

TOWN OF OCCOQUAN SERIES

# 1889 Hall Serves Several Purposes

Editor's Note: This is the final article in a four-part series on the Town of Occoquan which will celebrate its centennial next year.

By ANN HOLIDAY  
 JM Staff Writer

Lodge, school, church, stage show, even the Ku Klux Klan—all have used the Odd Fellows Hall in Occoquan at one time or another since it was built in 1889, the year Crescent Lodge No. 33 IOOF was instituted. The Odd Fellows Hall is the tallest building in Rhea Locke's sketch of Commerce Street, one of five winners in the sketch contest held jointly by the Merchants of Occoquan, the Town of Occoquan and Historic Occoquan, Inc., to raise funds for celebrating the town's centennial in 1974 and the nation's bicentennial in 1976. Signed prints of the five sketches are available at many of the town's shops, and the originals are on display at the Frame House.

The Odd Fellows Hall was built in about six months during 1889 at a cost of about \$900, including the ground. Lumber was brought by horse and wagon from old Ox Road near Burke Lake, supplied by Willie Halley Lumber Co. Halley was a member of the lodge for more than 50 years, and his son has been a member for 46 years. The hall was built by members of the order who volunteered their labor and were helped by paid ex-slaves according to Howard Petellat, who has held the highest offices in both the local and state lodges. Petellat has dug up historical data on the building over the years as people have asked him about its past.

"It was the civic center for the town for years and years," Petellat said, recalling some of the organizations which have called the hall their meeting

promptly at one o'clock," the announcement advised, five speakers were listed for the event. The cornerstone was to be laid by the Masonic Order of Occoquan, which met in the Odd Fellows Hall.

"Lunch and refreshments will be served by the ladies from 12 to 4:30, at which time a bountiful spread will be ready for all who desire to partake."

The announcement invited. No prices was listed, but proceeds were to go to the school fund. Bethel School is now the

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"The Glass Menagerie" will be presented by the Stonewall Jackson Thespian Troupe tomorrow, Friday and Saturday, at 8 p.m. in the school's auditorium.

The cast of four includes Susan Hewitt, John Salovara, Teresa Benn and Bill Layden. Connie Wood is supervising all production activities and Betsy Plummer is rehearsal stage manager. Steven Wells is an assistant to both girls. Troupe sponsor, Mrs. Betty Hewitt, is directing the production.

This Tennessee Williams' play opened in 1945 and is a memory plan presented to the audience by Tom Wingfield who relates the tender, yet desperate, lives of his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura. Tickets will be available at the door the night of each play.

Muriel Humphrey School for the Retarded at Smoketown and Davis Ford Roads.

Later, the local high school was closer to Occoquan now Occoquan Elementary School, was opened in 1927.

These schools were not for everybody, however. Petellat recalls, "The colored kids used to go up Tanyard Hill to go to school." That school is now a bank branch at the entrance to Lake Ridge. In past days the Negro children who went on to high school traveled by train into Washington.

To the left of the Odd Fellows Hall stands a squarish house with lots of windows and morning glories twining up the porch rail. The present tenant occasionally hold impromptu bluegrass festivals on the front porch on warm weekend evenings, with banjo, mandolin and guitar plunking out the tunes.

One former resident of the house is Marvin Best, Occoquan's justice of the peace, who bought the house in about 1935 and lived there until 1949. Best remembers the day he came to Occoquan, which was the day Herbert Hoover was elected.

"I was 21 and the polls were open. I was coming down that dirt road in front of those houses (Commerce Street) and met an old man who asked me, 'Young man, are you going to the polls?' I hope you see it our way," Best recalls. He told the man he had paid

his \$1.50 poll tax and was going to see it his own way. "Come around the corner," the older man invited, and attempted to bribe the young voter with a jug of moonshine whiskey.

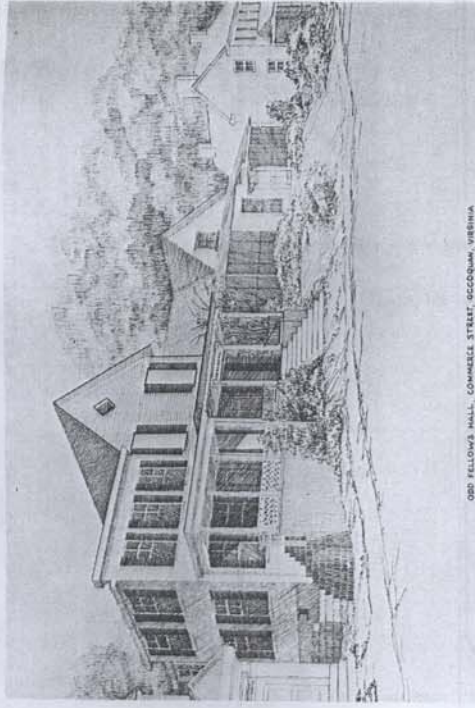
Best tells another story which he says happened in a building next to the Mooney house on the corner of Commerce and Union Streets. The building, now a brick-faced duplex, was then a store, run by Fred Woodward.

