

# Raising the roof on the Glen Leslie Church

By Caryn Ceolin

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Restoration of the Glen Leslie Church reached a climax Wednesday when construction workers were able to remove and reposition the original garble roof clad in wood shingles.

“It’s definitely challenging,” said Ken Boom with Chinook Log Homes. “We ended up with more rotten logs than we originally thought, so there were that many more logs we had to replicate from before, and that’s always interesting.”

In addition to the roof work, crews still have a lot to tackle. This includes restoring the brick chimney at the rear of the building, and its five-panel door flanked by windows on either side. Construction on the historic site began in May and is slated for completion in 2015 for the church’s 100th anniversary.

“It’s definitely an ongoing process — there’s no two ways about it,” said Wanda Zenner, president of the Glen Leslie Church Preservation Group. “When you think of this whole set up, what amazes me is that (the construction crew) can restore this building by moving it piece-by-piece, inch-by-inch.”

According to Zenner, the church, now a designated Alberta Historical Resource, once sat on large rocks. However, over time the rocks settled into the earth, causing the structure to shift. It was then moved off its original foundation so that the base could be upgraded and the walls stabilized log-by-log. It has since been moved back on.

“We think if we weren’t able to preserve it here in this time, it probably would have been falling down in a few years,” Zenner said. “The history of this area is really hinged on this church, so it was really important that we try to preserve it at all costs.”

The rural church, approximately 20 kilometres east of Grande Prairie on Secondary Highway 670, served the county in many ways back in the day, Zenner said. While built as a place of worship for homesteaders, the approximately six-by-nine metre church also doubled as a school and community centre.

“It really was the hub of this entire area, but it was getting a little iffy in terms of the integrity of the building, so we really needed to do something with it.”

The value of the church’s heritage not only lies in its rich history, but also in its architecture, Zenner said. The style of construction used to craft the church from squared logs, with exposed exterior walls, is now rare throughout the province.

“It’s supposed to be one of the very few un-relocated buildings of this age in northern Alberta,” said Zenner, who’s hoping the church will get the official designation of a Provincial Historic Site once construction is brought to fruition.

Refurbishing the Glen Leslie Church to its former glory has posed a fair share of challenges, Boom said.

Walls were torn down due to a high number of rotten logs that needed replacing. This means new logs need to be matched with former ones.

“We’ve done quite a few restorations in the past, but this is an interesting one because it’s one of the older (buildings) we’ve worked on, and just the nature of how we’ve had to do things,” said Boom.

“Sometimes we just tear the building right apart and then rebuild from scratch. Building new is straightforward. With (restoration) you’re dealing with twists, and issues that have existed since the first time it was built.”

For instance, Boom said, dovetail joints on the original structure weren’t constructed at a unanimous angle back in 1915. But while combining the old with the new might be challenging, it’ll make it that much more rewarding in the end.

“One of the most fascinating things about this job is working with the original flooring,” said Boom, who thought the floors would be entirely rotten once they had sunk at the corners.

“When we flipped (the floors), everybody was amazed at how sound the wood was underneath, so the decision was made to try and reincorporate it into the new foundation and that worked out really well.”

The eight original pews have also stood the test of time.

“There really is something to be said about capturing part of your history,” said Zenner.  
“Hopefully the building will last 100 more years once construction is complete.”

The restoration project is a partnership between the County of Grande Prairie and the Glen Leslie Preservation Group, with support from the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation. Construction is currently being funded through fundraising efforts and grant applications.

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