RIGHT: When the Elks Lodge was built in 1907, it had a front lawn on Third Street. Later additions covered the lawn to create an entrance directly from the street.

BELOW: Today, wedding receptions, parties and meetings are held in the building, now called De La Ronde Hall.

Old Elks Club was once ‘the life of the community’

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER
Special to The Advocate

For decades, Baton Rouge’s movers and shakers transacted business and relaxed at the old Elks Club, now De La Ronde Hall, located at 320 Third St, in the heart of downtown.

“It was the life of the community for a long time,” said Andrew J. Hart, a past exalted ruler of the Elks.

The late Ernest Gueymard described the importance of the building in a column in the State Times Oct. 29, 1974.

“The Elks borne was the center of much of the social life of old Baton Rouge and many dances or other events were held there. Its membership was drawn from the leading families of the area and each prospective member was carefully scrutinized before being voted into the lodge,” he wrote.

The local organization was formed by a group of friends who met at the Odd Fellows Hall on Third Street in April 1899. Twenty-five men — Dr. Harry J. Feltus, H.F. Brunet, W.M. Barrow, A.D. Barrow, Eugene Cazeaux, A.F. Cazeaux, E.P. Flower, Gov. Murphy J. Foster, P.P. Gordon, Sam A. Gourrier, Felix H. Gaudet, B.F. Hochenedel, Will A. Hurst, Charles Lehmann, Charles McVea, L.E. Morgan, Henry L. Pickard, P.E. Posy, Oscar F. Rabenhorst, A.E. Rabenhorst, L.J. Ricardo, LeDoux E. Smith, Julius Weis, Donald D. Williams and Robert N. Wise — signed the original charter to form Baton Rouge Elks Lodge 490 May 20, 1899. The first membership was issued to Foster, grandfather of the present governor.

With permission from the Grand Lodge of Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the membership was kept open for 30 days, and in that time, Dr. R.H. Aldrich, George S. Curt, L. Arthur Goddard, J.D. Housen, L.E. TL. Sharburne, and seven others were added to the list of charter members. Foster was the first exalted ruler.

One of the first items of business was to build a combination meeting place and theater — the Elks Theatre, at the southeast corner of Third and Florida streets. The theater was completely equipped, and the Elks Theatre became the center of activity in the area.

Artist Melissa Barrington is painting a modern mural in the room that was once the Elks gymnasium, considered the best equipped small gymnasium in the city.

Only four panes of stained glass were missing from two skylights in the ballroom when the Brassett family purchased the Elks Club.
The Opera House Association with president Ben R. Meyer, vice president W. T. W красивое, treasurer W. F. Beall and subscription committee members W. M. Barlow, O. A. Rabenhorst and Brunot formed the organization to entice the contractors and to solicit $4,000 from the community. The committee itself contributed $1,000, and in that the remainder of the money raised being fewer than 300 subscribers.

The souvenir booklet describes the building's history. Construction November 17, 1900, under the brilliant glare of electric lights with the excitement of all of Baton Rouge, while stage hands were hurrying among the painted scenes, and the audience expectation was immense. Upon a stage of the play, the beautiful drop curtain was raised, and the audience was greeted by a wild storm of applause, disclosing the enthusiasm setting the audience in a mood of anticipation to hear the best Christian. Every Elk must have felt a thrill of pleasure as the curtain rose to reveal the grand architecture of the theater. As the audience of the young lodge whose efforts have been crowned with such success.

More than 500 persons were present in the theater including some of the leaders in the city in its early years with H. R. Strube as its first manager.

There was so successful that the Elk's decided to build a separate lodge. The club purchased two lots across Third Street in 1904. The cornerstone was laid in this location for the new building. From the De Lange Hall, on April 2, 1907. The State Times described the new building event on April 13, 1907. Among the most important events of the entire town and every show closed its doors to prevent the loss of the event, which began at 2:30. The newspapers of the day carried several front-page stories concerning the event, which was held at the most "cathedral." Visiting Elk's from all parts of the state were here for the dedication of the building. The building cost between $35,000 and $40,000.

Oscar F. Rabenhorst, listed in the suggestion list, was given an honorary life membership in the Elk's for nearly a year of service in overseeing the construction of the new building. The building was set back from the street to create a spacious front lawn right on Third Street. In the basement and the building, the player cards, smoked cigars, discussed the day's happenings and checked the reviews of the latest movies, the machine giving the latest quotations.

The city was devastated when the Elk's Theatre was destroyed by fire in Atlanta. The owner of the Istrouma Hotel diagonally across the street, Eugene Lamb, and Brunot, a district court judge who later became a candidate for governor, were on the second floor of the building when it burned.

The card room contained slot machines, which could be found hidden in the walls of the place. The building was called the Tripod Building for many years until it was purchased by B. B. Taylor in 1927 and renamed the Taylor Building.

In 1927, under the leadership of the Elk's lodge, the club was completely reorganized. The modern building contained a central hall, a music hall, a billiard room, a grill room, a movie theater, and a dance floor. The Times of June 8, 1927 reported, "a lodge room of such spaciousness and elegance that no such room to any ceremonial." It even contained a Brunswick bowling alley, a pool table, a lounge, and the "first of its kind in Baton Rouge." It is its "best equipped small gymnasium in the city" contained equipment for basketball and volleyball as well as parallel bars, trapeze, ropes, a rowing machine, punch ball, wall ball and other equipment.

The article continued, "Nothing was spared to make the club complete. From the needs and tastes of its members exacting requirements.

One of the city's leading "characters" spent their days and evenings at the Elk's. "Bill" Roberts sires stories her father, John Kastrow, told about local events. He said that Cecil Blad would wander around the club, watching the card games, and if he did not approve of the way the games were played, he would say, "Cecil was down here every day," said Lucas. "We had to take the New Orleans papers every day."

The club's "best old guard" of yesterday, long gone to their reward, are probably turning over their graves under the drastic changes that have befallen Third Street, long the main street of the city. And now another blow has been struck — the Elk's was moved away.

For some years, the city struggled to lose the old building for a more central location. It was been empty for years when it was purchased by the Elk's, who formed a limited partnership in 1962. Pioneers in the once-luxurious rooms.

Brian Abt, his husband had lost it when he bought the building, Army said. "He loved that ballroom. It was his real estate. The Elk's built and owned by the Elk's, he said."

By the 1890s, the building was home to several dramatic activities in the Theatre of Baton Rouge," describes the fund-raising for the building.

The building was converted the old building to a place for reception and ceremonies, the old store fronts on the street and replaced with two new store fronts on the front lawn of the old building.

The building the Elk's chapter sponsored several important civic projects, including a high school magazine project of providing for the needy at Christmas. The Elk's chapter supported the needy people, said Hart. "We sold all pick-it-in and deliver." The Elk's chapter would start delivering the baskets at 5:30 a.m. Christmas Day, and the baskets were delivered to the homes of those in need of assistance.

The Elk's chapter also sponsored a project for the impecunious families with children moved the project to Christmas Eve.

The Elk's chapter had the Christmas project in mind. The Elk's was the Thanksgiving project for the homeless and destitute. The Elk's sponsored Boy Scout Troop 490, which used the gymnasium for a meeting pool. In 1960, de Soto's was dying a slow death. Shoppers chose newer shopping centers with modern amenities, and local businesses moved to outlying areas. Finally, in 1974, the Elk's abandoned the downtown lodge in favor of a location on Harrell's Ferry Road.

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