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The Morganton Community House: A brief history

Morganton, NC: November 15, 2012

From its inception in the 1930s until today, the Morganton Community House has served as a gathering place for clubs, civic groups, receptions and community functions in the City of Morganton and surrounding communities, and like any good community assembly, food has always been a centerpiece of the activities.

The Morganton Community House project was initiated in 1933 by members of the Morganton Women's Club. For some time, Morganton residents had believed that a local gathering place would be useful in the City, but for whatever reason, no group had set about to construct a building. That changed in November 1933 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled the Civil Works Administration (CWA). The CWA's goal was to create manual labor jobs for millions of unemployed workers during the Great Depression.

When Roosevelt announced the CWA and the goal of putting men to work on community projects, members of the Morganton Women's Club decided that the Community House project would have a very good chance to receive funding from the CWA. Early in the planning process, the City Council offered the property on the corner of King and Queen streets to be used for the building, if the Women's Club could raise funds for the project. After the first meeting with CWA officials, the Women's Club learned they could not apply for funding, so the City of Morganton officially took over ownership of the project. The City of Morganton made the official application for funding to the Civil Works Administration and the Women's Club managed the project through completion.

In March 1934, the CWA approved funding and manpower for the Community House project. The CWA agreed to provide all construction labor as well as 30 percent funding for materials. The Morganton City Council had agreed to lease the property on the corner of King and Queen streets to the Women's Club for the project, and after receiving approval from the CWA, the Club set about raising funds.

The Women's Club donated $1,000, Burke County donated $2,000 and the Morganton Hardware Company made the first cash donation of $100 during the fundraising drive. According to a newspaper column written by Beatrice Cobb, the Community House was completed with a loan from the Morganton Building and Loan Association.

On Friday Nov. 29, 1935, the day after Thanksgiving, the Women's Club held a Civic Dinner in celebration of the formal opening of the new, City-owned Community House.

Many people attended the grand opening and the crowd included local civic leaders, elected officials, and club members. The Burke County Chamber of Commerce President kicked-off the night as toastmaster, and greetings were given by city and county officials, members of Kiwanis and the Lions Club and the local Merchants Association. Tenth Congressional District Representative Major A.L. Bulwinkle attended the event and the honorable Wilson Warlick, Resident Judge for the 16th Judicial District, gave the address.

The dinner itself offered a Thanksgiving spread including Cates pickles, "Burke County roast turkey," cranberry sauce, turkey dressing and "whip-poor-will ice cream," and the musical program included "Rondo Brilliante" performed on the piano, a trio performing Hungarian Dance No. 5 and the Russian melody Dark Eyes, and a violin duet performing "Andantino" by Lemar.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, residents used the Community House almost every week and weekend. Civic clubs held meetings in the building, and residents also used the facility for wedding receptions and special events. Dances were held on weekends and the food service was always a major part of events.
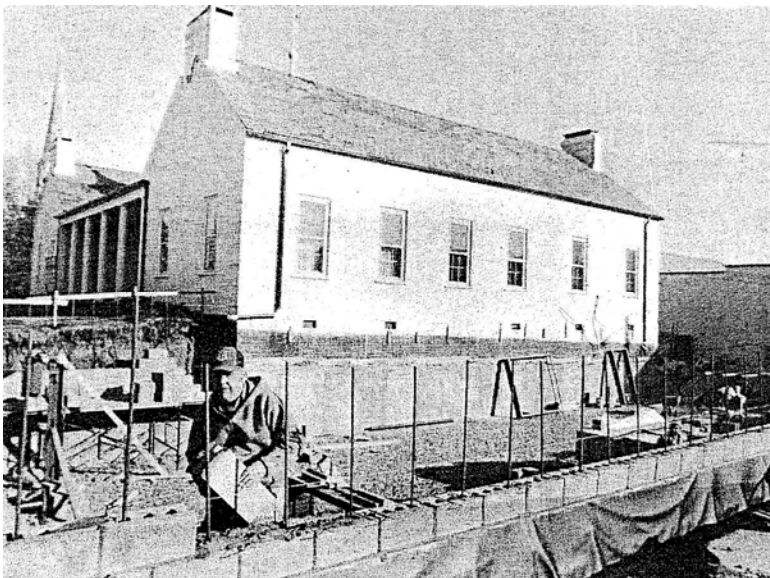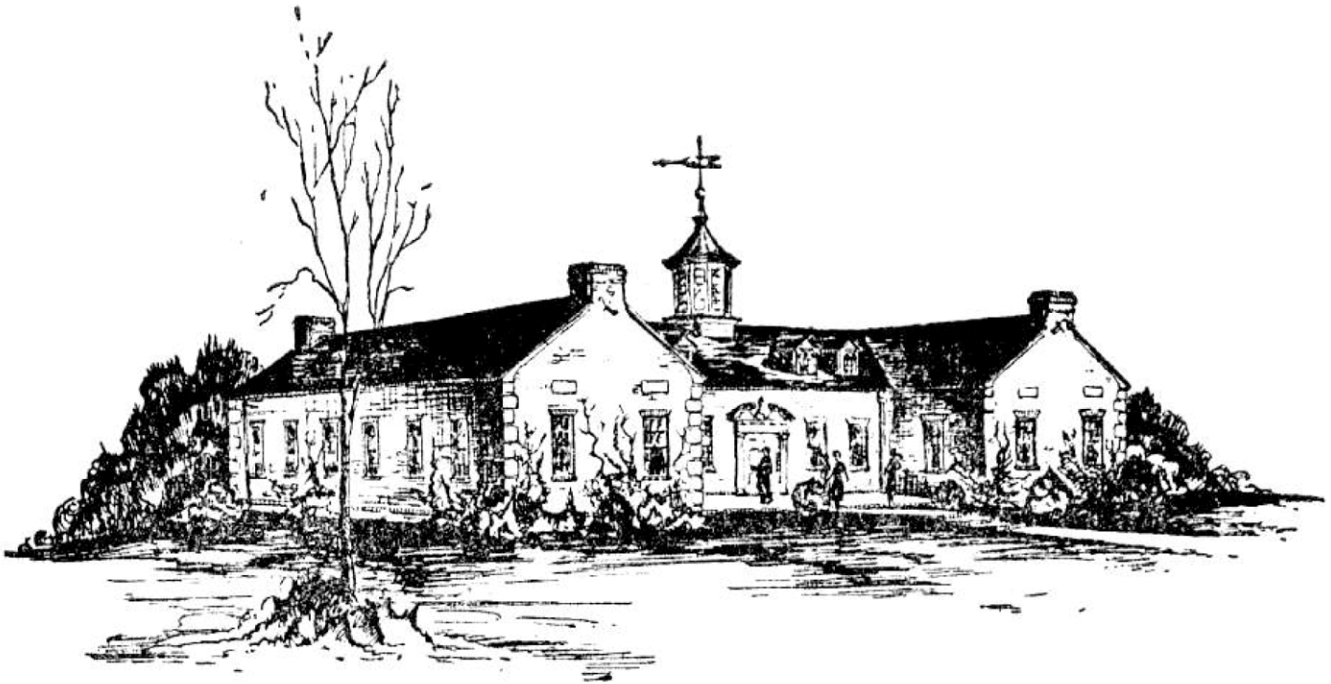
In May 1952, members of the Community House Building Committee approached the City Council about making some improvements. The members believed that there was not enough equipment or space in the building for meetings or social functions, nor was there enough room in the kitchen. At the time, the Chamber of Commerce office and the Merchants Association office were also located in the Community House.

