

**AMERICAN LEGION BUILDING NOW ON
STATE AND NATIONAL REGISTERS OF HISTORIC PLACES**

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Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN
Tuesday, 25 September 2012, A-5

OVERTON COUNTY – If you look close enough...past the faded green curvature of the corrugated metal roof, beyond the weathered brick façade with its tarnished glass blocks..you'll see them.

The “ghosts” of Overton County’s American Legion Bohannon Post 4.

On a corner in front of the Quonset hut structure on South Church Street, a group of young World War II



veterans chuckle as one regales with rest with tales of high adventure.

At the entrance, voters make their way inside to cast ballots, while young children exit with library books in tow.

(Pictured: Admiring the World War II-era American Legion building in Livingston – which was recently named to the Tennessee and National Registers

of Historic Places – are Thelma Danner, Leadership Overton alumni committee member; John Alcorn, American Legion post adjutant; and Larry W. Gunnels, post commander. Since being purchased by American Legion Bohannon Post 4 in 1949, the building has served not only as a meeting place for the American Legion and Ladies Auxiliary but, also as a dance hall, regional library, voting precinct and community gathering place).

And, venturing even closer and listening with a nostalgic ear, you'll hear the pounding feet of square dancers inside, along with a live band and the banter of young men and women socializing on an old-time Livingston Saturday night.

So many people, so many memories, so many years gone by.

These days, while more than 65 years old, the building is still semi-functional, serving as the occasional meeting place for members of the American Legion and Ladies community gathering place having long since diminished.

But a group of Overton County residents are hoping to change that – hoping to resurrect the activity of the past and inspire new memories at the historic American Legion Hall.

And they're on their way to doing just that, having recently succeeded in getting the World War II-era structure named to both the Tennessee and National Registers of Historic Places.

It all began when members of the Leadership Overton alumni committee met in 2009 to discuss the possibilities of saving the building before it fell into disrepair.

“It was brought to our attention by Robbie Melton, a member of the Ladies Auxiliary, because the building was getting in bad shape,” said Thelma Danner, alumni committee member. “Just about everybody in the community has memories of this building, and they all wanted to see it fixed. Nobody wanted to see it just done away with.”

So, they decided to take it on as an alumni project, forming a committee with Danner, Melton (representing the Ladies Auxiliary), John Alcorn (representing American Legion), Phillip McCormick (chairman), Ronald Dishman (county historian) and Charles Maynard.

“It’s a project that not only needs to be done, everybody wants to see it done and wants to help,” Danner said.

The American Legion building became a part of Overton County history in 1948, following the end of World War II, when it was purchased by W. T. Reagan and served briefly as an Army surplus store.

The Quonset hut – basically a single-room cylindrical frame facility – originated through the U. S. Navy’s need for a lightweight, all-purpose building that could be shipped anywhere in the world and erected without skilled labor. A total of 11,800 had been fabricated by the end of World War II. Afterward, the huts were sold to the public as military surplus and used in a variety of ways.

In 1949, the American Legion Bohannon Post 4 in Livingston purchased the iconic building from Reagan out of its need for a larger meeting space for the veterans returning home.

“When the World War II vets came back, of course, they still had that bond,” said American Legion post commander Larry Wayne Gunnels. “They came together and wanted to get the legion set up in its own building.”

Prior to that, the American Legion post – which was established April 14, 1922 – had met on the top floor of the Overton County Courthouse.

Danner said, “Before World War II, in 1940, they had 161 members. In 1950, after the war, when they came back, membership jumped to 548, so they had to have a place to accommodate more people.”

Through the years, however, the American Legion building served as more than a gathering place for veterans. It was the site for multiple social organizations and used by the community as an event venue, regional library, dance hall, reception hall, voting precinct and veteran’s service office.

Gunnels remembers it from his childhood days.

“I’ve been here as a little boy,” he said. Gesturing to one corner inside the building, he added, “I sat right over there with my mother, and my sisters were square dancing on the floor. And that Coke machine – which I hope to see refurbish – I bought cold drinks out of it when I was a kid.”

Danner has memories as well – one in particular from the early 1960s when she and a friend decided to ditch the movie theater in favor of the American Legion dance hall.

“When I was a young teenager, there were miners that came from Wilder, and they came here on Saturday night to dance and it got to be known as a kind of a wild place. My mother and daddy didn’t recommend I go there.”

But when her friend suggested they check it out, Danner agreed.

“Well, knowing I wasn’t suppose to go, I said okay! So we walked from the Square down there and went in.”

A couple of minutes later, she recalled her father coming through the door – “so that was my one and only trip to the dance!” Danner said.

Danner recalls the process of getting the building on the state and national historic registers.

“We really didn’t know what to do, but we just started contacting people and asking for advice,” she said.

Among them were Randy Williams and Dawn Kupferer of the Upper Cumberland Development District’s cultural resources department.

“They gave us a list of what we had to prove to get it on the registers, and we had to research when it was built and all the things that went on there that were part of its history,” Danner said.

The first good news came May 23, when alumni committee members learned they had succeeded in getting the building on the Tennessee Register of Historic Places. The national listing came Aug. 7.

“Along with those placing, there is funding that will be coming, but we don’t know yet how much that will be,” Danner said.

But the committee has already gotten busy drawing up plans for revitalizing the buildings so that it can go back into full-time community use.

But first things first – fixing the leaky roof. After that, it’s just a matter of seeking more funding in order to keep checking things off their to-do list, like getting the kitchen and restrooms fully functional.

Then the fun can begin – social functions, club meetings, wedding receptions...and even music again.



“We’ve had inquiries from Hippy Jack,” said Danner of Jack Stoddart, who hosts the Jammin at Hippy Jack’s Americana music festival each May and September from his farm in Crawford, Overton County, and also records a music program that airs nationally on PBS. “He’s interested in moving his TV broadcast to this building,” Danner said. “He said the American Legion building would be the perfect place for him if we could get it fixed.”

(Pictured: American Legion Bohannon Post 4 commander Larry W. Gunnels looks at the beginning of what he hopes will become a wall full of Overton County veterans photos at the American Legion Building on South Church Street in Livingston. For more information about the veterans picture history programs, call Gunnels at 260-9100).

Gunnels added, “If we can get the video programs in here, that’s going to help the whole area. It may even develop into some jobs.” Danner agreed.

“It’ll bring a lot of people into the area through tourism, plus it will help us promote Overton County and Livingston. Hippy Jack as already announced on his TV program that Overton County is the ‘Home of Americana Music.’ And that’s what he want to do – bring Overton County into the music spotlight.”

Livingston's American Legion currently has 130 members who look forward to bringing their building back into full-time use and continuing with their mission of serving their fellow veterans.

Gunnels said, "As the American Legion, we are a veterans organization. We assist veterans across the board, so we're going to make this a focal point again to where they have another resource when they have a problem or just want to get together."

American Legion Bohannon Post 4 was the fourth American Legion Post in Tennessee, the first three having started in Memphis, Knoxville and Kingsport.

Gunnels has high hopes for its continued growth and wants to see such additions to the building as a veteran's hall display of photos. Any veteran family needing more information about submitting a photo for the wall may contact him at 260-9100.

Looking ahead, Danner, Gunnels and the rest of the alumni committee foresee great things for the American Legion building.

"We're very excited, and we've had so much interest from the community," Danner said. "Now we're just waiting for some money to start the work."

*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>