

CUS ON COMMUNITY

Landmark building on market

By CHRISTINE RIEDEL
of the Potomac News

MANASSAS — Old Town's business community has always hoped for an end to the hollowness and dark at 9102 Center St. A recent flurry of interest in the empty building may mean those hopes are close to becoming reality.

"We've had a lot of lookers. Some have even wanted to rent one space, but we're interested in selling," said Bob Christopher, an employee of Park Communications, the company that owns the building and the Journal Messenger. The newspaper once had its office in the building, but has been trying to sell the property for at least the last year.

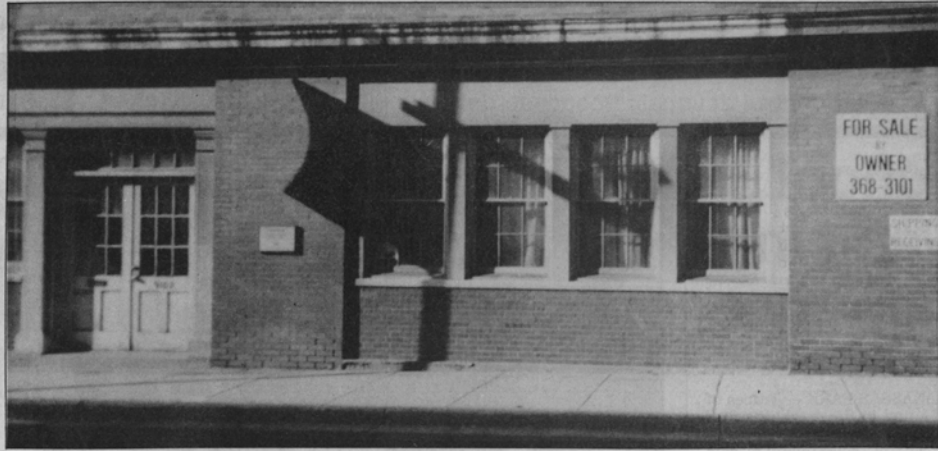
One of those lookers is Lord & Company Inc., an engineering firm with offices on Church Street. The company is considering moving its operations into the building, president J.G. Cabrera said.

"It hasn't happened yet and we still have a couple little quirks to work out," he said. "Who knows — a couple quirks could be enough to undo the whole thing."

The asking price is \$320,000, said Bob Burns, vice president of the Ithaca, N.Y., company that is trying to sell the building for Park Communications, which is also based in Ithaca.

The brick building, known as the Old Opera House, looks blankly out on Center Street with its dusty windows, peeling doors and rusting eaves. Its appearance belies the days when it was a stately hub of activity in Manassas.

Built in the early 1900s by promi-



Photos by Christine Riedel-Potomac News

The old Opera House in Manassas where, legend says, Carrie Nation spoke out on the evils of alcohol.

nent land owner and businessman E.R. Conner, the building has ties to the Civil War and to families who live in Manassas today.

People disagree about when the Opera House, which was first known as the Conner Opera House, was built. Walser Rohr, one of Conner's daughters, says it was built in 1906, the year after a fire destroyed several blocks in Old Town.

"It was built of brick because all the wooden buildings burned down," Rohr said.

But Rohr's sister, Elvere Cox, says she believes the building was built in 1911, when she was just a toddler. Written histories of Manassas mention both 1906 and 1911 as the years the building went up.

Conner constructed the building, Rohr said, so he would have a place to run his butcher shop. She remembered that about four stores, including a grocery, opened up on the

lower level of the building.

The second level became a cultural center for Manassas. High-quality theatrical productions took place on the stage. Local theater clubs would also give performances. Dances were held there into the 1940s.

"We always used to have plays up there. I was in some of them. Our class even used to play basketball up there," Cox said, adding that her uncle painted scenery for plays on huge canvases.

Rohr remembers going to her first dances there when she was 13. She also remembers her mother telling of speeches there by prohibitionist Carrie Nation.

"She was known to take her ax and go and chop down bars," Rohr said.

The building also served as a place where Mosby's Raiders, which conducted daring forays against Union troops during the Civil War, would hold their reunions. Some say that Mosby himself was there once, but there is no



The plaque explains history.

documentation to back that up, said Manassas Museum Director Doug Harvey.

Those who remember the Opera House in its livelier days look forward to seeing the building have occupants again.

"I think that would be great," Cox said.