

Glenns Ferry Historic Opera Theater, an Idaho Treasure

by Dorothy Drake

Recently I saw a sign in front of a rundown theater that read: "This theater is important." The words resonated as I thought about the theater my husband and I purchased in late 2019. Fundamentally, I knew the Glenns Ferry Historic Opera Theater is important. Historically important as one of the oldest operating theaters in the state; aesthetically important because its architects also designed our state capital and the Egyptian Theater; socially important as reasonably priced entertainment serving rural communities; sentimentally important to volunteer casts who study and practice grueling hours for a chance to perform on stage. We purchased the theater not just because of those reasons, but because it had a persona of its own, pieces of the past that could be seen and felt - a living, breathing, and maybe even haunted piece of history. It didn't seem to be important that I had no theater experience or that I was supposed to be retired, I launched into this new career based on the lure of the building alone, intrigued by its impact on the multitude of generations that have walked through its doors.

Looking back in time, historians considered the Three Island Crossing of the Snake River to be one of the most famous and treacherous river crossings on the Oregon Trail. The formidable 2000-mile trail has been referred to as the "longest cemetery in the nation". Reports about this particular crossing from settlers noted that "the river was deep, the bottom was uneven and had many holes in it that could cause wagons to tip over, dragging the teams of animals and emigrants underwater to drown and scattering their belongings along the riverbanks for miles." In 1869, an enterprising early settler, Gustavus Glenn, recognized an opportunity at this treacherous crossing and decided to build a ferry, primarily to move freight across the Snake River. Not long after, the town of Glenns Ferry was born.

By the early 1900's Glenns Ferry was an important rail hub for Union Pacific's Oregon Short Line Railroad. The railroad got to work building a 2-story hotel to house its layover employees while the city prospered and grew. Along with the hotel and busy train depot, a water distribution system, electric plant and even a steamboat were swiftly added. In this setting, recent West Virginia emigree Dan Gorby flourished. Having set his sights on building an opera house where traveling vaudeville troupes could step off the train and walk across the street to entertain eager townsfolk, he hired the prestigious firm of Tourtellote and Hummel to build what was then known as the Gorby Theater, completing it in 1914. Just 11 years later, his obituary announced he passed away at age 42 having become a "highly esteemed and beloved citizen", "the funeral was the largest ever held in this part of the state." In my view he was a rare visionary who saw beyond his time. And his legacy lives on.

Gorby's building was constructed during the era of "movie palaces" that sprang up across the nation. At his theater, not only could vaudeville performers step off the train and step onto the stage, but as I dug through the theater archives, I found 2 newspaper clippings and a deteriorated poster advertising silent film. The *Unwritten Law* was a "a seven-part photo-drama" being shown at the Gorby Theater on May 26. The year of the paper is missing but the film came out in March of 1916 and was promoted heavily by the Premier Feature Film Company as a "gripping story – intensely interesting". Theater historian John Eickhof told me that in 1916 "silent movies of about 8-14 minutes were shown between vaudeville acts with manually operated projectors. At 65 minutes, *Unwritten Law* was epic for the times."

Evolution from vaudeville entertainment center to movie house was inevitable. Mr Eickhof related that "the 2 projectors that you currently have would be replacements for the manually cranked one. They

are series K and would have come out in the early 1930's". Not much written or oral history remains from the transition. Wear and patina on the banisters leading to the balcony, evidence of water damage and failing plaster, and the beautifully preserved chair and door moldings hint of a still prosperous but aging building. Under decades of old soundproofing and wallpaper, wall designs of incredible precision have been found. Every new discovery is a tiny snapshot of the eras the building has witnessed and launches me on a quest to find more.

The Movie Years

I wasn't able to talk to Herman Johnson, owner of the theater from the 1940's into the 1960's but knew from my own experiences that Hollywood and movies became entrenched in the fabric of our lives during that time. In the theater's paper archives, I found printed schedules of upcoming movies during the 1960's, and they were good ones. It didn't take me long to run into people who remembered the times and the place.

I found two Shirleys during lunch at the senior center. When I asked the first Shirley what she remembered about the theater, she said "my folks talked about going to dances before movies were the 'thing', but I went to the movies as a child and teenager. At that time the hotel built by Union Pacific was a boarding house, but it had a telephone that we were allowed to use." The second Shirley talked about watching movies from the balcony with her boyfriend. "After I had children, I used the crying room (a small glass enclosed room on the balcony) when I came to the movies with my young children."

