

The Wright Answer

A HERCULEAN EFFORT TO PRESERVE AND RESTORE OURAY'S ICONIC OPERA HOUSE

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

It's been a long, strange trip for Ouray's beloved Wright Opera House, since it first opened its doors 125 years ago, in December 1888.

The brick behemoth that anchors the 500 block of Main Street is today renowned for its decorative blue-and-white painted facade – said to be the nation's premier example of a Mesker Brothers iron front – and its arching antique windows that reflect the intricate alpine splendor of the Amphitheater.

But there is plenty of substance, and a great survival story, beneath that facade.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Wright Opera House is that it is still being used for its original purpose as a venue for the performing arts, at a time when most of Colorado's 150 original opera houses have long since burned down or been converted to more mundane purposes.

The Wright Opera House might have succumbed to this fate, as well, if not for the Friends of the Wright Opera House, a small group of Ouray residents that coalesced in 2008 to purchase, preserve and renovate the building.

Some dismissed it as a hopeless cause, but the community caught their vision and rallied to their support. Today the nonprofit organization has achieved its mission, and is breathing new life into the aging venue.

LEGITIMATE ENTERTAINMENT

Together with the Beaumont Hotel, Ouray County Courthouse, original public school and Miners Hospital (which now houses the Ouray County Historical Museum), the Wright Opera House was one of the most imposing structures in Ouray during the late 1880s and early 1890s, made of local brick from the old Carney brickyard in Ouray.



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Ouray's Wright Opera House today, renowned for its decorative blue-and-white painted facade, is thought to be the nation's premier example of a Mesker Brothers iron front. (Photo by Jim Opdahl). Across the top, left to right, two details from its Mesker Bros. iron front (photos by Samantha Wright), and the Opera House in the first half of the 20th century (courtesy photo).

The building sits astride two 25-foot lots on the 500 block of Main Street, and makes a significant contribution to the Ouray Historic District. It is also a candidate for an individual listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It has a solid stone foundation, and a cavernous basement with a center column that runs down the middle, from front to back. Its walls vary in thickness from five to seven bricks thick, and are lined with old three-coat plaster.

Massive, exposed rough-hewn ceiling trusses hold the frame together like a trestle, leading historical architect Michael Bell, who conducted a structural assessment of the building 2008, to conclude it was probably designed by mining engineers.

This would make perfect sense, considering the man who built it. Ed Wright and his brother, George, natives of Canada, made their way to Ouray via Silverton in the winter of 1875. Together, the two established the Wheel of Fortune Mine in the Mt. Sneffels Mining District. The mine was soon producing impressive quantities of valuable ore, and the *Ouray Times* declared it to be “one of the best mines in the whole San Juan country.” The brothers sold part-interest in the mine to two investors for \$160,000 in 1877, and established themselves as “gentlemen of means” in the burgeoning Ouray community.

The story of the origins of the Wright Opera House a decade later may be apocryphal; it is said that Ed Wright built it at the urging of his wife, Letitia, who wanted to improve the cultural environment of Ouray for their young daughter, Irene.

The year was 1888, and like any mining boomtown, Ouray had plenty to offer in the way of less-than-virtuous attractions, down in the red light district on Second Street. The Gold Belt Theater had just opened up with an impressive variety of entertainment – bands, variety shows, booze, gambling and



The Wright has always had commercial businesses on the ground floor; today's tenants are the Blue Pear gift store and, next door, the Artisan Bakery. (Photo by Jim Opdahl)

Through the years, it has housed an early-day car dealership, a gas station, a drug store, a hardware store, and for decades, a Jeep rental and tour business. Today, it is home to a bakery and whimsical

gift shop.

girls, girls, girls! As historian Doris Gregory put it, the offerings “were attracting even the ‘better’ element in Ouray.”

At the opposite end of town, the Wright Opera House would be built adjacent to another commercial property that Ed Wright had developed in 1881, called the Wright Building, on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Main Street. The opera house went up in a hurry. Construction got underway in the summer of 1888, and the Opera House opened on Dec. 4 that same year, with a grand benefit concert and ball to raise money for uniforms for the Ouray Magnolia Band.

