



PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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Early Opera Houses of Urbana and Champaign

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "opera house"? Do you think of The Metropolitan Opera in New York or, closer to home, the Tryon Festival Theatre at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the home of the Illinois Opera Theatre? It wasn't always that way. The show at the old opera house could have made our grandparents and great-grandparents think more of the Grand Old Opry than grand opera. During the late 19th century and the early years of the 20th, "opera house" was the term generally used instead of theatre.

Opera houses booked all kinds of entertainments. There were concerts of all types, plays, musicals, lectures, and vaudeville acts including comedians, acrobats, jugglers, animal acts, and magicians. Later, in the early years of the twentieth century, the opera houses added moving pictures to their play bills. You might even go to your church social or roller skating at the local opera house.

There were opera houses in larger towns and cities located downtown near the railroad tracks, but smaller towns were just as likely to have had an opera house. The best preserved old opera house in this area is in the town of Homer.

The opera house would often be located on a building's upper floor, above a retail establishment, with the retailer running the opera house as a sideline. This was the case with Champaign and Urbana's earliest opera houses.

Tiernan's Opera House was Urbana's first opera house. Frank Tiernan owned and operated the hall, located on the third floor of his building at 115 West Main. The building was built sometime after 1850; by 1889, the opera house had come and gone and the building was purchased by the Masons.

The hall measured about 40 by 55 feet with a narrow balcony in back and on the sides. The stage opening measured 23 feet

across by 11 1/2 feet high. The stage, including the apron, was about 13 feet deep and elevated 18 inches above the audience. The opera house would hold at least 600 spectators sitting in movable chairs placed on the flat floor.

The Masons extensively remodeled the building in 1914, including adding a new terra cotta facade. They spent more than \$50,000 to remodel and furnish the building. E. G. Bente was the general contractor and J.W. Royer the architect. The opera house space became the main lodge room. The Masons used the building until they sold it in 1979. The ground floor has always been retail space and the Masons rented out part of the second floor as office space. The building is still a vital part of downtown Urbana; a restaurant occupies the ground floor and offices the upper floors. Portions of the lodge room remain intact, hidden away behind the offices.

Simon H. Busey opened **Busey's Hall** at 120 West Main, Urbana, to replace Tiernan's Hall. In addition to theatrical activity, it was used for roller skating, dancing, and church affairs. About 1903, Gus Freeman came into possession of the building, converting it into a fine dance hall. Urbana then had no opera house until the Illinois Theatre opened in 1908. Mr. Freeman's building was later to be remodeled into the Princess Theatre (now the Urbana Cinema).

Barrett's Hall was perhaps the first opera house in Champaign. W. C. Barrett had a three story building erected in 1865 at the northeast corner of Main and Neil. The opera house was on the third floor. Later, Henry Swannell bought the building and operated a drugstore on the ground floor. During this period, the hall was usually called Swannell's Opera House. The opera house later became the A F of L Union Hall. The building was torn down in 1950 for the construction of the W. T. Grant building. This historic site, commonly known as "Number One Main" is becoming a parking lot.



The third story of this building was known as Eichberg's Opera Hall and was used by the Congregational Church when their Park Street Church was destroyed by fire in 1873. Photo courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Society.

The **Eichberg Opera House** is another early Champaign opera house. The building that housed the Eichberg was built in 1872 at 22 Main. The 1878-79 City Directory lists just one opera house - the Eichberg Opera Hall, and the Eichberg is the only hall listed until the 1890 directory when it is joined by the Swannell Opera House and the Walker Opera House.

Max Eichberg and Ben Baer operated the Eichberg & Baer New York Store on the ground floor, selling, among other things, dry goods, notions, and carpets. The ticket office was on the second floor and the opera house was on the third.

The Eichberg Opera House ceased operations sometime after 1895. The space was then used as a Masonic Temple until early January, 1914, when the Champaign Masons moved to their own newly constructed building. The opera house building was purchased by S. A. Nelson. After the Masons moved out, Nelson spent \$500.00 to completely renovate the opera house space for use as a public hall to be known as Nelson Hall. In the early 1960s, the building was heavily damaged by fire. It was then razed and the land became a parking lot.

There were other opera houses in town: Meibach's Hall operated for a while on University Avenue, the Coliseum (later known as the Crescent Theatre) was at Hickory and Washington, and the Walker Opera House was at Neil and Park. The Coliseum and Walker both came later than the others and were housed in their own buildings. These opera houses will be discussed in future newsletter articles.

Many changes in the entertainment field took place in the first years of the twentieth century. Moving pictures had been introduced and nickelodeons were opening. Vaudeville gained popularity and plays and musicals toured the country. The opera houses began to become out-dated as managers demanded larger houses and the acts required better equipped stages. Moreover, the original opera houses had been built with scant attention paid to fire safety. Some disastrous theatre fires heightened the public's awareness and concern for fire safety. Newspaper stories announcing the opening of new theatres always stressed the safety precautions taken in the design and construction of the buildings. Other changes were taking place also. The stage increased in size, fly lofts grew taller, orchestra pits appeared, lighting technology advanced, and the auditorium floors began to be sloped for better sight lines and were made of concrete for fire safety. The new buildings were no longer opera houses, they were now called theatres.

