

Historic Aurora school marks 100th birthday; launches \$500,000 renovation drive for updates

It was a birthday party to remember.

With presentations, history displays and guided tours, Big Woods School Foundation held a 100th birthday party Sunday (Oct. 1) for the historic former one-room school on Aurora's far East Side.

The outdoor celebration, held in the school's former back yard, included launch of a \$500,000 drive for the structure's preservation, renovation, an addition and a 23-space parking lot. The school served K-8 students from 1917 to 1963.

The school replaced a Big Woods School built in 1850 opposite the current facility at 3033 N. Eola Rd. in Aurora.

The celebration opened at 2 p.m. with registration, history displays of photos and documents and refreshments. Scheduled speakers at a 2:30 p.m. program were school alumni Rosemary Comstock of Sycamore and Ron Vaughan, Aurora; Roger Vernon, chairman, Big Woods School Foundation; and Lane Allen, principal, Allen and Pepa Architects, Geneva.

In remarks to about 100 visitors, Comstock recalled arriving in Aurora at age 2 with her family from El Paso, Tex. Comstock, 82, said she walked two miles to school while living in a railroad box car, with no utilities or indoor plumbing.

Attending Big Woods from 1941 to 1948, Comstock said she was the school's lone graduate in 1948. She went on to graduate from East Aurora High School in 1953. After attending Aurora College for three years, she became a Spanish translator for medical and legal services.

Accompanying Comstock Sunday were sons Daniel of Aurora and David of Sycamore.

Vaughan, an unscheduled presenter, came forward to reflect on attending Big Woods from 1960 to 1963. The Aurora resident said he liked the school so much that he repeated first grade.

According to Vaughan, his family, former farmers, founded an Aurora-based provider of school and charter-bus transportation services.

Lane Allen of Allen and Pepa Architects in Geneva detailed a \$500,000 project to preserve and, renovate the current structure, add an addition and a 23-space parking lot for a future community center. Planned improvements include a library, history room, classroom, kitchen, bathrooms and elevator.

Allen said lack of water, sewer, gas, and electric to the school are challenges to redevelopment.

Vernon recalled how the vacant school became home to a furniture refinishing business during the 1970s before becoming a residence. He said the former Big Woods Church, adjacent to the school, purchased the school in 2008 from a developer who planned to demolish the facility.

The Big Woods School Foundation, formed in 2013, purchased the school from the church in 2013. In 2016, the structure was accepted to the National Register of Historic Buildings.

The event closed with guided tours, raffle prizes and refreshments. Guests included Chuck Nelson, Aurora deputy mayor, who won a power tool in the raffle.

For more information, call Vernon at (630) 460-7193 or email bigwoodsschool@yahoo.com.

PHOTO (top) Visitors view history displays at Big Woods School in Aurora Sunday during a 100th outdoor birthday party for the school. Highlights included alumni presentations, building tours and launch of a \$500,000 drive for preservation, renovation, an addition and a 23-space parking lot. (Al Benson photo)

PHOTO (bottom) Sycamore resident Rosemary Comstock, right, tours Big Woods School in Aurora Sunday during a 100th outdoor birthday party for the former one-room school. Brought to Aurora at age 2 from El Paso, Tex., Comstock, 82, said she was the lone 1948 graduate of the K-8 school. She attended from 1941 to 1948 while her family lived in a railroad box car, with no utilities or indoor plumbing. (Al Benson photo)

