

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland Schoolhouse Project

Renovation Procedures

O. H. 611

RALPH SYLVESTER

Interviewed

by

Michelle Blum

on

November 16, 1983

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland Schoolhouse Project

INTERVIEWEE: RALPH SYLVESTER

INTERVIEWER: Michelle Blum

SUBJECT: Education, grants, funding, project specifications,  
Austin Log Cabin, lease agreement

DATE: November 16, 1983

B: This is an interview with Ralph Sylvester for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Poland Schoolhouse, by Michelle Blum, on November 16, 1983, at 8:30 in the morning.

Mr. Sylvester, how does the school board and the schools feel about the restoration project?

S: I would have to say that we're pleased that the property is going to be restored and used for some useful purpose in the community.

B: What useful purpose would that be?

S: In accordance with what the Historical Society says, they are going to try to restore it to its original condition or as near its original condition as possible and open it for community use, for group meetings. It will be available for the schools to use for tours. They will be able to take field trips to the site. They will also incorporate it into the local Poland history that is taught in the junior high school. We do have a course in our junior high curriculum that deals with Poland School District history, which is a history of the whole Poland community. I believe it is a six week course that Mr. Wilkeson teaches. The schoolhouse itself has a significant role and will be incorporated into that curriculum also.

B: That course is new?

S: No, we've had that for about six years. I think it is taught in the eighth grade as well. It is taught in the

classroom where President McKinley used to teach.

B: What were some of the steps that had to be gone through to get this project started?

S: First, the Historical Society has to assume responsibility for the development or lease of the property. The school board worked with the Poland Historical Society to come up with a lease agreement that could be published, made known to the community, and then it would help them in soliciting funds for the renovation of the project. When it became clear in the community that the school board had more or less acquiesced on its position to sell the property and actually lease it to the the Historical Society for community use, then the groundwork was laid for the development of the renovation itself, the project, soliciting funds for, and the lease itself. Right now it's leased to the Historical Society; the date of issue on the lease was July 6, 1981. The lease period initially is for three years, but we do have a renewal clause for it to be renewed. It is relatively easy to do that. Our concern at the time of the initial lease was that there would be money collected and people in the community would be serious about this renovation of it rather than to just lease it to them or to have the property lie dormant and continue to lie dormant and not see the practical use. That is why we went with a short-term lease initially so that at the end of the period we will evaluate the progress that the Historical Society has made. From what I've seen at this point, however, I think the renewal will just be automatic because they have generated revenues and they do have a plan in operation and they are actually working on the site right now.

B: I'm confused. I've heard about a three year lease and also a ninety-nine year lease.

S: I'm making reference to the memo that Dr. North sent to the board in April of 1983. At that time he summarized four sites that are currently leased to different community groups. In that memo he indicates that the period of lease was three years with a five year renewal clause. I can tell you that almost all of the properties we have are for ten years usually, maximum. We have leases with the Little Bulldog Association, the baseball association.

B: What are the terms of this lease?

S: The leases are more or less intended to provide some type of . . . They are legal documents and they are intended to provide some type of legal right to use the property so that other communities and groups would not be permitted to use the property. In other words, the way I see a lease agreement, it is an agreement between, in this case the Historical

Society and the school district, with the purpose of letting the community know that they're concerned about the sale of the property. The lease does actually bind us to the leasing agency for the purpose stipulated in the lease, in this case renovation of the property or some progress towards renovation of the property, some indication of what the use of the property will be, and evidence of development toward that end. I can say at this point we're pleased that those conditions in the lease are being met. We're convinced that at this point it was a good move to lease the property. It hasn't been lying dormant with nothing happening to it and it has become a focus for people in the Poland Historical Society and other historians in the community. It is sort of a rallying point for that group of people.

B: The monetary terms of this lease agreement . . .

S: It is probably a dollar. Our typical lease is a dollar per year or nothing at all. The lease actually describes the physical premises, the dimensions, where the property is located. Most of our leases are for one year initially; now we've updated that because people who are leasing from us are well-known community groups that have leased from us the same property year after year. We got in the situation where we were renewing the leases every year because we were only granting them for a year. To make it more convenient we've gone to three-year, five-year, and ten-year lease agreements on property. The initial lease agreement was drawn up by an attorney and they are notarized by a local notary public. We require six months written notice for termination. In our lease agreement we can terminate the lease with a six month notification by the school board; that's a clause that we have in all of our lease agreements. This is in case developments are not as they're supposed to be, or the property is not being used for the purpose that the original lease was intended for, that type of thing.

B: You mentioned ways that the Historical Society goes about setting up a project. Could you go more into that?

