Despite five months of work and twelfth hour calls to area banks, the plan to move the historic Sims House failed for lack of financial planning. A rather sensational article appeared in the NEWS GAZETTE concerning PACA’s last minute salvage efforts at the house. For the benefit of PACA members the entire five month process will be related.

On February 18, Mrs. Margrete Ekstam called PACA Executive Director, Karen Kummer, upon the recommendation of the Champaign County Historical Archives, and asked for advice concerning the disposition of her rental property at 803 West Green Street. She knew the house was historically and architecturally significant; it had been in her family since the 1930’s. However, an apartment developer had been pressuring her for a number of weeks to sell and the maintenance and utility bills were getting to be too much for her to handle. Mrs. Ekstam asked PACA for assistance — what should she do? Ms. Kummer emphasized the significance of the house to Mrs. Ekstam and asked for time to find a sympathetic buyer for the house. Mrs. Ekstam gave PACA one week to find a buyer.

After many frantic phone calls, Board discussions and consultations, PACA found a buyer who would restore the house on the site. Ms. Marylee MacDonald exceeded the developer’s initial offer of $65,000, offering Mrs. Ekstam $70,000 for the house and land. Ms. MacDonald is an experienced restoration contractor who had the knowledge, expertise and devotion to make the project a success.

Mrs. Ekstam went back to the developer, who offered her $75,000; rather than become involved in a bidding war, Ms. MacDonald dropped out. It should be noted that the very deteriorated condition of the house made rehabilitation costs quite high; therefore, the initial purchase price had to remain reasonable in order to make the project economically feasible. Mrs. Ekstam sold the property to the developer for $75,000 cash plus the right to keep all the rents until June 1 and to move the house from the property by July 1.

At this point, Mrs. Ekstam came back to PACA offering to give PACA the house to move in exchange for a charitable donation. Although rather disturbed at having the offer to restore the house on-site refused, PACA agreed to accept Mrs. Ekstam’s offer and facilitate the moving of the house. However, she was fully informed of the fact that moving the house would be extremely difficult for a number of reasons. The house’s size and poor physical condition, the lack of suitable nearby lots with acceptable moving routes and the very short timetable made the project a “long-shot” at best.

PACA began advertising the house’s availability and started looking for suitable lots, while working with the Urbana Community Development Division on location, route, zoning, setback and other requirements. Local newspaper and television spots generated interest in the project and a number of people responded. PACA arranged for tours of the house, distributed rough floor plans and the names of potential house movers. The Board decided that the most equitable way to proceed would be for all interested parties to submit a written proposal stating that they had considered the following points: lot size...
and set-back requirements; deed and zoning restrictions; cost of new foundation; moving route, cost estimates and financing; basic renovation plan including financing and timetable. The proposals were due on May 13, at which time the Board met and chose Robert Auler’s proposal as being the most feasible.

Mr. Auler had one month to move the house; Mrs. Ekstam’s verbal agreement (the legal contracts were never executed for various reasons) with PACA gave PACA until June 15 to find someone to move and renovate the house. Mr. Auler’s task was hampered by Mrs. Ekstam because access to the building was limited by a lack of keys, by tenants remaining beyond the June 1 deadline, and by furniture and appliances being left in the building. This made it difficult to produce the necessary working drawings and building specifications required for moving and relocating a building in Urbana. Problems were also encountered in finding an available mover; however, PACA was able to help in this regard and continued to work as facilitator between Mr. Auler and Mrs. Ekstam.

The June 15 deadline was waived by Mrs. Ekstam because she was assured, as was PACA, by Mr. Auler that everything was under control and that, while the plans were progressing slowly, a reasonable time frame had been established. An extension beyond July 1 was received by Mr. Auler from the new property owner and developer, Douglas Larson, so that he would have until mid-July to move the house. Mr. Auler also obtained City Council approval for the move and was working on the last requirements of the code and public works departments.

Although Mrs. Ekstam’s legal rights to the property terminated at the real estate closing on July 1, she was kept informed of the project’s progress by Mr. Auler’s project coordinator, Neil Sheehan, and PACA. In fact, she continued to hold keys to the house and removed furniture, fixtures, and other items from the property after the transfer of ownership.

Preparation work for the actual moving of the house began Monday, July 22. On that same day, however, Mr. Auler received word from the bank that his loan was denied; all work was stopped. PACA was informed late Monday afternoon of the situation and Monday evening and all day Tuesday were spent by PACA revising the project’s scope and cost estimates and contacting numerous loan officers. The job was hampered by Mr. Auler’s initial application to only one bank and by the fact that he was on vacation and unavailable to talk with loan officials. PACA was continuing to look for financial backing when Mr. Auler’s office called late Wednesday morning stating that he had withdrawn from the project and had so informed the developer.

PACA immediately contacted the developer, Mr. Larson, who already had obtained the necessary demolition permits, and was informed that the house would be demolished the next day. PACA received permission from him to salvage items from the building that evening. The little time remaining was spent by Ms. Kummer recruiting salvage volunteers and dealing with unexpected personal obligations.

Upon arriving at the house at 2:30 p.m., Ms. Kummer informed Mr. Ekstam, who was removing furniture from the building, of the situation and that the house would be torn down the next day. He was told that he should take anything they wanted from the building that day. It was assumed by Ms. Kummer that Mr. Ekstam would inform his wife of the situation. Apparently, he did not.

Salvage volunteers began work about 4:00 p.m. and continued working through the evening without supper or breaks and in very high humidity. A stranger stopped by and asked for permission to remove some new kitchen cabinets. Although legally no longer owned by the Ekstam’s, Ms. Kummer felt the cabinets might be something that they would want for their own use or to sell; consequently, she told the gentleman that he would need to ask the Ekstam’s. He called Mrs. Ekstam, who gave him permission, but she also learned of PACA’s salvaging efforts from him (not from her husband). Upset at the turn of events, Mrs. Ekstam called the Urbana police and went over to the site.

Upon assessing the situation as related by PACA and Mrs. Ekstam, the police officer informed Mrs. Ekstam that she had no legal right to interfere (which she acknowledged) and asked her repeatedly to leave the site since she was visibly upset and emotionally distraught. Mr. Larson also came by and reaffirmed PACA’s position. Both Mr. Larson and PACA offered Mrs. Ekstam anything she wanted from the house, but Mr. Larson repeated that the house would be demolished the next day.

Mrs. Ekstam refused to leave, but rather continued to harangue PACA about how she had given PACA the house and had refused offers to sell the staircase since the house was to be moved. Ms. Kummer repeatedly informed Mrs. Ekstam that the very quick turn of events with less than twelve hours notice and the fact that PACA had done its very best but had no legal right to stop the demolition, necessitated the rapid removal of the building’s salvagable features or they would all be destroyed. Mrs. Ekstam was told that any or all of the salvaged items were hers if she wanted. PACA does not salvage for profit, but to save irreplaceable architectural elements. PACA also offered to help her remove any items she wanted from the building.

It should be stated that after hearing the complaints of Mrs. Ekstam and after working in the heat for an extended length of time, a few PACA volunteers were upset. They were frustrated and disturbed at the knowledge that the last frame Italianate house in Urbana was being torn down — and that it need not have been so, if it had been sold to PACA’s buyer rather than to the developer.

The Sims Farmhouse was the second attempt by PACA to save a house from demolition by relocation. The first project, the Little House in Rantoul, was successful; PACA helped Saint Malachy’s Parish find an interested developer who moved and will restore the house. Our second project, the Sims Farmhouse, was much more complicated and had only a limited chance for success. PACA has learned quite a lot from the experience, which should prove to be helpful in future projects. Hopefully, through continued survey and planning projects and the education of the community to the value of historic architecture, future situations will have positive results.

PRAIRIE CONFERENCE

Plans have been finalized for the 1985 Central Illinois Prairie Conference on September 21-22 at Mahomet-Seymour High School in Mahomet. Saturday’s schedule begins with registration from 7:30 a.m. to 8:45 a.m. At 9 a.m. Dr. James King of the Illinois State Museum will deliver the opening keynote address, “Prairie Frontiers—What Was.” At 10 a.m. concurrent sessions on a wide variety of prairie topics will begin. There will be discussions of grassland ecology, history of the Grand Prairie region, prairie wildlife, mycorrhizal re-
relationships and prairie, legalities of land acquisition, managing degraded prairies, rare plant restoration, and other issues. Lunch at noon will be followed at 1:15 by a second keynote speaker, Dr. Paul Risser of the Illinois Natural History Survey, who will discuss “Prairie Frontiers — What Is.” At 2:10 p.m., concurrent sessions will be presented on such topics as the prairie garden, prairie soils, prairie education for the public, central Illinois’ remaining prairies, prairie successes, music of the prairie, introducing children to the prairie, prairie restoration, and conservation ethics and agriculture. The closing address will be delivered at 4:15 by Dr. Robert Betz, North Eastern Illinois University, who will talk about “Prairie Frontiers — What Will Be.” At 7 p.m. there will be the annual meeting of the Grand Prairie Friends, primary sponsor of the conference. Ivan Sherburn will discuss the role of forest preserves in prairie preservation. The evening will conclude with entertainment.

On Sunday there will be three field trips of varying lengths to prairie sites. Registration for the conference is $15 for those who register by September 1; after that the fee is $18. The fee includes lunch and entertainment Saturday and the Sunday field trips. For more information, contact the Grand Prairie Friends, P.O. Box 36, Urbana, IL 61801.

(Reprinted from the Illinois Heritage Association Newsletter)
NOTES
The last issue of the Newsletter contained two articles about Property Tax Abatement for historic houses. These were excerpted from the newsletter and fact sheets published by the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois. For more information, contact LPC at 312-922-1742.

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Kevin Price
Trent Shepard
Gene Jacobs
Janet Page
Mark Replogle
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Carolyn Baxley
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