

Opera house dedicated in 1906

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The history of the Oberlin Opera House goes back to Dec. 31, 1906, when it was dedicated with an eastern opera company presenting, "The Mikado." It was located on the southern lots of the present Sunflower Cinema Theater, Golden Age Center and bowling alley complex at 220 N. Penn in downtown Oberlin.

It was described as the most exquisite building for such a purpose between Denver and Chicago. It was built by a Kansas City Construction Company, using a mule-powered load lift for the bricks which were made by Broderick Bricks of Oberlin for the interior. The outer surface of bricks were shipped from eastern Kansas by train and tenders and brick-layers also came by train from Kansas City.

Opening night showed a packed house, filling the main floor seating plus two balconies. Seated on the lap of his father, D. G. Addleman, was the late Ted Addleman, father of Rusty Addleman.

Many plays and operas were brought in from the east, and later it was used for local plays, commencement exercises and other school and community programs. Among owners were Dowden, Henry Beardsley and Tudor Stevenson.

After the Oberlin Elementary School was completed in 1926, many of these programs were moved to the new school gym.

Down at the Wigwam Theater, located a block south, a dime bought a seat in 1928 to watch Hoot Gibson as a cinema cowboy in "Clearing the Trail," on bargain nights. Meanwhile, at the Oberlin Opera House, such features as the one-night stand by Chick Boyes Players, presenting "What A Woman Will Do," was packing them in.

After the Wigwam closed in 1928, most of its equipment was purchased for the Chief Theater. In the 1930s the Indian motif was used in remodeling the building, now called the Chief Theater. Southwest murals were painted on the walls by Harold Bearney of Almena and Axel Ericson of



THE OPERA HOUSE, dedicated on New Year's Eve, 1906, converted to a movie house, called the Chief Theater. was a popular place for operas, plays, school programs, commencement and other functions for many years. It was later

Oberlin. Movie fees were 11 cents for children and 25 cents for those ages 13 and above.

The big news in March 1928 was that the opera house would soon become the first theater operation west of Salina to present "talkies," those innovative new movies with sound.

Going to the movies was a family tradition for many years and Tuesday night was "Bargain Night" when cost for a ticket was less. Friday and Saturday nights were almost always Westerns, but many other comedies and dramas were popular throughout the week. Iva Johnston sold tickets and did the janitor work for 22 years, and later she and her family lived in an apartment on the second floor of the building.

After television came into homes in the area, there was a wane in attendance at the movies. The roof at the Chief Theater showed deterioration and after a big rain during the Mini-Sapa celebration the last weekend in September 1973, the roof collapsed, ending nearly 65 years of service for the building.

The building was demolished and later the Sunflower Cinema opened as a new theater in the former Pepsi building, just north of the original theater. Senior citizens also campaigned to raise funds for a senior center, which later opened as Golden Age Center in the same building.

When the roof which covered both buildings was beyond repair, a fund-raising campaign,

spearheaded by senior citizens, Greg Lohofener and many others, to tear it down and construct a new complex, was started. The new building includes a modern senior center and meal site with a new kitchen, modern theater, and the new bowling alley, for which funds are presently being sought.

Architect for the new building was Rex Olson of Boulder, Colo., and contractor was Sappa Valley Construction, owned by Kevin Brown of Oberlin. Both are 1979 graduates of Decatur Community High School.

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