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Century-old, one-room school to be on display in renovated state museum

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MONAHILL — There's not many one-room schools still standing.

One in Logan County will soon be standing inside the state museum in Charleston.

Opal McCoy Lewis owns the old school building where her mother attended classes. It was passed down through her family and now she's giving it to the museum so that it can be preserved and put on view for many generations to come.

"I hate to see it go," Lewis, 86, and with tears in her eyes, said, as she stood looking at the old log school building, which has also been a residence at one point in its history. "I think I might cry."

Lewis said her mother attended nine years of school in the one-room building.

"My mommy, Dessie Pearl Vance McCoy, went to school in it up at Monaville," Lewis said. "She went to school in it from first to ninth grade and she made her papers to substitute teach the ninth grade — or whichever grade they needed her to teach. Paw and Granny, my grandparents, Floyd French Vance and Nancy Ellen Meadow Vance, lived at Monaville and Mommy always told us that Paw and Granny gave the school to the board of



Senate President-Lt. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin, above, fifth from left, was on hand Thursday at Monahill as the state Department of Culture and History accepted a one-room, log cabin school house from owner Opal Lewis. Also on hand were Logan County Commissioner Willie Akers, Jim Frye and Frankie Esposito with The Museum In The Park and County Administrator Rocky Adkins, along with Lewis' family, including Amos and Pam Lewis, Edna Fields, Carl and Louise Baisden, Connie Dempsey, Peggy Farley and John and Tammy Craddock. The cabin will be restored and placed in the state museum. At right, an old photo of the schoolhouse and one of its classes. Lewis' mother, Dessie McCoy, is

education. When Mommy was eight or nine years old, they moved the one-room school to where it is now. **pictured, third from right in the second row. Photo/Michael Browning**

They built a new school above Steele's Store. It was six rooms and one year they were building two new rooms and I guess they didn't nail it down good and a wind storm came one night and blew it down. They fixed it back later. I guess they used oxen to bring this school building down here."

Opal Lewis' son, Amos, said his mother had been trying to give the cabin to Chief Logan State Park for the past decade.

"I think it's about 130 years old," Amos Lewis said. "Maybe we'll get it preserved so people can enjoy it."

Opal Lewis said her mother was born in 1897 and attended school in the log cabin at least by the age of nine, which would make it at least 100 years old. Opal Lewis said she hates to see it leave her backyard.

"It seems like the longer it's been here, the harder it is to get rid of it," Opal Lewis said. "I just live down from it, so all I have to do is look out my back window and I can see it."

On hand for the ceremony was several members of Lewis' family, including her 88-year-old sister, Edna Fields, who said she has good memories of the old cabin.

"I've enjoyed many days in that house," Fields said. "My first beau lived in it.

"My mom and my aunts and uncle attended school here," Fields said. "It was one, big, open room and all the classes went in the same room together. I think there were just a few children in it. It was farming community and not a mining town at that time. It was called Vanceville. Our grandparents were Vances and they owned the property up there. I suppose they had the school built."

Senate President-Lt. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin (D-Logan) was on hand to accept the donation of the building to the state. He said it was a great honor to acquire the building so it can be preserved and put on display for visitors to the museum to see.

"There has been a lot of publicity about the state opening its new museum at the Cultural Center in Charleston and the main reason I'm here is the State Department of Culture and History has decided it wants to put this old school building as a permanent display inside the newly-renovated museum," Tomblin said. "It's an honor to have something from your home county to be on permanent display in the state museum. There's a lot of history here.

"The building is deteriorating here and it will be restored before it's put into the museum and will always be there for people from all over West Virginia and the country to see what life in early southern West Virginia was like. This will be a good addition to the state museum, so that everyone can see what buildings and schoolhouses in southern West Virginia looked like a century ago."

Frankie Esposito, director of The Museum In The Park, said she is excited to get the log cabin for the state museum.

"This is local history that will be preserved and put on display so that people can learn about life in early Logan County," Esposito said. "I'm so glad we were able to get it for the state museum."

Adam Hodges, director of the state museum, said the schoolhouse will be a major addition to an already-impressive collection that includes George Washington's telescope used to survey parts of what is now West Virginia, the rope that was used to hang John Brown and a documented Daniel Boone rifle.

"The significance of the log cabin is that it was used as a one-room schoolhouse and as a residence and, in building the state museum and trying to save taxpayers' money, we've been looking for creative ways to do the scenic, artistic environment in the museum," Hodges said. "It probably would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to have scenic people recreate the log cabin in the museum. Instead, what we're able to do is take this log cabin that exists and has a history in Logan County and bring it into the museum and use it as our log cabin. We're saving an enormous amount of money in the building of the museum and the big plus for me is that we have something that has a history itself. Instead of fabricating something, we actually have a real thing that has a living history.

Hodges said the next step is to have the log cabin taken apart, preserved and rebuilt inside the museum.

"We'll have to do some repair and restoration and it will have to be modified in order to fit in the space that's been designed for it," Hodges said. "It will have to be treated for fire safety reasons and treated for insects before we bring it with the other artifacts. Right now, we're working with a for-profit company who takes down log cabins and replaces them in different areas and, it's my understanding that they're going to do as much as possible as a non-profit. They will store it until the moment we need to put it in. The whole process of building this museum has to go in stages. We've got some general construction to do before we can put this other stuff in place."

Hodges said the log cabin should be installed in the museum within the next year and the museum itself should be open by early 2009.

"There's all kind of cool stuff in the museum," Hodges said. "It's a great story. I was real happy when Frankie helped organize this. I love the idea that we're creating another story in the museum instead of just a fabrication. We're getting a one-room schoolhouse in the museum that wasn't there. Now, the object, the actual structure is going to be there and that's a really great, really cool thing."

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