

# Little Round School retains early charm

PAM COTTREL - MY OPINION Oct 16, 2019  
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At least a hundred times I've driven by it — no maybe more like a thousand times. Olive Branch School on the east side of Tecumseh High School on Route 40 has always fascinated me. I've found the shape of the building, the innovative educational use of the spaces, and the use of local rocks for the exterior to be intriguing.

Tom Stafford's column this past Sunday in the Springfield News-Sun detailed the efforts to save this marvelous structure.

If you've not yet read it, I recommend this excellent article.

I'm amazed at how many people have worked together to save this unique structure even from the beginning when the 5-year-old building suffered a fire in 1913. Already it was so beloved that all efforts were made to preserve it.

"There's a real fondness in the community for this school," said Cyndy Young Gerken. "They call it the Little Round School or Little OB."

I've been told that some Bethel Twp. folks would not vote for the new school construction levy until they were reassured that the Little Round School would not be torn down. I can believe that. It is indeed very special.

I was surprised by the size of it when I visited Monday morning to meet the cleanup crew, better known as the Olive Branch School Preservation Society. All on hand had a connection to Little OB as students or teachers. The school is a common bond and they love telling stories about their early school memories and pointing out how things looked at the school back in their day.

Howard Stahl spent his first year teaching junior high social studies in this building. He would go on to work in the Tecumseh district for 37 years.

While they set up the sign together, he made his former student Boyd Banger laugh about when Coach Stahl told Banger to shave before a game.

Little OB really isn't that little. The middle common area once held a small basketball court and a stage.

At some time in the past the stage was walled off to form an office for the principal.

The central area is ringed by high windows and the skylight is the ceiling.

The classrooms were big, roomy and bright.

The sunshine revealed that the windows still have the wavy glass.

First thing I noticed is that there are lots of boxes and metal shelves remaining from the time Olive Branch was a storage building for the district. In the midst of the stuff there is an old bell from one of the district schools and a few of the old wooden desks.

As Gerken explained, the building remained solid since paper products and materials were stored here and it had to be dry. There was also a wood workshop in one room. The roof was maintained and a furnace kept the interior from freezing in the winter. She believes this helped to save Little OB.

The storage shelves have been removed from two rooms. One of the rooms is set up as the group found it with a lowered ceiling and tile floors, framed black slate boards, and an antique science work table in the middle.

In the other room the workers have removed the tile to plywood flooring, and then pulled some of that up to reveal the original oak flooring.

Jim Leathley clearly remembered how those floors would be oiled during Christmas vacation and over the summer. "It smelled so good when we walked into the room," said Leathley.

It is hoped that someday at least one of the rooms will have that original floor revealed and refurbished.

They have already removed the more modern lighting fixtures and the dropped ceiling. The original domed ceiling will be restored in the old style room. The double sliding pocket doors that formed an entrance to each classroom have been preserved behind panels. I cannot wait to see how they look once the work is done.

The biggest dilemma seems to be determining how far back to restore the building.

"What point do you pick for the restoration?" said Gerken. "It is all layers on layers."

Will it be a high school or junior high or elementary as it has been over the years? How much support they get from grants will also guide their efforts.

This open house is the perfect opportunity for the community to see how education has evolved in this area over the last 100 years.

The website at [Olive- BranchSchool.org](http://Olive-BranchSchool.org) is fascinating and has lots of photos from years past and detailed information about the architect, Charles Insko Williams.

There has not been an open house at Olive Branch since 1912. The focus of this two-hour event is the formal unveiling of a sign, but the secondary reason is to let the community come in and see the architectural treasures that will soon be restored. The possibilities are indeed endless. And I'm sure the group would welcome more volunteers.

The doors open Saturday at 11 a.m. with the unveiling of the new National Register of Historic Places sign at 11:30 a.m. The building will be open until 1 p.m. for tours of the one classroom that has been cleared out to the original walls and a classroom that looks like they did in the 1960s or 70s.

However the restoration plans go, the Little Round School will again be a shining example to our children.

The preservation and restoration of Olive Branch teaches us all about wise use of physical and financial resources, local history, respect for education, and the joys of innovative architecture.

And best of all it can show the next generation how the individuals, organizations and businesses of a community can work together.