

# OPERA, ANYONE?

By Christine E. Buck

Residents of Smithville Flats longed for an opera house in the late 1800s. So did others in small communities. Opera wasn't their interest, but they wanted a place to hold concerts, plays, and meetings. Today we might call a building like that a theater. But in those days, people questioned the morals of anyone involved with theater. So, an opera house it was.

The name opera house also gave the impression of a grand facility. Their interiors may have been fancy, but small-town opera house exteriors usually looked like their fellow downtown buildings. In Greene, the opera house was in the upper stories of today's Village Office.

Smithville Flats had two different opera houses, one after the other. The first was a church that had been converted. The Baptist Meeting House stood on the west side of County Road 2, near the junction with today's Route 41. Erastus Agard had built the church in 1832, replacing one at the same location destroyed by fire.

After a strong beginning, church membership declined over the years. By 1895, only five members remained. They decided to close the church and sell it at auction. Their decision was controversial, because a church bell had rung on the site for seventy years. The Methodist Episcopal congregation held its services in the sanctuary, so perhaps the Baptists hoped another religious group would win the bid.

The auction was held on a November day in 1895. When the gavel came down, the old church sold for \$303. It did not go to a religious organization, but to local entrepreneurs Alex Miller and Charles Keough. The following summer they repaired and remodeled the church and christened it the Smithville Opera House.

In September, the *Chenango American* commented that the Opera House was a good one, well-appointed and comfortable. It was sure to draw performers to Smithville. As an aside, and a further accolade to Smithville, the newspaper mentioned the town's fine ball ground.

The earliest use I found of the Opera House was in October 1896. The Presbyterian young people's group reserved Sunday nights, 7:30 pm, for their weekly meetings.

Political parties staged rallies at the Opera House, also in October that year. The presidential election was especially dramatic, with Republican William McKinley running against Democrat William Jennings Bryan, a silver-tongued orator. People wanted to hear political issues discussed.

Republicans and Democrats each hosted visiting Congressmen and Senators as speakers. The meetings were well attended, some packed to overflowing. At one rally, the dignitaries spoke nearly three hours.

There must have been sighs of relief when the Smithville Glee Club stepped on stage with musical entertainment.

Other Opera House events those first months were religious revival meetings and lectures on the history and teachings of religion. Also, Thanksgiving services.

A particularly pleasing program was held at the Opera House on Saturday evening, November 14, 1896. It was the first in a lecture series presented by the Presbyterian Church. Its mission projects benefited from the modest admission.

A large audience attended. Dark outside, the room was lit by lamplight and warmed with a wood stove. Mr. Will Payne was the opening performer, singing a selection of Scottish songs. His renditions were so well received that the crowd called for an encore. Mr. Payne granted the request.

Next on stage was Greene attorney Eugene Clinton, formerly of Smithville. Known as an entertaining and skilled speaker, he often performed at Greene's public celebrations. Mr. Clinton's topic for the evening was *The Life and Poetry of Robert Burns*. His presentation moved the audience between emotions of sorrow and joy. He could not have been excelled, according to the newspaper report, and the event was an absolute success.

We might wonder why a Scottish program was so popular in a community known as "Young Ireland." A commanding number of Smithville residents were Irish, but some were Irish only by birth. By ancestry, they were Scottish, and they were Protestant. Their ancestors had left Scotland to settle in the counties of Northern Ireland. After a generation or two, some emigrated to the United States.

For a decade, the extended community enjoyed programs, plays, and concerts in the Opera House. And singing school and dancing school. But ten years after opening, the *Chenango American* told of the old building's sad ending. About noon on March 21, 1906, someone reported a fire. The fire brigade responded, but the building burned to the ground. The night before, young people had been practicing for a program. They may not have left the wood stove in a safe condition.

Local lore says the show the previous night was named *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*. I found nothing to either confirm or deny that. We may never know.

The Opera House owners, by then Loomis and Keough, were insured for \$600. The newspaper noted that the community would miss the Opera House for its events.

Some people still remember the replacement Opera House in the center of the hamlet. Others who were interviewed by the Smithville Historical Society left us their recorded memories. The Opera House stood on the east side of State Route 41. It was on a small lot between house number 5262 (formerly Whitmarsh) and Pond Creek. We haven't seen a photo of the building, but it was described as small, modest, and two-storied. Perhaps it looked like other downtown Smithville stores. A barbershop operated on the first floor. Upstairs was the Opera House, a basic meeting room with a stage on one side.

Bill Hofmann, a 1916 charter member of the Smithville Valley Grange, told about early Grange meetings. The first were held in a second-floor room in the James Keough building, just north of Huttleston's Garage. Then the group met across the street in the Opera House. The Grange soon obtained its own building, formerly the Universalist Church.

The Opera House hosted Amanda Hofmann's tenth grade graduation exercises. In 1916, the Smithville Union School no longer provided eleventh and twelfth grade classes. Amanda and her sister were the school's only graduates that year, but everyone in the upper grades participated in the event. Music and recitation added to the fun. Then for their final two years of high school, the Hofmann girls drove a horse and buggy to Greene every day.

A different disaster ended the life of the second Opera House. The raging floodwaters of July 1935 knocked the building off its foundation and carried the battered remains downstream. Norva Gray's barbershop was on the first floor. His family also lived in the building. Living on the second floor were William and Irvin Chapman. Clarence Brown of Greene owned the building.

This confirms that by 1935, the Opera House was used for housing, rather than entertainment. This is not surprising. By then, the excitement of motion pictures had destroyed the era of the opera house. Live entertainment just couldn't compete with the movies. Some opera houses were converted to movie theaters; some buildings were remodeled for other uses; some burned or simply fell into disrepair, abandoned to the pigeons.

Occasionally, communities recognize the value of their old opera houses and renovate them for modern use. I think of Bainbridge. The Jericho Arts Council moves toward completion of its Town Hall Theater restoration. This theater was once the Bainbridge Opera House, built in 1909-1910. What started as a grand structure followed the path of other opera houses. In the 1930s, it was transformed into a movie theater and then closed its doors in the 1950s. Now brought back to life, its live entertainment offers an opera house experience.

While the Smithville Opera House is gone forever, the Town's community center serves the same purpose. Built as a church and next used as a Grange Hall, now the building is a place where groups hold meetings, conduct business, and present programs. On a dark night when people gather, the community center comes alive with light and laughter. A lot like Smithville's opera houses of old.

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