



In the Beginning

A request published in the 1904 Prescott Daily Journal Miner urged businessmen of the city to attend a meeting on Feb. 12 to discuss a proposal from the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks Lodge #330 to include 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 a good 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 opportunity is offered," the newspaper notice stated.

The Elks Lodge's original plans did not call for a theatre. Entertainment-hungry residents raised the necessary funds and it was incorporated into the plans for the three-story building housing the lodge on the top floor, offices on the second floor and retail space on the ground floor.

The granite cornerstone of the building was laid on April 3, 1904, with an excited crowd in attendance. Architecturally, the building represents a transition from the Victorian commercial styles of the 19th century to the Sullivanesque and New-Classical designs of the early 20th century.

The February 10, 1905, Prescott Weekly Courier reported:

"The peer of that theatre is not found east of San Francisco until the great cities of the Mississippi Valley are reached, and even there our theatre is outclassed only as to size, for our theatre is about as perfect as the handiwork of man generally gets to be."

The grand opening of the Elks Opera House was Monday, Feb. 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 musicians from Prescott, Jerome and Phoenix. Opera boxes sold for \$20.00 and general admission was \$2.50. The box office proceeds totalled \$1,225, leaving a \$600 to \$700 net profit for the Elks Lodge.

The Weekly Arizona Journal headline asserted: "Opening of Elks Theater Last Night Brilliant Social Event."

Prescott residents were equally proud of their opera house, around which they built their business and social lives. The location – one block east of the Yavapai County Courthouse Plaza and along the streetcar route – was ideal. Prescott was a convenient stopover for companies traveling between the larger cities to the east and west. Famed performers Sir Harry Lauder 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.

The venue, which at the time boasted 900 seats and eight dressing rooms, also was used a great deal for balls, civic presentations and high school graduations. The acoustics were considered "superb."

The Advent of Cinema

The 1915 film masterpiece, *Birth of a Nation*, was shown at the Elks in 1916. 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 owing to the Western Electric sound system. Movies were a mainstay of the Elks Opera House through the 1970s, with live performances returning in the 1980s.

Major physical changes started at the Elks Opera House in the 1940s, when the opera boxes and ornamental finishes were removed to accommodate wide-screen movies. The copper elk statue atop the roof and an inside box office also eventually disappeared as did a second set of balcony stairs.

Under New Management

The Arizona Community Foundation purchased the Elks Opera House in 1982. That same year the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Yavapai College managed the theater from the mid-1980s until 1992, when the college's performing arts center was built. Prescott College succeeded as Elks manager and during its stewardship, the building benefited from many grant-funded structural repairs and equipment upgrades.

The City of Prescott acquired the Elks Opera House from the Arizona Community Foundation in February 2001, paying \$250,000 in a bid to preserve the historic landmark and ensure its continued use as a community gathering place. The Elks Opera House Foundation was organized by a group of Prescott citizens in late 2002 as a non-profit, tax exempt Arizona corporation.

The City of Prescott and the Elks Opera House Foundation are steadfast in their partnership to restore the 107 year old Elks Opera House in downtown Prescott to its original glory. Recent improvements to the Elks Opera House include the restoration of the first lobby, the addition of heating and air conditioning, and the renovation of the green room and dressing rooms. On Friday, December 9, 2006 "Bill", the much beloved elk made of Arizona copper who adorned the top of the Elks Opera House from June 5, 1905 to 1971 was returned to the top of the Elks Opera House following his restoration and rehabilitation. "Bill" had been moved in 1971 and taken to the Elks Club, B.P.O.E. #330 when they moved to their new building.

The next step in the renovation was the renovation of the inner (2nd) lobby, concessions upgrades, and the installation of a new, state-of-the-art sound system. In the lobby the existing dropped ceiling has been removed, the artwork was restored, and the electrical wiring and fixtures were upgraded. The concessions upgrades included the addition of a new soda fountain, refrigeration, ice machine, ice well and hand sink. The existing concession stand was refinished. The City of Prescott contributed over \$135,000 to the sound system and concessions. An Arizona Heritage fund grant and a match by the Arizona Questers will fund the \$40,000 lobby renovation.

House "Goes Dark"

The Elks Opera House 'went dark' on July 1, 2009 to begin a yearlong restoration process; it reopened on July 24, 2010 with a gala celebration featuring selections from the Phoenix Opera. Prodigious fund raising by the Elks Opera House foundation raised more than \$1.7 million for this restoration. An early donation of \$1-million dollars from the Harold James Family Trust kicked the fund raising into high gear (the trust later added an additional \$250,000 donation).

This restoration brought the Elks back to its splendor when it opened in 1905.