Donna Carnahan, self-professed oldest Glenns Ferry resident, has relatives that stretch back to the city's foundations. Her great grandfather helped settle and develop Glenns Ferry as the bank president, owner of the butcher shop and hardware store, an organizer of the King Hill irrigation district, and ultimately a Union Pacific railroad official based in Glenns Ferry. She remembers that early on the seats were fixed to the floor along the walls, the center seats folded and were put against the wall for dances and other activities. Donna's most prominent memory was going to the theater in 1942 and 1943 during WWII. She describes the news film clips of the war, "They were very scary with bombs and pictures of dead soldiers. That really had an impact on me, even today". A special part of those years was Thursday night or Bank Night at the theater. Donna laughed a bit telling me "Everyone who lived in town, alive or deceased, had their name in a bowl and one of the kids was allowed to draw a name for a prize ... not very many people won." Cheryl Rose, a subsequent owner of the building remembers being excited when she was chosen to draw a name. All of these memories were viewed through lenses of how special and magical the time and place was in their lives without any sense of the building being less than it was when built.

In 1969, 21-year-old Larry Rose bought the theater very shortly before marrying 19-year-old Cheryl. Cheryl laughed as she told me she is still puzzled about that decision. But Larry was a jack of all trades and true entrepreneur involved in everything from photography to police department, even an oil business. He was a true movie buff whose love was stacking 2 or 3 cartoon shorts before the movie began. He would joke with people saying, "My wife can't complain about going out – I take her to the movies all the time". During the 5 years they owned the building and as a young mother, Cheryl was enchanted by the children. "At Christmas, we had a free movie. Santa would be outside handing out goodies and then the kids would stampede through the door." What sticks in her mind? Children who gathered cans to get the money to come to the movies. Equally stuck in her mind and that of the still

prosperous Glens Ferry, was Union Pacific deciding to move their hub in 1972. When the railroad finished moving out of town in 1973 every aspect of town life was impacted. The roundhouse and depot across from the theater were torn down and theater attendance began to wane. The Roses sold the theater, which was resold, then sold again. And the building declined and lost its luster.

It seems clear that people in town did not want to see their beloved theater deteriorate further. During that time, Lynn Dorrrough initiated the process to have several buildings in Glens Ferry added to the National Register of Historic Places which was granted in 1982. The findings indicated that the theaters architecture was unusual for the area and was considered a close cousin of the Elks Club building in Boise, also constructed in 1914, "as a modified Italian Palazzo Style with classic heraldic ornamentation." Although the designation allowed access to funding for restoration, a move to see that happen didn't begin.

By the time Neil Irish purchased the theater in 1987 water damage in the stage area was bad even though the auditorium was OK. Neil Irish loved running the projectors – in fact projectors are his hobby. But financially times were hard and movie audiences were dwindling and he could only hold on for a year. Irish described his last event before closing the theater "It was Halloween and we decorated to the hilt, outside and inside. Over the concession booth, we hung an old chain saw and covered it with ketchup. It was a movie double header, Chain Saw Massacre and the Evil Dead. That day was a total hit!" I asked why buy a theater in the first place? His answer and motivation were unlike other owners, "I went into it with a fascination about movie equipment. I never made any money, but still left with a smile on my face for having had the experience."

More years of vacancies and deterioration passed before Bo McWilliams purchased the building in 1989. In an article in the Idaho Statesman the same year, Bo indicated that his intent was to revive stage acts as well as continue showing movies. Western movies were in demand and the theater was popular for a time – there was even some Cowboy poetry on stage. At the time, Mike Aug owned the building adjacent to the theater for a season with pizza and games. "It was a busy, busy first summer then business changed. After a year, it just wasn't viable." Moviegoer audiences continued to diminish and both buildings were abandoned, sitting empty for several more years.

Revival Begins

The building was purchased in 1993 by Rich and Connie Wills and a new era began. The Wills were extremely instrumental in not only saving the building but creating a dinner theater atmosphere and truly reviving live stage acts. They formed a non-profit and applied for grants to fix or upgrade all of the pieces that make a successful theater run. Every member of their family was involved in some way. An article in the Idaho Statesman told some of the story. "In 1993 Rich and Connie Wills came to the rescue, tackling falling plaster and the buckling hardwood floor. Over several years grants, donations, and use of theater proceeds the Wills further rescued the building with expanded bathrooms, sound, lighting, curtains. With the reopening and physical improvements, the theater becoming a center for modest cultural revival." In the published statement, Connie said "The people in town are really psyched about it. It's scary because we came to close to losing it".

