

**“Readers Refuge” article for August 18, 2010, meeting at 7:00pm at the Cheyenne Mountain Heritage Center, 1118 W. Cheyenne Road**

(The following article is taken from *Kiva* magazine, Fall, 2001. The article is “From Diamonds to Dust: The Saga of the Burns Theatre.” It is by Marion Ritchey Vance.)

Fine horses and carriages and shiny new motorcars swept onto Pikes Peak Avenue, carrying the cream of Colorado Springs’ society to the event of the year.

It was opening night at the Burns Theatre – May 8, 1912. Dramatic four-globed street lamps were ablaze, illuminating the polished terra cotta façade of the opulent building. According to a newspaper account of the day, “The theater presented a splendid appearance when peopled with the flower of Colorado Springs society. Not only in the boxes, but throughout the house, full dress was the rule...In honor of the occasion, the display of handsome costly gowns lavishly garnitured (sic) with rare heirloom laces and jewels was an exceedingly notable one.”

The evening featured the Russian Symphony Orchestra and Russia’s premier imperial dancer, Mlle. Lydia Lopoukova. Conductor Modest Altschuler arranged a program “to fittingly commemorate the occasion,” including works by Tchaikovsky, Verdi, Puccini, Rimsky-Korsakov and Leoncavallo. To the delight of his audience Altschuler interspersed patriotic numbers such as “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean.”

Nearly 1500 patrons packed the theater at 23 East Pikes Peak, and hundreds more were turned away. From his private box, James Ferguson Burns presented to the city of Colorado Springs the finest opera house in the west. “The occasion,” wrote a local newspaper, “was a decided success, beyond even the most sanguine expectations.”

## **True Class**

Jimmie Burns was a plumber from Portland, Maine who struck it rich in Cripple Creek (or, more accurately, in Victor). Through shrewd management, he built an 1891 mining claim into the Portland Mine Company, the richest producer of gold in the area.

Burns was an unlikely benefactor of the social set. He had a certain disdain for Little London’s elite, whom he saw as more pompous than cultured. He once remarked that “it takes more brains to repair a toilet than to speak bad French or race a gig down Cascade Avenue.” The antipathy was reciprocated, particularly by other mining magnates to whom Burns’ pro-union, pro-labor stance was anathema.

But on Opening Night there was no doubt that Jimmie Burns – blue collar prospector and renegade millionaire – had brought true class to the arts in Colorado Springs. Attendance was *de rigueur* for anyone who was anyone, and the audience was dazzled. Chester Alan Arthur II spoke:

“Mr. Burns, I have been requested by...the citizens of Colorado Springs to voice the general public sentiment of gratitude to you, which the opening of this beautiful theater inspires. We feel that you have met a long-felt public need...”

Legend has it that Jimmie Burns set out to build his own opera house when his request to rent the Old Opera House on north Tejon was denied. More likely, it was Burns genuine love of drama and the performing arts that inspired him. He held a yearly reserved box at the Butte Opera House in Cripple Creek, where he relished live stage productions.

It is also clear that Burns invested years in the conception and design of his “Theatre Beautiful.” He studied the finest theaters back east and in the Old World, and assured architects Douglas and Hetherington the resources to reproduce the best and to advance the state of the art. Among their innovations were graceful, sweeping balconies supported from the outside walls, requiring no pillars or columns from the main floor. Every seat in the house thus enjoyed an unobstructed view. Layout of the theater was such that no seat was farther than 90 feet from the stage apron.

Another novel feature was the stage floor, which was made of hundreds of 2x4s, cut to 4 inch lengths, set on end and wedged seamlessly together on a concrete base. The purpose of such painstaking carpentry by contractors Troop and Schaaf was to keep the stage from splintering under heavy loads or when bulky scenery was pushed across it. The 80 x 50 foot expanse accommodated elephants for productions of *The Queen of Sheba* and a huge treadmill for the chariot in *Ben Hur*. Lights and special effects and backdrops were controlled by an electrical panel that was a marvel of its day.

