

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.

Sycamore

In 1885, Sycamore joined the Opera House craze. In 1879, Henry Ward, who was born at historic Fort Dearborn, bought Winn's Hotel of 1875 at what is now 360-362 West State Street, hiring Chicago architect George Garnsey to design "Ward's Opera House" to the east of the hotel. The auditorium was on the second floor, over what were originally three stores -- now two (344 + 352 West State) and the wide stairway up to it, which was where 352 1/2 West State is today. It had a capacity of 500 persons.

During Ward's ownership, things such as political events, talent shows and charity benefits for the Red Cross and other groups were held there. In the days before electricity, oil lamps provided dim light, pairs of large floor stoves on either side of the room was the source of heat, and shaded candles served as floodlights. There was a constant fire threat as a result.

(cont.) To the sides of the stage were small dressing rooms, while scenery storage was below the stage. On July 31, 1909 the facility became the Townsend Theater. The opening show was local producer/playwright Fred Raymond's comedy "The Missouri Girl," well-known at that time in this country and in Europe. During the Townsend years, class plays and concerts more so than anything else, were held there. When it closed, the interior underwent conversion into a small factory, destroyed by fire in the early 1940s. The ground floor store fronts were unaffected, but the hotel suffered extensive smoke and water damage, requiring removal of its second and third floors.

The 1875 cornerstone remains on the California Street side of the structure, containing the name of its architect - J.W. Ackermann. When restored by the present owner, he chose to mount the words "THE Opera House" on the Façade of 360-362 West State, which is incorrect.

Sandwich

Formally Sandwich City Hall/Opera House, was constructed during a six month period of time in 1878, at a cost of \$12,000. The building was the work of local carpenters Enos and Israel Doan. Architecturally, it is a mixture of Second Empire, Italianate and Classical Revival design elements. The roof is a variation of French Mansard-style; while windows and doors are Italianate with segmental brick and stone lintels; and over the projecting entrance bay is a Classical pediment. The first floor front corners meanwhile are accented with decorative stone quoins.

The structure is 48' x 80', two stories high and brick. First floor office area ceilings are 12', while second floor ceilings rise 22' to the top of the auditorium. Originally, city offices, the council chambers, fire and police departments, the jail and other facilities occupied the first floor. The Opera House auditorium saw uses by local productions, lectures, Womens Christian Temperance Union gatherings, vaudeville, Shakespearean plays by traveling companies, school plays and graduations, church meetings and other functions.

By the mid-1940s however, it had all but outlived its usefulness, becoming a police shooting range and deteriorating. One of the stairways accessing second floor was even removed. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, \$1,275,000 in state grants was used for its initial restoration between 1983 and 1986. Other projects have also been undertaken over the years. In 2017 the Midwest Ghost Society conducted paranormal investigations at the Opera House, at the request of the Executive Director. The auditorium originally contained bench seating for 1,000, while cushioned chair seating now accommodates 316 persons. More than 100 assorted types of programming now take place at the Opera House annually. An unusual feature on the first floor at the toilet stalls in the women's restroom. These started life in 1879 as the jail cells.

Kirkland

"Rowan's Hall" at Main and Fifth Streets in the downtown business district, was in a building regarded as the best looking one in town.

(cont.) Its front and side bay windows were particularly noteworthy. Harley B. Rowen of an early Franklin Township pioneer family, had it erected. It was to house his drug and grocery store on the ground floor and an Opera House known as “Rowan’s Hall” upstairs. The drug store occupied the front and the grocery the back. The grocery was well known for selling 17 pounds of granulated sugar for just \$1. Harley became active in the two businesses early in 1883, when only 21 years old.

The building itself is a two-story brick Italianate-style structure, originally containing distinctive decorative ornamentation above its front cornice. Second floor was taller than first floor, in order to better accommodate the Opera House at that level. An ornate opening night program survives in the collections of the Kirkland Historical Society. The opening was scheduled for Monday, December 24, 1894, with Gualand’s Italian Band to perform. Supper was to be served at the Morris House Hotel nearby. Little information exists about what the historic second floor looked like, unfortunately, except that the stage was at one end.

Like the Malta, Sandwich and Sycamore Opera Houses though, it is remembered as being the hub of entertainment and activity in Kirkland, with everything from operas, bands and orchestras, dances, graduations, box socials, cake walks and other events taking place there. Especially well remembered were the man P.D. Whales weekly 10 cent silent movie shows with piano accompaniment held there. Whales had a circuit riding group which arrived by train.

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.



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DeKalb County Tours



DeKalb County Opera Houses #2

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