begins, what are some of the steps that they have to go through?

C: Well, first they . . . Is this building going to be nominated for the National Register of Historic Places?

B: Well, they feel it has some historical value, yes.

C: One of the first criteria for that is, has the building been moved from its original site, has it been significantly altered in its architecture. For example, wings put on, or an additional room, or porches added. Also, there is a State Preservation Association that operates from the Ohio Historic Center in Columbus. They really have the guidelines and the rules. So, the first step would really be to check with them.

I also know that if there is going to be any application for funds, say National Preservation funds for restoration that know restoration should be done before the application has been either approved or disapproved. I have known cases where an organization was very anxious

to complete a restoration and they were hopeful of getting a grant, but they went ahead and did the work before they got the money and they didn't do it the way the preservation people thought it should be done. So, they ended up not getting the money, so they are upset. There really are rather strict guidelines for historic preservation.

If you are in the business, if you go around and look at some of these buildings that have been done; sometimes they have, for example, done a fireplace that is exactly right for the period and everything and the house restores the fireplace perfectly. Then they may put on a wallpaper or something else that really is not of the period of the house. The organization really should decide how true they are going to be to the history of the building, or if they are going to restore the building for an alternate use. Here in the valley there are some very good examples of that. The old Rayen School which is being restored isn't going to be a school, but rather it is going to be offices for the Youngstown Board of Education. That is certainly a legitimate alternate use. Also the Holy Trinity Rumanian Orthodox Church on Wick Avenue is an excellent example of historic preservation for an alternate use. It was a home and the architect who remodeled for the church use didn't use any new material. The architecture of the building was well preserved and those are considerations.

B: But, there is a group together. Do they have to form a historical society if none exists or can they just go along?

C: I wouldn't think they would have to have any formal . . . Because any individuals can restore a building. There is a group of attorneys in Warren who have turned one of those wonderful houses on Millionaire's Row into their offices. So, it doesn't take . . . It can be a business or an individual or any kind of association.

B: How does one go about forming a historical society?

C: There are also guidelines for that and there is an excellent little book put out by the American Association of State and Local History, which is How to Start a Historical Society. I am not sure that is the exact title, but essentially that tells how to write your bylaws or code of regulations. It would differ from state to state, it would depend on whether you wanted to have a tax exempt classification or be incorporated under the state code. There are legal things that have to be attended to. It should have a purpose if it is going to collect the history of a certain locale like a village or a county. Is it going to have a specialized

collection like costumes or books, is it going to have mainly a library. It depends on the focus how they design a society.

B: One in Mahoning County, what would they have to go through to form a historical society?

C: I don't think it would be county regulations particularly. If they got together and they decided they really wanted to have a viable group, it would be under the state regulations from whatever that organization is.

B: What sort of funding is available for historical restoration projects?

C: I cannot give you the details on that, but the state preservation office can. There are regional state preservation offices, the one for this area is in Canton. They would be the people to contact for that. It would depend if you really just concentrated on public funding or if you wanted to do also private funding. My advice to any such organization would be that you really have to look at both. For example, when the Mahoning Valley Historical Society first opened this museum, they had private endowment funds that had been left towards the maintenance of the building. They were able to open to the public with the assistance of the county commissioners, Mahoning County Commissioners.

Over the years, because of the rise in the cost of operations, utilities and you name it, inflation, that funding was just not doing the job. The Board of Trustees are building up a base of community support and it is a building process and sometimes it seems like it takes a long time. Then when you look back you can see how much has been accomplished. They are a private foundation, not only in the county, but also in the state in businesses and industry.

Now, this is a currently economically depressed area, but it is amazing to me how much community support the Mahoning Valley Historical Society has generated. It is really wonderful community support and that enabled us to do our archival library project and our increased operation expense so far has been helped very much by community support. You can do it by memberships and if you have some kind of exhibits or if you have a place that is open to the public, you can generate some by admission fees. Actually those are smaller types of income. It just is a constant . . . Public relations is really the number one thing for a historical society or a museum. You just have to constantly put yourself in the public eye and tell your story to the community, constantly.

I remember when I first came here and I was starting the education program. I sent letters to the principals in all the surrounding schools telling them about our program, and inviting them to bring their school classes. Then the next year I thought, "Oh, I notified all those principals, this year I don't have to do that." It was really amazing how our number of class tours dropped off. So, we do it every year.

