

Nathalie Edmunds could well be called the Mother of Historic Preservation in Ypsilanti. A true preservation pioneer, Nathalie began working to save the architectural legacy of this community over 30 years ago, when historic preservation was an unpopular concept. Without her determination and dedication, much of what today constitutes "Historic Ypsilanti" would no longer exist.

In 1963, Nathalie organized the drive to move the public library, located in the Ladies Library building, from its North Huron Street site to the vacated post office building on Michigan Avenue, rather than see the latter torn down for a gas station. Over the years, on six different occasions, she saved the Ladies Library building from destruction by organizing petition drives to prevent the City from demolishing the vacated building as part of various development schemes. By 1973, the future of the building was assured when Nathalie persuaded the City to allow the Sesquicentennial Committee to use the building as offices. Once saved, it was later sold and restored to its present glory.

In 1970, Nathalie ran for City Council, determined to change the City's Master Plan for the demolition of Depot Town for an industrial park, a high rise development on Huron Street, and the demolition of the Old Fire Station. Nathalie's efforts to obtain National Register District designation were responsible for saving much of the Huron streetscape from the City's and County's plan to demolish the Ladies Library, the Old Municipal Court, and the Thompson House, in order to build a new County Court House. By threatening the County with loss of Federal funds for new construction if the old buildings were demolished, Nathalie succeeded in getting the County to abandon its development plans and the battle to save Huron Street was won.

Together with Jane Bird Schmiedeke, Nat (to use her best-known name), founded the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation in 1974. She later went on to plan and promote the Ypsilanti Heritage Festival, which has become Ypsilanti's largest annual event, uniting countless volunteers from throughout the community and attracting nearly 300,000 visitors each year. Nathalie was also a founding member of the Ypsilanti Historic District Commission and was instrumental in saving the Octagon House and the G.A.R. Hall, among other structures. Most recently, she has been dedicated to the installation of the One Room School House on the campus of Eastern Michigan University.

These few paragraphs can only summarize a small part of Nathalie Edmunds' service to this community. She is living proof that one person, with vision and strength of conviction, can indeed make a difference! Try to imagine what Ypsilanti would be like today if she had not begun the fight to save what we now recognize as perhaps our most precious community resource. Truly, we all owe a tremendous debt to Nathalie Edmunds.

Jane Bird Schmiedeke has dedicated a lifetime of her energy and attention to the pursuit of historic preservation in Ypsilanti. She has been an inspiration to more than one generation of preservationists since her entry into the movement in 1971, and she has won the respect of the community for her leadership in preservation. As chairperson of the Historic District Commission, she leads the city's now long, officially established movement to capitalize on the rich resources of its older buildings.

In 1971, Jane joined with Nathalie Edmunds in a petition drive to prevent a would-be developer from razing five historic structures: the five buildings we now see so beautifully restored and utilized directly north of St. Luke's Episcopal Church on North Huron, the showpiece at the center of one of the largest historic districts in the country. For Jane, that initial work was the beginning of what has been an almost full-time, mostly unpaid career in historic preservation.

In 1972, she chaired the Historic District Study Committee, which produced the feasibility report that led to the City Council's 1973 designation of the Historic District. At this same time, she began writing and working for the passage of the Ypsilanti Historic District Ordinance, which was eventually passed unanimously by City Council in 1978. This ordinance gives its appointed commission jurisdiction over a large area of the city, including Depot Town, as well as almost the entire downtown business district - more than seven hundred buildings in all. Jane was elected its chair and has remained its steadfast leader ever since.

In 1974, Jane, together with Nathalie Edmunds, founded the Ypsilanti Heritage Foundation, whose initial purpose was to save the Towner House. What began as a small nucleus of dedicated community servants is now, twenty years later, an organization with a membership of over 200. Through its Historic Marker Program, its annual Historic Home Tour, and other programs, the Foundation has become a vital part of the community. Jane, who has worked assiduously on all of the Foundation's programs over the years, remains an invaluable member of the Board of Directors.

In short, Jane Bird Schmiedeke serves as a lesson in how to get the job done and how to win the crucial battles that will preserve our architectural heritage for future generations to come. Her genius for maneuvering through rough seas when dealing with a crisis, her skill in working with people at all levels of the community, and her seemingly untiring dedication to the subject of preservation serve as an example to all those determined to make Ypsilanti a better place in which to live.

*Taken from the YHF 20th Anniversary Celebration Program*