

STARS

M A G A Z I N E

SYRACUSE HERALD AMERICAN

JULY 18, 1993



FILE PHOTO/STARS

HARBOR HOLIDAYS

This is the week for Oswego's annual Harborfest extravaganza. We offer a complete schedule, along with highlights and a map. **Page 18**

Up Front



OLD-TIME FLAVOR

The 101-year-old Earlville Opera House offers a setting unique among CNY theaters. **Page 3**

KINSA



WINTRY WINNER

Lauren Richards' photo, above, won in the contest's third week. See inside for details. **Page 21**

Entertainment



MASS QUANTITIES OF FUN

Dan Aykroyd and Jane Curtin star in "The Coneheads," a film based on their old TV skits. **Page 24**

Up Front

The view from the balcony, which seats 50 people, shows the stage, the 250 seats on the main floor and the 19th-century decor of the Earlville Opera House. See Page 4 for a map with directions to Earlville, and a complete performance schedule.



ALBERT FANNING/Contributing photographer

THE EARLVILLE OPERA HOUSE

Victorian jewel survives, providing a unique venue for today's live performers

By MARK BIALCZAK
Staff Writer

— EARLVILLE

Climb the 21 steps up the painted wooden staircase at the Earlville Opera House, and you're greeted by The Wall. The cream-colored surface with lavender stenciling fits seamlessly into the restored decor of the 101-year-old Victorian building.

What stands out are the choices for wall-hangings. To the left of the doorway leading into the theater reside photos of the 13 diverse musical acts lined up for this summer's season, from folk-rock trio The Nields (who opened the proceedings on July 2) to folk music legend Richie Havens (who closes the regular season on Sept. 5).

To the right of the open arch, just above a purple pad urging visitors to sign in — and secure a spot on the opera house's mailing list — sits a busy placard. Listed are the 158 members of the organization, from patrons Jo Anne Pagano and Bruce Berlind (who earned that level for contributing \$100 or more) to senior/student

Elisabeth A. Williams (who joined that category by giving \$10 or more).

Arts for the people. That's what the Earlville Opera House still stands for after all these years.

When this brown brick building was built in 1892 — the architect is now unknown — it rose from the efforts of people who refused to let a special part of their life die. Two previous opera houses in that exact location had been leveled by fires.

In the late 1800s, many Central New York villages were proud of their opera houses. Not 30 miles from Earlville sat four similar buildings: in Hamilton to the north, Waterville to the northeast, and Sherburne and Norwich to the south.

In the days of horse-drawn buggies, that was just right for touring vaudeville groups and medicine shows to make the circuit.

For the townsfolk, there was more to the grand buildings than song and dance. "Not only traveling shows, but town meetings," said Lisa Reilly, the executive director

"I wanted to perpetuate the original concept of the opera house, a cultural meeting place for the community."

— Joey Skaggs
man who saved opera house from wrecking ball

of the Earlville Opera House, who in less than a year in her part-time paid position has studied the history of that landmark and its counterparts. "It was the place for events. That's where people got together."

In the 1920s, yet another fire ravaged the opera house, but this time it was not destroyed.

"Even back then in the '20s, they tried to duplicate that 1890s look," Reilly said. For example, the proscenium arch above the stage is an exact copy of the original. Workers had several photographs and pieces of the building, like shingles, to help duplicate the previous style. However, some of the other touches adorning the walls of the 300-seat theater, such as the floral-type designs surrounding the proscenium arch, smack of '20s Art Deco style.

Soon after the project was completed, however, America romanced a new darling: silent movies. Vaudeville waned, and the opera house,

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Richie Havens, community theater, Cajun music on tap at opera house

Here are the remaining acts that will appear at the Earlville Opera House this year. To order tickets by phone, call the opera house office at 691-3550. Office hours are 3 to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, and there is an answering machine on at other times to take orders. Tickets cannot be charged by phone or in person.

If there is time, the opera house will mail out tickets after a check is received. If there is not enough time to mail the tickets, they can hold them at the door. Tickets may also be bought in person at the office, 22 E. Main St., four storefronts away from the opera house entrance, in the same block.

On performance days, the opera house doors open an hour before showtime; at that time, tickets are sold at the second floor entrance to the theater.

JULY 24

Epic Brass, internationally acclaimed

brass quintet, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$12.

JULY 25

Touchstone Theater, "Madison Malone and The Case of the Missing Maps," children's theater production, 2 p.m. Tickets: \$3.

JULY 31

George Wesley & The Irletations, the rhythms of Jamaican reggae, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$10.

AUG. 7

Moment's Notice, an evening of jazz, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$10.

AUG. 13 & 14

Hamilton Music Theatre, performing the Philip King farce, "See How They Run," 8 p.m. Tickets: \$8. Proceeds benefit the opera house.

AUG. 20

Steve Riley & The Mamou Playboys, Cajun music straight from Louisiana, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$12.

AUG. 28

Inca Son, Latin American music and dance, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$10.

AUG. 29

Steve Johnson's Magic Variety Show, magic with comedy, juggling and surprises; part of children's series, 2 p.m. Tickets: \$3.

SEPT. 5

Richie Havens, a folk music legend, 8 p.m. Tickets: \$15. This is the opera house's last show of its regular season.

SEPT. 17, 18, 24, 25

Sherburne Music Theatre, "Kiss Me Kate" 8 p.m. Call 607-627-6852 for tickets (\$8 apiece) or more information. This group uses the opera house after the regular season ends, so it, not the opera house, handles ticket sales and information calls for this show.

