



Arizona Community Foundation earlier this year. The Prescott City Council in February authorized the purchase of the 97-year-old opera house for \$250,000. The purchase ensures the historic building will be protected as a city treasure and will continue to be used as a community event venue for years to come. The city has commissioned restoration plans and an economic feasibility study for the theater.

Meanwhile, city staff members are exploring future uses and management of the theater. Prescott Parks and Recreation staff members are developing a preliminary management and use plan for the opera house.

The first event to occur in the Elks Opera House under city ownership was the April 28, 2001, premiere of the motion picture, "The Cactus Kid." The movie was filmed in Prescott in January and February 2000. All proceeds of premiere ticket sales benefit the city's Elks Opera House Restoration Fund.

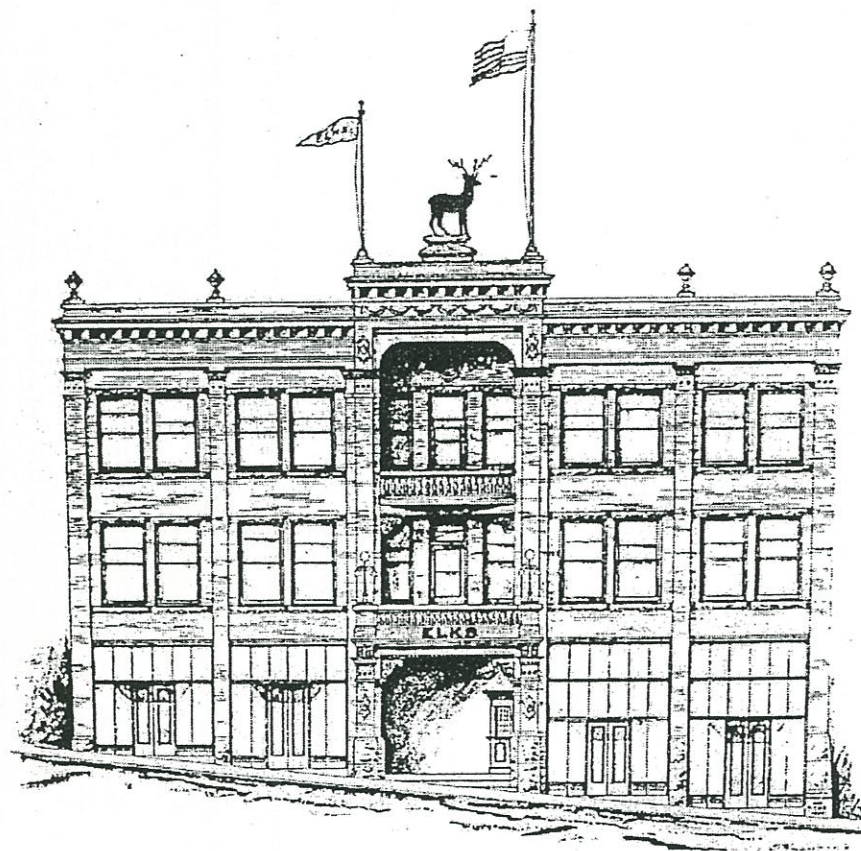


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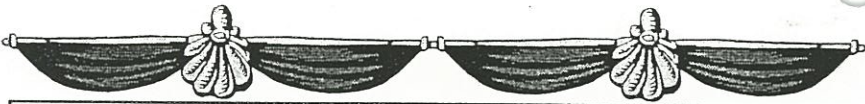


ELKS OPERA HOUSE PRESCOTT, ARIZONA



1905 - 2001





The Elks Opera House circa 1910.

Turn of the Century

A request published in the 1904 Prescott Daily Journal Miner urged business men of the city to attend a meeting on February 12 to discuss a proposal from the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Lodge #330 to add an opera house, at an estimated cost of \$15,000, to the building they were erecting on east Gurley Street. "Prescott should have a good opera house and there never was as good a chance before to have one for the money that this will cost, and if this chance is lost it will be a good long time before another such an opportunity is offered," the newspaper item stated.

