



Once an elementary school, Lyle Activity Center now rents space for both social gatherings and business.

Restoring Childhood Memories

Former Lyle resident returns to her hometown and helps preserve its old elementary school

By Jeanie Senior

One day more than 60 years ago when Mildred Lykens was in second grade, she and her classmates walked down the hill from the old Lyle School—which housed grades one through 12—to a brand-new room in the Lyle Elementary School.

Until the new elementary school opened, all of Lyle's students attended classes in that one big, two-story school. Once the new school opened, students in junior high and high school remained in

the building on the hill. Next to the old school was a large gymnasium with a cafeteria downstairs.

Mildred and her family moved to Lyle from Los Angeles in 1948, during a winter so long and ferocious the Columbia River froze. Her father owned businesses in Lyle, including two gas stations, and he eventually worked on construction of The Dalles Dam. After the dam was completed, the family moved to Eureka, California. Mildred was a high school sophomore when they arrived there.

"I moved from this little bitty school in Lyle, where I knew everybody and was a cheerleader, to a school three stories high, with a thousand kids," she recalls. "Nobody knew me, nobody cared. It was awful."

Mildred was just starting to know people when they moved again, to Grants Pass, where she graduated. She stayed in Grants Pass, got married and raised three children.

Mildred moved back to Lyle in 2001. She bought a house just a short walk from Lyle Elementary School, which had sat abandoned for many years, and she got involved in the community.

Then the school district said it intended to demolish the school building.

"They just had gone in and started to tear the hallway out—there are hammer holes in it—and we stopped it," Mildred says. "The public went to the school board and said, 'Please don't tear it down. Let us revive it.'"

The protest worked. Mildred is an active member of Old Lyle Elementary

School Supporters, which leases the property from the school district, manages the building and is working on its restoration. The former athletic field adjacent to the school is a much-used green space in the center of town, the site of community events such as last September's Northwest Homesteading Fair.

"It's been a long haul and it's been a struggle," says Mildred. "Those of us that have worked diligently to keep it, it's worked out pretty good."

She says restoration is paced by the fact that "it all takes money, and the activity center has to do fundraisers for everything. We're doing one room at a time."

Volunteers started work in December on the classroom that originally housed fifth- and sixth-grade students. When they removed a false ceiling and fluorescent light fixtures, light flooded in from formerly obscured clerestory windows. The next step is to remove the original ceiling tiles and replace the two inches of original insulation with R-38 insulation, followed by a new ceiling.

Mildred, who writes the Lyle community news column for the White Salmon Enterprise, invited people to help with the work.

"If you like to be destructive, or constructive and have frustrations you wish to release, this would be a great opportunity to expel them," she wrote.

As it turned out, workers were quite sedate as they took down the old ceiling.

The project is aimed at creating a better rental space, she says.

"Eventually we want to put in a little catering kitchen so people can cater a party there."

It is part of the ongoing revival. All three classrooms have new heating units. Major needs, including a new roof, still are on the to-do list.

OLESS is sustained by short- and long-term space rental in the old school. It has become a popular place



Mildred Lykens, an active member of Old Lyle Elementary School Supporters, does her part to help restore the elementary school she attended years ago.

for parties, and family and community gatherings. Bahai Fellowship and Community Enrichment for Klickitat County are among the groups that regularly meet there.

Santa visited the activity center twice in December for community parties.

"Cookies, candy canes and cocoa greeted the children and parents lined up to see Santa," Mildred wrote of the first visit. "It was the biggest turnout so far, with families lined down the hall and out the door. Santa entered the community with lights flashing and sirens screaming from the sheriff's vehicles escorting his sleigh."

The center's first occupant was the Twin Bridge Historical Museum, which set up displays in one of the former classrooms in 2007. Last year, the museum relocated to new quarters in the former Lyle United Methodist Church, which held its last worship service there in April 2012.

The activity center's present long-term renters include Catlink, an all-volunteer

group that facilitates the trap, neuter and return of homeless and feral cats, and the Klickitat Trail Conservancy, which rents an office.

During the years Mildred lived away from Lyle, the old Lyle School and the gym were torn down and replaced with new buildings.

"I cried when I saw them both gone," she says. "It about broke my heart."

But now, seeing the school where she attended grades two through six preserved and in regular use by the community is well worth the effort, Mildred says.

Some of the building's features are remarkable and unchanged: an abundance of beautifully crafted woodwork and cabinetry, all milled from what is old-growth Douglas fir. The restroom doors still are marked "Boys" and "Girls" in carefully painted letters. A long row of grade-schooler-height coat hooks lines one side of the hallway, blemished only by two holes left from the halted demolition. ■