Phyllis LeJeune sits on a crate in the middle of the 50-by-80-foot stage of the 1,500-seat Crowley Grand Opera House, which is above the Dixie True Value Hardware store.

Opera house holds old tales, fresh appeal

By PAT WATTERS
Special to The Advocate

CROWLEY — For years, almost no one paid attention to the beautiful, nearly century-old Crowley Grand Opera House hidden away above a hardware store downtown on Parkerson Avenue.

With its big stage, auditorium and ballroom, the opera house stood silent, a ghostly and letter-strewn monument to the illiterate former farm boy who built it in 1901.

But lately, interest in the relic has picked up, according to Phyllis LeJeune, a True Value Hardware Store employee who conducts tours for anybody requesting it Mondays through Thursdays.

She and the store’s owner, Olen Reynolds, said there has even been talk of restoring the old opera house. But so far it’s just talk.

“There’s nothing definite, but I’d sure like to see it,” Reynolds said. “Find us a millionaire,” said LeJeune, laughing.

LeJeune said sometimes as many as 20 people will ride with her up the creaky old freight elevator to tour the opera house.

“People come from other parts of the state and even other states. Mississippi and Texas. And from Germany, France and England.”

She attributes the increased interest to recent publicity, including a feature about the opera house by Jeff Duhe on Louisiana Public Broadcasting.

LeJeune said the foreigners are attracted to the area by the late J. O. Miller’s recording studio, famous for Cajun music.

“Being interested in music, they want to know (about) this opera house,” he said.

The opera house is on the National Register of Historic Places, Reynolds said.

He bought the store in 1983. LeJeune began working there five years ago.

Both have steeped themselves in opera house lore, including old newspaper articles and courthouse records.

The lore began a year after the town’s founding in 1886 with the arrival in Crowley of a 24-year-old man who was to become the unlikely builder and proprietor of the opera house.

He was David Lyons from the Acadia Parish community of Bruin (now Brusly).
orphaned at an early age, growing up as a farmhand and stable boy. According to legend, he couldn't read or write, learning later in life to "draw" his name.

In the new town, Lyons worked as an Acadia Parish sheriff's deputy for four years. At an 1891 auction, he bought four lots for only $300 on what is now Parkerson Avenue, and he built and operated a livery stable there until 1900.

"He has met with splendid success, keeps good stock and is always courteous and obliging," according to the Crowley Daily Signal of Oct. 27, 1894.

In 1900, he moved the livery stable to another location and went to work building the opera house on the site. It cost him $5,000, a considerable sum in those days. It would seat 1,500.

LeJeune is convinced Lyons "did most of the work himself."

Despite being illiterate, a condition not uncommon in the working classes of those days, he had a "good mind," she said. Old newspaper accounts say he later built an exhibit hall and stable at the parish fairgrounds which he owned and a race track with grandstands.

How did Lyons know how an opera house was laid out? Maybe he rode the train to Houston or New Orleans and studied the ones there, LeJeune speculated. No one knows, she continued. He had no children, so there are no descendants to ask.

Reynolds pointed to markings in the middle of the first floor of the hardware store where, according to early news stories, "a magnificent flight of stairs" led to the wonders Lyons built above.

No one knows what became of those stairs. Now people use the freight elevator to get up to the wonders.

A large stage and orchestra seats occupy the second floor with balconies and a ballroom on the floor above.

To the right and left of the stage are box seats, one above the other. Each is decorated with cherubs hand-painted on the stamped-tin ceilings. Those were the most expensive seats in the house, Reynolds said. "The way they're built, people could see the people in the box seats across from them, but couldn't see the stage," he pointed out.

He believes this was Lyons' revenge on "swells" who likely snubbed him in his early days.

Reynolds pointed to a dusty pair of old-fashioned buttonhook men's shoes.

"Those were right there when I first came here. Nobody has disturbed them."

"That was in 1963 when he began calling on the hardware store as a salesman," he said.

The store has been there since 1948. It took the place on the first floor of various establishments that were there when the opera house was in operation. These included a farmer's market, a bus station, a pharmacy, a saloon and even a mortuary.

For all the grandness of construction and despite the name, opera was never staged in the Crowley Grand Opera House. The name came from Lyons' imagination, according to several accounts.

The walls of one of the dressing rooms in a wing of the main stage at the Crowley Grand Opera House are covered with the names of performers from plays years ago.

Scattered about the darkened floors are boxes, equipment and other overflow from the hardware store.

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He just thought that's what so fine a theater should be called.

What did show there were touring plays, vaudeville and movies. Bygone celebrities, including Jack Dempsey, Buffalo Bill, William Jennings Bryan and Huey P. Long, also appeared on the stage.


 Plays and vaudeville attracted people from afar, LeJeune said. They were the only such offerings between New Orleans and Houston, she said.

The movie "Birth of a Nation" drew the largest crowd ever when it was shown in 1917. After about 1921, live theater ended and movies were the only fare.

The long-ago plays come alive briefly for those up there touring the opera house today in a dressing room where a wall is filled with penciled names of long-dead performers. A poster advertises "Jimmy Giford and his orchestra" and "15 colored artists."

Hand-lettered on another wall: "At the end of the rainbow ..." and "No Smoking on Stage."

Lyons is a presence in all the opera house lore. When rowdy boys cut up and threw peanuts, he would stop the projector at an interesting moment and threaten to throw them out. He would come behind a lady watching a performance and remove her tall (view-blocking) hat and place it on the seat beside her.

He used to stand near the ticket window as people bought tickets and compute in his head the amount of money being taken in.

Most accounts say he was poor when he died in 1940. The last picture show in the Crowley Grand Opera House was in 1946.