The cornerstone of the building was laid on April 3, 1904, with a crowd in attendance to participate in the ceremony. The foundation work is native granite with the cornerstone still in place at



The Elks Opera House today.

theater.

During its management tenure, Prescott College sponsored artistically and culturally diverse theater programming, conducted theater and dance class performances and rented the theater to organizations such as Sharlot Hall Museum, which hosted its annual Cowboy Poets Gathering in the theater.

In February 1995, to celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of the theater, a local company, The Actor's Workshop, presented four performances of the Thomas Strelch play, "Dog Logic."

The popular Arizona Jamboree took up residence in the theater in the late 1990s, performing live musical variety shows in the summer and during the holidays.

New Era for Elks Opera House

The City of Prescott acquired the Elks Opera House from the



The Elks Opera House was back in business in late 1980 starting with a movie on December 5 and followed by a December 27 performance of *The Sons of the Pioneers* — the latter being the first live show in the theater since 1940.

On May 8, 1982, the theater was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Renamed The Prescott Center for the Performing Arts, a gala rededication of the Elks Theater was held there that same night. The program included readings from Mark Twain, songs of Gilbert and Sullivan and Stephen Sondheim, and a scene from the play "Me Corn is Green."

The Arizona Community Foundation purchased the theater in November 1982 and designated the Prescott Center for the Performing Arts as the operating entity. By 1984 the theater was more than \$50,000 in debt and was fighting for its life. A new board of directors was chosen, although their dedication and vision were not enough to put the theater in the black.

Yavapai College became the next steward of the Elks Opera House, using it as the venue for their performance season. The college also rented the Elks to other organizations. With the completion of their on-campus performance hall in 1992, Yavapai College discontinued its management of the Elks theater.

Prescott College

In June 1992, Prescott College became the steward of the Elks Theater. The Arizona Community Foundation made the theater available to the college at no charge. The theater provided an opportunity for the college to establish itself as a cultural resource for the Prescott community.

A grant in 1992 helped to underwrite an historic structure assessment as an initial step toward stabilization and protection. In 1993 the roof was patched, eliminating one of the many problems that resulted from age. Also that year a new light board and sound system were installed. Two years later, the south wall was replastered and painted, the pressed metal ceiling repaired and the stage enlarged. In the first three years of Prescott College's management, eighteen grants were awarded in support of the



the northwest corner. The Elks Building and Opera House was a forerunner of the changing trends of commercial architecture in the early 20th century, according to the book, "Staging a Comeback." Neo-classical decorative elements are used sparingly on the exterior, yet profusely throughout the theater's interior. Architecturally, the building represents a transition from the Victorian commercial styles of the nineteenth century to the Sullivan-esque and Neo-Classical idioms which ushered in the commercial architectural styles of the early twentieth century."

The February 10, 1905, Prescott Weekly Courier reported, "Upon entering the building, every condition is so pleasing that if the brow should be fanned with invisible spirit wings and a chorus of spirit voices should cause the air to vibrate with the word 'Harmony,' no surprise would be occasioned and that word fully describes the impression of the man of thought. The local lodge of Elks are naturally very proud of their fine building and splendid theater, which is Prescott's present pride and index of the city to be ... the peer of that theater is not found east of San Francisco until the great cities of the Mississippi Valley are reached, and even there our theater is outclassed only as to size, for our theater is about as perfect as the handiwork of man generally gets to be ..."

The grand opening of the Elks Opera House was held Monday, February 20, 1905. Actress Florence Roberts acted in the opening night play, "Marta of the Lowlands", written by Angel Guimera and billed as a romance of old Spain. The orchestra was composed of local musicians except one from Jerome and another from Phoenix. Opera box seats sold for \$1.50. Two days later the Weekly Arizona Journal headline read, "Opening of Elks Theater Last Night Brilliant Social Event." The box office proceeds totaled \$1,225, leaving a \$600 to \$700 net profit for the Elks Lodge.

