

Sewing up history

By Ann Loomans-Wenzel | Posted: Monday, September 3, 2012 12:00 am

Since 1996, the fate of the building formerly known as Pumpkin Hollow School has been in the hands of Kris Stone. All restored buildings should be so lucky.

Located at the corner of Hoepker and Portage roads in the Town of Burke, the distinctive red brick structure is now home to both Stone's business, Kris' Custom Sewing, and to Stone herself.

Stone's work is well known in the Madison area, as she has been expertly creating and repairing almost anything that involves sewing since starting her business in 1990.

On a recent day she was busy restoring the pads used by the UW Badger football team to keep players from injuring themselves when they run into the wall surrounding the field at Camp Randall. She is also the talent behind the buffer zone bleacher covers, and the fireproof blackout curtains hanging in the old Fieldhouse.

At the Kohl Center, she has provided pads for the press boxes, and dasher board covers. When the white covering that rings the sports area was found to be too bright for the television cameras, she came up with the black Ponti material that is used today. Stone is asked not only to construct such necessities, but to design them as well.

Other common tasks found in her "to do" bin are to make or repair the following: awnings, porch covers, boat covers, convertible tops (both car and boat), cushions, leather work, firemen's turn-out gear and hose bed covers, machinery and air conditioner covers, and even some blue jeans.

She creates and repairs "Anything custom that you need to be sewn, and can't be done on home machines," she stated.

Stone is assisted in her business by Fred Mohns, a friend she has known most of her life who now partners with her to run a fulfilling and successful operation, both professionally and personally.

They play off each other like a well-oiled machine. It is with obvious affection that Stone says "He does all the grunt work. He bends all the custom framing – aluminum and stainless steel – picks up big rolls, saws things...anything heavy, he does it."

Mohns takes all ribbing in stride, and can dish out as well as he receives. It is with pride that he discusses the quality of work they produce together, however.

Speaking of the many custom boat covers he and Stone are asked to produce, he said, "We make the cover to fit your boat, we don't expect the boat to fit the cover," he said. Customer satisfaction is the ultimate priority for both Stone and Mohns.

How Stone's business ended up in the old school is a convoluted story.

Kris' Custom Sewing was first run out of the basement and garage of Stone's home on the North side of Madison.

"I had it there for three years," she said. "In the winter I'd be in the basement. In the summer, I'd be in the garage. I actually HAD to move, because I had nowhere to store stuff. The dining room table was covered. Spiders were running rampant – boat covers come with spiders! We found a place to rent out on River Road, and I was there for three years."

Those three rental years were made difficult due to multiple problems.

"The roof leaked, and it was cold," said Stone. "We fought with the landlord to put on a new roof. The inspectors made him put in a new furnace." That helped with the heating problem, but the leaks continued. "He (landlord) wanted us to sign a new contract, and said then he'd give us a new roof," she remembers. When they insisted the new roof would have to come first, no promises were made. They continued on a month-to-month lease while keeping their eyes open for options.

One day, on a whim, Stone's husband at the time (Jack) suggested they go look at a school that was for sale. She agreed, somewhat reluctantly. It was a life-changing decision.

"He hardly had the car stopped, and I was out the door. I absolutely fell in love," she said. Carefully picking her way through the long, unkempt lawn, she tried peering in the windows.

"I would live here!" she exclaimed. Her husband was incredulous, as he knew she loved the home they owned. He asked twice if she meant it, she would sell their home and live at the old school. Her response each time was "Yep!"

"This place just reached out and said 'Come here!'" she said, gesturing as if pulling something towards her heart.

Their home was put up for sale, and they took possession of Pumpkin Hollow School in October of 1996. The love affair continues to this day despite all the hard work it has involved, and will require into the future.

When they first toured the school with a realtor, they were told all was up to code. Stone looked around at the leaks, mold, filth, broken boiler, lack of electricity and cracked "The code for what? A pole barn?!"

It is Stone's suspicion that the former owners had used the building mostly as a place to party.