But perhaps the outstanding feature of the Burns was its acoustical clarity, which proved exceptional from the beginning and was lauded by performers and engineers throughout the life of the building. Further enhancing its natural properties, the theater was insulated from street noise by a layer of office space that faced on Pikes Peak Avenue. The Burns Theatre’s reputation for fine acoustics prompted experts in New York City to request the drawings.

The aesthetics of the theater rivaled its technical perfection. Polished Italian marble floors, tall gleaming pillars, and marble staircases gave the foyer a feel of grandeur. The original seats were of rich wood trimmed with olive-green velvet. Sumptuous red velvet draperies curtained off the stage, which was framed by sculptured neoclassical figures. On the ceiling were oil murals hand-painted by an Italian artist. Lavatory fixtures sparkled in marble and burnished brass.

### **Another Milestone for a Better and Greater Colorado Springs**

Entertainment offered in the early years did justice to its setting. There were grand productions of opera and theater classics, as well as touring road shows for which the renowned Burns drew the finest talent of the day to little Colorado Springs. Sigmund Romberg, Yul

Brynner, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Gloria Swanson, and Sergei Rachmaninoff all played the Burns. Lon Chaney worked as a stagehand before setting off for his Hollywood career.

Soon the theater became the center of the community's cultural life.

Symphonies and concerts were regular fare, and local institutions chose the Burns for their special events. Colorado College held commencement ceremonies there in 1913; its roster of graduates lists two familiar names – Lloyd Shaw and Dorothy Cory Stott.

The cachet associated with Burns patrons led some enterprising physicians to “advertise” by having themselves paged during performances. When the theater began paging by seat number rather than by name, the number of medical emergencies dropped precipitously.

In 1915 the screening of “Birth of a Nation” made news. Local musicians complemented the small core orchestra that traveled with the famous silent film. The projectionist cranked his machine by hand; if the “soundtrack” fell behind the action, he slowed down until the musicians caught up. He could also influence the mood by prolonging love scenes or speeding up the Keystone Kops.

Silent movies became the rage and in the late 20s and the “Mighty Wurlitzer” organ was installed for in-house accompaniment. In addition to its three keyboards and eight sets of pipes, the Wurlitzer was equipped for special effects from train whistles and calliopes to sleigh bells and snare drums.

In short, the Burns lived up to its initial billing as a playhouse second to none which ushered in “a period of new possibilities for lovers of drama and music, and the passing of another milestone for a better and greater Colorado Springs.”

In March, 1973, the Burns Theatre was torn down.

## **How Could It Happen?**

Jimmie Burns' gem did not go directly from glory days to the wrecker's ball. By the time of the mining king's death in 1917, lavish productions and elegant audiences were giving way to changing American tastes. Vaudeville, supplemented by silent flicks and an occasional road show, was the main fare of the 20s. Then came Hollywood. In 1927, the Burns Theatre was converted to a movie house. Over the course of various remodelings, the elegant boxes were torn out, and spring-folding metal chairs in utilitarian covers replaced the hardwood-and-velvet seating.

A company called Paramount-Publix leased the theater in 1928, changing its name to The Paramount. In 1933 Westland Theatre Corporation took over the lease and transformed the

building once again. This last incarnation, as the Chief Theatre, is likely the one best remembered by readers of *Kiva*. The most notable change was the addition of a neon marquee which has been described in terms ranging from “graceless” to “monstrous.”

The Chief operated for 40 years as one of the city’s major movie theaters. Despite indignities suffered, the interior retained enough of its innate grace and ornate beauty to impress two generations of movie-goers.

In mid-October, 1972, Westland Corporation and other tenants were notified by their landlord, the Exchange National Bank, that the building was “unsafe” and that their sub-leases would be bought out. The venerable theater’s doors closed for the final time on October 31, 1972. Word quickly spread that the Bank, which neighbored the Burns to the east, intended to raze the Burns Building by December 1. The specter of demolition set off an intense campaign to “Save the Burns!”

### **“A Symbol of the Direction of Our Future Development”**

Citizen efforts to preserve the theater were galvanized by the Landmarks Preservation Council of the Pikes Peak Region, “a coordinating council made up of group representatives and individuals seeking to combine the best of traditional values (historic, aesthetic, architectural, scenic, cultural) with current economic considerations, building for a sound future.”