Much ado was made of the event in the local paper, the *Solid Muldoon*, which had long been clamoring for Ouray to have an opera house of its own. Almost all towns in Colorado had one in the late 1800s, although most of them never actually hosted opera performances.

As historian Charles Ralph explained in his online article, “Opera in Old Colorado” (operaoldcolorado.info), “To distinguish between the bawdy, low-class places of entertainment that many theatres were at the time, it became common practice to call a town’s foremost playhouse an ‘opera house’ and thus make it known that only socially acceptable, legitimate theatre would be tolerated there.”

The next evening of “legitimate” entertainment” to be held at the Wright Opera House occurred a few weeks later, on Dec. 19, 1888, when “Professors David and Laux” gave a program of piano and organ duets. And so it all began.

SUCKER TOWN

The street level portion of the building was always used for commercial purposes.

gift shop.

But the theater space upstairs “wasn’t highly used or highly profitable” in those early years, said Friends of the Wright Opera House Board President Dee Williams. It appeared that many early Ourayites still preferred the more rowdy offerings down at the other end of town.

“When the Gold Belt Theatre was running full tilt, they would send a band to the Wright Opera House, and march through Main Street to get people to go down to the Gold Belt,” she said.

As for Ed and Letitia Wright, “He was a miner and she was a wife and mother; they were not entrepreneurs. They did not have great business acumen, and the Opera House did not flourish,” Williams said.

Ed Wright died suddenly of pneumonia in 1895. Letitia, upon assuming management of the Opera House, soon discovered that her husband “had borrowed heavily to make his investments and had many unpaid bills,” as Gregory recounted in her book about the building’s history.

George Wright and his wife Lenora paid off the bills and assumed ownership of the building to keep it in the family.

“George ran it for awhile and hired somebody who was a promoter to run it,” Williams said. Many of the acts that came through in that period were far from what Letitia must have had in mind, back when the building was built for the edification of her daughter.

“On the entertainment circuit, with the kinds of acts that were put on at the Wright, Ouray became known as a sucker town,” Williams said. “Whatever act was performed here, we would come and see it.”



Dancers in colorful tutus scamper up the fire escape to enter the backstage of the Wright Opera House during a Weehawken Dance performance. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

By 1915, the age of opera houses was in decline. George and Lenora eventually gave up and sold the Wright, and it slid into a long period of so-called “quiet years.”

But when the Friends of the Wright Opera House began the process of acquiring the building back in 2008, they got to know it on a more intimate level than had ever been chronicled in books and newspapers. Under the stage, for example, they discovered a treasure trove of old props – spears, hats, feathers, fabric togas – as well as a few mummified “four-legged things with fur” and, best of all, its original painted backdrop of the Mt. Sneffels range, based on a famous William Jackson photograph.

Backstage, they discovered a century’s worth of old graffiti bearing witness to the events that took place there over the years. If those walls could talk, they’d have stories to tell. “Like lots of old theaters, there were probably a few maidens who had some firsts up there,” FWOH Treasurer Jim Opdahl speculated.

Several clues FWOH uncovered about the Wright Opera House’s construction – from sloppy brickwork, to the lack of a central heating system and an unfinished ceiling – suggest it was built on the cheap.

“My guess is that they ran out of money,” Williams said. “This place was a garage and jeep rental much longer than an opera house.”

Perhaps what saved the Wright Opera House in those early years was that it became somewhat of a community center. It was frequently used by the Ouray School as a venue for school dances, athletic events, contests of elocution, and theater productions (including a well-documented production of *A Tom Thumb Wedding* put on by first graders in 1907). Legend has it that it that it hosted a Jack Dempsey boxing match on at least one occasion.

THE WAY OF PROGRESS

While the building went through a long dormant period, a handful of people in the community never lost sight of the Wright as a venue for the performing arts.