This article was researched and written by PACA Board Member Perry Morris.

History Conference

"Illinois, Beginning with Women...Histories and Cultures" is the subject of a two-day conference sponsored by the Afro-American Studies and Research Program and the Women's Studies Program at the University of Illinois. The conference will examine and celebrate the uniquely rich and varied histories of Illinois women. It is scheduled for March 26 and 27 at the Levis Faculty Center. For information contact, Phyllis Vanlandingham at 333-2990.

ISTEA and Preservation

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA) has major provisions of interest to preservation advocates. "ISTEA" is monumental, complex legislation that provides over \$155 billion in transportation funding through fiscal year 1997. The new legislation represents a departure from past policies of the Federal Highway Administration, giving unprecedented responsibility and flexibility to state and local transportation officials in deciding how Federal highway and transit funds should be used.

Alternatives to highway construction, such as mass transportation, bicycle and pedestrian facilities, and carpool programs, are encouraged. The new law includes provisions for public access to and participation in the planning process for transportation and requires that special consideration be given to the needs of the elderly and people with disabilities.

The largest program created by the ISTEA is the Surface Transportation Program, providing block grant funding of \$23.9 billion over the next six years with an 80/20 matching ratio (80 percent federal share). Ten percent of these funds can only be used for "transportation enhancement activities," listed below:

1. Provision of facilities for pedestrians and bicycles.
2. Acquisition of scenic easements and scenic or historic sites.
3. Scenic or historic highway programs.
4. Landscaping and scenic beautification.
5. Historic preservation.
6. Rehabilitation and operation of historic transportation buildings, structures, or facilities (including historic railroad facilities and canals).
7. Preservation of abandoned railway corridors (including the conversion and use thereof for pedestrian or bicycle trails).
8. Control and removal of outdoor advertising.
9. Archeological planning and research.
10. Mitigation of water pollution due to highway runoff.

A memo from the U.S. Department of Transportation gives the following guidance on determining the scope of activities that could qualify as transportation enhancements:

"Many projects are a mix of elements, some on the list and some not. Those project elements which are on the list may be counted as transportation enhancement activities. For example, a rest area might include a historic site purchased and developed as an interpretive site illustrating local history. The historic site

purchase and development would qualify as a transportation enhancement activity.

"Activities which are not explicitly on the list might qualify if they are an integral part of a larger qualifying activity. For example, if the rehabilitation of a historic railroad station required the construction of new drainage facilities, the entire project could be considered a transportation enhancement activity. Similarly, environmental analysis, project planning, design, land acquisition, and construction activities necessary for implementing qualifying transportation enhancement activities are eligible for funding and may be counted toward the 10 percent requirement."

In Champaign County ISTEA activities are coordinated by CUUATS (Champaign-Urbana Urbanized Area Transportation Study). CUUATS is mandated to develop a 20-year long-range plan and a 3-year transportation improvement program. Transportation enhancements must be considered in these plans. By requiring that citizens and others with an interest in transportation be involved in transportation plans and programs, ISTEA sets the stage for participation to occur early enough to allow citizens a hand in planning for the future of their region or state. PACA encourages everyone who has an interest in transportation enhancement activities (bike paths, rails-to-trails, streetscapes, etc.) to contact CUUATS and ask to be a part of their public participation program.

Urbana, Ohio, House Tour

PACA has entered into a "sister city" relationship with the preservation group in Urbana, Champaign County, Ohio, our county's founding namesake. They have sent us the following information about their first house tour.

First Annual Urbana Historic Home and Garden Tour June 19-20

Enter through the doors of gracious historic homes and gardens during the First Annual Urbana Historic Home and Garden Tour. Visit Ohio's best kept secret and enjoy a variety of architecture, crafts, food, and entertainment. The tour will also include a variety of special attractions such as the 1877 St. Paul's A.M.E. Church, a private home restoration in progress, and a completed commercial renovation. Ticket prices are \$8.00 pre-sale and \$10.00 the days of the tour. For tickets or information, write to: Urbana Home Tour, 112 East Reynolds Street, Urbana, Ohio 43078.

Annual Membership Meeting

Over 40 people braved the cold and snow to attend the PACA Annual Membership Meeting held February 21 at the C-U Station and hosted by Architectural Spectrum. A reception was provided by Schooners Restaurant. After a short business meeting in which 1992 preservation activities were reviewed, three members were elected to the Board of Directors to serve through 1995: Carolyn Baxley, Perry Morris, and Richard Cahill. Currently serving are Alice Edwards (93), Art Zangerl (93), Susan Appel (93), Steven Roemmel (94), Marianna Murphy (94), and Tim LaTourette (94). Patricia Jensen retired after six years of service. Prof. Robert Riley presented a lively program on "The Great American Grain Elevator."

The 1993 Heritage Awards were also presented. PACA would like to take this opportunity to rectify an omission. Contractor Ron Herron was instrumental in completing the renovation of 507 West Washington Street and deserves a Special Heritage Award for his efforts.

