Duchamp Opera House: A bit of St. Martinville history

by Paris Noel

Ghostly echoes of operatic voices from the past are deeply absorbed within the fibers of the Duchamp Opera House. The historical structure was built between the 1830s and '40s by master carpenter David François Sandoz, a native of Switzerland.

Sandoz moved to the United States as a child and soon found himself within the growing community of St. Martinville. He quickly became a valuable asset to the community while working as a master carpenter in the efforts to build many of the town's historical structures.

Sandoz built the Duchamp Opera House with handmade bricks of clay retrieved from Bayou Teche. The opera house was built as a means to accommodate the cultural life in St. Martinville, and performers from around the world graced the stage with entertainment. Grand Balls adorned the evenings' ends with costumed barons, marquises, counts and countesses dancing the minuet on ballroom floors glazed over with candle wax.

In its heyday, the Duchamp Opera House was the largest and newest of three of its kind in St. Martinville. Throughout the years, the ground floor served as a feed and seed store, a grocery store and a mercantile store, the second floor continually remained a place of entertainment.

Beyond the elaborate French doors of the second floor opera house are four beautiful fireplaces decorated with exquisite moldings and cypress wood floors.

During its early years, the Duchamp Opera House was notable for hosting fund-raisers in efforts to build the community. The town's first hand-pump fire wagon was one of the many contributions to derive from its generosity.

The opera house played an instrumental role in saving the city during the St. Martinville Great Fire of 1856. The interruption of a ballet performance brought both audience and performers together to form a two-block bucket brigade in efforts to extinguish the fire.

Another community asset to derive from the generosity of the Duchamp Opera House was a new organ at St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church in St. Martin.
In 1877, David Sandoz died, and his beloved wife, Claire Christine, followed a year later. Their only surviving child, Marie Amelie Sandoz Duchamp, inherited the opera house. It continued to house the operatic voices and lavish performances of entertainment until her death in 1913.

That same year, brothers Reuben, Zerben H. and Willie J. Bienvenu purchased the property from the Duchamp heirs, and upon their return from military service in March of 1918, they opened a department store known as Bienvenu Bros. with the slogan, “Leaders in Fashion.”

Bienvenu Bros. carried the finest brand name merchandise from wholesale houses in New Orleans, Dallas, St. Louis and New York, and the booming business allowed the Bienvenus to begin remodeling the interior structure of the building. They added an interior staircase to access the second floor, for the opera house entrance originally was accessed from an outdoor staircase with a carriage way to the south side of the building.

Willie J. Bienvenu died in the 1930s, leaving behind no heirs to his estate. The surviving brothers and their children operated the successful business until 1994. In August of 1998, the surviving heirs of Reuben and Zerben H. Bienvenu donated the building to the city of St. Martinville.

The Duchamp Opera House project quickly became a city government project, with the intention of stretching tourism farther down St. Martinville's Main Street. It was decided that the cultural icon would serve two purposes: an antique mall on the ground level, while the opened stairs would lead to the refurbished opera house. The vision was to restore the building to its original glory.

The renovation was extensive, and workmen labored to remove an old wooden floor and dig out 18 inches of mud in an effort to pour a new foundation. During this process, innumerable artifacts were discovered predating the Civil War.

Elaborate plaster work with signatures of past performers dating back to the 1800s was discovered as old paneling was removed from the walls upstairs. The attic was adorned with massive Norman truss beams, and it was assumed that Sandoz designed the building according to the customs of his homeland, Switzerland.

The remodeled structure, now known as the Old Opera House, officially opened on Oct. 21, 2000. The total cost of renovation was $854,000.

In January 2001, the Evangeline Players performed "Driving Miss Daisy" to a full house on the second floor, currently known as the Duchamp Room, and it is now home to the Evangeline Players.

Since its renovation, the Duchamp Opera House has come full circle while opening its yearly calendar to plays performed by the Evangeline Players and the Acadia Players, as well as events such as pageants, drama camps, banquets and Christmas concerts. It has played an important role in the social and the economical world of St. Martinville.

The bottom floor of the Duchamp Opera House now houses a flea-market.

(BNP/Paris Noel Photo)