After a long discussion, the City Council decided to renovate the building and ask the Chamber of Commerce and Merchants Association to make plans to find new locations. The Council also approved hiring and architect to draw up plans. Later that year, the Council approved funding the project in the following year's budget to be paid from profits from the Electric Department operation. During the remodeling, the Council bought a $1,470.00 oil heating boiler and $5,000.00 worth of new furniture. Those renovations met the needs of Morganton community members for the next 30 years.

In the early 1980s, after almost 30 years of continued use, the Morganton City Council decided to once again make improvements to the Community House and embarked on a $283,000 renovation. In July 1981, the Council held a special meeting to discuss future capital projects, and during that work session, the Council decided that expanding the Community House should be their No. 1 priority. The Council wanted to add more meeting space and upgrade the furnishings and aging kitchen equipment.

The plan was to demolish the existing Retired Men's Club building beside the Community House and construct a new wing. The new wing would add another 3,500 square feet, about 50% more area. The new banquet room would seat 400 people for a meeting or 200 for dinner, and the room would have movable partitions to allow staff to set up three separate meeting spaces when needed. Drexel Heritage agreed to provide designs and furnishings for the new lobby.

For the past 77 years, the Morganton Community House has stood in the heart of downtown Morganton and served residents and visitors. Community organizations and clubs still use the building for meetings and banquets and many people host parties and other events at the Community House. The Community House continues to serve its original purpose put forth by the Morganton Women's Club to build a civic center in Morganton "for the good of the entire community."

Above: This illustration appeared on the cover of the program handed out during the formal opening of the Community House Friday Nov. 29, 1935. See the full program on the next page. Credit: North Carolina Room at the Burke County Public Library in Morganton.

Left: In 1981, the Morganton City Council approved expanding the Community House by building a 3,500 square foot addition.

MUSICAL PROGRAM

DURING DINNER

Mrs. M. B. Kibler, President Schubert Music Club
In Charge

Piano—Rondo Brilliante_____ C. M. von Weber, Op. 62
Mrs. M. B. Kibler

Trios:—Hungarian Dance No. 5_____Johannes Brahms
Dark Eyes _____Russian Melody
Mrs. Councilman
Mr. Hagerman
Miss Shiflet, Accompanist

Violin Duet—Andantino_____Lemar
Mrs. Councilman
Miss Betty Patton
Miss Shiflet, Accompanist

CIVIC DINNER
In Celebration of the Formal Opening
OF
THE COMMUNITY HOUSE
MORGANTON, N. C.
Auspices Morganton Woman's Club

SEVEN O'CLOCK
FRIDAY EVENING, NOV. 29TH
1935

MENU

Tomato Juice Cocktail

Cates Pickles   Hearts of Celery

Burke County Roast Turkey

Cranberry Sauce   Turkey Dressing

Steamed Rice   Giblet Gravy

Potato Croquettes   Peas

Combination Salad

Whip-poor-will Ice Cream   Cake

Coffee

PROGRAM

F. C. Patton_____Toastmaster
President Morganton Chamber of Commerce

America _____ All Together

Invocation_____Rev. J. C. Cornett

Greetings:
County_____J. H. Buckley
Chairman, Board of County Commissioners
Town_____Dr. J. W. Vernon, Mayor
Kiwanis Club_____J. H. Gaston, President
Lions Club_____J. W. Piner, President
Chamber of Commerce_____W. T. Kyzer, Secretary
Merchants Association_____E. A. Kirksey, President
Major A. L. Bulwinkle_____Member of Congress
10th N. C. Congressional District

Introduction of Speaker_____H. L. Riddle

Address_____ Hon. Wilson Warlick, Resident Judge,
16th Judicial District

Acknowledgments_____ Mrs. I. T. Avery
President Morganton Woman's Club

'Good Night, Ladies'