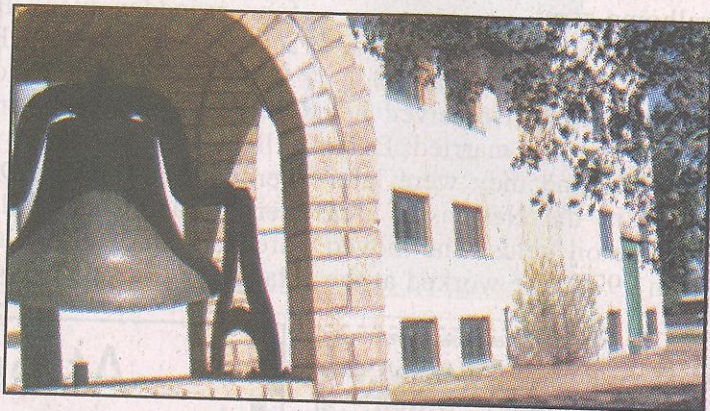


Pioneer School: Three-story albatross?

By John Miller

Staff Writer

Torrington has seen a multitude of changes in the past 24 years. Mayors have come and gone, businesses have prospered and went belly-up, and



Photo/ John Miller

The original Pioneer school bell is on display near the old school at East A Street and 22nd Avenue.

infrastructure improvements are abundant. But for all the progress made around it, even an updated county courthouse across the street, none of it involves the old schoolhouse. Forlorn and in tatters, it's as if it doesn't even exist.

Built in 1915, Pioneer School was a hub of activity for 71 years in Torrington until it closed in 1986. Many of the children who attended the school now live next door at Bellpark Towers, a Volunteers of America elderly residence. And what they see is both a bittersweet reminder of what once was, as well as the looming, stark

reality of what is.

"I wish someone would do something with it," Bellpark manager Sharon Pryor said. Though she sees no health or safety risks with the building as it stands, she believes it's unsettling for her tenants who went to Pioneer to see the old school in such a state of disrepair and decay.

Meanwhile, tenants Pat Rust and Betty Sheridan harbor strong opinions regarding the building, calling it an "eyesore" and a "waste of land." They remember a not-too-distant past before it

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was boarded up and its windows replaced when it was infested with pigeons and bats. They said one could smell the guano emanating from the building, and nighttime would see flocks of bats taking flight to feed.

Sheridan, 62, attended the school in her youth and has many fond memories. But now she believes the site to be "dangerous," and that it needs to be demolished. She thinks the current owner is probably using it for a tax write-off.

If only it were that simple.



Sandy Pittman has been the city of Torrington's clerk since 1986, and she remembers well the series of events surrounding the old school after it's closure. However, a look through the 20-year-old file kept by the city concerning the property reveals some contradictory information, as well as additional circumstances, that have led to the current standstill in progress.

As early as 1988,

Volunteers of America was working to erect elderly housing. An architectural site plan dated Sept. 5, 1989 shows the home encompassing the entire block from 22nd Avenue to 23rd Avenue, with no sign of the old schoolhouse even existing, prompting speculation it was to be removed.

Indeed, Pittman verified the city sought to demolish the building, and a bid from Rock the Wrecker Associated Wrecking Co. in Omaha, Neb. dated July 16, 1990 was found in the city's files. The bid called for a fee of \$98,760 to demolish the structure, which included asbestos removal and disposal.

Pittman, however, contends the plan was foiled by the Wyoming State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) which, in a letter to the city, informed them the old building had significant historical value and they were prohibited from demolishing it. Pittman said this decision was delivered in spite of findings submitted to SHPO in a March 16,

1990 letter by the Cultural Resource Advisory Committee determining the building had no "special historical significance," and any data collected by a new study "would be redundant."

Michael Johnson, the principal SHPO representative responsible for the project, has since left the agency. But current SHPO representative Betsy Bradley said she believes the agency was misunderstood. She said the SHPO doesn't have the authority to demand of any landowner to not pursue whatever project they wish. Indeed, the letter states that "Torrington allow the project to proceed" and that "if any cultural materials are discovered during construction, work in the area should halt immediately" in accordance with state and federal laws.

"Sometimes, it's just easier to say 'SHPO says we can't,'" Bradley said.

In any case, believing they had no recourse, the city accepted sealed bids to buy the property. Larry Cottier submitted a bid of \$5,050, which was accepted by the city, and

he has been the building and property owner since. Cottier said he never paid the city any money for the property, instead trading construction services which he can't recall in exchange for ownership.

Originally, Cottier's plan was to transform the old building into condominiums. He hired work crews to gut the building, removing all of the interior walls and leaving only three stories of concrete and steel. Cottier said at no time has SHPO ever contacted him in regard to the building, nor has any asbestos ever been found.

But the expense involved in converting it into several living spaces proved to be much higher than he

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School

had originally anticipated. He owns the Cottier Apartments, which was the original Eastern Wyoming Junior College, and he said at the time converting the building into apartments was relatively simple. But he said new state and federal building regulations have squelched many a would-be project.

"As much as we need housing in this town, that's why no one is building any," Cottier said. "If we build something, there are certain rules and regulations we have to abide by. Any new building you have to sprinkler it (overhead sprinklers for fire prevention), and that's a huge cost. When we did the EWC building (in the late 70s), we didn't have

to sprinkler it."

"I'm not saying anything bad about the rules and regulations," Cottier said, "but you've got to abide by them, and to do that is just cost prohibitive. People think that rentals right now are higher than heck. Boy, if I had to put that (building) into condos or apartments, what they would have to pay..."

Cottier said he also had government officials interested who were considering converting it into office space, but that it didn't fit their needs. At this point, he said all he really wants is to recoup whatever he

and particularly former assistant coach Don Dungan, who were personally touched by coach Jim Wiseman during his years at the high school. The sign was purchased almost entirely by alumni donations, Pinnacle Bank and the Wiseman family. A dedication of the sign and Wiseman Field is scheduled for the Oct. 8 homecoming at 6 p.m. Additional donations can be made through First State Bank, P.O. Box 1098, Torrington, WY. Schlager manufacturing is donating a metal plaque to be placed at the stadium listing donors to the project. Any money above and beyond what is required will be placed in a scholarship fund.

has invested.

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There are some possible solutions on the horizon. Cottier said he is having discussions with an interested group concerning the property but won't have anything concrete to report for at least a few months.

Bradley advocated the use of a new business structure called L3C, a low profit, lim-

ited-liability initiative described as a hybrid between a charity and a for-profit business. Developed by Americans for Community Development, she said the concept is so new that many entrepreneurs may be unaware of it.

But whatever happens, it's a certainty it won't be soon. And the old schoolhouse will still be there.

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