Williams recalls a time several decades ago when one local entrepreneur wanted to remodel the building, tearing out its stained-glass windows and other historic embellishments, and put an all-you-can-eat-style cafeteria upstairs. Then-local newspaper editor Joyce Jorgensen and Ouray native son Roger Henn joined forces to vocally oppose the plan. “There was no committee devoted to historical preservation at the time,” Williams said. “But Roger and Joyce got on it, and made [the entrepreneur’s] life miserable, and he eventually said, ‘Screw it!’

“The interesting thing is that the uproar was mostly against Joyce and Roger for standing in the way of progress. I think it is really a miracle the Wright is still here.”

For a number of years, the theater space was completely abandoned. C.W. McCall (aka Bill Fries), a country-western singer most famous for his 1976 hit song *Convoy*, was the first to bring it back to life with his multimedia slide show, the *San Juan Odyssey*.

Fries and his family signed a lease for the second floor theater space in 1975. He and his sons spent the following year photographing the San Juan Mountains in all four seasons. They set their slide show to the music of Aaron Copland, as performed by the London Symphony Orchestra. It was narrated, of course, by C.W. McCall.

The show opened in 1977 and ran for 20 years, becoming a staple of summer entertainment in Ouray, seen by thousands upon thousands of visitors. It was state-of-

the-art entertainment for its time, with the equivalent of surround-sound, 15 computer-controlled and synchronized 35mm slide projectors and five screens connected in a 50-foot-wide panorama to

portray the beauty and drama of the San Juan Mountains.

The show finally shut down in 1996. The Wright Opera House had new owners, Larry and Alice Leeper, who had other ideas about how to use the space. For a number of years, a movie theater operated there. It wasn’t until an organization called Weehawken Creative Arts leased the upper floor of the Wright Opera House as a dance studio and performance space that the theater became truly vibrant once again.

FWOH gives a lot of credit to the Weehawken Dance program for awakening community passion for the Wright Opera House. With children coming in and out of the theater on a daily basis for dance classes, and performances like *The Nutcracker* being mounted on the Wright’s old stage to enthusiastic audiences numbering in the hundreds, the Wright seemed to bubble and fizz with new life.

“The buzz in the room was just contagious,” Williams said. “People were blown away by what could happen in this space. It would have been much more difficult to raise funds to purchase the building if Weehawken had not opened the doors to the possibility of what was here. People realized how important it is to have a performance space.”

It was 2007, at the height of Ouray’s real estate boom. After owning the building for 10 years and conducting extensive renovations, the Leepers were willing to sell the Wright for \$1.4 million.

IN LOVE WITH THIS OLD LADY

Shortly afterward came the crash.

The Leepers were more anxious than ever to sell, and suggested to Williams, Op-

dahl and several others who were passionate about the building that they form a committee to look into buying it. The Friends of the Wright Opera House came into being, made up, in those early days, of Williams, Opdahl, Nancy Nixon, Joyce Linn, Tom Kenning and Ralph Huesing.

On the one hand, their timing seemed impeccably lousy. Ouray was in the midst of the worst economic crisis it had seen in decades. “I remember my husband saying to me, ‘There is no way in hell you will ever raise enough money to buy this opera house,’” Williams recalled.

But with real estate values in free-fall, the Leepers soon dropped their asking price to \$750,000, which put it into the realm of barely attainable.

“With stars in our eyes, we said, ‘Let’s raise the money to buy it,’” Williams recalled. And they got to work. The goal may have been lofty, but the strategy was simple.

“We just asked everybody,” Williams said. Once the pledges started rolling in, a couple of second homeowners stepped out of the wings with significant donations.

If the community had not stepped up to the plate in such a big way, an effort to purchase the building would have surely foundered. The charitable foundations the Friends had planned to approach for funding had also been hit hard by the economic downturn, and in some cases were giving 75 percent less than they would have, just a year before.

The Friends did succeed in winning modest grants from a few foundations. The State Historic Fund made up the difference, kicking in \$225,000 toward the acquisition effort, but requiring they raise more matching funds from the community by the end of the year, or return the money.

