

Old Town Hall saviours salute 20th anniversary

A celebration for the 20th anniversary of Aylmer Old Town Hall Library became something more last Friday—an opportunity for some of the men and women who saved the building from destruction to re-unite and reminisce.

Chris Mayhew, librarian, and her staff organized a

party to unveil a new computer website for the branch.

After formal presentations, Blair Barons, Paul Baldwin and Giles Hume recalled the controversy that revolved 20 years ago.

They remembered Wilf Chalk, a key figure in preservation of the historic structure. (See related story).

About 40 persons attended the ceremony.

Carnegie Library

Cathy Bishop, manager of library services for Elgin County, recalled the day the library moved from the Carnegie building on Centre Street into Old Town Hall 20 years ago.

“I swear there had to be a thousand steps going up to that (Carnegie) library.”

The web site was part of a Community Access Program, funded by the federal government, to provide Internet access to rural areas.

Michael Manchester, who

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Aylmer library staff members Michael Manchester, left, Jacquie Jeffery, Cheryl Campbell, Susan Morrell, Chris Mayhew and Bonnie Barons donated a framed

enlargement of an old postcard of Old Town Hall during a 20th-anniversary celebration last week. Absent are employees Renee Saarloos and Merrill Taylor.

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oversees the access program in Aylmer, said that one day he and Mrs. Mayhew were discussing a redesign of the web site.

They decided that the site should include a history of Old Town Hall, and the historic role it played in the community.

When Old Town Hall was built to house municipal offices and an opera house in 1873, it included a Mechan-

ics' Institute, which was an early form of library.

The building had come full circle, with its modern use as a library branch.

Pat Zimmer, curator of Aylmer and District Museum, helped find old photographs and postcards of the building to include on the web site.

Controversy explodes

The most contentious part of Old Town Hall's history, Mr. Manchester said, came

after it was closed to public use in the 1970s.

For five years, town council debated the future of the dilapidated building.

In 1978, several persons formed Heritage Aylmer to save Old Town Hall.

Many residents opposed preserving the building, because of cost, including some on council.

Council held a referendum on the subject. The majority opposed saving the building.

However, a new council decided to ignore the vote and restore Old Town Hall.

“This created considerable backlash.”

A lawsuit went to an Ontario high court, which ruled the referendum wasn't binding on council.

The building was renovated under the supervision of Ventin Group of Architects, and re-opened in 1982.

The opera house on the second floor was restored in 1988.