B: So it is possible for a historical project to get both private and public funding at the same time?

C: I would say that is important. Don't put all of your eggs in one basket. When the Mahoning County Commissioners . . . There were a couple of years when they were really in financial (trouble) themselves, and they could not support us as they had previously. When something like that happens, you just have to go out and find it elsewhere. We were fortunate enough to get a federal grant for the year that we didn't get any county funds.

It is very time consuming, especially for a small group. We only had four full-time staff members and grant proposals. It was an extremely time consuming project. It was a little scary for a small organization, when you see you are writing to Washington where they are funding the Smithsonian and places like that. Actually, they are quite interested in what smaller organizations are doing. In fact, there is a new project that is just underway in Columbus. The Ohio Historical Society has gotten a planning grant for a collection sharing project and they got it from the National Endowment for the Humanities. They are surveying their collection and are going to select artifacts they will be able to loan to historical societies and museums throughout the state. If a small museum or a historical society wants to have a special exhibit, they can look at this. They will be able to, from the Ohio Historical Society, and collect things that will enhance their exhibits.

There are also organizations in this state that can help. The Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums is especially to help small historical societies and museums. The Ohio Museums Association does too, but OAHSM, that is what they are for, to help small historical societies. A lot of the historical societies do not have any paid staff, they are strictly volunteer organizations. You can really learn a lot by belonging to these groups because there are regional meetings and there is a really good exchange of ideas. The Western Reserve Historical Society started an association of county historical societies in Western Reserve. That is really groups just in this area, northeast Ohio. You find out that everybody has the same problems and sometimes people come up with a solution that can be shared.

Those things are very helpful.

B: What kind of help could my historical society get from organizations such as OAHSM?

C: Right, the Ohio Association of Historical Societies and Museums. We are in region 3-A and they could help with things like forming your code of regulations or bylaws, and forms that you need to have for loaning things or acquiring things. They can help you with experience in legal problems like getting yourself set up. The Ohio Historical Society has a local history office and James Stryder is the head of that. He is extremely helpful. Many times I have had a question and he is as close as the telephone. He has been up here several times to help us and he can give advice about funding. He knows what grants are available, so there are a number of sources to help a starting organization.

B: He is out of Columbus?

C: Yes, but he is very helpful. I have his address.

B: Why should a building be restored? Why shouldn't the land just be used for real estate development?

C: It depends on what part that building has played in the history of the area. Is it a significant part of the history of the area, does it have significant architecture, does it reflect the life of a certain period? You know, is it worth saving or would somebody miss it if it were torn down. There are many schools of thought, and I know in our own case of remodeling the carriage house and the archival library, there were people on our Board of Trustees who thought, Why not tear that down and build something from scratch? To me that was horrifying because the architecture is very much compatible with these buildings. It was a sound structure and I am very glad it wasn't torn down.

I think, right here on Wick Avenue there were a number of significant buildings destroyed. I mean there is a parking lot directly across the street. That was torn down the day after this block was declared a historic area. The wrecking ball was there. There are two ways to stop a building being torn down; if any public monies, that are tax dollars, are going to be spent in building the building on the property that has been torn down, it can be stopped. The only other way is just by public sentiment. For example, the Pollack House on Wick Avenue was just saved simply because of public sentiment. The (Youngstown) University students themselves helped save that

B: I understand now that it is falling down again.

C: Well, there are devious ways that those things can happen. If the owner of the property lets the building deteriorate so that it is not economically feasible to restore it, there is not too much that can be done to fight that. It is a very discouraging job to be in sometimes, trying to save a building. Very often there is disagreement even among people that are knowledgeable. For example, one architect might think that a building is worth saving and another might think it isn't. It is just like art, it is a matter of personal opinion.

B: What segment of the population of the public usually supports historical projects, museums, and things like this? Is there a general segment or is it overall?

C: I would say that this history museum, the Arms Museum, has a broader segment of general population than maybe Butler Art because it is just in the nature of what is kept here. We try to reflect the history of the whole broad section of the population. This has not always been the case. For example, we try to have things that please all ages of people and all kinds of people. Youngstown, this area, is a very rich ethnic community. We try and have special exhibits that reflect that. We have had Rumanian and Polish and Black history, and we are going to be putting up one from the Italian community. By special exhibits we try to serve all parts of the public.

