

Otwell Associate Architects as Depicted by Arizona Highways

This Old House

Looking down from the balcony of Prescott's newly renovated Elks Opera House is like watching colors from an old movie drip through time — spreading across the barrel ceiling and down the walls, forming a vintage yet modern-day masterpiece.

This is a renovation success story, and it began by digging into the theater's past. By studying layers of canvas and paint, the restoration team was able to interpret the mysterious array of century-old photos and ultimately reproduce the deep golds, greens and burgundies that existed when the stately theater opened to the public in the early 1900s.

In addition, original stenciling hidden beneath the aged layers became models for exact, hand-painted replications that now grace the walls. Ornamental plasterwork was re-created based on original, cast-plaster moldings dug up during the renovation. Nearly 1,000 tin ceiling tiles, rusted and warped with age, were stripped, repainted and hand-pounded back into shape. Every detail, from the floor to the ceiling, the chandelier to the opera boxes, was flawlessly restored,

renovated or preserved with historical and architectural accuracy.

"We don't like to guess," says Bill Otwell, an architect for Otwell & Associates, the firm behind the theater's restoration. "We like to have confirmation before putting a historical element back."

He says the building's "good bones," which were reinforced with new wood and steel beams by Haley Construction Co., are the reason the opera house stands strong today. But it's more than just a solid structure.

"This beautiful theater is the heart of the community," says Elisabeth Ruffner, a longtime Prescott resident, historian and chair of the Capital Campaign for the Elks Opera House restoration.

Like so many theaters built at the turn of the last century, this one, which now features gold-leaf design, detailed plasterwork, a proscenium arch and elegant drapery, has seen a number of changes.

Over the years, it evolved from a live-per-

formance theater in 1905 to a silent-film house in 1910 to a wide-screen theater in the 1940s, when movies were all the rage. It remained a movie theater until the early 1980s, when live performances, once again, took center stage.

Perhaps the biggest change during that evolution was the removal of four ornate opera boxes, which were torn down in the 1940s to make room for the movie screen. That move took away "the character and originality of the theater," according to Mic Fenech, the director of administrative services for the city of Prescott, which owns the building. The theater's splendor and elegance were boarded-up behind wooden panels "until the Elks Opera House Foundation was able to raise close to \$2 million to do this beautiful restoration," Fenech adds.

Today, that restoration takes visitors on a guided tour of the last 100 years.

"As you walk into the theater through the first lobby and then through the second, you're going from about 1928, through 1915, and into the 1905 theater," Fenech says. "It's like walking back in time."

It's a form of time travel that's especially meaningful to the hometown crowd. "They've lived their lives here," Fenech says of longtime Prescott residents. "Maybe they had their first kiss here or their first date."

Jody Drake is on that list, and her fondest memory of visiting the Elks Theatre takes her back to the early 1970s.

"We'd just seen *The Cowboys*, one of the most romantic movies ever made," says Drake, a Prescott native whose husband proposed to her outside the theater in 1972. "He said, 'We're really good buddies. We ought to get married.' That's about as romantic as it gets."

There are hundreds of stories like hers, and thanks to the meticulous renovation and preservation of what some people call "Prescott's jewel," more stories are yet to come.

"It's a dream come true for this community," Ruffner says.

— *The Elks Opera House is located at 117 E. Gurley Street in Prescott. For information, call 928-777-1367 or visit www.elksoperahouse.com.*

Arizona Department of Transportation

Like so many theaters built at the turn of the last century, the Elks Opera House in Prescott has been through a number of changes. At one point, it even played the role of movie theater. But thanks to an extensive and meticulous restoration, live performances are once again taking center stage.

by Rachelle Sparks



Prescott's newly renovated Elks Opera House displays fresh color and grandeur (right and above).
| NICK BEREZENKO

The façade (below, right) is shown circa 1910. | SHARLOT HALL MUSEUM