Catching up with some of the actors and volunteers a theme emerges, It Takes a Village. The Wills pursued every opportunity to help the theater succeed and its popularity grew. Everyone who was part of the revival mentions a sense of family. I caught up with Liza Martin who talked to me about the Wills

many years at the helm. “Everyone and anyone who walked into the theater was involved. There was a meaningful job for everyone. And every person - performer, parent, audience member - left the theater feeling like they belonged and were family.” She described the theater as a “beehive of meaningful activity” where actors practiced, costumes were made, props created, and lights/sound fine-tuned. “Connie was quick to welcome a newcomer, find out about their interests, talents, and experience, and soon have the newest volunteer cheerfully working alongside a seasoned helper and feeling like a family member,” she continued. Amy Cole told me a story about Rich. “He was truly a great showman and loved to play with an audience. There was one year that we were playing in a pre-show skit together from an old Carol Burnett skit. It was a funny skit with a man and his wife sitting in rocking chairs going back and forth with each other, making jokes about everything. I loved acting with Rich because it was always real and dynamic and fun. He had the best facial expressions and body language to go with every character and made each scene so funny!”

Setting the Stage for Future Generations

Returning to current events, in 2019 Rich and Connie decided to retire, selling the theater to my husband and me. I purchased the building with no real idea of what I was getting in to and laughed when more than one prior owner expressed the same sentiment. Somehow, I felt that my love of historic architecture and our combined experience as event planners could translate to operating a theater.

As a lover of the Edwardian and craftsman eras, spanning 1900 to WWI, my first impression was of classic bones, fantastic woodwork, and an opportunity to scrape away the years to peek at the building’s original grandeur. I knew that infrastructure needed to be addressed when I saw the electrical panel cover had been signed by the original electrician in large letters. I was told early electricians did that – wiring buildings was dangerous work, and it was a way to preserve their legacy – I saved that door. Modern heat and air-conditioning were added, walls were scraped down and repainted, period sconces found and installed, and the curtain arch decoration restored to its original design. While replacing the ceiling fabulous murals were discovered but water damage had taken its toll and the entire ceiling came down in huge chunks destroying the artwork.

My goal was to continue with dinner theater, seamlessly moving from the 2019 season into the 2020 season. Fortunately, the Wills had set up a solid framework of volunteers that could be built on along with a non-profit board of directors as an additional resource. From those groups, I was able to form a theater operation committee to put into action steps that could build on the existing foundational components while enhancing audience experience. Through the committee a costumer with professional training and a director with a professional background were recruited. Two of our children opened a bakery/catering business in the adjacent building adding gourmet flavors to the menu.

Although COVID was in our midst for 2 years the plays continued in a reduced format but carrying on undaunted. I was surprised to learn that only 5% of theaters nationwide stayed open during the COVID crisis. Fortunately, we were able to keep to a regular year-round schedule, with only 2 complete play cancellations.

Melodramas and farces continue to be a big part of our play series; my earliest memory of dinner theater is fried chicken and villains to boo at; love at first view. But our professional director, Kurtis Workman made suggestions for performances that stretched casts beyond simpler roles. In 2020 he

asked to expand theater productions by adding a fall radio theater presentation of Frankenstein. It gives me chills even thinking about it. Under his direction the live, visible sound effects were beyond amazing. In 2021 we added a Sherlock series to the schedule. This year, CLUE is one of the summer plays. This has been the biggest cast "stretch" yet but a lot of fun to watch. The audience has been enthusiastic about the production and being able to get out after 2 years of isolation. Dinner continues to be a hit, with patrons frequently stopping me to say that dinner was awesome and dessert, divine. After each performance, I make it a point to say goodbye to the audience as they leave, and most of the time I don't even have to ask how they liked the show. I hear comments like "that was so much fun", "there was so much energy", "great actors", "I can't believe some have never acted before".

The importance of our theater is not just philosophical, there is a tangible energy in the audience that impacts the cast, upping their performances synergistically. It is among the cast members, who are neighbors, friends, and co-workers that come together, letting themselves be someone else, melding their unique personalities with their character, and producing performances just as unique from week to week. Importance is also found in the training of youth and young adults in performing arts, providing them with opportunities for personal and theatrical growth through free workshops and theater experience day-camps. But most important is the yearly June / July summer play spotlighting young actors.

And why does the audience come? I hear words like "something different", shy smiles accompany "date night", "some girl time", "have never been to the theater", "I got a postcard and it looked like fun", and "Oh my gosh so fun". One little tyke was going to see mommy in the play. One lady spent time telling me about her *grandma's weekend* "the dinner and play was an amazing experience". One couple told me they came on opening night and then 5 weeks later to see the evolution of characters and were pleasantly surprised.

We love this place and what we do. Volunteers keep the plays and operation humming while grants help restore our treasure. It is an exciting time for the Glens Ferry Historic Opera Theater. The building continues to live and breathe as its restored face emerges, ready to delight audiences into future generations. You are invited to experience the magic.

We continue our summer play series through August, then move into our Fall and Winter shows. Details can be found at www.glensferrytheatre.org.