

7 Days Of Play » 18

**LOVE KNOWS  
NO AGE**

Seniors have lived the good life  
for more than 20 years » 6

**HANDMADE  
VINTAGE**

Crafty shoppers can find deals  
at Fort Myers shop » 10

— A FIELD GUIDE TO PARADISE —  
**TROPICALIA**



**Essential Estero**

Historical society works to restore schoolhouse, other structures » 3



Jean Pryal of the Estero Historical Society looks through the Estero Historic Schoolhouse in 2012. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

# REPAIRING HISTORY

Estero group making fixes and  
raising money to preserve the past

By Anne Claire Shilton  
Special to The News-Press

A few windows are cracked and the floors creak ominously as you walk. Sometimes, they creak so dramatically you find yourself tiptoeing, as if transferring your weight to the balls of your feet and stepping with care will magically keep the boards from bucking. You can't safely go up the stairs and wires hang precariously from the walls.

But to the members of the Estero Historical Society, this 1904 schoolhouse has tons of potential.

The building, which originally stood on Highlands Avenue, is one of the last remaining historic buildings in the community. Gifted to the society by Charles Dauray and the College of Life Foundation, the little whitewashed school sits waiting patiently for its face-lift.

See ESTERO » 21

And soon the schoolhouse's wait may be over. If the Estero Historical Society has its way, it may not be long before this little structure is once again educating Estero's youth.

### Casualties of the boom

When you think of Estero, you don't necessarily think of historic buildings. In the last two decades, the town has had a tremendous building boom, transforming from a sleepy fishing village to the land of upscale shopping malls, FGCU and emerald-lawned gated communities. Unfortunately, the casualties of Estero's landing on the proverbial map have been the town's historic structures. While the Koreshan settlement was saved by the remainder of the group deeding the land to the state in 1961, few other historic landmarks in Estero have been so lucky.

Although, in all honesty, part of the reason so few historic buildings made it through the building boom was because, well, there weren't that many buildings to start with.

"We weren't even a wide spot in the road until recently," says Bob Morris, the group's president.

But the other problem was that since lumber was so hard to find, Estero residents often sold parts of their homes to neighbors looking to build additions.

"If I wanted to add on to my house and you weren't using part of your home, you'd give me lumber from your house to build mine," said Jean Pryal, the director of the Estero Historical Society.

Which is why preserving the few historic buildings left in the community is a main priority for the society. When Dauray and the College of Life offered two buildings — the 1904 schoolhouse and an early residence — plus the money to move them, the Estero Historical Society couldn't pass up the



Students stand outside the Estero school that Historical Society members are trying to save. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS



Steve Shandor, a member of the Estero Historical Society removes old screening from the porch of the one-room schoolhouse. THE NEWS-PRESS FILE PHOTO

deal. But finding a new home for the buildings and getting them there was no easy task.

"It was the most wonderful thing, watching the houses move," remembers Pryal. "We'd worked so long for something to happen and we'd gone through so much."

The move to where they sit now — a plot in the Estero Community Park — happened in the middle of the night. It took several hours to shuffle the buildings down Corkscrew Road, and the bell on the top of the schoolhouse clanged rhythmically the whole way, creating a strangely somber soundtrack to the buildings' steady march across town.

### Finding funds

First priority was to fix up the residence, called Hall House. It currently serves as the group's headquarters. Now that Hall House is completed, the group is ready to tackle building two, the little schoolhouse. But there's one little problem: funds.

"We're about halfway around where we need to be, maybe a little less," said Bob Morris, president of the group.

Dave Pryal, the vice president of the group, chimes in with an estimate that they'll need about \$50,000 more to make the needed renovations happen.

"We have to strip it down, it

Society

» **Where:** Address: 161 Bay Road, Fort Myers Beach, FL 33931

» **Info:** Phone: 463-0435. Esterohistoricalsociety.com

has, when it was remodeled as an apartment, different windows were put in and we've got to go back to the original window style," Morris says. "And it has vinyl siding over the old siding. We've got to pull that off and try to preserve the old siding. And it has a second story in it now; we're going to take that out too."

The schoolhouse was damaged badly in the Cuba Hurricane of 1908, actually closing for a year. In 1911, a two-room schoolhouse was built and the original was eventually turned into a residence. Over time the second floor and a kitchen and new siding and electricity were all added; things the society will slowly have to deconstruct to bring it back to original condition. The good news, however, is that the bones of the building are still in place and ready for another century of use.

Which is exactly what the group has in mind.

"We hope to make it a tourist attraction and to make it a place where teachers can bring students to show them what life used to be like," says Jean Pryal.

### A matter of identity

There are other historic school buildings in the county, but this one is worth saving for a few unique reasons. First, it's uniquely Estero's. In a town that's often lumped in with Bonita or Fort Myers, there's this constant question of identity for early Estero residents. Several members of the Estero Historical Society have even confessed that before joining the group, they wondered, why did Estero even need its own historical society?

The answer, of course, is because its history is different

the schoolhouse.

"The school is of significance to me because a school is always the cornerstone of any town, and this school served my beloved hometown of Estero," says Jeff McCullers, a lifelong educator and Estero resident. "For six generations now, my family has lived in Estero and attended schools here. It was fortunate that the community and the Estero Historical Society worked together to save this building, because it provides us with a close-up view of how we became what we are today."

But beyond this, the Estero schoolhouse is important because of why it was built.

For the first few years of the 20th century, the Koreshans ran most of Estero. According to the book "Early Estero," written by historian Quentin Quesnell, an influx of 108 Koreshans from Chicago in 1903 so changed the demographics of the tiny town, that when the group voted as a bloc (30 of Estero's 55 registered voters — meaning white men — were Koreshans), it almost always prevailed.

The Koreshans were happy to let Estero residents attend the group's school, but the Estero residents balked. In a very early example of recognizing the need to separate church from state in public schools, the residents of Estero opted to build their own, non-Koreshan schoolhouse.

This all-are-welcome attitude is one that the Estero Historical Society hopes will prevail during its fundraising campaign. While the group says that one big, golden donor could help fill in the anemic-looking thermometer in front of the dilapidated building, they hope it is actually more of a group effort.

"Ideally, I'd like to have a lot of people contribute a little, so it belongs to everyone," says Bob Morris.

Which is exactly how public schools — like this one — have survived hundreds of years.