

Opera House Returns to Small Community

Ah, the good ol' days when one could enjoy an evening out at the town's opera house for dinner and theater.

Those days are back in Rockwood, Pennsylvania at the Rockwood Mill Shoppes & Opera House thanks to Judy Pletcher, a lifelong resident of the Rockwood area. The building in this small rural community has run the gamut from lumber and feed mill to opera house to feed mill and once again back to opera house.

Built between 1898 and 1905 by Penrose Wolf, a local businessman and landowner, the proximity to the B & O Railroad made the location ideal. Wolf built the structure in two distinctive sections that are still apparent today.

The first floor of the clapboard-sided front section was used as a storefront for the lumber mill. The second floor served as an opera house. The rear three-story section, whose exterior walls are four-bricks deep, was added in 1905 and operated as both a feed and lumber mill.

These businesses were instrumental in the expansion of Rockwood and the surrounding area; in fact, Penrose Wolf himself was a major factor in the growth of the tiny borough. During the height of his lumber business he employed many of the men of the town and surrounding area.

The feed mill also operated with great success. "Ask Penrose Wolf for Sunkist, the flour of perfect purity," an ad in the 1912 Somerset County Leader urges.

The Opera House opened on the second floor of the building sometime around the turn of the century; thus, Wolf brought culture to the community, as well as business.

When Judy began her renovations, she found reminders of early minstrel shows on the walls of the old building. "Masie Ward Minstrels, October 1904" was etched on a dressing room wall. Next to it was the promise: "We will be back."

A handbill advertises "H.J. Meyer's Marvelous Moving Pictures and Specialties. Moral, instructional, pleasing. March 16, 1906." The November 30, 1906 issue of The Rockwood Leader encouraged locals to attend a performance of The Carra Comedy Company – "some of the best in the vaudeville profession."

The Opera House closed around 1918; its memory but a shadow in the community. The lumber and feed mill continued to operate until 1938.

In 1952, local resident, Ray Friedline, leased the building and opened his

own feed mill. For 40 years Friedline's Feed Store was an icon in the borough of Rockwood. For the gossip-minded, it was the place to find out about the latest news. Children knew they could count on some candy from Ray's counter and eagerly accompanied their fathers to pick up grain or fertilizer for the farm.

The family-run business closed in 1992, but it's not unusual to hear people, even today, refer to the building as "Friedline's."

The building lay vacant for eight years until Judy Pletcher discovered it. She was looking for a place to start a women's fitness center but immediately saw the potential this structure, so rich with history, offered.

The years had taken its toll; the floors, walls, and ceilings were coated with layers of dirt and grime from the feed mill and passing trains. The renovation became a labor of love flowing into late nights and long weekends for Judy, her husband, their son and daughter, and their spouses, each of whom also worked full time jobs.

"The kids thought I'd lost my mind," Judy said. "There were times I did, too."

Judy was careful to follow historical standards to restore the building. "Everywhere there was a light bulb, we put a light bulb," she said. They even restored the porcelain bases for those fixtures.

The wallpaper in the Opera House is very similar to the original. To purchase an exact reproduction would have cost \$100 a roll, and Judy needed 200 rolls! So she looked through book after book of patterns at the local Sherwin Williams and finally found a close match. The original was a grayish background with a yellow-gold emblem. The emblem in the new wallpaper is almost the same as the original. (You can see the pattern of the wallpaper in the background of the Mill Shoppe's website – www.rockwoodmillshoppes.com.)

The structure itself was solid – strong wooden beams and brick walls four layers thick ensured its longevity. The mill's five grain bins were 9' x 9' and built of 2x4's laid on their sides. There are enough 2x4's in the grain bins, which extend from attic to basement, to build an entire house! One grain bin was converted into a newly-built stairwell since the original stairs would not have passed safety codes. The remainder have been opened up and utilized for storage, a laundry room, and the day spa's shower. Stair-Glides® at the front of the Opera House provide access for the handicapped and elderly.

Restoration of the building began in February of 2000. By June they were able to open the first floor. The Opera House, which seats 300, opened in August, and the Day Spa and Tanning Salon opened in September. By April of 2001, the Fitness Center opened in the building's basement, and in June 2002 the National Historic Registry approved the historic status of the Rockwood Mill Shoppes and Opera House.

Judy has petitioned Amtrak to include Rockwood on their scheduled stops. The train passes within 20 feet of the building's back door morning and evening, and making Rockwood a stop on its route would be a return to the early days of the 20th century when trains stopped regularly in the borough.

Judy recently acquired the neighboring Penrose Wolf home that she plans to restore and furnish with antiques; it would serve as a showcase and antique store. She hopes to make the Shoppes and Opera House a regular stop for day tourists. They can enjoy local attractions in the early afternoon, then visit the Opera House for dinner and theater.

One hundred years after Penrose Wolf set about improving the financial and cultural welfare of the borough of Rockwood, Judy Pletcher has embarked upon the same mission. She does so in the same building and in the same spirit as the man who first had the vision to bring theater to a small town.

As the motto on the Mill Shoppes website proclaims: "Part of Yesterday, Even More Today."