

# Westford's sturdy Victorian regains her former beauty

(Editor's Note: Gordon B. Seavey is a retired newspaperman and local history buff.)

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

**WESTFORD** - The sturdy Victorian building which for 69 years was the second home of Westford Academy, and now is the Roudenbush Community Center, is still the grand old lady, albeit primped with a new dress and a generous coating of paint.

She won't be as cold and drafty as was formerly the case, for beneath her stained cedar shingles she wears a garment unheard of when built in 1897: a thick layer of insulating cellulose.

Her many windows, which now include storm sashes, have been reglazed and painted and washed inside and out.

All her fancy trimmings have been scraped and repainted. Workmen found several decayed boards, all of which have been replaced. The floor of the bell tower which, over the years, had rotted so much that a high wind on March 31, 1977 tipped the ornate steeple at a crazy angle, is all new. Private funds righted the leaning tower at that time.

The bell, which was a gift of a member of the Abbot family, remains in storage waiting for the opening of the town museum. Incidentally, the fate of this museum is in limbo, but a home for it is almost ready - the original Westford Academy building erected in 1794.

To defy nature, screening has been placed in the tower louvres as an attempt to discourage pigeons, and the bees found under the eaves were exterminated.

Its graduates will remember when the building had three classrooms, two on the first floor and a single room holding about 60 desks on the upper floor. The gymnasium, such as it was, was in the attic. The basketball court was nowhere near legal size and because of the shape of the roof, players would bounce the ball off the sloping ceiling and, hopefully, into the hoop.

**NOW THE BUILDING** is divided into several more rooms for the various projects and functions of the busy community center. The Roudenbush has made use of much of the basement previously used only for locker rooms and toilets, one side for boys, the west side for girls, with separate entrances. Hot water was not available.

The old heating system was the best obtainable four generations ago - a coal-burning hot air furnace. Whenever the janitor stoked the hungry fires, the sounds of the clanking doors, grates and nuggets of rolling anthracite coal penetrated all three classrooms. When dared, a student might open a gate in the basement and send a whoop up through the system, causing another type of disturbance.

Although Principal William C. Roudenbush, who served for 25 years, was a gentle man, he nevertheless was a good disciplinarian and highly respected. "Whoopers" were treated with expedition.

Needless to say the building was drafty, particularly on cold days, but its students were well prepared for the rigors of winter. Students who walked to school or rode in horse-drawn "barges" and later Reo Speedwagons were well-dressed in preparation for the vicissitudes of Westford weather and the Academy's heating system.

Members of the Connell family, living just over the town line in Tyngsboro, often walked to school. If they hurried, they could make the trip in an hour. When the farm horse was available, they



**THE ROUDENBUSH COMMUNITY CENTER**

drove, stabling it in a nearby barn, of which there were - and still are - several in the vicinity of the school.

**FUNDS FOR** the restoration and improvements came through the town's annual appropriation in May in the sum of \$36,500. In addition, the Roudenbush Associates gave \$1,100 through gifts and proceeds from their annual auction. The latter sum was used to insulate the area between the second floor and the attic. This is to conserve more energy, and not to dim the sound of pounding feet and bouncing balls of basketball players who long ago took their play elsewhere.

The "William C. Roudenbush School" sign which was placed above the main entrance of the building when it was converted to other school purposes in 1957 has been removed.

Hidden behind the sign, workmen found a single white pine board, about 10 inches in width, upon which, in block letters leafed in gold on a black background, was the 22-foot long nameplate of the school when it was first opened.

These two signs also are destined for a home in the town museum.

Ellen Harde, chairman of the community center's governing board, said the committee chose to have the new letters denoting the building's purpose as the Roudenbush Community Center painted in maroon - the school's colors for nearly 200 years.

"For the first time in 83 years," Harde noted, "the building should be really warm, and at not too exorbitant a price for gas."

Located on Main Street, adjacent to the Whitney Playground and the William E. Frost School (named for another Academy principal), this rather ornate building on a sturdy base of cut Westford granite is once again a showplace of the community.