Little Brown Church to be preserved

Julia Scott, STAFF WRITER
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PACIFICA SOME were married in the Little Brown Church. Some taught there. For 18 years, it even housed the local police force.

Over the course of 95 years, the church has accumulated a lot of memories. And now, thanks to the efforts to the Pacifica Historical Society, those memories will be preserved as it begins a new life as a museum.

Four years ago, when the Pacifica Police Department moved out of the converted Presbyterian church to a new location, the Historical Society joined with members of the Pacifica community to form the Little Brown Church Committee. Their goal was to preserve the landmark church, which was built in 1910 out of coastal redwood, and one of the oldest buildings in Pacifica.

On Sunday afternoon, residents cheered as Mayor Julie Lancelle officially turned over the church's keys to Karl Baldwin, chairman of the committee. The city has leased the church to the Historical Society, which will take on the responsibility of restoring the fading, shingled two-story structure to its original appearance. They will renovate the interior to create a public meeting space, a historical archive, a sports display celebrating Pacifica's prominent athletes, and a Coastside museum depicting the area in its "boom" period from 1905 to 1940.

"We think it's important that Pacifica retain some links to the past. There aren't many historical structures left," said Baldwin, who was Pacifica's first city manager when it was incorporated in 1957.

Ballot measure

The Little Brown Church Committee had to push the City Council to agree to preserve the church from development.For a time, the city considered building a business complex with apartments on the site, situated on Francisco Boulevard, next to City Hall and across from the phantom tracks of the old Ocean Shore Railway.

The committee argued that the building should be left intact, including the three classrooms that were added onto the back to accommodate extra students from Sharp Park Elementary School in the 1950s. Eventually, they gathered enough signatures to put the issue before Pacifica voters in a 2004 ballot measure, which passed overwhelmingly in favor of historic preservation.

The building also functioned as a house of worship, a neighborhood movie theater and a well-baby center until the 1970s. In the early 1980s, it was converted into the headquarters of the Pacifica Police Department.

The bell tower is rumored to be haunted. According to several people present at Sunday's ceremony, the police officers never visited it.

Lots of work ahead

The Historical Society will have its work cut out. The church has lain vacant for four years, and the interior is in a state of disarray. Police consoles, telephones, tables and chairs sit abandoned in low-ceilinged offices. Desktop computer shells lie on the floor next to tangled nests of wire ripped from the walls. The plumbing needs replacing, and the roof and the foundation need repair.

When Nita Buchanan looks at the building now, she doesn't see all that. She sees the pews of a church she used to worship in, and she sees an orderly classroom of Sunday School students she taught there in the 1950s.

"It was one of the nicest things I ever did," she said. "To be back inside is so exciting."

Buchanan leads the fund-raising committee for the Little Brown Church. So far her group has raised over $60,000 from rummage sales.

Connie Brown, committee treasurer, had her wedding at the church in 1977.
"Since our name was Brown, we wanted to be married in the Little Brown Church," she said.

Committee chairman Baldwin said he didn't know how much money it would take to restore the building, although some preliminary estimates had been as high as $1 million. The group plans to hire an architect as soon as possible; the city has given them seven years to complete the project.

Nita Buchanan was unfazed at the prospect of having to raise such a large sum of money.

"There are people lining up to give us money," she said. "And when they find out the history behind the church, they're going to want to have their picture taken in front."

Staff writer Julia Scott covers North County and the Coast. She can be reached at (650) 348-4340 or at jscott@sanmateocountytimes.com.

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