



## **A Brief History of the City Opera House**

In 1891, Traverse City was a thriving town with mud streets, horse-drawn carriages and many of the buildings that still dot the downtown area. There were few places for people to congregate other than at some churches and the Ladies' Library, which could only hold about 100 guests. At that time, three local businessmen (and brothers-in-law), Charles Wilhelm, Anton Bartak and Frank Votruba, decided to build a public hall.

A Steinberg construction, the City Opera House officially opened in 1892. In 1897, box seats were added to round out the impression that was desired of an Opera House of the day. You can tell by their placement that they were more for the prominent citizens to be seen rather than to provide optimal viewing of the stage. You can also notice that they are a bit tall for the site where they were placed; they were ordered from a catalog, prefabricated and then installed. The City Opera House was the first public building in Traverse City to be lighted by electricity.

One of the features that catches peoples' attention almost immediately is the names in the ends of the vaults of the ceiling. These were the names of famous actors and singers of the day who might have been likely to perform in venues such as the City Opera House. However, none of these actually performed here. Another feature of the vaults in the ceiling is that the colors are darker as you face the bay, depicting that a storm is rolling in. The center dome has cherubs with the baby faces of local donors during the most recent renovation. You, too, might be able to have your face added!

The City Opera House has survived three fires in adjacent buildings; while there has been smoke and water damage, there has never been a fire in the House. The first nearby fire was in 1906; it started in Bartak & Wilhelm Grocery located in a storefront below the ballroom. In 1975, a fire destroyed the top level of the Anderson Building to the east, and in 1987, yet another fire destroyed the top two floors of the Masonic Building to the west.

In its early days, the Opera House was a busy venue for meetings and performances. However, in 1920 the hall was leased by a motion picture firm, and was closed so as to minimize any competition to their other movie house in the city. Their lease ran out in 1954, and from then until the early 1980's the upper levels remained vacant with the exception of an occasional basket ball game: the hoop was placed in front of the east balcony wall. During this period, there was serious deterioration and much of the building was not safe.

The City Opera House Heritage Committee was established in 1978 to restore the theater to its original splendor. William Kessler Architects of Detroit were commissioned

in 1979 to do a feasibility study for the restoration. In 1980, the Votruba family donated the building to the city. The Heritage Committee worked for five years to raise public awareness. The few events that were staged during this period were limited in size to about 50 people due to the condition of the building and the fire codes. However, between 1986 and 2001, community, social and cultural events served over 30,000 patrons annually.

In 2000, the future began to look brighter for the facility. With encouragement from Lt. Governor Connie Binsfield, the State of Michigan awarded a \$1.5 million grant which served as a catalyst for the next phase of construction. The renovations to the main floor permitted audiences of up to 400 people.

In 2003, having raised an additional \$4.1 million, the Committee retained Ann Arbor-based architect Quinn Evan to draw up plans for the final stages of restoration and renovation. Driven by a great from Dave and Faye Mathia in 2005, the Grand Entrance lobby and stairway was completed. The balcony reopened in 2007, enabling use to full capacity—710 people. With the intention of keeping the original feel and look of the building, even the chair replacements reflected the original seating, since they were ordered from the company that provided the original seats. All of the relief work, the woodwork and wall treatments, the light fixtures and the ceiling painting are part of the restoration. If you look closely when you are in the balcony, you will notice that the ceiling is not plaster at all—it is perforated metal, which is part of the building acoustics. Little from the original work could be salvaged. In 2009, a beverage service bar was built in the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor lobby by Trattoria Stella's; it's wood and marble carry the theme of the rest of the building.

Of the 128 opera houses built in Michigan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, only seven remain. Several have been faithfully restored. Of these seven, the City Opera House is the largest.

Currently, the City Opera House is a busy place! In addition to its own Performance Series, it is the venue for many private parties, receptions, dances and meetings. Paintings by local artists grace the walls on a rotation basis. Caterers provide some of the best cuisine in the area. Children's events introduce the youth of the region to this gem in their midst. This Grand Old Lady is here to stay for another 120 years!