"It was filthy, just all FILTH!" she said, wrinkling her brow at the memory.

There was no hot water, as the pipes had burst. Beer cans, bugs, and dead critters were found all around. There was mold nearly everywhere, due to leakage from the roof and walls. The pipe to the well had split, and these were just the obvious problems.

The cleaning process began.

"I had one outfit I'd wear, and a mask," she said. "I'd put one part bleach to 10 parts water. I used a garden sprayer." And spray she did, over and over between scrubblings, then worked to get the filthy

water out of the building. With no source of water in the building, the process was made all the more difficult.

“We hauled water from home (in North Madison) in pans, buckets, anything we could find,” she explained. Meanwhile they had to put a bathroom in, to accommodate business codes. They used snow shovels to haul out the dirt and garbage, hauling it to a waiting dumpster. They had to be out of the old rental place by November 1st, and worked furiously even through exhaustion.

It was Stone, her husband, and Stone’s brother Ed Atkinson from Verona that did most of the cleaning and clearing of the 1959 addition to the building. That section now houses the work area of her business. Every day, after working fulltime at the old location, she’d quickly eat dinner and then they would work at Pumpkin Hollow until around 10 p.m. Weekends were entirely spent at the school.

Spirits stayed high though the work was grueling.

“We were having fun doing this,” said Stone,” her smile confirming the evaluation.

The most touching moment in the renewal process came on October 31st, the day before they were to move in. Stone was working inside when she heard her husband call to her from the front door.

“He said, ‘You’d better come look at this’,” said Stone, who remembers being annoyed at the interruption. “He pointed to the front of the building, where the letters were. When we bought it, there was no ‘N’ in the ‘Pumpkin Hollow School’ sign. Now there was.

Someone, unknown to us, had replaced it. And stuck in the ‘N’ was a plastic stick with a plastic pumpkin. I knew for sure then that we were welcome and appreciated, and that the sign was staying. We couldn’t take it down now.”

Mohns nodded and smiled. “If you’re (a reader who is) responsible for bringing the ‘N’ back, Kris would like to meet you,” he suggested.

Stone agreed. “I put a note that said ‘thank you’ (on the wall) but I’m not sure you could see it from the street. I’ve never found out who did it.”

They made the November deadline, but just barely. Meanwhile, they continued paying on two buildings until the home in Madison sold, which took six months. Their new home was the former cafeteria in the basement of the school.

Making that space livable involved more extensive work. There was no insulation, so a wall had to be constructed on the South side to help hold heat. A bathroom was remodeled, a kitchen with a bar was added, along with counters. The old tile floor was painted over, then laminate was laid creating the look of a wood floor. All electrical work was ripped out and replaced, and walls and the ceiling cleaned and painted. This was home for five years, while they saved money to transform more of the schoolhouse into the living space they desired.

When it became time to transform the original two-room school area into permanent living quarters, Stone had multiple ideas ready to go. Making those ideas reality would take another two years. At times

all that was standing in the original section was the four walls.

The moveable wall that had separated the two classrooms in the olden days had been replaced with a solid wall by the time Stone took possession. That had to go, as well as a brick chimney and other walls.

A plaque was found near the chimney during its removal which reads "School No. 2 1908". Stone placed that next to her pond in the delightfully landscaped backyard.

In place of the old wall there now stands a huge pantry closet, underneath a beautiful wooden staircase with wrought iron railings.

The newly created second floor consists of the master bedroom and bathroom, extra storage space, and a sitting room decorated in a whimsical jungle theme. All are filled with sunshine streaming from the two dormers, tall windows and a skylight.

"If there was any favorite room in the house, it would have to be my bedroom," said Stone. "The big oak tree is RIGHT there... I'd open the windows, and hear the waterfalls (in the pond out back) and the tree frogs and toads... I love the wind coming through the window, and the birds are always singing."

Getting the dormers was a project, as Stone's husband was not a fan. When she gave the go-ahead for a second one, she had to think of how she would break the news to her husband.

