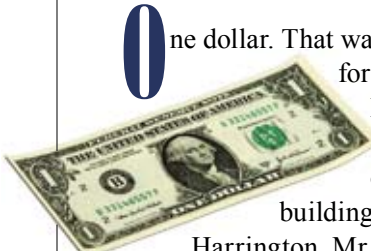




The Harrington Opera

A shining star in the heart of Lincoln County

by Karen Allen



One dollar. That was the purchase price for the Harrington Opera House and Bank Block Building. The City of Harrington originally sold the building to Bob Lucht, the city attorney of Harrington. Mr. Lucht had the building for about ten years and lived part-time in an apartment inside the Opera House. He had no specific plans for the building, other than the fact he lived in the apartment while he was in Harrington on business and while he was golfing. When Douglass Rudkoff, a retired college professor from Georgia, moved to Harrington, she saw historical value and potential in the old structure and did not want the building demolished, since its condition was deteriorating. She convinced Lucht to sell the old building so it could be restored and used again. She was very persuasive and persistent so he sold it to the newly formed Harrington Opera House Society for one dollar. The deal was made on one condition: that the falling-down old structure could only be used for non-profit activities and that he could retain use of the apartment as long as he lived. A purchase arrangement was made, and since that day the people of the Opera House Society have worked tirelessly to get funding to renovate the building. Donations, grants, and volunteer time are all a part of the tender loving care for this historical beauty, and one-of-a-kind Opera House.

Built in 1904 by JR Burill and Company, this wasn't just any building; it was the entertainment and commerce center of the town. The Victorian architecture is grand and the building stands out as a major historic landmark in Harrington. Located on the ground floor were the Bank of Harrington, JW Dow's shaving parlors, and R Benchly's cigar and confectionary shop. It even had a bowling alley under the cigar store! An arched doorway on Third Street provided a welcoming and gracious entry for guests to go upstairs and see the shows in that portion of the building, which was the Opera House. The capacity for the Opera House was approximately 350, but could handle more, and people journeyed from all over the region to see the acts within.

The expansive wooden floor, the center stage, flowing velvet curtains, and the dressing rooms where the acts would change and prepare for a show were all top-notch. A long stairway led up to the auditorium and stage, where the stage curtains were richly colored, hand painted works

of art, displaying different scenes and advertisements to serve as backdrops for performances. They were created by Spokane Scenic Studios, and were all uniquely designed for the Opera House.

A single sink in the corner of each dressing room, and a faint outline of where a mirror once hung on the wall are remnants for future generations to discover. Each room is a testimony to who was there. Signatures, sayings, and notes are written on the walls of the dressing rooms, and will remain as part of this fabulous building.

"Cut out the booze or leave the hall!" was written on the wall for the sake of the performers and the guests of the house.

"The Jolly Entertainers, Sept. 18-19, 1916" is written on the wall of a dressing room, and upon continued inspection, is found in different areas for each time they performed. A search for information on the group reveals that they were a family act led by Herman Draper and his wife Annie.

The couple adopted homeless and abandoned children of all races, creeds and colors, providing education, musical training work skills and the ability to create a monthly newsletter, *Good Will*, which the children wrote, typeset and printed. They also created their own handbills that they distributed to promote their shows. The children played in the band, and one advertisement shows "Baby Edna, so small she stands on 'Daddy's' hand and plays solo on her coronet." They played and toured for nearly 20 years, playing locally, regionally and nationally as well as in Canada. The Drapers had about 36



House

children before Herman and his wife died in 1927. Annie died of heart failure and Herman, heart-broken, passed within hours of her funeral (HistoryLink.org).

“Mary Ellis 1904” was another elegant signature, and probably one of the first acts who dared to autograph the wall.

“At the End of the Rainbow, given by Harrington High School, April 5, 1913” was proof that the community was proud to showcase their talented youth.

Who were the people who entertained for a living and took their show on the road? The names are interesting and create curiosity. Ray Fox, Casey’s Jazz Co. and Casey’s Vaudeville Co., Cupid Robertson, Lucile McRae, H Leslie Smith, The Beeson Brothers 1909, Cynthia Rambo or Scott Gates Pictorial Extravaganza 1908.

A sign stating “Positively No Liquor Allowed in This Hall. By Order of the Management,” firmly reminds us once again about the liquor laws and rules of the time.

In 1928 the Ladies Aid of the Harrington Community Church and High School gave a humorous talent show. It was titled “The Womanless Wedding” and most of the 63 men were dressed as women. A photograph of this spectacular cast and all of the people involved adorns the wall in the Opera House.

Live performances are unforgettable. Imagine what it was like to see a show in earlier days. Backstage in the small compartmental changing rooms, actors prepare, tune an instrument, re-

hearse lines or collaborate with a colleague about their performances. The performers are nervous and wait for the introduction cue. A full house of eager spectators, out for an evening of fun and entertainment and dressed in good suits and dresses, chat and laugh excitedly before the curtain opens.

The auditorium light dims, the room gets quiet, a brief introduction, the announcer melts away and the curtain is slowly drawn. Acetylene gaslights provide light to illuminate the stage and show. The acoustics of the Opera House are extraordinary and every word or musical note can be heard when delivered, all the way to the back of the room. The band begins to play . . . the show has started, all eyes and ears are fixed on the stage. Popular jazz music fills the air and folks are mesmerized by the sound of professional perfection. Tune after tune is played until it is time for intermission. A roaring ovation erupts as the music concludes and the curtain is drawn quickly.

Margaret Kupers was one of the original members of the new Opera House Society and a major contributor to money-raising events. She not only tirelessly sold tickets for raffles and events, she even donated some diamonds to be raffled off to raise money to pay for the new roof.

Her dream was to live long enough to see the building used again. A December 2008 performance by Bronn Journey was to be in her honor, but she passed away two days before the event. Bronn Journey and his wife Katherine filled the house to capacity in a magical evening of harp music, singing and comedy—a meaningful and successful Christmas production.

More recently, the Harrington School District Spring Concert was held on April 16, and the students, grades 5-11

put on a grand show and entertained the audience with music, singing and a finale of music from *Bells Across the Gridiron* and *Phantom of the Opera*. It was an historic night for these students, who were amazed when they practiced before the show and discovered to their shock the acoustical power of the building’s design, and the fact that “You can hear every note!” exclaimed one student to Monte Swenson, the Superintendent of Harrington School District and band leader.

Even though the Opera House is not complete, performances and visual art displays are being booked and people are coming to see them. May 15-16, Artist Charlotte Schacher will show her artwork and provide painting lessons in a two-day workshop to those who sign up by May 8. *Pages of Harmony* are coming in June, and more acts are lined up pending scheduling confirmations; including Nona Hengen, noted Northwest author and artist.

There is still work to be done at the Opera House, but anyone who sees it knows the amount of progress that has taken place. A beautiful new stairway built by local craftsmen, a lifetime roof, central heating and the necessities to make it operational are complete. The Opera House will again be the performing arts center of the county and is fast becoming exactly that. It is obvious that the people in Harrington have a great sense of community pride and want to continue to promote the use of the building for local, regional and national performing and visual arts. This little town in wheat country has a lot to offer with its shining star, the Harrington Opera House. ■

Karen Allen was born in the region, grew up in Spokane, and went to Lewis and Clark High School. Her interests in photography and visual communication were cultivated at Shoreline Community College in Seattle. She finds inspiration in the outdoor world, and in the inventive and creative accomplishments of hard-working people of the past.

