Crowley Grand Opera House

An old treasure hidden away

By John St. Ores
Acadia Bureau writer

CROWLEY — Probably a lot more people are shopping at the WalMart store here than at Dixie Hardware.

But the only thing atop WalMart is a roof.

Above the hardware store, just a brisk, rattling ride on a dusty freight elevator, is a lost treasure so rare that time seems to have stood still.

Dixie Hardware survives on Parkerson Street, in a downtown area that has seen better economic times. It's a genuine southern treasure, an eclectic agglomeration of Mixmasters, masonry drills and 20 Mule Team Borax.

But if you think mountains of knick-knacks and gee-gaws is all there is to see, think again. For Dixie Hardware is only the bottom of the iceberg.

It's the Crowley Grand Opera House, a beautiful old belle that many natives do not even know exists. But even that anonymity serves to perpetuate both the myth and the magic of the elegant edifice.

Olen Reynolds, owner of Dixie Hardware, steps off the freight elevator and commences a tour into the past.

One is reminded of similar landmarks that are signposts in our nation's history, like Ford's Theatre and the Ryman Auditorium.

The Grand Opera House was originally built in 1901 by one-time deputy sheriff David Lyons. Built of bricks and cypress, the Opera House cost $19,000, a princely sum at the turn-of-the-century.

Small shops dotted the first floor, where the hardware store now exists, and a 70-foot, solid oak and cypress staircase (now gone) rose from the ground floor to the entrance of the Opera House.

The auditorium doors were 14 feet high and three inches thick, built specifically to enhance the acoustics. The central isle was 12 feet wide and had 47 rows of hand-crafted, oak and cypress seats on each side, allowing for seating for 1,500.

Oak floors, eight inches thick were topped by ornately-carved railings surrounding hand-crafted cypress balconies.

The opera stage and seating area has been a storage area for the hardware store for many years. On the far right is an elevator that was installed in the center of the opera house by one of the past owners after the opera house closed and was just a hardware store.

The Grand Opera House played host to such luminaries as Babe Ruth, Irene Dunn, Jack Dempsey and Huey Long. And David Lyons became known as the "Amusement King of Louisiana."

When he died in 1940, the Grand Opera House began a slow, painful demise of its own.

Today, its stands as a dirty, cluttered shell of its former self. Boxes and crates are piled high in every corner, containing everything from metal flat-head screws to antique soft drink bottles and reams of World War II-era aluminum culled from packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes. ("Lucky Strike has gone to war").

The grand old lady cries out for help, but Reynolds says a rescue of the Opera House doesn't seem to be in the immediate offing.

"Unfortunately, this is only one of a number of such buildings around the country," he said. "It would be nice to save them all, but you're talking about an undertaking of several million dollars at this site alone."

For the time being it will have to be enough just to know that the Grand Opera House is there. Waiting and hoping for a time when it might again be called upon to serve as a showcase of art and architecture, and perhaps even as an anchor for a revitalized downtown looking toward the new millennium.

Dixie Hardware is located at 505 N. Parkerson Avenue. While regular tours are not offered, Olen Reynolds can usually be coaxed to take the freight elevator back into history.

Main ballroom in its heyday.

The decorative railings around the box seats by the stage.

The ceiling of both the auditorium and Grand Ballroom was crafted of over 42,000 one-inch pine slats, precisely fitted.

The 80 by 50-foot stage includes two sets of trap doors, leading to a hidden area beneath the stage. The walls of the off-stage dressing rooms are literally alive with drawings and dated inscriptions.

Medallions, pressed tin tiles, and hand-painted pressed tin mural decorate the four VIP boxes that flank the stage. Winged cherubs on a field of blue sky surround the electrical drop lighting fixture.

Decorated ceiling in one of the box seats near the stage.

Photos by Terri H. Fensel