She slipped in the news while they were traveling in the car. "My husband said, 'By the way, I ordered...' whatever, I don't remember what," she said. "I said, 'Oh. Ok. By the way, I ordered a second dormer.'"

Luckily, he agreed that it was necessary to balance the look of the building, and all was well.

On the first floor, the original flooring and wainscoting was cleaned and preserved. Two bedrooms and a bathroom were created where there was once a classroom, and the tin roof from the basement was removed and moved to the ceilings of those new rooms.

A kitchen now covers an entire side of the other former classroom, which is now the living room/dining area. New windows were put in, keeping the large, open space of the original windows. When it was time for the dry-walling to be done, Stone threw "dry-walling parties," and her entire family showed up to help. Since she's one of nine children, that meant a lot of help.

"We grew up on a farm, so all of us kids knew how to do SOMETHING," she said. "Farmers have to make do with what you have."

She provided coffee, cookies, doughnuts and other snacks, while sisters-in-law would bring a dish to share. It was a great and joyful bonding experience, one Stone is grateful for, and repays in kind whenever possible. One of her favorite memories is the teasing.

"I'd hear from another room, 'Oops! Don't tell Kris', said loudly enough that I'd be sure to hear," she says. She had to hope they were kidding.

The original tin roof had to be removed and cleaned, while the new trusses, roof, stairway, and second

floor rooms were installed. Stone did the cleaning, painting, and re-shaping of the tin before helping to put it all back in place.

Three weekends were spent up on scaffolding to accomplish this task. She pressure washed each 2' by 8' section, finding multiple colors of paint flaking off in large sections. She would scurry about scraping up the wet pieces so they wouldn't become garbage that would blow into neighbors' yards.

"I didn't want them to think we were pigs!" she said emphatically.

Not only were the neighbors uncritical, they were both interested and supportive. That was a blessing to Stone.

"We'd be out there working on landscaping, and people would go by and they'd say, 'We just love what you're doing!'" she recalled. "You'd feel so good, your heart would just go thumpity thump."

Stone's love of antiques is evident throughout the home, as is her artistic eye. Walls that appear to have wallpaper of an intricate design are actually painted by Stone, sometimes using a feather duster and multiple colors.

Some of the paintings hanging on those walls are her original creations, as are the huge, colorful braided rugs that appear in strategic spots. These beauties originate from her craft room located at the bottom of the school's former entryway. It is full to bursting with all a crafter could ask for, more proof that the process of homemaking is still under way.

As if she weren't industrious enough, Stone also has a greenhouse whose ceiling panels are visible to drivers passing by, where she keeps goods she has canned over the years.

In the former school entryway are hand-painted garden scenes and stained glass, and there are plans for more to be obtained and mounted at a later time. The tiny rooms on either side of the welcoming stairs were meant for coats and boots – girls on one side, boys on the other.

They remain, and are a now-silent reminder of how active and alive with children's laughter the building was in its former life.

Reminders of that life are on display at the Sun Prairie Historical Library and Museum in downtown Sun Prairie. Among the treasures are a plaster relief of the school entry (the same view as was drawn for a school fundraiser) and the large curtain used for performances held at Pumpkin Hollow School put on by school and community groups.

On the back of the plaster cast it reads "To Diane Zeravle, from the Pumpking Hollow Teachers' Club, 1990".

The curtain is a work of art to behold, hand-painted and colorful. Called an "ad curtain," it does indeed prominently display ads for area businesses, some of which are still around today. Their two or three digit phone numbers hark back to a far simpler time.

Both the work that is done in this thriving business, and the work that has restored a cornerstone building

in this small community, make for a jewel that most people would not expect to exist on this little country corner.

Stone saw the treasure for what it could be, and continues to bring it to its full, shining glory. Sighing, she clasped her hands over her heart.

“ I love my whole house,” she says, eyes seeming to mist over. “I’ve got my whole heart there.”

For your custom sewing needs, contact Stone at:

Kris’ Custom Sewing

3956 Hoepker Road

608-244-3488

kriscustomsewing@sbcglobal.net