



NEWS From
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ORIGINAL 1891 "LIBERTY BELL" REPLICA
RETURNS TO THE OLD SCHOOL HOUSE

The original 1891 "Liberty Bell" replica, which for more than 60 years rang out from Douglas-Union School at 130 Center Street to signal the start of countless school days, lunchtimes and recesses, will return to its rightful place for a new life at The Old School House Discovery Center on Wednesday, April 16.

Having rested as a nostalgic monument at the Douglas Elementary School, 261 Randolph Street, since The Old School House closed in 1957, the bell will be transported back to its prior home accompanied by current 3rd and 4th grade classes. Starting at 12:30pm in the Randolph Street schoolyard, brief ceremonies will mark both the beginning and end of the procession. At a later date, the bell will be remounted in the same rooftop cupola originally designed to let its peal embrace the entire community, and refitted with a pull-rope so it can be rung manually from below as it was in the past.

Listed on both the Michigan and National Registers of Historic Places, The Old School House is one of the oldest multi-classroom school buildings in Michigan and considered one of the finest surviving examples of 19th century school architecture in America. It still has many alumni among current area residents. Having been carefully maintained since 1962 as a four-unit apartment building by the family of Ms. Nancy J. Budd, now a resident of Holland, the 1860's-vintage building was purchased by the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society late in 2006 with proceeds from a successful local fund-raising campaign. The Society is preserving and converting it to become a unique addition to the community's educational infrastructure in collaboration with the area's District Library and Public Schools.

The new Discovery Center is envisioned as a regional resource where children and adults alike can explore the area's genealogy, history, culture, ecology and architecture through recreational activities, educational programs, special events and access to the Society's growing archive of local artifacts, photos, records and newspapers. Most of its surrounding 1.16-acre grounds -- the equivalent of six city lots -- will become a "back-in-time" pathway with diverse plantings and "story stops" telling about local environment and history. With these attractions, the Center also is expected to enhance the area's destination appeal in the growing heritage tourism industry.

The original Douglas-Union School "Liberty Bell", about half the size of its historic namesake in Philadelphia, is thought to have emerged from a variety of commemorative replicas produced during the "Century of Progress" World's Columbian Exposition of 1892 in Chicago -- which actually didn't open until May 1, 1893. There, an exhibition of the true Liberty Bell sparked broad public enthusiasm. A number of schools and churches bought these replicas as a

gesture of patriotism and support for the celebration, but over the years many of those bells have since been replaced by electronic bells, recycled into other objects or simply forgotten.

--- Help Needed With Mysteries ---

Although the minutes of the Douglas-Union School Board's final meeting in 1957 document the request that the bell be moved to the new Randolph Street school, no documentation has yet been found to precisely date the bell's earlier installation at The Old School House. Also missing are the bell's original clapper and rope-wheel.

An old photo indicates that when the bell moved to the Douglas Elementary School, it was displayed on a pedestal with clapper in place but without the rope wheel. Individual memories locate that display in the Kindergarten playground on the school's west side until the school was expanded with an addition dedicated in 1993, during which the bell was moved to the front yard alongside the school sign where it remains now. Some say the clapper was removed to quell the noise of playful ringing, but no one seems sure as to when that was done or what became of the clapper.

Also unanswered is the question of what, if any, bell occupied the Old School House cupola prior to the 1890s.

Anyone who can provide answers, clues or rational theories that might help solve these mysteries is invited to share that information in a letter to this newspaper's editor or to the Historical Society.

More information about the Old School House Project is available on-line at the Society's newly redesigned web site www.sdhistoricalsociety.org, including floor plans and a photo diary of work done to date. Information can be submitted to the Society through the web site's "contact us" e-mail portal.

With approximately \$350,000 still needed to fulfill The Old School House Project's fundraising goal, and targeting this summer for an opening date, the Historical Society urges more area businesses and residents to contribute toward the earliest possible completion of this distinctive community asset. Contributions or bell information may be sent to The School House Project, Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society, PO Box 617, Douglas, MI 49406.

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