

Opera Houses in DeKalb County

Even small towns like Kirkland, Malta and Sandwich were known in the late 1800's to contain a building, usually downtown, known as an Opera House. Opera Houses were different from theaters, as they were then known, in that theaters were raucous establishments, noted for gaudy things like Burlesque shows. Opera Houses were family oriented facilities, known for wholesome entertainment. Opera per se was not necessarily what took place though. DeKalb, Kirkland and Sycamore had theirs on the second floor of buildings, with retail businesses on the ground floor.

Malta

It's Opera House was in its 1873 Town Hall, at North Third and Jefferson Streets, but apparently not until after 1990s. The building grew in stages, with use as an Opera House doing double duty with the Town Hall, owned by Malta Township. The rear section that is now the kitchen was added as the stage, a basement being beneath it with dressing rooms. Traveling groups would arrive in town by train, the other side of the tracks, in close proximity to three hotels. Entering from the front door, one accessed the ticket booth, auditorium and stairs to the balcony. The balcony was reserved seating for the town's well-to-do citizens, giving them a birds-eye view of the stage. Ground floor seating was in captain's chairs mounted on platforms, with the exact capacity unknown. A wood-coal furnace provided heat. Kerosene lamps hung from the ceiling, which could be lowered for cleaning and refilling.

DeKalb

During the summer of 1875, the city found Jacob Haish in the process of constructing an Opera House Block on the northwest corner of Third Street and Easy Lincoln Highway. It was expected to cost \$20,000-\$30,000 to erect and be three stories high and multipurpose. Early 20th century postcard views show only the main façade and a very small corner of its Third Street side, not the two complete street sides. An 1892 pen and ink sketch shows both facades. Based on this image alone, the structure consisted of three architecturally different looking sections. The front being the most formal. It was brick with light colored stone trim.

During the summer of 1875, the city found Jacob Haish in the process of constructing. On a postcard dated September of 1905, Kirchnens Pharmacy and J.A. Watson Co. Dry Goods occupy the store fronts. One account says a single wide stairway off the front was the sole access to the upper floors. Professional offices were on the second floor, with apartments on the third. The center section, along Third Street's second floor had oversized windows in the Opera House portion. An undated postcard view of the interior showed a stage with a proscenium arch, rows of wooden chairs that were movable, and two tiers of decorative balconies down the long sides of the room. The sidewalk area of Third Street gave access to basements where other businesses were located, as well as two-story wing at the north end, according to the 1892 pen and ink sketch.

In January of 1906, the Opera House Block was destroyed by fire, which was claimed was arson, but couldn't be proven. His personal loss was put at somewhere between \$25,000 to \$30,000, while the total loss was set at \$45,000. There was no loss of life, fortunately. No actual cause for the blaze was ever determined. Haish only carried \$20,000 worth of insurance on the building.

Almost immediately after the rubble of the Opera House was removed, construction began on a new Opera house Block on the site. While it stood three-stories like its predecessor, for whatever reason, Haish chose to build the structure in a cheaper fashion, using cinder blocks for the exterior. Cinder blocks absorb moisture to such an extent that in short time the third floor was condemned by the City and had to sit empty. The exterior walls themselves took on a shabby appearance before long. Professional offices occupied space on second floor, while the west storefront at ground level was again taken up by Kirchnen's Pharmacy.

The easy half of the first floor from 1911 to 1922 was home to the Jacob Haish State Bank. Like the 1876 Opera House Block, there were businesses in the basement also. The entrance to the Opera House was at ground level off of Third Street, near the back corner. There was a marquee projecting out from the wall above the door that said "HAISH AUDITORIUM Advance Vaudeville." No known interior photographs or other images survive of it, and just when it closed is unknown. As in the case of the 1876 Opera House, the second one only stood for 30 years itself.

In 1938 the City condemned the structure and it was torn down. The site remained empty and boarded up until the Doctors Smith Building went up between 1946 and 1948.

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Creativebug.com has more than 1,000 award-winning art & craft video classes taught by recognized design experts and artists. After logging in with your library card number and PIN, you will need to create your own account with an email address.

DeKalb Public Library Hours

Monday - Thursday
9:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Friday
9:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

Saturday
9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

Sunday
1:00 - 5:00 p.m.



Haish Memorial Library Building

309 Oak Street
DeKalb, IL 60115

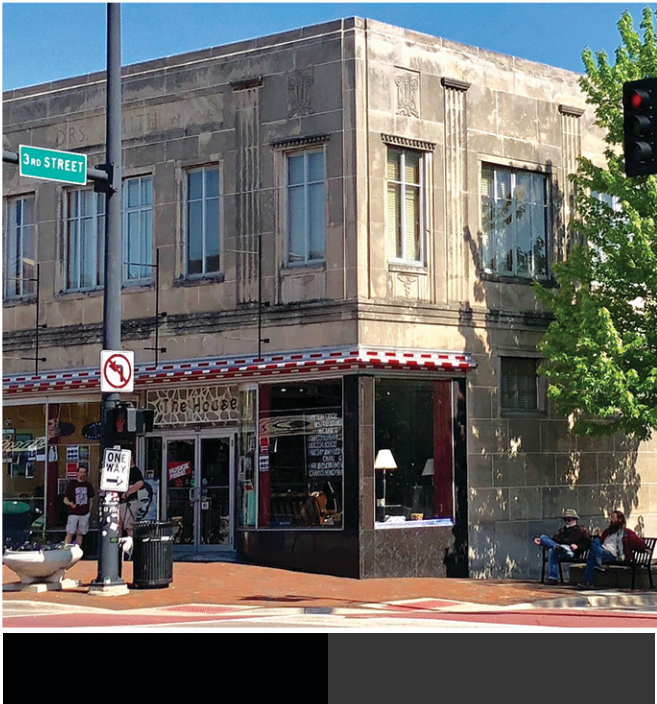
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DeKalb County Tours



DeKalb County Opera Houses #1

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