“We were in jeopardy of losing the grant at the end of 2009,” Williams recalled, and went to local fundraising guru Kelvin Kent



Dancers getting ready for a performance at the Wright. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

for advice. “We were all prepared to return the money,” Williams said. “But Kelvin said, ‘Let’s kick into high gear and make a real passionate plea.’”

It worked.

“I remember calling donors I thought had already given a huge amount, and sucking in my breath and saying, ‘Can you give more?’ And they did,” Williams said, still amazed.

In the end, they brought their very biggest local donors back in, and made one final pitch to them as well. “I remember standing there and to my embarrassment, breaking into tears,” Williams said.

FWOH’s passion for the project carried their effort across the finish line. Soon, they had sufficient funds in the bank account to satisfy the match. They notified the Colorado Historic Fund, triggering the legal process to complete the acquisition grant to purchase the Wright Opera House. The closing happened the following February.

Opdahl still marvels that they pulled it off, in the midst of such dire economic times. Altogether, local donors contributed almost \$400,000 toward the acquisition. That support has continued over the years, with residents continuing to donate money to help pay for the building’s operating expenses and now, for its renovation.

“It is a project that is not difficult to get excited about,” Opdahl said. “It is easy to fall in love with this old lady.”

BALANCING ACT

Williams and Opdahl laugh now about how naive they were when they took this all on.

“We had this romantic idea of saving the Wright,” Opdahl said. “On the day of the

closing, we looked at each other and said, ‘Now what do we do?’ We had no concept of what would be involved.”

“Raising the money to purchase the building was the easy part,” Williams added. “Now we are faced with the hard part. We sit in a lot of meetings, figuring out everything from the renovation to operations, making it all work together so the Wright stays true to its intent. It’s a real balancing act.”

When they first bought the Wright Opera House, FWOH consulted with Ridgway architect Doug MacFarlane to begin envisioning the building’s interior transformation. Preliminary drawings showed a radically altered ground-level entry area with a sweeping grand staircase rising to the lobby and theater on the second level. Upstairs, the group dreamed of a larger lobby area where concert-going crowds could comfortably mingle, and a deeper theater, made possible by a large addition to the back of the building, that would also allow for more spacious backstage and green room areas.

Opdahl now says those plans were “naïve – and just a million or two dollars out of reach.”

Today, Opdahl and Williams are relieved that they never pursued such grand plans. The theater itself, it turns out, is already the perfect size. It can comfortably seat 200 – about as big as Ouray’s audiences typically get. Today, they have refined the vision to renovating and updating what exists now. Roof and foundation repairs may not be exciting or romantic, but it’s a start, as is some modest remodeling to create a proper box office and lobby area on the first floor. Aesthetic improvements have been made in the theater area, as well, including the painstaking removal of decades’ worth of paint and plaster to expose one of the beautiful historic brick walls inside the theater, and the acquisition of new seating as well as a new state-of-the-art sound system and movie screen.

The next big structural improvements come in early 2014, with the long-awaited installation of an elevator, and additional remodeling in the lobby area upstairs.

Today, Wechawken Creative Arts has outgrown the space it once helped bring back to life. But there are plenty of other performing arts events at the Wright these days, even in the midst of renovations, from summer melodrama to professional theater and dance productions to weekly movie nights to excellent live music offerings in a variety of genres.

Part-time Ouray residents Jay and Jackie Lauderdale are some of the Wright’s biggest fans and supporters. Two years ago, with the goal of putting the Wright Opera House



The Friends of the Wright Opera House board members took the keys from former owners Alice and Larry Leeper at the closing in February 2010. Front row: Joyce Linn, Dee Williams, Alice Leeper, Larry Leeper. Back row: Valerie Hill, Nancy Nixon, Jim Opdahl, title agent Ed Folga. (Courtesy photo)



The walls of the backstage area are covered with a century's worth of graffiti. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

on the map as a music venue, they offered to underwrite a three-year summer concert series, bringing in nationally known singer-songwriters to the Wright's historic stage.

