

Hyde School Makes A Comeback -

By BOB NISS
Staff Writer

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Headmaster Ed Legg
on restoration project

BATH — The building seems to sob quietly, its sobs barely audible above the sporadic din of sawing and hammering. Blackened wood scars its walls, hidden in places by new, warmly contrasting panels of teak and mahogany.

Built in 1913 by famed architect John Calvin Stevens for Hyde Windlass Co. owner John Hyde, the Hyde Mansion was heavily damaged by fire, smoke, and water in the early morning of July 29, 1975, after two young students ignited some flammable liquid in the mansion's library.

Now part of the 10-year-old Hyde School, the Georgian Revival style building is being painstakingly restored by craftsmen who will probably never again face such a challenge. School officials were, in fact, certain they would be unable to find craftsmen capable of doing the job, but two master carpenters from Harry Waning and Son of Westbrook, Paul Laslie and Al Coe, are doing a job which their great grandchildren will no doubt talk about.

"We were very, very fortunate to find them," says Hyde headmaster Ed Legg. "There just aren't craftsmen of their ability around anymore, and I use the word 'craftsmen' very purposefully because that's what they are."

Coe and Laslie began work on the project last February and, says school business manager Larry Kennedy, "they'll finish exactly a year later." The price tag for the project is in excess of \$250,000, most of which will be paid with insurance funds. Some \$12,000 has been raised among Hyde alumni and friends, a fact of which Legg and Kennedy are particularly proud, considering the age of the school and,

consequently, of its graduates.

The school has also applied for a grant from the William Randolph Hearst Foundation to cover the remainder of the project costs. Other avenues of financing are being explored, too.

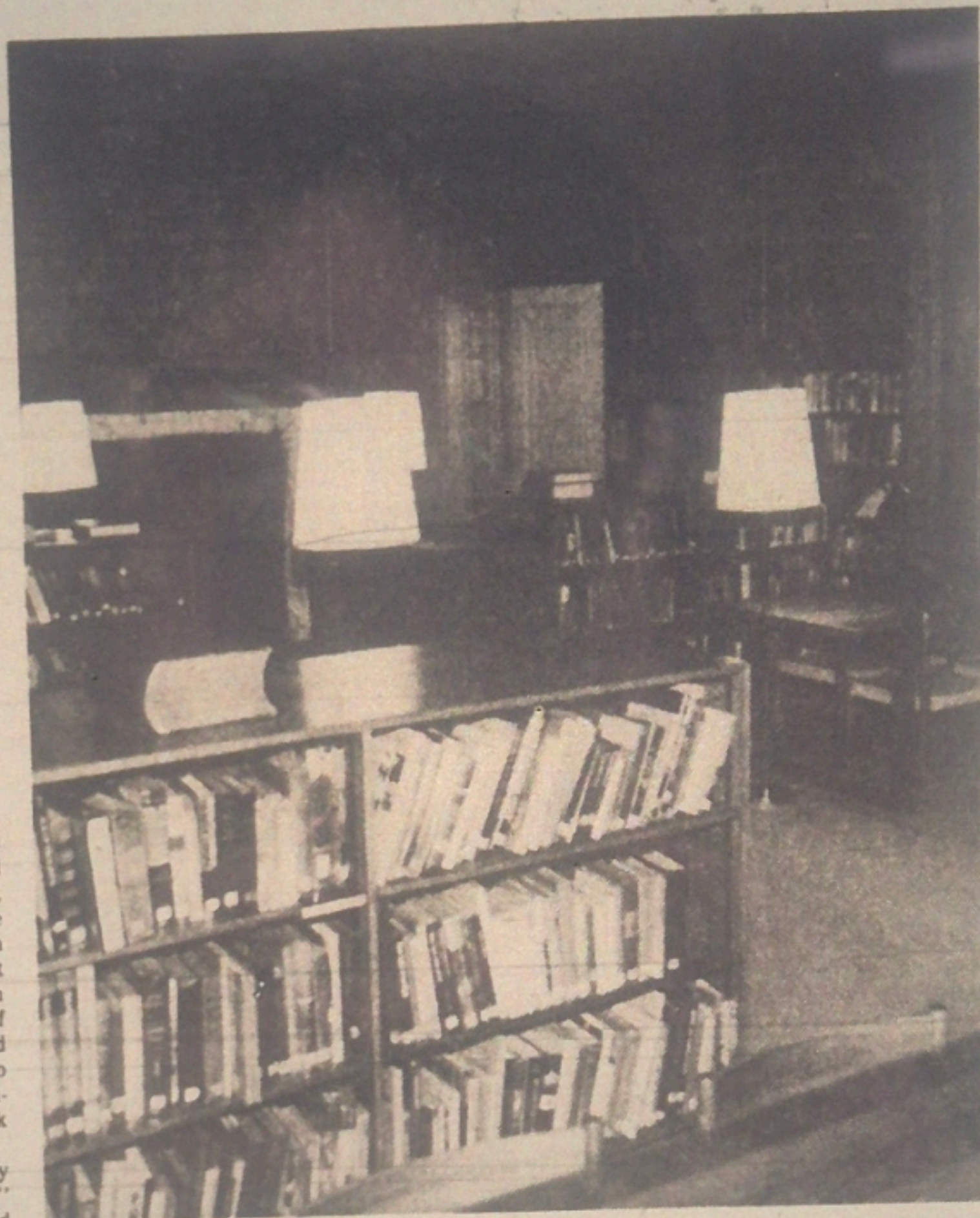
Kennedy says some people advised the school "to take the insurance money" and do what would amount to a slipshod restoration, using mediocre materials and less accomplished carpenters. "But we never really thought about doing that."

