



# PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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## Focus On: Homer Opera House

William Jurgensmeyer wanted to bring some entertainment to the town of Homer. In 1902, he built the opera house building at the corner of First and Main streets for \$25,000. The brick Italianate building stands two stories tall plus a full basement that is used only for utilities. In the basement, brick columns that support the building are visible. These columns are particularly interesting because the bricks are laid so that the columns flare out at the bottom to spread the load over a wider surface.

The Jurgensmeyer Building has had an interesting and varied history. The opera house occupies the west half of the upper story. The east half and the lower story were all commercial space. Over the years, the building has housed the Lyons and Palmer grocery, a music store, photography studios (an upstairs room has excellent northerly exposure), doctor's offices, millinery shops, the Grab-It-Here grocery, The First National Bank, and even a school.

In the early spring of 1914, Homer High School District Number 302 was organized. The school board decided to lease the upstairs of the Jurgensmeyer building, remodel it, and use it for a community high school. The auditorium was used as a gym during the years the school occupied the building. The school moved to its own newly constructed building in September, 1928.

The Jurgensmeyer building was rededicated as the Homer Municipal Building on April 2, 1972. The Homer Village Board had bought the building from the Grab-It-Here owners to be remodeled and used as a municipal building.

The first floor was completely remodeled; "modernized" with paneling and a suspended ceiling that provides a new, low maintenance finish. It is functional space for the village government, but all uniqueness was erased and the building was rendered undistinguished from so many others. The large display



*Homer Opera House, 101 N. Main Street, Homer in 1981. Photo courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Society.*

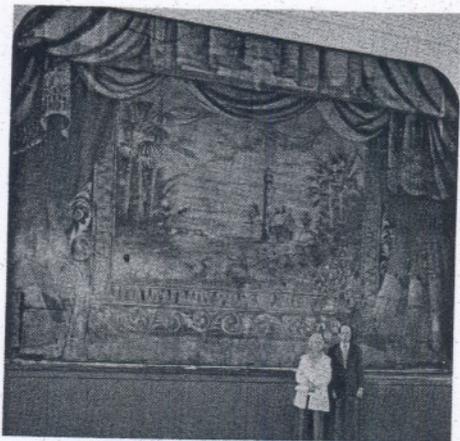
windows were filled in, and the interior was divided into 12 rooms, providing space for the water department, township offices, the village library, community groups, and a community room with adjacent kitchen. On the second floor, the opera house was untouched except for some remodeling of its first floor entrance. The remainder of the second floor remains largely unused.

Over the years, the opera house has hosted traveling shows, school and local productions, musical troupes, semi-professional basketball, Golden Gloves boxing matches, the Cloverleaf Square Dance Club's Saturday night dances, and now a few events sponsored by the Homer Parks & Recreation Board—a haunted house at Halloween and a winter-wonderland at Christmas. In 1978, Parkland College presented a series of six shows in the opera house.

The opera house entrance is on the First Street (south) side of the building. The original entrance (south side, but more westerly) was crowned by a cornice. That opening and several windows are now bricked up. The cornice was left

in place, but the entrance being moved further toward the rear of the building, utilizing a door that formerly served as the back entry to the grocery store. A large part of the south exterior wall, including the location of the original opera house entrance, has been used for a mural that depicts the history of Homer from Indian times through the present.

The new, downstairs lobby area is rather small, dominated by a wide "L"-shaped staircase opening onto an extra-wide hallway upstairs. Directly opposite the top of the stairs is the ticket booth and the entrance to the auditorium is on the left. Both the upper and lower lobbies' walls are now covered with barn-board paneling. The auditorium is 57'-2" wide and 48'-5" from its back wall to the stage. The side walls each contain three very tall, narrow windows with the rear windows partially covered by the balcony. A narrow staircase leading to the balcony is located along the back wall of the house. The small (three or four rows deep) wooden balcony is supported along the front by plain, thin, metal posts. The floor of the balcony is stepped, while the main



Painted act curtain, circa 1914.  
Photo courtesy of the Champaign County Historical Society.

auditorium floor is flat; there are no permanent seats.

The opera house auditorium is extremely tall with a flat ceiling made of metal and bordered by a large cornice molding. The house lights are plain globes arranged around a center square depression in the ceiling.

Decoration in the opera house is minimal. It is limited to the metal ceiling, the banister of the balcony staircase, and the painted act curtain. The walls are plain plaster with the lower eight feet covered with wallpaper. Simple wood moldings are used as trim.

