

The lasting legacy of Silverhill's Little Hall



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SILVERHILL, Alabama — Just over a year after it was damaged when a tornado ripped through the area, the Little Bohemian Hall is sitting securely on its new foundation at its new home, approximately 200 feet from where the more than 90-year-old structure sat for the better part of three decades.

"I'm just thrilled to have the building down on its foundation and secured," said lifelong resident and former mayor Frankie Kucera, who from the beginning has spearheaded the fight to save Little Hall and serves as the chairman of the Save the Little Hall Committee.

It's been a long journey for Kucera and several others to get to this point. But Kucera is no stranger to a challenge.

"I like having a challenge," he said from inside the building he and others have fought hard to save. "Sometimes I back myself into a corner just to see if I can fight my way out of it."

So far this is a fight those working to save Little Hall appear to be winning and it's a fight the 74-year-old Kucera, who retired after 34 years with Baldwin EMC and has run his own business as an electrician for the last 17 years, is determined to see to the end.

"I'll say this. I believe if the good Lord wanted to see this building go, He would have taken it down," Kucera said. "This building was built good and strong and that's why it didn't go anywhere."

The journey to save Little Hall began in March of 2011, when the building sustained extensive damage during a tornado. Two months later the Silverhill Town Council voted to proceed with plans to demolish the structure and build a new Community Center, which will be located in the southwest corner of the park.

Days after that vote, Kucera said, he visited the structure and came to a conclusion.

"The moment I walked in the building I could feel it," he said. "Just by looking at it I knew the building could be saved."

So Kucera, along with several other concerned residents, came forward, and another three months of discussions later, in August of last year, plans proceeded to save the Little Hall and move it to a new location.

Another six months of discussions followed, trying to decide what to do with the structure, where it could be moved and how to move it. Then, on Feb. 13, a proposal was presented to the Council at a specially called meeting to move the structure closer to the corner of Third Avenue and Fourth Street near the town's water tower.

"I'm just fortunate to be the spokesman for this great group of people who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to get this done," Kucera said.

After receiving no objection from the Havel family, who donated the land for the park and approved the usage of the land when the structure was moved in the 1970s, and confirming with the town's insurance company that, as long as they give the building a new address, it can stay at the park, the Town Council voted at its regular meeting March 5 to move the structure to its new home at the corner of Third Avenue and Fourth Street, mere feet from where the structure has been for more than 30 years.

Three weeks later, after receiving approval from the town's Planning Commission and following the proper procedures to facilitate the move, employees with the Town of Silverhill and Fauver's Movers out of Semmes worked together to right, turn and move the structure from facing east toward Second Street to facing north toward Fourth Avenue.

"They did a super, super job and we're really lucky to have them helping us," Kucera said of the Mobile County-based company. "They are good honest people and they did what it took to work with us in making this move possible."

That included waiting several months after being hired while the decision of where to put the structure was made.

Now the real work can begin.

While the structure itself is sound, Kucera said, much of the sheetrock in the walls and a lot of the roofing structure, which was saved and now sits on the floor inside the building, will have to be put back into place.

But first, Kucera said, the whole building will have to be rewired from top to bottom. Once that is done, it can be determined whether or not the eight ceiling fans that line the ceiling, can be fixed or will have to be replaced. The blades on nearly all of the fans appear to be warped, but can be easily replaced if the fans themselves still work, Kucera said.

Then there is the stage and bathroom area, which was damaged beyond repair in the storm and had to be completely removed before relocating the structure. The front port area will also have to be completely replaced, Kucera said. Kucera and his brother, George, who is 78 and a master carpenter, built temporary steps leading up to the front of the structure.

Six windows on the east side (formerly the south side) of the structure were blown out in the storm and will have to be replaced. Part of the stage area was salvaged and also sits on the floor of the building.

"It can all be replaced if we have enough money," he said. "It's really going to depend on how much money we raise as to how much gets done."

Fundraising efforts so far have proved fruitful, Kucera said, including a pair of fundraisers held recently through United Bank, raffling off a Valentine's Basket and an Easter Basket.

The Committee is currently selling chances on a handmade quilt which was donated for the fundraising effort and proceeds from the annual Silverhill Car Show, which Kucera organizes and has been held over the last 10 years to benefit the Oscar Johnson Memorial Library, will this year go toward saving Little Hall.

Kucera said the Car Show will probably be the biggest single fundraiser for the structure. It has averaged around \$3,000 profit per year and he said he expects to raise at least that much this year.

"That's always my goal," he said. "We have a lot of interest in the car show and we have a lot more vehicles scheduled, so we're hoping for a big turnout. As in past years, it all depends on the weather. If the weather cooperates, we'll have a good turnout."

In addition to money, Kucera said, donations of materials and volunteers to come and work on the structure are always welcome.

"Once we get a plan in place, we can start scheduling some work days for people to come and work on the structure," he said. "Once that starts I am confident that everything will come together. It's going to take a while, but if we keep working at it, we'll get it done."

For Kucera, the journey is about more than saving an old building, it is about preserving a legacy that has been passed down from his parents and grandparents and throughout the Czechoslovakian community in Silverhill.

"This is not just about me it's about everybody in this community," he said. "This building has served this community, first as a school, then as a community center, for generations and it will be here for generations to come."

The journey is also a personal one.

"My momma and daddy had their wedding reception in this building when it was out in the country, and so many others had their weddings here," he said. "I personally remember attending supervised dances here as a teenager."

Once completed, the building will serve as more than just a meeting place, Kucera said. It will also serve as a museum of sorts, showing the history of the town and specifically its Czech and other heritage which has so long been a part of the identity of the town.

Plans are to have photos lining the walls from the early days of the town. There will also be shadow boxes constructed which will house artifacts and examples of traditional dress from the Czech and other cultures.

"We want this to be something everybody in Silverhill can be proud of," Kucera said. "This building was a gift to this town and that's exactly what it's going to be when we give it back to the town."