Earlier, the Landmarks Council had been instrumental in the successful drive to stave off destruction of the Old County Courthouse – now the much-acclaimed Pioneers Museum. News of the threatened Burns was a new spur to action. In early November, the Council formally requested the Exchange National Bank to put demolition plans on hold for six months to allow them to come up with a viable plan to save the building.

Members placed newspaper ads to alert citizens, promoted letter-writing campaigns, and circulated petitions. They publicized a field report from the National Trust for Historic Preservation stating that the building should be saved because of its architectural and acoustical merits as well as for its historical qualities, and noting that urban renewal and other Federal programs could assist the city in such an endeavor. However, the report also pointed out that it would take substantial community interest to bring this about.

In a full-page newspaper spread on November 11, Landmarks sought An Expression of Public Opinion. “As a guide to our course of action, we need to know how widely our concerns are shared by the general public. Shall we bow to the building’s destruction, accept defeat as inevitable – another in the long series of community retreats from higher goals? Or shall we strive for a better solution? The Burns poses the question both for itself as a cherished and needed facility – and as a symbol of the direction of our future development. The Landmarks Council prefers the high road to the low one. Yet it has no desire to tilt at windmills... Your

opinion will be helpful to us and, we think, to the community. It's made easy by use of the form opposite."

The Exchange National Bank countered with full-page publication of a letter to Dr. Frank Tucker, President of the Landmarks Council, reminding him of the legal and financial consequences that could ensue were he to interfere with the bank's planned expansion.

### **In The Eye of the Beholder**

The legal right of the bank to destroy the theater was not in question. In 1965, the Exchange National had signed a 99-year lease which gave it the option to demolish the building. That was, as noted later by a bank officer, the Exchange's intent from the outset. One can only speculate on how such a lease might have been negotiated. The owner, Mrs. William F. Nicholson, was Gladys Burns, only daughter of the founder, and heir to the theater. Management and affairs of the building, however, had for some years been in the hands of husband 'Will' Nicholson, a former Mayor of Denver and two-term Colorado state senator.

The crux of the argument over preservation was the physical state of the Burns: how extensive was the structural damage, could it be repaired, and if so at what cost? The Bank contracted the architectural firm of Lusk and Wallace, who reported that cracks in the concrete cross beams above the first floor of the office portion could make the building unsafe. Called in at the behest of the bank, the Regional Building Department seconded the findings. According to the Bank, the only practical option was demolition. A bank officer said that his personal opinion was that the theater should be "hit with a sledge hammer on the backside and it'll all fall down."

A different version emerged from the "Preliminary Report of the Engineering and Scientific Study Consortium of the The Burns Theatre and Office Building Complex" prepared at the request of the State Historical Society of Colorado. According to the engineers, "The Burns Theatre is in reality a complex and may be considered as three separate entities: the terra cotta front façade facing Pikes Peak Avenue; the office structure immediately behind this façade; and the theatre proper located behind the office area.

The engineers pointed out that it would be entirely feasible, with appropriate setback, to build additional stories to accommodate bank offices.

After a detailed analysis of the Burns' fabled acoustics, the report concluded that "The original designer of The Burns Theatre's thorough knowledge of the best design principles and availability of ample money, generated an acoustical enclosure that would be difficult if not impossible to achieve with today's construction techniques."

## The Issue Engaged

Restoration was feasible but restoration meant money. Estimates for acquiring and restoring the Burns ranged from \$2 to \$5 million dollars. Such financing would require action by the city in the form of a bond issue or application for federal assistance or both. That in turn meant that the fate of the Burns lay squarely with the City Council.

The issue was engaged in the press, in public forums, and in Council chambers. An article in the *Gazette Telegraph* of the day characterized it as “a bitter battle between preservationists and proponents of progress.”