The stage is located at the front (west) of the building. It is 18' deep and the proscenium opening is 23'-9" wide. The original act curtain is extant. It is made of wood and covered with a painted canvas. Although the curtain is counter-weighted, two people are required to operate it, one on each side of the stage. The stage is accessible through doors at the front corners of the house. Each side of the stage has two small dressing rooms. The stage walls are covered with writing—each performer in every production ever presented in the opera house must have signed his or her name on the wall. Names and dates of the productions are included. The rear wall of the stage also has tall narrow windows; in addition, small round windows are located above the regular windows. These round windows are not only decorative, but, before the age of air-conditioning, provided much needed ventilation. The stage ceiling is as high as the auditorium, but not high enough to be rigged for flying scenery. Instead, the scenery was hung from vertical boards extending down from the ceiling. A good sized trap is located upstage center. The poor actor who must use it descends into a trap room only three feet tall!

The Homer Opera House is a beautiful

piece of Champaign County history. Very few of the old opera houses are left intact. The Homer Opera House, with its large free-span space combined with its unique history, deserves to have more activity. A dedicated group of Homer residents, led by the Homer Parks and Recreation Committee, is interested in preserving the opera house. Contact Robin "Doc" Hatton in Homer for further information.

*This article was written by PACA Board member Perry Morris.*

## Main Street: A Gateway to Memory

Main Street is much more than a name to Americans. It is a state of mind, a set of values. Along Main Street, farmers would find the stores with city-linked supplies and city luxuries such as the barbershop, the offices of the local lawyer and the local newspaper. Main Street was where the Fourth of July parade was held, and later on it was where young people would kill time at the drugstore and the movie theater; and as many of us will remember, it was a place to "cruise" on the weekend.

But what about Main Street today? Of the Main Street of the future? Will it survive and prosper, or will it wither and disappear? The changing exhibit at the Early American Museum this season looks at the story of Main Street in each of the communities throughout Champaign County. Rather than attempt to compile a complete record of downtown history, however, the goal of this exhibit is to draw attention to Main Street as a historic environment and to point out its essential role in developing a sense of place and local identity. The exhibit uses both period and contemporary photographs as documents to show how and why Main Street came to be, and what is happening to it now.

Of course, photographs alone cannot tell the complete story. Visitors will also find business artifacts from familiar stores such as Kuhn's, Robeson's, Vriner's, Sholem's, Luker's Bakery, and the Piggly Wiggly, to name a few. In addition, there is a significant amount of information revealing the diversity, complexity, and associational richness of the Main Street environment throughout the county. All will find that these images through time reveal not only change, growth, decay and revival, but also the evolving attitudes toward Main Street itself.

The Early American Museum is open weekends from 10-5 in September and October.



## A Preservation Success Story!

On August 16, 1994, after six years of very hard work on the part of the original Orpheum Preservation Committee, PACA and the Board of Directors of The Discovery Place, the Champaign City Council voted to sell the Orpheum Theatre to The Discovery Place for \$50,000. This vote represents a triumph for preservation in our community and will help to secure the future of one of our community's most significant buildings!

Funding for acquisition and Phase I renovation—a small storefront children's science museum and second floor office space—will be provided by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Busey Bank in the form of a participation loan. Construction will begin again on the building the first week in September with expected completion and a grand opening in November. There will be three second floor offices and a shared conference room for lease to child-compatible, low traffic tenants. If you are interested, call Carolyn Baxley at 384-4838 or Perry Morris at 328-6463. The Discovery Place will continue with Phase II renovation of the auditorium and stage as money becomes available.

The Discovery Place Board would like to thank everyone who has contributed money, time, sweat, and tears to this project since it began. Hundreds of volunteer hours have been spent doing the dirtiest possible work, and in a couple of months the end result of that hard work will benefit all the children of central Illinois!

Continued support is needed! The Phase I financing is a **loan** that has to be paid back. If you can send a donation of any size, now is the time to do it. Mail to The Discovery Place, 110 West Main Street, Urbana, IL 61801. The museum is a 501(c)3 corporation and your donation is fully tax deductible. Everyone is also invited to attend The Phantom Ball—a gala 80th Birthday Party for the Orpheum—at Silver Creek on October 9 from 7-10 pm; tickets are \$50.00 each (\$30.00 of the ticket price is tax deductible) and dress is black tie or costume! Call Carolyn or Perry for more information about the social event of the season.

## Economic Development in Historic Areas

Communities are living organisms that must have healthy commerce and a high quality of life to prosper. Many cities have areas surrounding the central business core which could serve as a very beneficial location for economic development. Grand downtown commercial and civic landmarks as well as the stately homes in historic neighborhoods receive considerable attention. But the areas between have often been neglected in planning and development.

A one-day symposium, "Economic Development and Historic Areas: First Class & Up to Date," will examine those locations between the downtown and established neighborhoods. These areas often include a mixed stock of buildings with commercial, multi-family housing, or single-family residential structures. Some of the buildings may have historic and/or cultural significance while others do not. Some of the buildings may be in good physical condition, some may be in poor condition, and some may be considered "blighted."

