MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2010

Today is the 270th day of the year. In 1938, Warsaw, Poland, surrendered after weeks of resistance to invading forces from Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II.

BORN ON THIS DAY: Jayne Meadows, actress; 90; Arthur Penn, movie director; 80; Don Cornelius, producer ("Soul Train"); 74; Meat Loaf, rock singer; 63; Shaun Cassidy, singer, 52; Patrick Muldoon, actor, 42; Gwyneth Paltrow, actress, 38; Lil Wayne, rapper, 28.

SEAN KIRST | POST STANDARD COLUMNIST

MANNY BRELAND (left), the last basketball coach at Syracuse Central High School, and Don Merrill, the school's last athletic director, take a final look at the school upon its closing in 1975. The majestc school would cost millions to renovate, but could be a gem on the southern edge of downtown.

GRAND OLD SCHOOLS DESERVE ATTENTION

By Bob Gardino has never shied away from argument. The former Republican chairman in Syracuse often serves as a lightning rod. Yet he stood up Sunday at a forum at the Onondaga Historical Association and offered his case with such communal passion that it was hard for anyone in the room to disagree.

His eloquent summary cut to the heart of a debate I was asked to moderate: What do we do with Blodgett Elementary School and the old Central High School, two once-majestic landmarks whose restoration for classroom use would cost tens of millions of dollars?

Central served for decades as a downtown high school. Gardino, a retired teacher and vice president of Parents for Public Schools in Syracuse, recalled walking through the front doors for the first time, as a little boy. "I fell in love," he said, testifying to how monumental architecture can fuel childhood aspirations about knowledge.

While many in the crowd nodded their assent, it only brought them back to the overriding issue: Should Blodgett and Central be saved as schools, or used in some other way?

Central shut down as a high school in the 1970s. Blodgett — built as the old vocational High School — remains in use as an elementary school on the Near West Side. Some argue that it makes no sense to retain Blodgett for classroom space, that economic logic in a shrinking city demands moving the pupils from that massive old building into classrooms at the Delaware, Seymour or Frazer schools.

Panelist Anne Messenger, of the Near Westside Initiative, said the notion flies against what the neighborhood wants. Messenger pointed to a burst of activity in the area, such as construction of new homes and plans by WCNY and ProLiteracy to move their corporate offices into the old Case Supply warehouse. She said some seem impossible.

The point was echoed by Common Councilor Nader Maroun, who said the priority is getting a clear sense of what the community wants. Beth Crawford, of the Preservation Association of Central New York, said civic officials should be open to what "works in other places — especially when partnerships between government and business trigger requests that seemed otherwise impossible.

Maroun and Ned Doul, of the board of education, agreed that the relationship between the school district and city hall is much better than often perceived. If so, the mutual responsibility of those governing bodies comes down to this: Central and Blodgett are grand landmarks intended to evoke soaring emotions, but every day of inaction is one more day in which they crumble.

In a cash-strapped era, we need to settle on what those buildings ought to be — then get it done.

If you go:

Rediscovering that Old High School Spirit: Syracuse's High Schools of Days Gone By.

Where: Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St.

Hours: Through Oct. 17, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

What: A collection of yearbooks, trophies, photos and other materials from such new-closed high schools as North, Central, Blodgett (Vocational), old Nottingham, Eastwood and Valley. Admission is free.

About 1000 new arrivals, in the form of documents delivered to the Ackman-Zingale Center for Jewish History, bring the total to 50,000.

The papers are legal records from Jewish communities throughout the world.