The Landmarks Council (somewhat presciently) framed it thus: “Whether the historic Old Burns Theater falls to the bulldozer or is restored as a prized and much needed concert hall and home for the performing arts points up a basic community question – one which goes to the heart of many of our other recent growth and environmental problems. It’s the question of dollar-dominance in our community decision-making. Involved are such items as quarries in the wrong places, misplaced high-rise structures, greedy land developments, over-emphasis on size at the expense of quality. Which isn’t to say that dollars are unimportant in community decisions, but merely that they must be rightfully balanced against other values no less important... It’s a question of leveling down to the ordinary, or reaching for something better, of striving for a superior, distinctive city, or being content with just an average one. It will remain with us until we find a better answer than sheer economic determinism.”

An editorial from the *Northeast Mail* on November 22 of 1972 took issue with the Landmark Council’s claim of taking into account “current economic considerations.” The benefits, noted the author, would be a “concert hall and home for the performing arts...which would seat less than one-half of one percent of the population of Colorado Springs, but would be the expense of all of the community...Moreover, some of the highest tax yielding land in the City would go off the tax rolls, plus causing the entire block to become impotent as a commercial area.” The Burns is “a gingerbread shell that encompasses an attractive too-small theater facility in the wrong location. The traditional values are few, and the economics are altogether wrong.”

Architect De Ros Hogue spoke to the economics of preserving such a “handsome, interesting, and glorious building.” “An entertainment facility,” he notes, “is indispensable for keeping people involved in a predominately business area after hours. It will generate activities and this will assist other after-hours businesses. Business areas without entertainment facilities will generally lose their value and deteriorate. This has been proven across the country, where the downtown area looks like someone dropped a bomb on it after 5 p.m.”

## The Question Goes Before Council

By January 1973, pressures were mounting on both sides. At public sessions of City Council, well-known performers, architects, historians, and citizens presented the case for preserving an “architectural gem; an auditorium of Stradivarius grade,” but the groundswell of public opinion that might have swayed the course of events did not materialize.

A headline in the *Colorado Springs Sun* on January 26 presaged the actions to come: “Cool Council Delays Action on Burns Appeal.” City Council was made up of eight members: Karl Andrews, Luis Cortez, Richard Dodge, Robert Kohler, Betty Krouse, Andrew Marshall, Lawrence Ochs and influential Mayor T. Eugene McCleary. Both McCleary and Marshall also sat as members of the Board of the Exchange National Bank; Lawrence Ochs had urged a “hands off” policy by Council since the question first arose in October.

At a key meeting in mid February, spokesmen for the State Historical Society and The National Trust for Historical Preservation testified, as did Dana Crawford, Denver consultant behind the hugely successful restoration of Larimer Square. Ms. Crawford offered her services without fee to investigate productive use of the building “which could be a huge plus for everyone.”

Prime mover for the Exchange National Bank was its vice president Karl Ross. “We’re always happy to talk to people, but we’ve been wasting time since October 16, and we’re getting a little tired of it.” Expansion, he told Council, was critical to the bank. He also indicated that specifications for demolition had been drawn up and bids were soon to go out.

The Landmarks Council proposed that the matter be put to a public vote, reasoning that because the Burns Theatre was a gift to the city, the citizens of Colorado Springs should have a voice in its future. The City Attorney found that Council could draw up an ordinance, to be submitted to a vote of the people on April 3.

By a slim margin, Council agreed to take the matter up again at their meeting on February 27, allowing two weeks for additional input.

## **A Broader Debate**

The question, as it turned out, was larger than the Burns Theatre itself. By dint of timing, restoration of the Burns got caught up in the broader (and seemingly perennial) debate over the city’s need for a civic center-cum-performance-space. Voters had recently rejected such a center, but aspirations for the venue re-surfaced in the form of CONCUR, a planning committee headed by Mayor-to-be Robert Isaac.

There was concern in some quarters that allocating money to the Burns would jeopardize chances for construction of the new and larger facility.

Though an apparent natural constituency, the city's major musical institutions were split on the issue.

The Colorado Springs Symphony Association was not in favor. Quoting General Manager Bee Vradenburg, an article in *The Sun* reported that while the Symphony Board agreed with the need for a facility for the city's cultural and entertainment performances, it "could not endorse the current effort to save the Burns because it doesn't meet the current or future requirements of the symphony audience." The Symphony preferred to have funds go for "an auditorium with larger seating capacity and ample support facilities."