Examples of successful community programs in the midwest that have addressed this issue will be presented. Locally, the City of Urbana has begun to develop a mixed office/residential land use designation for this type of location. Participants who will discuss ways to promote economic development in these areas while enhancing the historical and cultural character of the area include: Champaign/Urbana Convention & Visitors Bureau, City of Champaign, City

of Urbana, Champaign County, Champaign County Chamber of Commerce, Preservation & Conservation Association, Champaign County Design and Development Foundation (CCDC), the UI Department of Urban & Regional Planning, and the UI School of Architecture.

The symposium will be held Saturday, October 29 from 9:00 to 3:00 at the Early American Museum in Mahomet; the cost is \$20.00 which includes a box lunch. Sponsors of the symposium are the Early American Museum and the Preservation Association; members of these groups receive a \$5.00 discount. For more information contact the Museum at 586-2612.

## Forbes House Update

In April, the Forbes House was moved from West Springfield Avenue, Urbana to 508 East Church Street, Champaign next to the current Center for Women in Transition (formerly the Women's Emergency Shelter); but, due to technical difficulties, the house was not set on its full basement foundation until mid-August. However, work has been proceeding on the exterior with work crews from the Paris Work Camp busy scrapping, caulking and painting the exterior. The crews have also been removing the remaining plaster and lath on the interior in preparation for installation of new mechanical systems and insulation. In the meantime, volunteer architects and engineers are completing the plans and specifications for the new shelter as well as for rebuilding the front porch with an additional handicap ramp. Some interior changes to the former floor plan are also necessary to meet ADA re-

quirements and to make efficient use of the space for shelter needs.

Now that the building is firmly on its foundation, repair work can proceed on its exterior "envelope." PACA is helping to coordinate this work for the Center and is now **issuing a call for experienced volunteers**. Among the tasks that need to be done this fall are the following:

- window sill and frame repair
- decorative detail repair
- bay window repair
- front porch rebuilding
- window weatherstripping and re-installation

PACA and the Center will provide all materials and some unskilled "go-for"-type volunteers if wanted. We need experienced people to take charge of a small, specific project that can be done in a day or a weekend. Many PACA members have done this type of work on their own historic houses and we are now asking you to help preserve this historic house as well as help "build" a much needed shelter. Call PACA (328-7222) for more information about specific projects and to volunteer. We need your help!

**Save the Date!**  
**Fall House Tour**  
 Sunday  
 October 9  
 1-5 p.m.

## Membership Application P.A.C.A.

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:

INDIVIDUAL

- Adult .....\$15.00
- Student (1/2 time or more) .....\$10.00
- Senior Citizen .....\$10.00
- Family .....\$20.00

CORPORATE

.....\$75.00

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTION \_\_\_\_\_

- NEW MEMBERSHIP
- RENEWAL

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

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

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

## Come Home to Urbana

Eight historic houses will be featured on PACA's Fall House Tour scheduled for Sunday, October 9 from 1-5 pm. This year, PACA has a cosponsor for the tour—the Twin City Garden Club—which is hosting a Standard Home Flower Show entitled "Times Remembered." Juried floral displays will be showcased in many of the homes and one house will be entirely devoted to the Horticultural Division with exhibits, artistic crafts and educational exhibits.

The tour's featured homes are found in the 400-600 blocks of Illinois, High, and Green streets in Urbana. In addition, the Conservatory of Music, 312 West Green Street, will be holding a musical open house that day to which all tour participants are invited.

Tickets for the tour are \$10.00; PACA and Garden Club members are half-price. No other discounts will be offered. However, as in the past, volunteers are needed to help staff the houses and, as a "reward" for working, volunteers receive a free tour ticket! Two work shifts are available: 1-3 and 3-5 pm. If you are interested in volunteering on October 9, please call PACA (328-7222) and leave your name and phone number.

### Salvage Donations

University of Illinois  
Don Rhodes  
Joan Zagorski  
Dale Steffensen  
Scott Williams  
Bruce Komadina  
Michael Markstahler  
Mary Beth Allen  
Alice Dodds

### Salvage Crew VIPs

Bob Swisher  
Al Frederick  
Pius Weibel  
Rich Cahill  
Mike Miller  
Hank Kaczmariski  
Dick Elkin

### Warehouse Cleanup VIPs

Steve Roemmel  
Kathy Roemmel  
Mike Miller  
Dan Wurl  
Alice Edwards  
Bob Swisher  
Dick Elkin  
Al Frederick  
Pius Weibel

### VIPs

Kent Snodgrass

### New & Renewing Members

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Esther Patt  
Lisa Strassheim  
Susan Peirce & David Freedman  
Bernadine Evans Stake  
Elaine & Allen Avner  
Jennifer Putnam & Bruce Komadina  
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