S: I was referring to the development of events leading up to the actual leasing of the schoolhouse specifically. What I related was that for the longest time the property was used for a storage facility by a local resident. At one point the school board was seriously considering selling the property. It was at that time that the local Historical Society generated an interest in the property and it became a focal point for the Historical Society. It was a project for them to do; it gave them something to do, something to concentrate on.

At the time there were many local factions who wanted that

property. Poland Township government subdivision actually wanted to purchase or be given that property to use for a township garage. I don't know if their plans were to tear down or build around it, but they actually wanted the property as a township garage for Poland Township. We had private real estate agents who wanted to purchase the property and develop it commercially. The school board was put in a position where if it sold the property it would have had township government angry at it and residents in the township who were looking for a new police station and a new township hall, they would have been angry. The Historical Society would have been angry because they wouldn't have had an opportunity to restore the facility. Real estate agents would have been angry because they wouldn't have been angry because they wouldn't have been able to purchase something and then make a money-making project out of it. What we very quickly realized was that we were creating quite a furor in the community by considering a \$20,000 to \$25,000 income for the school district with a budget of about six million dollars. It was frankly becoming more problematic than it was worth. At that point I think the school board wisely decided that if we were going to consider not selling it for profit, and that was going to be our final conclusion, that it ought to perhaps try to maintain its original intent and be used for community service in some way. What happened was that two years after that initial time other property became available for township government and it was even more centrally located, so they no longer cared about investing or looking at that school property.

An interesting thing when it comes to property of the schools is that the property really, in essence, belongs to the taxpayers of the community. Different agencies within that community feel that since they've already paid for that with tax dollars they shouldn't have to pay for it if they want to use it for another purpose. They will argue very strongly that you should donate the property to the township or you should donate it to a baseball group to develop little league fields and things. The board was put in that posture very quickly as soon as the news broke that we were considering selling the property. The Historical Society, in my personal opinion, was the best way for the school board to keep all parties who were interested in the property happy, or at least neutralized.

I can recall that when it first began we had real estate people coming into the office almost every week when it first hit the paper. They wanted to submit private quotations for the property, and what they would actually sell it for or buy it for from us and what they would develop it into. The township trustees became concerned because one real estate person was going to make an ice cream parlor out of it and they didn't want one out there. Their motive was to get the

property for their own use. It was very interesting to see the development of that. I imagine that it wasn't just the fact that it was the last little, one-room school-house in this part of the Western Reserve. It was that it was a piece of property that many people within the community wanted to develop for use for their own particular purpose. I would say in all honesty that I would give total credit to the Historical Society for organizing the effort to get the property to them and develop the property. The school board, in all honesty, didn't call the Historical Society even when it found itself in the middle of warring groups who wanted to acquire the land. We still didn't call the Historical Society; they came to us and we saw it as a solution for getting ourselves off the hot seat in terms of . . . We have great concerns as a school district when we cause chaos in the community. People in the community have to support the schools financially and they are always renewing levies and there are always additional levies that come up; you have to be very careful about antagonizing these people. When you stop and consider it, the Historical Society's renovation of the property as the solution to the problem is one that not too many people in the community can be angry at. It really was the best choice on the part of the school board I think.

B: Selling this property could have benefited the school system. How did you make up for that situation?

S: I was never a party to discussions by the school board, but I was a part to discussions by the administration about the events of the school board meetings and so on, and what kinds of discussions were going on. The property was assessed at a maximum value of \$25,000 I think by an independent agent. The unofficial quotations that were received to purchase the property ranged from \$8,000 to \$15,000 to \$20,000, in that area. At the most, we were looking at income of about \$20,000 in a particular year. Initially, that was just looked upon as dormant property that the school board had never used.

We didn't have any problems with that property as far as vandalism. We did have a person coming in who would check it because he was storing his own personal things in there. We really didn't have any problems with the property to cause us to want to sell it. We looked at it strictly as a source of possible income at a time when we were losing revenues from the state of Ohio. We were losing our revenues in real estate taxes. We were looking for any kind of income to get in. As we got into considering that, however, it became apparent that the amount of money was not worth all the problems. We felt we may actually jeopardize the renewal of some levy that perhaps would generate \$300,000 for a \$20,000 argument. We became more concerned about this harming the community and affecting our school issues, levies and so on, than we did

about the \$20,000 that would have been generated from the sale of the property, if we would have been able to get that amount of money. I think almost always these types of decisions come down to that. You do have a dual government agency within the Poland School District; you have a township and village political subdivision; they're separate bodies. The school district encompasses all of the township, including the village. As a school district we try to assure or at least try to maintain some kind of cooperation between both government agencies. We could see it was causing a problem, mostly because the Poland Township trustees were very aggressively seeking that property to be donated as a donation. We were then put in a position where-- What would the people of the village have thought about that? They paid for that property at some point with their tax dollars.