It is noteworthy that the original plans did not call for a theater. The citizens requested a new opera house, a wish-list topic for years. The local citizens were proud of their opera house which had a seating capacity of 900, eight dressing rooms and an asbestos fire curtain — the first in the state. The acoustics were su-

1943



perb!

The theater served an essential function in the business and social life of the area. Its location was ideal – one block east of the Yavapai County Courthouse Plaza and a streetcar line passed in front of the theater. The venue was used for balls, celebrity performances, civic presentations and high school graduations. Prescott was a convenient stopover for companies traveling between the larger cities to the east and west. Famed performers Sir Harry Lauder, Olivia de Havilland, and John Phillip Sousa were among the notables who appeared at the Elks. Tom Mix and Tony the Wonder Horse were repeat performers at the theater. Tony was a great favorite of the audience.

The Cinema Arrives

The 1910 film masterpiece, "Birth of a Nation," was shown at the Elks in 1915. During the silent film era, the theater had a small orchestra to provide the accompanying music. By 1929, the silent movie days were over, their demise due to the Western Electric sound system.

With the arrival of sound, cowboys and Indians thrilled the audience. In 1927, projection equipment was installed and replaced again in 1953. The opera seats were removed in 1943, or 1946 depending on the source, to accommodate wide screens. The wooden rooms that remain offstage today are the smoking rooms that led into the opera boxes. In 1953, the 3-D process and Cinema-Scope enhanced the enjoyment of the moviegoer at the Elks. New projectors and Dolby sound made their debut at the Elks in December 1980.

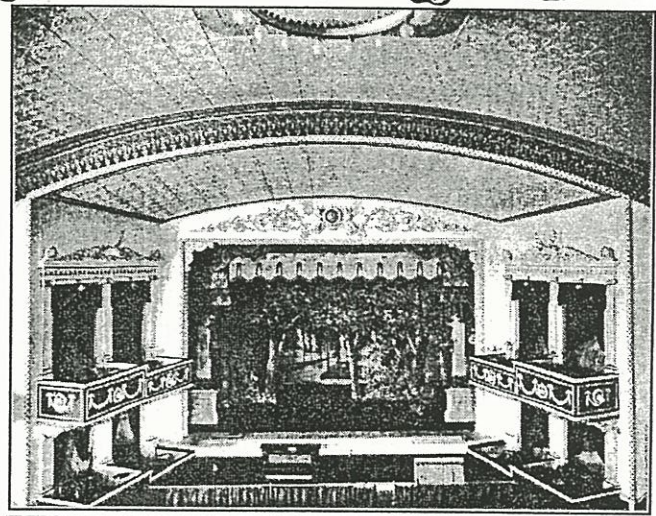
Theater Remodeling

According to the May 15, 1964 Courier, the Elks theater's appearance remained virtually the same until 1943. The opera boxes were removed as was the ornate bric-a-brac. The ceiling was lowered replacing a second set of stairs. The inside box office was removed, an outside one installed, and the existing marquee was added. The bronze elk statue was removed in 1971



and currently resides on top of the Elks Lodge in Prescott Valley.

In late 1980, renovations again were planned for the theater after years of decline had taken their toll. The theater received new paint, carpeting and wiring. The



The interior of the Elks theater, circa 1928.

crown jewel was an elegant chandelier. The October 29, 1980, Courier reported that the chandelier cost \$6,000, that it was 13 feet long and contained 1,000 pieces of cut glass. The chandelier was moved to Yavapai College in 1992 and has been replaced by a 4-foot Austrian leaded, crystal chandelier.

Changes in Management

During the silent-film era, the Elks Lodge began to lease the theater with the stipulation that twice a year their events would be staged there. These two annual events were the Minstrels Show and the May Day Ball. The last May Day Ball was held in 1928.

In January 1978, the Prescott Area Arts and Humanities Council and the Yavapai Heritage Foundation spearheaded a restoration campaign for the theater. A consultant submitted a proposal for a feasibility study of the theater which the groups hoped to finance through money from a local trust. This funding was not provided. A later appeal to the Prescott City Council for the \$4,000 needed to complete the consultant's study of restoring the theater for live performances also was denied.