"It was a slave ship," Williams said. "We were here all the time." The FWOH's only paid employee, a part-time administrative assistant, found herself working 50-60 hour weeks.

The Friends bumped up the size of their board to share the load, but even so, "Tons of

stuff fell through the cracks," Williams said. "It had become a much, much, much bigger project than we ever anticipated. We needed an executive director."

So a year ago, FWOH took the leap and hired Josh Gowans to manage the day-to-day running of the theater and oversee its renovation and ongoing fundraising efforts.

One of the first things Gowans did when he came on board was to visit the Sheridan Opera House in Telluride and the Wheeler Opera House in Aspen to get a feel for how they were run. It was an eye-opening experience.

"It's a whole different world," he said. "They already have renovated buildings and huge staffs and still, they were telling us, they are just trying to break even."

The Wright is in an even tougher situation than those other opera houses, Gowans said, because it is located in a community with more modest means, yet is still faced with the challenge of renovating. Still, he is optimistic it can be done.

Gowans anticipates that most of the funding for the renovation will come from major donors and large grants.

In the meantime, "A lot of the support



Dancers await their cue backstage during a Weehawken Dance performance. (Photo by Samantha Wright)

we want to see from the community is just to have them in here, so the Wright Opera House can be the community venue it was meant to be," he said. "That support will keep the lights on, the staff paid, and the beer in the kegs."

Williams' ultimate vision for the Wright Opera House is to grow it into an economic engine for the town. "I'd really like this to be the reason people come to Ouray," she said. "I think we can do that." 📸

Never Summer Landscape

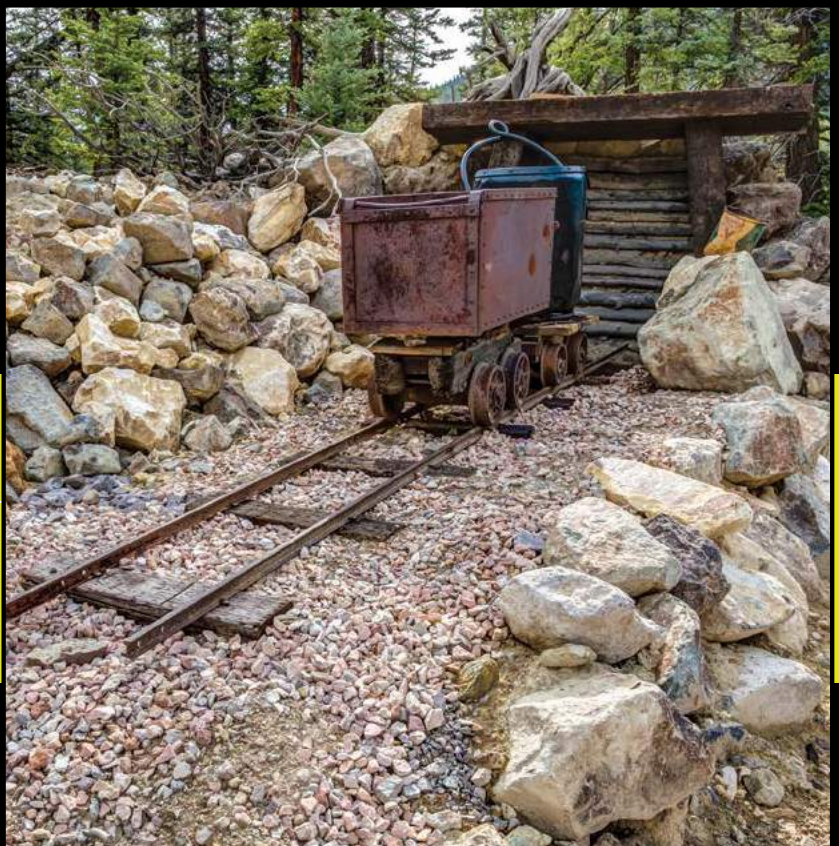
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