

Historical Ramblings

Lompoc's Cultural Center

Lompoc's Opera House, constructed in 1890, was the cultural center of the valley.

The Lompoc Hall Association was incorporated in the spring of 1890 with a capital stock of \$5,000. On May 10, 1890, two lots were purchased for \$1,000 from George Roberts, who took the purchase price in stock rather than cash. By June 7, 1890, it was reported that the "Town Hall" foundations were being laid. Construction was far enough along on the 50 x 100 foot building on July 4, that the Grand Ball for the Fourth of July celebration could be held there. The structure, with a two-story front, had a 12-foot entrance into a 12-foot vestibule, level with the sidewalk. A four-foot rise led to the auditorium floor, which reportedly had a seating capacity of 500. The large stage was supplied with a drop curtain, dressing rooms and had provisions for scenery. Underneath the stage, a 25 x 50 foot room was planned for use as a kitchen for banquets and parties. All of Lompoc's major dances of the year were held at the Opera House; New Year's, Valentine's Day, May Day, St. Patrick's Day and Fourth of July. It was also the venue for local dramatic productions and pageants, traveling vaudeville shows, Saturday night dances, high school and grammar school graduations, the annual Lompoc Valley Fair, silent movies and other public and private gatherings. Kerosene lamps, hung from the ceiling, provided lighting for the huge hall. Kerosene footlights lighted the stage. It only cost \$10 to rent the hall, so it didn't make much money for the stockholders.

By 1902, there was interest in changing from kerosene lamps to a carbide lighting system. Funds were also needed to replace the stage curtain. There were needs for maintenance and repair and general modernization. To raise money for such improvements, benefit performances were offered. By 1909, electricity had been introduced and silent movies were introduced by manager Joseph Schwartz. Enterprising manager Schwartz regularly traveled to Santa Maria distributing handbills advertising the nightly vaudeville shows and movies.

In 1991, Gertrude Loynachan Learned, then in her 90's, recalled her memories of the Opera House: "The movies became a magnet for us teens as the "Perils of Pauline" drew us for each episode. The Opera House was managed at that time by the Walling family – a burly father, a mother, plump and blonde, who played the piano watchfully synchronizing the music to the scenes while bouncing up and down on the piano bench, son Hershel and Elinor, the baby girl of 4 or 5 years of age who sang and performed precociously."

In 1913, the Opera House lease was purchased by Mr. W.J. Baker and Mr. W.A. Calvert. Judge Charles Poulson accompanied the movies on the piano. Charles Poulson was blind and it was, therefore, easy for him to play in a darkened theater. How could he possibly know what kind of music was called for by the action on the screen? He worked with someone who watched the film and, depending on the scene, a touch or grip of one shoulder or the other, would signal him to play "villain," hero," "heroine," or whatever appropriate music was called for.

In 1914 public ownership of the property ended. It was transferred to W.J. Baker who, along with W.A. Calvert added a new maple floor. After movies, the chairs were cleared away and the floor was polished by pulling a bale of hay around the floor behind a model-T Ford.

When the new Lompoc Theatre was built in 1927, Mr. Baker continued the lease on the Opera House, leaving the operation of the theatre to his partner, Mr. Calvert. Local social activities continued in the Opera House, with the addition of roller-skating on the fine maple floor.

By 1940, other venues had become available for graduations, dances and community events, so the Opera House was sold and torn down. In its place was built another cultural gathering spot – a bowling alley.