Residential Heritage Award

411 West Hill, Champaign
Stuart Laird

602 West High, Urbana
Dan and Tori Corkery

Commercial Heritage Award

41 Main Street, Champaign
William Youngerman
(Dave Wickersheimer, engineer
Dick Edgebrook & crew, stone setters)

Adaptive Use Heritage Award

C-U Station
Neil and Mary Strack
William Youngerman

Institutional Heritage Award

Taft House
University of Illinois

Springer Recreation Center
Champaign Park District

Special Heritage Award

Carolyn Baxley, Discovery Place

Dick Elkin, Salvage Volunteer

507 West Washington, Champaign
David and Jeani Keuster
Ron Herron

"Oomph Award"

108 East Vine, Tolono
Michael Zachay

Planning Departments
Cities of Champaign and Urbana for
the development of preservation
ordinances

Orpheum Cleanup

The first storefront demolition and cleanup "party" held last January was a great success. Sixteen hardy souls braved the cold to begin removing the deteriorated plaster in both the storefronts and the second floor rooming house area. A large dumpster, donated by the Waste Haulers Association, was filled to overflowing before lunch! Volunteers continued that day and on two subsequent work days to remove the plaster from the walls and to carefully salvage anything that can be reused in later work. A new roof is in the process of being installed over the entire building, but the cold snap and blizzard has delayed completion. **The next Orpheum work day is scheduled for Saturday, March 20;** volunteers are always needed and much appreciated.

Membership Renewals

At the January Board meeting, the Directors voted to increase membership dues effective April 15. Adult, Family, Senior Citizen, and Student dues will increase by \$5.00. Corporate dues will increase to \$75.00. This is the first dues increase since the Preservation Association was formed in 1981 and will be used to offset increased postage, printing, and operating costs. Early renewals will be accepted at the current rate.

PRESERVATION & LIVABLE COMMUNITIES

Make the Connection!

Preservation Week May 9 - 15, 1993 National Trust For Historic Preservation

Membership Application P.A.C.A

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

INDIVIDUAL

- Adult \$10.00
- Student (1/2 time or more) \$ 5.00
- Senior Citizen \$ 5.00
- Family \$15.00

CORPORATE

- \$50.00

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION

- NEW MEMBERSHIP
 RENEWAL

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825

Illinois Historic Preservation Day, 1993

The Preservation Association and the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois are sponsoring a Preservation Day in Springfield. This is a unique opportunity to let our legislators know how important preservation is to our community. As a supporter of preservation efforts in Illinois, your help is needed to educate our state legislators on the many social and economic benefits of historic preservation.

There will be a dinner and legislative briefing session on Wednesday, March 24. Participants will meet and discuss current preservation issues and bills in session and develop lobbying strategies. State legislators and participants will meet for breakfast and a presentation on historic preservation and economic development on Thursday, March 25. The rest of the day is open for individual meetings between legislators and their constituents. Some of the issues on the agenda for discussion include: funding for the Illinois State Historic Preservation Agency, admission fees at State Historic Sites, social and economic benefits of preservation, and community preservation projects. For more information about attending Preservation Day, call PACA at 328-7222. PACA has a delegation planning to attend.

PACA Newsletter

Alice Edwards, President
Susan Appel, Vice-President
Art Zangerl, Secretary
Perry Morris, Treasurer
Karen Lang Kummer, Exec. Director

328-PACA: Telephone & Answering Service



Orpheum Clean-up "Party"
Saturday, March 20
9:00 - 3:00

Salvage Donations

Neill Schurter
Jerry & Mary Schneider
University of Illinois
Harvey Barnhart
Spritz Jewelry
Daniel Lepetit
Roger Miller Enterprises

Orpheum V.I.P.s

Waste Haulers Association
Michael Bush
Stan Jenkins
Chris Anderson
Bruce Creamer
William Perkins
Art Zangerl
Bob Swisher
Michael Kurtley
Rich Cahill
Carolyn Baxley
Kate Hlavacek
Steve Roemmel
Kathy Roemmel
Woody Wilson
Perry Morris
Karen Kummer
Champaign Mens Team:
Spencer Landsman
John Grubman
Robert Herendeen
Tim Richards
Stewart Graham
Scot Wyatt
Jimmie Wyatt

New & Renewing Members

Mrs. Norman Barnett
Fred & Nancy Coombs
Alice Edwards
Mrs. William Youngerman
Marilyn Wells
Clifford & Karen Maier
Lawrence K. Richards
Barton Baker
Doug & Sheryl Maxwell
Chris Anderson
Mr. & Mrs. Harry Querry
Anne Marshall
Marianna Murphy & Laird Thompson
Dan McCollum
Mr. & Mrs. Walter Myers
David Garner
Dr. & Mrs. Victor Wojnar
C. John & Diane Mann
Steve Kibler
Richard Cannon
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Andrew B. White Family
Robbi Farrell
Velma Kurzweg
Pius Weibel
Mary Altenbernd
Mike Pace
Laura Weishaar
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