

Old Delphi Opera House gets face-lift

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DELPHI -- One of James Whitcomb Riley's favorite venues looks to be reborn.

Efforts to renovate the old Delphi Opera House, where Riley read poetry live several times in the late 1800s, and the near 150-year-old building that it is housed in have been ramped up. Working from the ground up, the Delphi Preservation Society and the Opera House Advisory Board have opened a new gallery in one of the three-story building's bays.

The Opera House Gallery, 109 S. Washington St., will serve as the new home for Carroll County artists Rena Brouwer, Terry Lacy and Alan McConnell. New work will hang on the walls and the artists will use the back of the space as a studio and workshop area.

Besides the modern track lighting, the gallery was renovated all by volunteer work. The White Iris flower shop last occupied the space. The walls were repainted, a new hardwood floor was installed and the ornate tin ceiling was emphasized.

"It's a historical building, and I'm thrilled to work in here," Brouwer said. "Basically, I'm setting up my homebase here. It's close to home for me and everyone has been tremendously supportive."

The Opera House Gallery opens Friday. A reception will be held from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m.

Brouwer will be showing her contemporary, trademark watercolor work while McConnell will show his latest outdoor photography. Lacy, who has worked in the handmade paper medium for 30 years, has expanded his art to watercolor and oil paints. A graphic designer as well, Lacy created the gallery's signs and logo.

The Opera House Gallery is next door to Martinez Fashion, the middle bay of the Opera House Building that was also know as "City Hall" -- despite never having any city government affiliation.

The southernmost bay is still empty, but plans are for renovations to be made to that space to lure another merchant, said Anita L. Werling, chairwoman of the Opera House Advisory Board.

Werling added that building tours will be held at 1 p.m. Saturdays. The tours will start in the gallery and then move up to the building's second floor, which has been used as storage and for residency. As part of a large-scale plan, the second floor will be turned into merchant spaces, a rehearsal hall, a multipurpose room and a kitchen for a banquet room.

Upstairs to the third floor is where Riley the famed "Hoosier Poet" held court and national touring opera singers performed. The first event held there was a dance in 1865 for soldiers returning from the Civil War, Werling said.

The stage is still there along with a backdrop painted by Delphi photographer John Ennis in 1882. A tin gutter at the foot of the stage held gas footlights. Old wooden seats are still screwed into the wooden planks of the small auditorium, and the Greek-themed decor can still be seen in a few spots. Werling said the balcony is a "mess" due to pigeons roosting there for decades.

The Opera House only lasted until 1914 when a fire in a Lafayette theater raised awareness of theaters on the second or third floor of a building that had only one entrance and exit.

Since then, the theater has gone untouched as the ceiling and roof crumble and peel away.

Werling said a new roof is one of the most critical additions to make the Delphi Opera House re-opening feasible.

According to new blueprints, Werling hopes to add on to the building to provide modern restrooms, an elevator, two fire escapes, dressing rooms and green rooms.

"We need all of these in order to reopen the opera house," Werling said.

The building still needs a lot of work, but Werling and the rest of the Delphi Preservation volunteer base see the Opera House Gallery as an important first step in revitalizing a significant part of the Carroll County Courthouse square.

"It's a nice space for a gallery," Lacy said. "It's like what you would want if you were to build one from scratch."

If you go

What: Opera House Gallery opening reception

When: 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Opera House Gallery, 109 S. Washington St., Delphi

Gallery Hours: Starting Saturday, the Opera House Gallery will be open from noon to 4 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays.

Also: Delphi Opera House tours will be held at 1 p.m. Saturdays

On the Net: www.delhipreservationsociety.org

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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