As Best tells it, two town residents were bone-deep enemies. "They wanted to kill each other," as he describes it. Both, however, were afraid of lightning. One afternoon during a thunderstorm the two happened to be in Woodward's store, "snuggled up together," as Best recalls, when Woodward "took his shotgun and went out the back and around to the front, and he fired both barrels into the air." Best breaks off in a chuckle, his eyes twinkling at the thought of the two men, the thunderstorm and the boom of the shotgun.

The houses at the left and right of the sketch are among the oldest in town. The Mooney home, whose front door shows back to the Civil War.

A building is recorded on that lot in the town plat of 1804, according to Nancy Mooney, daughter-in-law of the present owner.

Mrs. Mooney has researched the deed back to the Civil War but has not gone back far enough to determine whether the present building is the same one which was standing when the town was platted. The construction is of that period, however.



ODD FELLOWS HALL, COMMERCE STREET, OCCOQUAN, VIRGINIA

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1898, the year Crescent Lodge No. 33, IOOF, was installed.

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"It was the civic center for the town for years and years," Petellat said, recalling some of the organizations which have called the hall their meeting place. "All the local churches and everything were organized right here."

Everything includes the Ocoquan VFW, the Ocoquan Masonic Lodge, the Junior Auto Mechanics, Rebekahs and the Ku Klux Klan.

The Klan met there "for years and years," Petellat recalled. "They broke up when they made 'em take off their masks." That was during the Hoover administration.

The hall was also the scene of live performances by traveling troupes which would come to Ocoquan for one night stands. Dances were a regular feature, with one local band, the

the lower floor of the building in the early 1900's until the peaked roof building to the right of it was constructed. The grandparities of some of Ocoquan's present elementary school children attended school through seventh grade in that building, which is now a residence.

One former student there is Bire Cross, 63, Ocoquan postmaster, who grew up and was married in a house where the post office now stands on Mill Street. The school had two rooms then, and the screened-in porches had not been added.

The first four grades were in the "little room" and grades five, six and seven were in the "big room." The school had no water, Mrs. Cross remembers. Children would go down the street to a pump behind what is now the H. L. Mooney house at the far left of the sketch for water.

From that school anyone who wanted to complete four years of high school would have to travel. Some commuted by train to Alexandria High School. Mrs. Cross attended Massass High School, the forerunner of Osbourn High School.

She entered the high school after the seventh grade at the age of about 13. Massass elementary schools had eight grades, but "We had a very thorough teacher in seventh grade so I had no trouble catching up," she remembers.

She also remembers being homesick. Instead of commuting to Massass she boarded with one of several families who housed Massass High School students, coming home every other week. Although the school was free, her family had to pay for her room and board.

A closer high school was opened in time for Mrs. Cross' sister to attend. A poster, framed and hanging in the Mill House Museum, announces, "Corner Stone Laying and Dedication of Bethel High School." The date was to be Thursday, Sept. 3, 1914.

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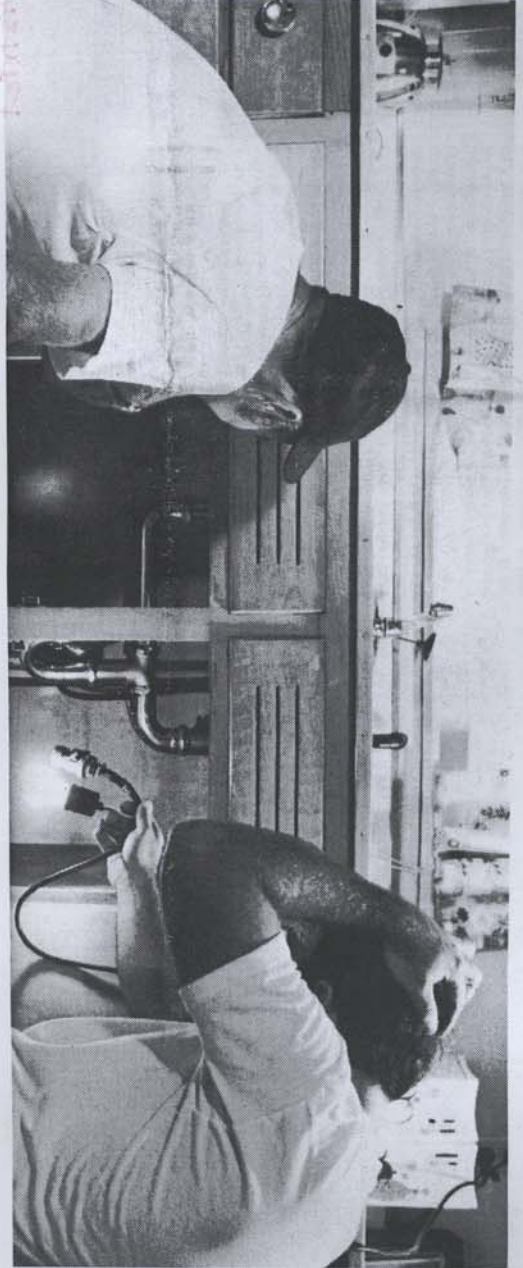
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