Appearance by jazz legend to reopen Crowley landmark

The show goes on

Final preparations are made to the stage for today's reopening of the Grand Opera House of the South in Crowley. A performance by New Orleans jazz legend Irma Thomas will kick off the opera house's new season.

Thomas performance to mark rebirth of Grand Opera House of the South

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CROWLEY — At first, it seemed like a snap. At times, it seemed like it would never happen.

Now, it's almost here.

The Grand Opera House of the South will reopen tonight with a concert by New Orleans' Irma Thomas, capping a renovation project launched some eight years ago that will cost $4.5 million and revive the history-steeped landmark at 505 N. Parkerson Ave. in downtown Crowley.

This past week has been busy at the once-forgotten opera house, which served for years as a storage area over the old Dixie Hardware store, but activity has been more or less constant since the project began.

What's changed is the focus, and energy, as the reality of the opening draws near.

"I don't know what to say," Executive Director Kim Gattie said. "I hope I'll be able to get on stage and talk, and not cry. I always knew it was going to happen."

Gattie's father, A.J. Gielen, said that he would be proud if he could have seen tonight's show.
bought the property and selected his daughter to spearhead the revival of the facility that opened in 1901, then evolved into a vaudeville theater and silent movie house before fading into obscurity.

"When we started, I was planning on having my rehearsal supper in the ballroom upstairs," she said. "Now, we just had our seventh anniversary, and we have two kids."

She and husband Tommy have a son, Thomas, and a daughter, Mary Elizabeth.

"Mary Elizabeth is 16 months this month," Gattle said. "She'll grow up in here, just as Thomas grew up in the hardware store."

Until recently, Gattle's mother, Goo Goo, continued to run the hardware store, which had occupied the ground floor since 1946 and once used the opera house auditorium as a storage area.

"It was Dad's idea," Gattle said of the revitalization. "He thought it would take about a year and cost $300,000. We were naive. We didn't know how much it would take."

"The city almost bought it before the Gielesens did," said Ellsworth Smolens, chairman of the Crowley City Council and the treasurer of the revival. "We knew we had a diamond in the rough."

Every effort has been made to preserve the original look of the opera house with much of the original wood preserved in the floor, ceiling and balcony. Where originals weren't available, exact replicas have been carefully crafted, such as the lights created by Lafayette's Richard Delhommeaux.

The chairs are improved, to accommodate modern ideas of comfort for the capacity of 566, but they appear much as they did a century ago.

Scribblings on dressing-room walls, left there by previous troupes of performers, have been preserved.

"There are some modern touches, of course, like air conditioning, and an elevator. But anyone who is able should ascend the refurbished grand stairway that offers a showcase entrance.

The ballroom is still there, available for wine and cheese before performances, and a museum will feature many items found on the site or donated. Old programs, photographs, tickets and dresses provide a look at yesteryears.

Also in the museum will be the original lighted sign, patented in 1903 and reading "GRAND," that used to hang out front and is remarkably well preserved.

A premier series of five programs stretches from October to next May, but first up is Thomas, whose latest CD is titled, fittingly enough, Simply Grand.

"Ticket response has been very fast," Gattle said. "People are excited. It's beyond gratifying. It's been closed for 60-something years, and we're able to give a special gift to Crowley, something that will be enjoyed by many generations to come. I'm honored to be a part of it."