

Venerable school on the mend

■ The Farm Life School, once at the center of rural Redland, is now the object of local efforts to recapture a history that has been lost over the decades.

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The Redland Farm Life School. The name alone evokes images of the past.

So does the partially missing roof, the chipping paint on the walls and the clusters of weeds sprouting from cracks between the once-wooden floors.

But after more than a decade of work by a group of determined locals, the historic school — one of many Southern schools where agriculture was part of the curriculum — could soon be restored to its

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FIXER-UPPER: The restoration committee has secured grants to help renovate the weather-beaten school, and it has been declared a local historical site.

Restoration in store for this old schoolhouse

• FARM SCHOOL, FROM 1B

early 1900s splendor for use as a museum and, perhaps, classrooms once again.

But first, about that roof. "It takes a little imagination, doesn't it, to see how pretty it's going to be?" said Barbara Hanck, who graduated from the Farm Life School in 1952, as she surveyed the site of many of her childhood memories.

Nestled between Redland Elementary and Redland Middle on Southwest 248th Street and 162nd Avenue, the Farm Life School remained an operating elementary school until 1992 — though the farming curriculum had been abandoned decades earlier — when Hurricane Andrew ripped the roof off the western part of the building.

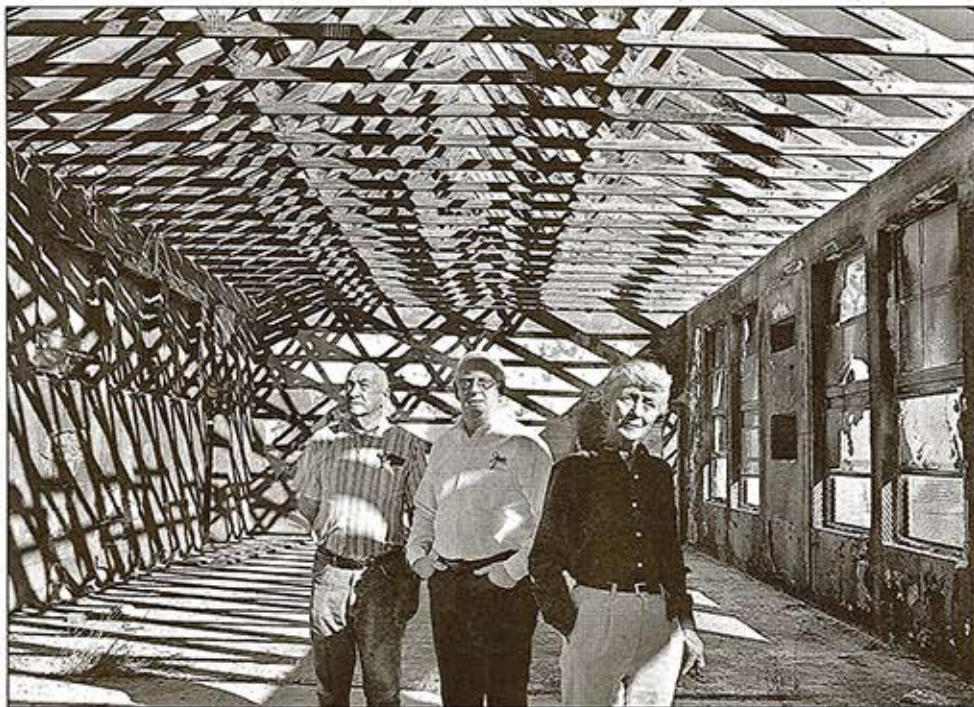
"The school's been sitting since the hurricane," said JoAnn McMillan, another former student. "The damage that was done has been exacerbated since."

The school system initially considered repairing the school, Hanck said, but decided against it in early 1997. Instead, it was planning to demolish the school.

POOLING EFFORTS

A few months later, a group of former students and community members, including Hanck and McMillan, formed a committee to save the school. The group succeeded in getting the property's deed transferred from the school district to the county, which now leases the land to the committee.

Helped by the Pioneer Museum in Florida City, the committee began applying for grants and has since received \$880,000 from the state's department of historic preservation and the county's preservation fund.



DONNA E. NATALE PLANAS/HERALD STAFF

INSIDE OUT:

From left, George Grunwell, E.O. 'Red' McAllister and Barbara Hanck, members of a community restoration committee, stand in a roofless old classroom at the Farm Life School in the Redland. Grunwell and Hanck are alumni of the school.

Another committee member, George Grunwell, who began attending the school in 1928, wrote a history of the school, which led to its designation by the county as a local historical site. Early next year, the group plans to apply for national historical designation as well.

The group has also started applying for more grants, Hanck said.

"It costs a lot of money to do something like this," said Robert Barnes, the project's architect and planner.

As projects go, this one is no small undertaking, Barnes said. With the aid of old photographs and recollections — gathered at informal "oral history days," — Barnes designed a site plan re-creat-

ing the school's appearance, circa 1920.

"It's gonna look fantastic," he said. "Almost identical to its original character."

PIECES OF THE PAST

The school opened in 1916 and, at 16,000 square feet, became the second largest rural school in the country, said Bob Jensen, president of the South Florida Pioneer Museum and a committee member. Its U-shaped design with 144 windows, an unusually large number by today's standards, provided natural ventilation — keeping the classrooms cool during the hottest months in the decades before air conditioning.

Other original features, such as wide overhangs, lush

landscaping, a courtyard and a red-shingled roof are all replicated in the architect's plans.

Though financial constraints make it impossible for the entire building to be turned into a school museum, one of the front rooms will replicate an original classroom. The rest of the building will be subtle, and some educational institutions have expressed interest.

For Hanck, McMillan, Grunwell and "countless others," all the work over the past six years, the thousands of hours put in to pull off a project of such magnitude, will be worth it. "It was simply the hub of the Redland community; everything revolved around that school

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when we were students," Hanck said.

"That's the reason for trying to save it."