- B: Getting involved with the historical renovation, what are some of the guidelines that have to be met?
- S: It is my understanding that depending upon what the intention of the historical group is in renovating the property, if they want to renovate it with the purpose in mind of making it a natural historical site, then there are very elaborate, specified guidelines as far as renovation is concerned. I'm not all that familiar with them other than what was true for Austin Log Cabin in Austintown. You do have to recommend that the property be estimated at some point to determine if there are any other foundations with any other auxiliary buildings on the property. Those buildings also have to become part of the total renovation to authenticity. It is a very involved and very costly adventure. For example, you can't take out brick, for instance, and replace it with new brick; you have to try to keep as much of the original structure intact through the renovation. What you actually do is take a part of the old brick and remortar the old brick into the new structure. As a general rule, you try to keep as much of the original building material that was used in the structure intact and part of the renovated structure whenever practical.

In the Austin Log Cabin, for example, the original logs were in fine shape so the mortar and cement and whatever that they used to go between the logs, that had to be mixed to the same specifications as what it would have been at the time that the log cabin was made, same materials, same color, same composition and so on. The National Historical Society actually has all of this reduced by what era you're dealing with. You have to follow their specifications and they even send an on-site inspector to look at the renovation and the value of the project. Especially if you seek federal funds for the renovation, you do have to get to a certain level of commitment financially at a local level before the federal government is willing to become involved in any kind of subsidies. The federal government will tell you that you have to demonstrate locally the

sincerity of your intentions to renovate before the government will help.

I don't think at this point that the Historical Society is looking at the little, red schoolhouse as a national historical site. What they're going to try to do is restore it as nearly practicable to its original condition. They concentrated on what the uses of the facility would be. They're using that as a guideline for the type of renovation that they're doing rather than if they want to restore it to a one-room schoolhouse condition. There might be some changes made because they are going to have groups tour.

If you were going to make it a national historic site like Austin Log Cabin then you're restricted from putting any barriers up or doing any rerouting of stairways and so on. That might facilitate traffic patterns during an open house when you have it open to the public. If it is a historical site you are forbidden to do that; you have to suffer with the crowds when they come in.

I don't think there is a strong intention on the part of the Historical Society to get into the historical site and seek federal dollars to do the renovation. I've been in the structure several times myself and what's going to be involved in the renovation structure will be a new roof; there is a lot of point work that has to be done on the bricks, although the brick is in pretty good condition. The mortar in between them is loosened and will have to be replaced. The floor itself will have to be shored up. The floor is a big problem. Our concern is that the schools have access to it as an instructional tool. We would be unique as a school district to actually have a renovated one-room schoolhouse where we could bring children on field trips.

B: Is there a difference between a national historical site and an Ohio historical site?

S: I believe there is. There are separate guidelines when you get into the actual renovation that you have to follow. You apply to different agencies. In order to get a historical site certified as a historical site in Southern Ohio, it would not be as difficult to get us certified as a national historical site.

B: What are some of the sources of funding available for a restoration project?

S: I would say historical societies have more revenues available than the actual public, governmental agencies do. That probably is why you would find the restrictions placed on you when you apply to a government agency much more than when you apply to a private foundation. There are numerous private foundations that are made up of individuals who are interested in preserving

historical sites and the history of areas that donate private funds to that foundation and then you can apply to that foundation for monies. As long as you meet the mandate of that foundation in terms of what it is used for and so on, they will release dollars to you to do that. When they do, however, they almost always have a time line that you have to follow for development of it and they will cut you; they will only give you a portion of your funding and they will cut you off if you don't actually demonstrate locally that there is an interest in seeing that the job is done to its completion. Almost all of the historical grants, whether they are from governmental agencies or private foundations have what are called phase-in periods. If you are given a grant of \$10,000 to do some renovation you will never get it all; you will get maybe \$1500 to do the first phase and you have to generate locally 'X' amount of dollars in your fund and match it. Almost all of them that I've seen have some kind of control over the local group so that the sincerity of that local group is really put to the test. You have to back up your intentions with dollars collected because they'll never give you enough money to do the job the right way.

B: What are some of the agencies that can be tapped for funds?

S: I'm not too familiar with what they would be by name. You would call the national historical society and ask them for a mailing list for private foundations that would be willing to underwrite the costs of renovations. You set up appointments with the directors of the private foundations and meet with them and give them an idea of what you have in mind. You have to bring pictures of the property. They have to have an on-site visit themselves, and evaluate the property. They pretty much tell you what they're willing to subsidize. Then you write the proposal based on what they tell you they're willing to subsidize. It's not a matter of you having a clear-cut objective in mind in most instances, and then just applying to different groups. Most of the time it is a matter of you trying to determine what that private foundation is willing to finance and then you write the grant for trying to meet that requirement of that foundation.

B: Do you know what year the schoolhouse finally closed?

S: No.

B: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW