Crowley rallies to rescue, renovate old Rice Theater

By SUZIE SMITH
Advertiser correspondent

CROWLEY — Rather in this decade, the Rice Theater closed. Nobody remembers exactly when, but it was just about the time the new, larger, multi-screened cinema house opened, local residents recall.

So the lovely, old Art Deco 1930s structure on the city's main downtown thoroughfare was abandoned and surrendered to vandals and nature, until its rescue by preservation-minded folk last year.

Since then, a few events have been held at the building, now dubbed the Rice City Civic Center, although renovations are incomplete and all donated money has been spent.

Crowley City Councilwoman Isabella de la Houssaye says local resident Florence Bergeron should be given most of the credit for saving the building.

"Most of it was her idea before anyone else thought of it," de la Houssaye recalls. "When I was first elected to the council, she telephoned me about historic preservation."

The building sits on Parkway Street, about two blocks south of the parish Courthouse in the city's Historic District, which lies mostly south and east of the Courthouse. De la Houssaye pointedly notes that Crowley had the seventh largest historic district in the state when it was registered in 1992.

"I don't know where we stand now, but we do have a large number of buildings."

An avid reader and other residents started making plans for the city's 100th birthday (1997), thoughts turned to the old, abandoned theater. The city's Historic Preservation Committee was anxious to purchase the property, but the asking price was $200,000 — too high for an economy that was spiraling downward in 1991.

"We just couldn't justify that expenditure," the councilwoman said.

Circumstances were changing, however. The company which owned the building, Southern Amusement Company, was phasing out its string of theaters and the building's value and asking price came down when the roof started leaking very badly, de la Houssaye said.

In 1997, the year of the city's centennial celebration, city officials felt justified in approving the purchase for $50,000.

So now the city had the keys to the door. What next?

"It was so smelly you couldn't get in the front door," recalled Mayor Robert Landry.

De la Houssaye noted, "The structure is so solid as it can be, but this place was filthy."

Cash and labor donations started coming in. Local author Dorothy McNeely donated the proceeds from her book, "Crowley: The First 100 Years" and the Little Theatre, which had ceased to operate, gave $25,000.

Richard Arnaud, director of the Southeast Louisiana Vo-Tech School in Crowley, is "more or less the chairman of renovations," according to Mayor Landry.

Under his guidance, students began to electrify the building and designed a 30-foot stage. As some of the students graduated, they were hired by the city to build the stage they had designed on school computers, the mayor said. Their computer hardware work has been framed and hangs in the theater lobby.

The Advertiser was taken on a tour of the building by de la Houssaye and Jody Viator, a local shrimp and insurance agent who has served as "manager" during the few public events that have already taken place.

Approaching the building, one steps onto a veranda that distinguishes the front walkway from the paved sidewalks on either side. Glancing up, the marquee is still in place, but needs work — about $15,000 worth of work, de la Houssaye points out.

Walking back a few steps and looking upward at the Art Deco architecture, it is noticed that one of the colorful tiles is missing. Viator quickly informs that the tile has been saved and can be put back into place.

Entering the lobby, still walking on the terrazzo, one sees freshly-painted walls and is told of local prisoners who labored over that task.

The contrast with today's stark, undressed cinema is startling. This is more than a building where motion pictures were viewed; it is the work of dedicated craftsmen of the late 1930s. There is atmosphere and one is surrounded by the ghosts of past decades — the soldiers returning home from World War II and the boom-era '50s teen-agers who crowded in, anxious to see the latest from Hollywood.

Walking into the auditorium, one realizes there was an attempt to accommodate the later crowds who came in fewer and fewer numbers. New, cushioned seats were installed two years ago.

The eye, however, instantly focuses on the new stage under construction and the massive brick wall behind it. There is room behind that wall for dressing rooms, says De la Houssaye — a hint of the plans for this new civic center.

Looking up, one sees the soaring ceiling where the leaky roof damaged some of the large tiles; turning around, there is the balcony. To get there, one heads toward the front of the building to the stairs, located just behind the cashier's cubbyhole.

Sadly, the work of vandals is observed while climbing the beautiful, Victorian-style carpeted stairs which have been violated by paint. Apparently, the walls are all unusual from buckets. The grotto at the top of the stairs is riddled with graffiti scrawled on walls.

The memories triggered by the balcony are not all pleasant. This

(See THEATER, page 14)