Dr. J. Julius Baird, Artistic Director for the Colorado Springs Opera Association, was a passionate supporter. "The Burns is a priceless treasure... a gem of a theater... with perfect sight lines and acoustics."

"Why throw out something fine when we already have it here?" He was careful however, not to cast the matter as either/or. Noting that the mayor's committee for the civic center had recommended two theaters, one that would seat 1,500 people and one that would seat 2,500, Dr. Baird suggested a creative mix of the Fine Arts Center's Little Theater, the mid-sized Burns, and a new 2,500 seat facility to meet the variety of needs. This trinity of so-called "fixed acoustical parameter" spaces was put forth as an alternative to the proposed "compromise" auditorium (that could be expanded and contracted) which would be quite costly to build and of lesser artistic quality.

The two other local arts organizations – The Choral Society and the Pikes Peak Arts Council – declined to take a stand.

## **To No Avail**

In the final weeks before the Council vote, supporters of the Burns pursued two other tracks. Julius Baird organized a petition drive to secure the 1649 signatures which would require the issue to be put on the April ballot.

Dr. Baird turned in the 1700 signatures on February 6, but an informal deadline set by the city clerk had passed. According to City Attorney Gordon Hinds, the charter does not stipulate a deadline, and the city clerk must accept the petitions, *but* the clerk has a total of 10 days to certify the signatures, and Council has up to 20 days to act. "I'm not saying it can't be done in less time than that, but if either the clerk or the Council insists on taking the entire time allowed, they just might not get on the ballot."

Meanwhile, the Landmarks Preservation Council monitored progress of its initiative (begun in 1971) to have the Burns Theatre placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The requisite papers had been filed with the state Historical Society, which in turn forwarded the final

paperwork to the Department of the Interior in Washington. The Historical Society notified the owner of the Burns estate in October, 1972 that the Theatre had been nominated for the National Register. (Coincidentally or not, it was toward the end of that month that the Burns' tenants were abruptly advised by the Exchange National that the building have been declared unsafe.)

Landmarks made its last-ditch stand at the February 27, 1973 meeting of City Council. Newly prepared artist's sketches demonstrated the effect a refurbished Burns could have on the downtown core. Dana Crawford spoke, as did Richard Pearl, new President of Landmarks, who repeated the plea for the question to be put to voters. "Contrary to rumors, the Burns Theatre is not in any way structurally endangered. All the technical evidence is that the Burns will be going strong after the rest of the neighborhood has fallen apart."

Treasurer Harold Seely stressed that "if the interest and charm are removed from downtown, it will wither away no matter how many big buildings are put up."

Dr. Frank Tucker announced that he had gotten word from the office of Rep. Frank Evans that the building had in fact been officially listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. The City Attorney stated that it had not.

It was all to no avail. Newspaper headlines the following day told the tale: "City Decides Burns To Fall Without Vote." The decision was four to two, with Councilmen Dodge and Cortez in favor of placing the matter on the April ballot, Councilmen Ochs, Andres, Kohler, and Krouse opposed. Mayor McCleary and Councilman Marshal abstained.

Demolition began forthwith. Many of the interior fittings had already been removed, and artifacts were being sold by closed bid auction. Jimmie Burns' leather-bound mining books went on the block and the imported Italian marble was sold by the square foot.

## **Landmark Jewel Lost**

A week after the critical Council meeting, newspapers announced that the March 6 issue of the Federal Register included the official listing of the Burns Building on the National Register of Historic Places. When he was contacted by the *Gazette Telegraph* Karl Ross said that bank officials had been notified, but that the designation would not affect the Bank's plans to demolish the building. In the battle between preservation and progress, "progress" had won.

But, if only in her demise, the stately Burns had the last laugh. The building that was supposed to crumble at the tap of a sledgehammer defied the wrecking ball. Destruction of the superbly-built Burns cost twice as much as its construction, and took endless weeks to accomplish.

Its former site is occupied – as it has been for 30 years – by a parking lot.