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SOUTHERN UTAH LIFE

Opera House stars during historic buildings tour in Dixie's downtown

By Susan Crook

For The Spectrum & Daily News

ST. GEORGE — Historic buildings in the St. George Downtown Historic District will be open for guided public tours Jan. 14 as part of the Heritage Days Sesquicentennial celebration.

How many opera houses got their start as wine cellars? How many opera houses have also been sugar beet seed processing plants?

The St. George Opera House is probably unique on both counts. If you walked up Main Street to 200 North in 1980 you would have seen a group of vacant buildings on a neglected lot.

Imagine this same corner on a lovely evening in 1880. Theater-goers are buzzing with anticipation as they hurry to their seats to view the latest production of the St. George Dramatic Association.

In this vat-to-riches story, the humble wine cellar went through a glass slipper transformation that made it the cultural hub of St. George and its environs for more than 50 years. What started in 1864 as the Gardener Club's stone-lined hillside dugout for the storage of Dixie wine got an upper story and a sizable addition between 1877 and 1880 thanks to the recently-formed Builders Union.

After the completion of the courthouse (1876), tabernacle (1876), and St. George Temple (c. 1877), the men who had learned their trades on these buildings decided to form an organization known as the Builders Union to pro-



ABOVE LEFT: The St. George Opera House is seen in this May 2010 photo. **COURTESY OF CRAIG J. HARVEY** **ABOVE RIGHT:** The old Social Hall in St. George was at one time used as a sugar beet seed plant by Utah-Idaho Sugar Company. **COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**



See more photos of historic downtown St. George online at www.thespectrum.com/photos.

mote building in the area.

Miles P. Romney, son of pioneer architect/builder Miles Romney, was chosen as their director. One of the first projects was to build an addition to the wine cellar and convert the structure to a social hall, in later years known as the St. George Opera House.

It probably didn't hurt that Romney was also a member of the St. George Dramatic Association and performed in many of the local plays produced by them.

To accommodate dramatic productions, the wooden floor had an ingenious structure, with a pivot at the west end that allowed it to be tilted down approximately four feet to give the audience a better view of the stage on the east. The raked floor, and a hand-me-down curtain and sets from a bankrupt New York opera company sent home by an alert, community-minded Mormon missionary, made for a first-rate performance hall.

The St. George Social Hall Company, which owned and



managed the Opera House, probably should have taken fewer squash and more cash in payment for tickets. In August 1900, with no assets other than the building, they were forced to relinquish title to the LDS Church to pay a debt. The shows still went on under the new management but attendance at live performances declined as movies became more popular.

In the 1930s the LDS Church transferred the property to the Utah and Idaho Sugar Company, which converted it to a mill for cleaning sugar beet seed. The opera house was modified to accommodate the beet seed processing equipment and several warehouses were constructed adjacent to it.

After U&I Sugar closed the mill the complex sat vacant and forlorn.

When Mayor Karl Brooks, Sun Capital Bank President John Allen and St. George Economic Development Director Bob Nicholson looked at the site, they saw not a derelict mill but an arts

center with the Opera House once more resplendent as its crowning jewel.

The vision became a reality with a campaign led by Elaine Alder to raise awareness and funds — around \$700,000 from generous donors — that resulted in restoration of the Opera House and its rededication in 1996.

Alder credited local architect and current St. George Preservation Commission chair Kim Campbell with being “ingenious in keeping the structure within budget and still fitting for the Pioneer Center.” Several of the warehouses on the site were also rehabbed to become The Social Hall and the St. George Art Museum. The complex, known as the Pioneer Center for the Arts, is owned and operated by the City of St. George.

Tours of the Opera House and other downtown historic buildings will be conducted by St. George Historic Preservation Commissioners, St. George Live! actors and Washington County Historical Society board members from noon to 4 p.m. Jan. 14.

Tour maps are online at the St. George City website and will be available at the Social Hall and at each historic building the day of the event. Tours are free and open to the public. Contact Craig Harvey at 627-4235 for more information.

Susan Crook is the Central and Southern Utah Field Representative for Utah Heritage Foundation, Utah's statewide historic preservation nonprofit. She lives in St. George.