Work may start soon on old opera house

Jimm Bradshaw
jbradshaw@theadvertiser.com

CROWLEY — Kimberly Gielen Gattle was a nappy elementary school teacher when her dad decided in the summer of 1999 that she ought to oversee the rebirth of the Grand Opera House of the South.

She’s ready to get started on the actual work soon, if the bids are right and the ghosts allow it.

The century-old playhouse atop the Dixie Hardware store on North Parkway Avenue in Crowley had been closed since 1940, and time and the elements had begun to take their toll on the building. She didn’t know much about rebuilding opera houses, she admits. But, she did figure out almost right away that it would take a lot of time and a lot of money.

On Tuesday, she hopes, bids will be taken to begin the restoration of the old building. She hopes, doors for a performance this fall.

The 22,000-square-foot opera house was built at the turn of the last century from virgin Louisiana cypress, pine and oak by David E. Lyons of Crowley. It took two years to build and cost $18,000 in 1900 dollars. Shops, a cafe and a bus station, among other things, were downstairs.

Harry Ward’s Minstrels presented the first performance in the building Nov. 23, 1901. Eight hundred of the 1,000 seats were filled that night, and Lyon continued to bring crowds to see opera and mostly vaudeville shows and other attractions — including appearances by Huey Long, Clark Gable, Enrico Caruso, Babe Ruth and Madame de Vilchec-Bisset of the Paris Opera.

Lyons died in 1940, and the opera house was closed. It stayed that way until 1998, when Gattle’s father decided to buy the place.

On March 8, 1999, we had a family meeting and made the decision,” she said. She left teaching and worked in the hardware store for about a year. Then Daddy said, “It’s time to work on the opera house.”

Gattle went to New Orleans to the executive director Kimberly Gielen Gielen for help and the site is many years ago.

Opera

course in the arts at NYU, then rolled up her sleeves and got to work — looking for money, mostly.

That entailed forming a non-profit corporation and actually deeding the whole building, (including the hardware store) to the opera house corporation.

Complete renovation will cost more than $8 million — some of it coming from state and federal grants, but a lot of it from private donors. Bidders willing, the first phase of the renovation should use about $2.5 million.

The first phase will involve restoration principally of the theater part of the opera house. A second phase will focus on the 3,000 square-foot third-floor ballroom once used for cotillion balls and the like.

“This is an exciting project. We’re really hopeful that we can get enough done by the fall to have our first performance,” Gattle said. “But don’t forget, we’ll still need a lot of help.”

Grand Opera House executive director Kimberly Gielen Gattle and her son Thomas look out from a fancy box once used by rich patrons.

The Advertiser
Lafayette, La.
Monday, April 10, 2006
Page: 1C
Columns: 2-6
Page: 3C
Columns: 1-3