

“Performing Arts History Rich in Benevolence”

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It's an odd name, Rohrbaugh.

Unfortunately, it is also an unfamiliar name to many Ottawans. Yet, Col. Samuel B. Rohrbaugh (pronounced Roar-baw) for many years had a major impact on the cultural advancement of this community by providing quality music, dance and theatrical entertainment. As National Arts Week closes, it seems appropriate to remember the generosity of the man who, in effect, was the “patron saint” of the arts in Ottawa.

Born in Pennsylvania of Dutch parentage Rohrbaugh later moved to Illinois where he learned the lumber business. On the last day of 1869 he arrived by train in Ottawa, determined to seek his fortune in Kansas. Two days later, he began pursuing that quest by purchasing a local lumberyard.

For the following 37 years he operated the successful Rohrbaugh Lumber Co. at the corner of Third and Hickory, where the First National Bank is now located.

His interest in promoting cultural events was soon noted in the community when he built the first opera house in town. Later, in 1889, Rohrbaugh extensively remodeled a former skating rink and carriage factory to serve as a public auditorium.

With a seating capacity of 1,000, this excellent facility stood on the east side of Hickory, directly across from where the Franklin County Courthouse is today. However, a fire in 1895, whipped by 60 mph winds, leveled the wooden structure in minutes.

The loss to Rohrbaugh was nearly \$23,000 and the people of Ottawa suddenly found themselves without an adequate facility for plays, musical events and public meetings.

Again, Rohrbaugh's generosity came through. “If the people of Ottawa will raise a few thousand dollars, I will build them an opera house they will be proud of.”

The townspeople raised \$6,000 for the project and the rest of the \$40,000 for a splendid building came out of Rohrbaugh's own pocket.

What he created, with local architect George Washburn, was a magnificent brick edifice on top of the ashes of the old auditorium. Three stories tall, the building could seat 1,200, had a balcony and eight elegant private boxes, beautiful frescoed ceilings and walls, brilliantly lit by immense electric chandeliers that could be dimmed, had colored lights for the stage and 18 different painted backdrops.

The Rohrbaugh Theatre was, in short, one of the finest performing arts auditoriums in the Midwest.

Its gala opening was held Jan. 31, 1896, with a performance of “The Three Guardsmen,” starring Alexander Salvini, before a packed house. Special trains brought dignitaries from Kansas City, Lawrence and Topeka, such as a former governor, the state superintendent of schools and the attorney general.

Many years of fine drama, dance, opera and other musical entertainment followed for the people of Ottawa. The facility, however, usually operated at a financial loss which Rohrbaugh covered.

The generosity of Col. Rohrbaugh also benefitted several local organizations and churches, most notably the First Methodist Church. When the church sought to erect a new building, Rohrbaugh gave it the lots at Fourth and Hickory and also \$20,000 for the structure. The First Methodist cornerstone is therefore inscribed “Rohrbaugh Memorial.”

His impact on Ottawa was felt in other ways as well. He served for many years as a director of the Franklin County Fair, was vice president of the People's National Bank and was made an honorary member of the local Civil War soldiers' chapter for his generosity in aiding aged veterans.

He built several of the buildings standing on Main Street today, and erected his own home between his theater and his church. It is now the Lamb-Roberts Funeral Home.

On the day of Col. Rohrbaugh's funeral in 1907, businesses closed and Ottawa came to a standstill as his friends and neighbors filled the theater he gave to them. After numerous tributes were paid to this beloved community benefactor, he was laid to rest in the Rohrbaugh mausoleum in Hope Cemetery.

Although the Rohrbaugh Theatre was later destroyed by fire a second time, and replaced by the present auditorium in 1919, the following eulogy still is true. (Although it appears that a eulogy was part of the article, it was not printed in the newspaper).