"There are just too many people to whom this school and this building are very important," adds Legg. "We couldn't have done anything less than what we're doing."

Laslie, Coe, and a handful of other, less permanent specialists have quite literally restored much of the mansion to its original glory, using the finest quality materials.

Teak imported from Southeast Asia graces the library, the intricate scrollwork of the wall panels precisely reproduced from

This room, the library, was the most heavily damaged in the building. Now it has been completely restored. Walls and ceilings have been covered with teak paneling; the furnishings and books are new. At right is a fluted column being installed in the main hallway, which was also badly damaged.



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the originals. Whereas the original panels were stained to resemble mahogany, the replacement panels bear three layers of color and grain-enhancing varnish, each layer meticulously polished with fine steel wool.

"I doubt there's another room in the state to match this one," Kennedy says of the library.

Kennedy crouches to point out a row of gleaming bronze grills, each hiding a heating outlet: "These were black even before the fire, so we didn't know what we had until they started scraping the soot off."

Several discolored wall sconces were also found to have been made of bronze, brass and other similarly valuable and seldom-used materials.

The library is now furnished with simple, modern chairs, desks, and bookcases of teak, creating an interesting and pleasurable combination of new and old.

The mansion's central hallway, highlighted by a massive stairway and fluted columns, sustained the greatest damage other than the library. Coe and Laslie are in the process of replacing the hallway's

paneling and support columns, the latter manufactured from cherry by the same Philadelphia firm which installed the original columns.

It is in the hallway that the two craftsmen are most consistently following the building's original architectural plans, portions of them supplied by Stevens Architects of Portland, the firm established by the mansion's designer.

"The Stevens people have been very, very helpful," says Legg.

Edging the ceiling above the second-floor landing of the stairway are scores of detailed molding elements, each hand-cast by the elderly son of the plasterer who made the original pieces.

"Each little piece was made individually and put in individually," Kennedy says with a note of awe.

"This place was built like a fort," adds Legg, "and that's why it's still here."

The structure is characterized by thick brick walls with many of its interior partitions containing a core of fire-retardant terra cotta tile. John Hyde was obviously worried about the possibility of fire: one of his previous homes had been gutted by a blaze and he did



Master craftsmen Paul Laslie, foreground, and Al Coe install a teak panel on a stairway landing during slow and careful restoration project. Below, Laslie fits an ornamental column head, one of several hand cast to match those damaged.

Staff Photos:
Charles Merrill

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The mansion itself was erected by Hyde's ship carpenters, and they used all the tricks of their exacting trade, ultimately blending beauty with function to create one of Maine's

foremost architectural landmarks.

Legg and Kennedy cite the ship carpenters' work as the building's salvation, the former saying flatly that "any other building would be nothing but ashes today."

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At the top of the main stairway carpenters are installing a glass wall where previously a wooden wall stood, punctuated by a heavy fire door. That door, says Legg, nearly exploded on top of several of the mansion's residents when they tried to escape the fire. All 26 of the mansion's residents escaped unharmed, but Legg and Kennedy are certain some would have been seriously injured or killed were it not for the thick walls, modern fire alarm and fire doors.

All 50 rooms in the mansion sustained varying degrees of damage, and a 15-room addition built in 1960 escaped damage when an automatic fire door closed. All the furnishings in the mansion itself were irreparably damaged, and Legg is hopeful that "friends will donate furniture and furnishings, just as they would to a museum."

"Getting the building restored was our top priority," he explains. "We decided to worry about furniture later."

An open house is scheduled for next spring, says Legg, at which time the public will be invited to view the building's resurrection.

"As I studied this black, charred structure, its true character showed through its dirty face," wrote former headmaster Joseph W. Gaud in the Maine Sunday Telegram shortly after the fire. "The fire could not destroy its pride."

Nor could it destroy the pride of those who lived and worked there.

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Account of restoration work being done
on the Hyde mansion at the Hyde
School, Bath, damaged by fire July
29, 1975.
(Photos)

Maine Sunday Telegram
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