B: You have a fourth, fifth, or sixth grader who just comes because everybody else is coming. He says that history is boring and I am not interested. What do you say to that student?

C: We have specially trained tour guides and many of them have education backgrounds. They are used to dealing with groups of students. Particularly for fifth graders, I think we have an outstanding education program. We have a pioneer suitcase which is taken out to all of the city's fifth grades and Mahoning County and parts of Trumbull County. It contains twelve or fifteen items that were used in the pioneer days that can be handled by schoolchildren. They have a taste of that history before they come to the museum.

There is an arts holiday program where all the fifth graders in the city come to the museum and they have a special tour and craft demonstrations. There is spinning and sometimes weaving. They really get hooked on the museum. I think sometimes the most turned off age groups are high school and college students. One of the most exciting things, to me, is to have YSU students come for one reason or another, and they get really

excited about the museum. We have had interns from YSU, we have tour guides from YSU, and some of our college students have gone on to museum careers just from getting started here.

B: Are you familiar with the little red schoolhouse project?

C: Yes, probably because I live in Poland. I am a member of that historical society.

B: Do you know how they have gone about their project?

C: Just really what I have read in the Poland Clarion. Have they decided yet what the purpose of the building is going to be when it is finished?

B: Yes, there are going to be two alternate purposes. It is going to be both a museum and a meeting place.

C: That is good because they will have income from the meeting place.

There is a group, I think from the middle school PTA in Poland, they instituted this program. They have their own little arts holiday for the middle school and I helped them a little bit with that. They took the children by bus, I don't know if they walked to some and then took them by bus to other places. But there are places in Poland that really reflect the settlement of the town. I think that the little red schoolhouse would fit in very well with that program.

B: Is there something different that the restoration project, something that you feel should be done differently than what you understand that they are doing?

C: I heard varying. . . I think there were a lot of alterations done to the inside of that building. I don't know what you are going to do, whether you are going to restore it the way it was originally or . . . I just don't know how much work you are going to put into returning it to the way it was originally.

B: You are looking at a historical project and you have a building and you want to look back at how it originally was. What sources can you go to for information?

C: I think I saw in the paper that there was someone who attended that school that is on the committee, and it would be the memories of that person. Also, there are people in Poland that have excellent photograph collections, and I don't know if there are any photographs that show the interior of that building. It would be worth looking into because that would certainly help.



Maybe there are some families that have old diaries that would talk about . . . The child may have reported what had gone on in school or what kind of stove or pad or what the desks were like. I just think that a lot of research can be done in that area.

B: What about an older building, something that there is no one around to tell anything? Are there any general sources?

C: Yes. There is a book that was put out by the Mahoning Valley Historical Society, I think the date was 1876, and it is full of recollections of people in the valley, including those from Poland, about life in those days. I think there are specific references to schools and there are early histories of the valley. The Joseph Butler history is a good resource. Also we have a history that was published in 1872 by the Williams brothers that is a very good history of the valley. It has references of specific townships and is written so that the education. . . There are paragraphs on education and references to the schoolhouses would be found in that kind of book.

B: Let me ask you how you got involved in the Mahoning Valley Historical Society.

C: Personally?

B: Yes.

C: Well, I have always loved museums. I have lived in Poland since 1950, I came to the area in 1948. We moved to Columbus and I was there for five years and I went to work down there for Ohio State University. I personally knew the director, she became the director here in 1971. She needed someone to come help her. We were moving back and she said, "How about coming to work?" So I did. It is a learning on the job process. Now there are graduate programs in museum work. It is really a new field, but there are a lot of publications and help for people in museum work.

We have such an excellent collection here and we are anxious to preserve it. There is a lot of reading material about how to do the kinds of paper that you use for storing manuscripts, and boxes, and how you store costumes. It is just like medical journals for doctors or lots of things, for museum people to read. It is really a fascinating job. It is the kind of work where everyday is different. The whole museum feel has changed from the concept of dusty, old places with hundreds of objects lined up on the shelves and tea drinking, old ladies, and has become two major jobs. One is education and also preserving the history of this

country and its people.

B: Thank you very much for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW