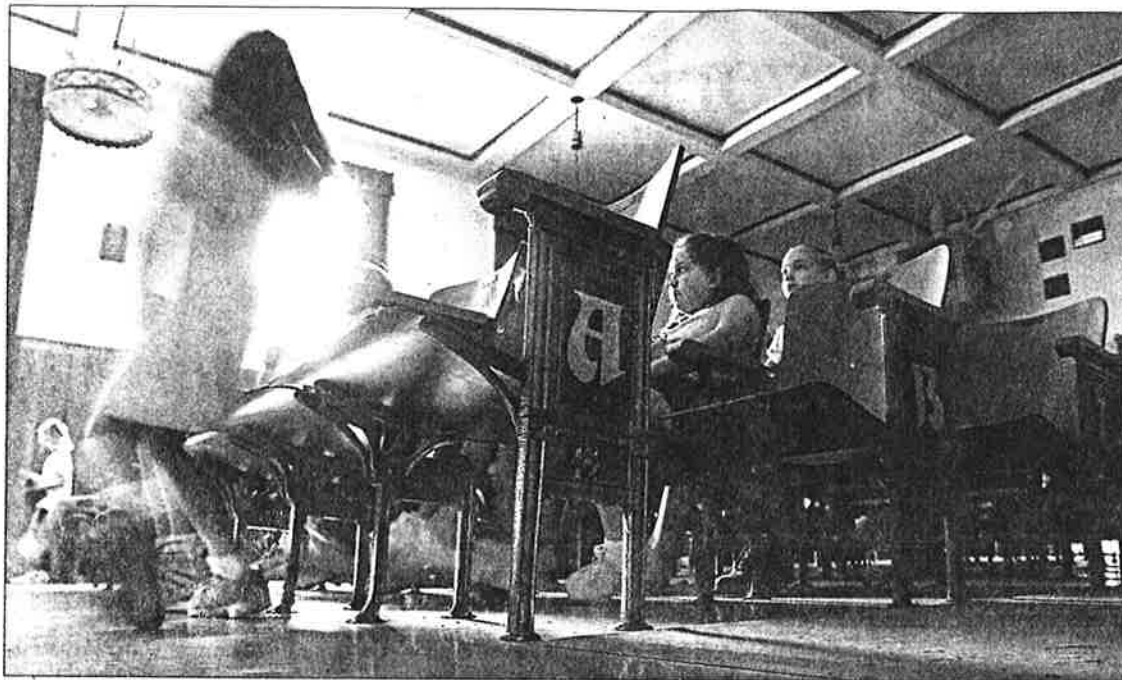


INLAND VALLEY

Los Angeles Times



PHOTOS BY CHRIS URSO / chris.urso@latimes.com

A group of school children take their seats in the La Verne Heights Elementary School auditorium. The auditorium was built in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration and remodeled in the early 1990s.

Staging a rebirth

La Verne Heights Elementary School's auditorium has the feel of a facility designed for the arts, with an updated look thanks to a renovation.

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Most elementary schools built within the past three decades have what has come to be called, in the utilitarian parlance that dominates education today, a multipurpose room.

On school days, the room will be used as a cafeteria. Picnic tables will fold into the wall to make room for folding chairs during school performances. Flat linoleum floors reflect the fluorescent lights buzzing overhead. Some have a stage, some don't.

But at La Verne Heights Elementary there is no multipurpose room. Instead, there's a good, old-fashioned auditorium — a theater, a place of childhood

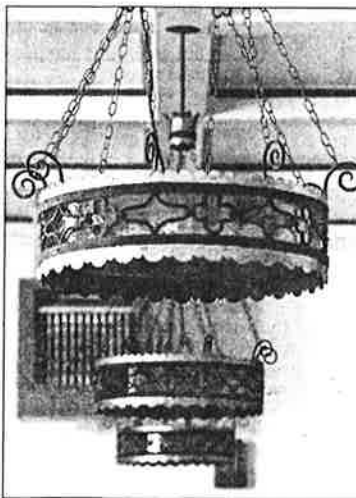
Since 1937, the school's tiny Art Deco auditorium, with its rich wood interior and decorative lighting, has been home to one pint-sized student spectacle after another, from juggling acts in 1940s talent shows to "Annie" in the 1970s.

Next month's two performances — a student-choir concert of Beatles songs and a Broadway musical — continue that long tradition in a location that current and former students and staff say lends a little bit of magic to their hard work.

The auditorium and school were built 64 years ago by the Works Progress Administration. It was intended for important occasions only.

"We were only able to go in when there was something special, like a classroom assembly or Christmas programs," said La Verne resident Ernestine Castellano, 62, who attended the school in the mid-1940s.

The auditorium has 210 molded-wood, folding seats. Hardwood maple floors creak in certain spots. Eight hanging lamps shine a deep orange when lit.



The lights that hang in the auditorium date back to the 1930s.

lunch on hot days because the stage was cool," said Rex Huigens, who attended the school in the early 1960s. "We probably were not doing anything good and one time we got caught and got chewed out."

School assemblies were conducted there in the daytime. Musicals were

SCHOOL

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staged at night. Community and church groups met there occasionally.

In 1976, La Verne residents celebrated the country's bicentennial there. Back then it had sea-green walls with gold curtains that covered the windows.

Through the next several decades, the auditorium hardly changed and was infrequently repaired.

"It may have been a lack of support from the central office," said Len Munter, the school's principal from 1974 to 1981. "When Proposition 13 was passed in 1978, it precluded spending and didn't allow us to do any of the repairs it needed."

"Prior to renovation, some of the seats were falling apart and the hardwood would come off the floor," said Karen Huigens, who taught at the school from 1973 to 1990. Karen and Rex Huigens are married.

The orange groves that once surrounded the school gave way to houses. Even as the auditorium aged somewhat ungracefully, it still produced treasures.

One time, Munter recalled, a couple phoned and said

they were having problems getting their Social Security income because they couldn't verify their age.

In the auditorium's second-story projection room, school staff found boxes of attendance records dating back to World War I, predating the school's current location. They included records of the two former students.

"They were these beautiful Spencerian, handwritten reports on attendance," Munter said.

Social Security accepted the records as proof, Munter said.

In the 1980s, as La Verne grew before new schools could be built to keep pace, the auditorium was turned into a classroom. The seats and wood floors had lost their shine.

"Not many of the lights worked and there was a very dark feeling," said Daniel Glaeser, now a sophomore at UC Santa Barbara.

In 1991, the Bonita Unified School District approved \$1 million to remodel the campus. But in the middle of the recession, school officials ran out of money to work on the auditorium.

That's when retired pastor and community activist Mel Laven came to the rescue. He spearheaded a \$50,000 fundraising campaign that

restored its original luster.

The auditorium will be named after Laven and his wife, Vera, both in their 80s, on Wednesday at a school board meeting at the school.

The repaired wooden seats, now firm enough to sit on without fear of collapse, bear the name of La Verne residents who donated at least \$100 to the cause.

The green walls and gold curtains gave way to off-white walls and a ceiling with a blue trim. Blue velvet curtains match the trim.

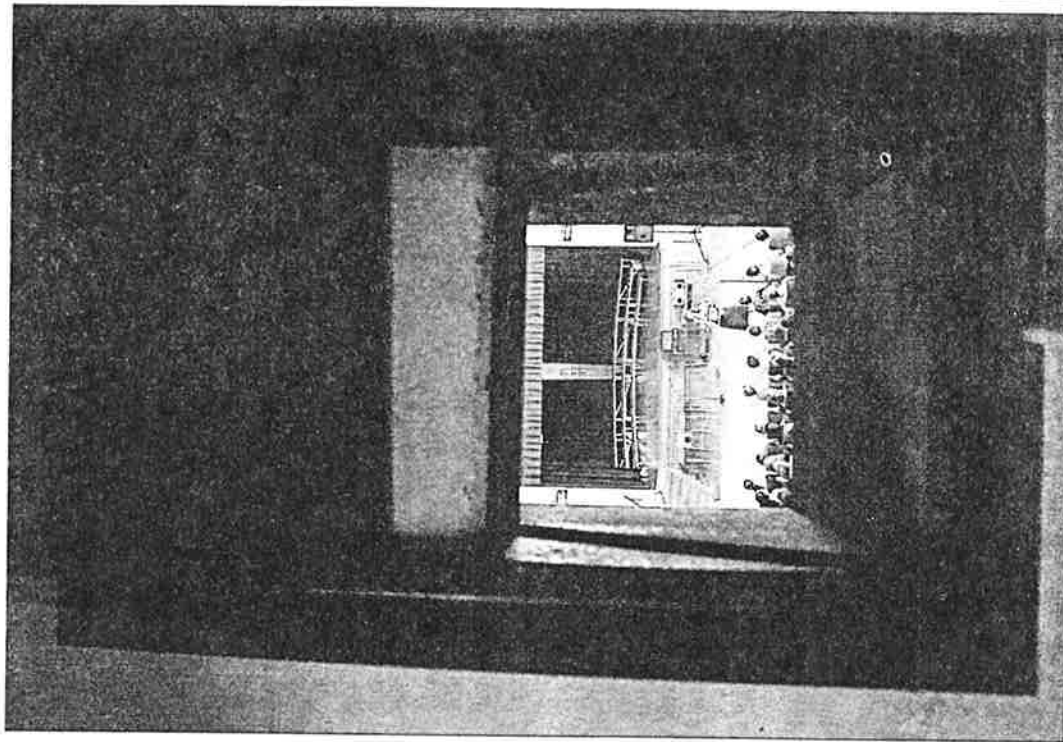
The bright colors now create a warm, welcoming feel.

"We're so lucky as a school to have one that's a throwback to what auditoriums really were," fourth-grade teacher Sarah Bronner said.

Though it still retains all of its 1930s feel, the auditorium has kept up with the times.

A modern video projection screen lies hidden above stage curtains. In the cramped backstage, a hand-capped access elevator lifts from the floor to stage level.

First-year La Verne Heights Principal Gary Temkin said he hopes to bring more professional performers in so students can appreciate the auditorium not just as performers, but in the audience, too.



Students from La Verne Heights Elementary School rehearse in the school auditorium as seen from the projection room.

SCHOOL DAYS

WEEK

- **Organization:** Oleander Elementary School, Fontana
- **Who:** Miki R. McCabe, principal
- **Wish:** Oleander is a multitrack, year-round school with 1,100 students in preschool through fifth grade.

"At all times there are students eating in the outdoor lunch tables due to lack of space in the cafeteria," McCabe said. "Our students would appreciate a canopy over the 12 outdoor tables."

- **How to contribute:** Contact McCabe at 357-5700.



2 Tuesday, May 15, 2001

Inland Valley Times

TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2001 Auditorium re-christening honors fund-raiser

■ Bonita Unified will rename facility 'The Laven Auditorium.'

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LA VERNE — Mention the name Mel Laven to people at La Verne Heights Elementary School and a smile will quickly spread across their faces.

The longtime La Verne resident was instrumental in 1992 in saving and restoring a charming 210-seat auditorium that dated back to the school's 1937 construction by the Works Progress Administration.

The Bonita Unified School Board will honor Laven, alling after two strokes, and his wife, Vera, by re-christening the auditorium "The Laven Auditorium." at its May 23 meeting at the school.



Mel and Vera Laven of La Verne will be honored by the Bonita Unified School Board for their work raising funds to restore the La Verne Heights Elementary School auditorium.

By the early 1990s the school secretary Rosemary once-impressive auditorium Jespersen said.

Laven, a retired minister, had grown shabby after more than five decades of use.

"The shine was gone," raised \$50,000 to restore it.

The auditorium has sloping maple floors and folding wooden seats. Overhead, eight Art Deco chandeliers with tinted orange glass hang from a bright white ceiling.

Before the restoration, the ceiling was a drab sea green.

"I'd never seen anything like it," Mel Laven said of chandeliers that hang from the auditorium's ceiling.

Laven cannot leave his La Verne home without great effort. He and his wife are in their 80s.

Vera Laven said she and her husband are moved by the honor.

Though Laven says he feels frustrated at not remembering as much as he used to, he still has kept his bright sense of humor.

"If you have a choice, don't grow old," he quipped.