EOH Gallery

The Earlville Opera House Gallery is in the same storefront as the office, at 22 E. Main St., about four

How to get there



STARS

The easiest way to get to Earlville from Syracuse is to head east and south on routes 92, 20 and 12B to the southern border of Madison County. Once in Earlville, turn left off of Route 12B onto Main Street, and you'll see the opera house.

doors away from the opera house entrance. They will be showing the following art exhibits from 3 to 6 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday, or by appointment at 691-3550.

Jane Ingram Allen, installation, through

Aug. 1.

James Loveless, paintings, Aug. 6 through Sept. 5.

Joseph Carrozzo, paintings, Sept. 11 through Oct. 3.

Ella Gant, Oct. 9 through Oct. 31.

EARLVILLE FROM PAGE 3

which had shown some silent movies over the years, was converted into a movie theater.

A decade later, the theater was upgraded to present the "talkies," as Hollywood gave voices to the images. The stage remained — at 17½ feet wide, 15 feet deep and 13 feet high, it was smallish by today's standards but still big enough to accommodate local productions — and area musicians at times bumped the movies for live shows.

Earlville native and opera house board vice president Joan Keefe said she recalls her grandfather talking about playing basketball in the old house, shoving aside the portable wooden chairs.

Even when the movie theater closed down in the 1950s, when Earlville's economy took a downturn, the building was opened now and then for special community events.

But by then, there was the school cafeteria and other rooms big enough to hold town meetings.

Nobody worried about the old opera house much. The former palaces in nearby villages shut down for good. And in 1971, the Earlville Opera House was in such a state of disrepair that it faced the wrecking ball.

That's when Joey Skaggs stepped in.

Skaggs was a sculptor and painter who bought and refurbished a farmhouse in McDonough, near Norwich, in 1970.

A real estate agent showed him the opera house.

It became a vision.

"I wanted to perpetuate the original concept of the opera house, a cultural meeting place for the community," recalls Skaggs, who's now a performance artist living in New York City and Hawaii.

He bought the blocklong building. He can't remember the price, except that "it was really cheap," but legend has it went for somewhere between \$800 to \$900.

Skaggs contacted Isabelle Fernandez of the Creative Artists' Public Service grant program, part of the New York State Council on the Arts. He found that office willing to help.

Then the artist started a search for a non-profit organization that would use the building for cultural purposes.

A year after he had purchased the building and gotten the ball rolling on a campaign to restore it, he chose instead to give the place — actually sell it for \$1 to satisfy legal obligations — to a group of Colgate University students, who incorporated themselves as Friends of the Earlville Opera House.

"I thought they were plugged into the community, and I thought the place needed the community to survive," Skaggs said.

The group established a board of directors, which, 21 years later, numbers an even dozen. In 1974, the Earlville Opera House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Local resident Dick Bennett, who died a few years ago, gets a lot of credit for the restorative work.

In 1976, the doors reopened for a summer series. The theater has no heating, so it can't be used in the winter. It has no air conditioning, either, but board president Mike Caton pointed out that a series of well-placed fans keep the weekend performances bearable.

Caton moved to Earlville from Connecticut four years ago. One look at the old theater was all he needed to join the board.

"The first time I saw it, it was so impressive," Caton said. "You don't expect something like this in a small town. I enjoy walking from my house to a show. It's a throwback to the old days."

To many of the 900 residents of Earlville, that's progress.

On a hot summer day, you don't have to chase down lovers of the opera house. Spend an hour chatting out front, and the small town comes to you.

Storm Hammond, a music teacher who brought her third- and fourth-graders for a tour, tells of the wonder in the eyes of children singing an impromptu version of "Waltzing Matilda" on stage.

Keefe, a retired music teacher, relates that her late husband, Irish tenor Richard Keefe — better known as "The Singing Farmer" — regaled throngs over decades at the opera

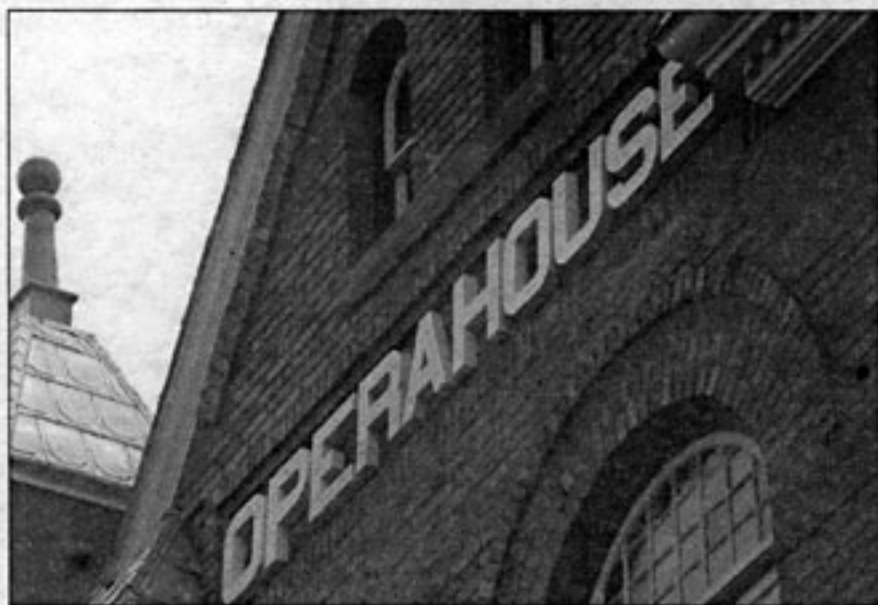
SEE EARLVILLE PAGE 5



ALBERT FANWING/Contributing photographer

The opera house block dominates the village's downtown. The street-level entrance is partly visible at far right. Businesses occupy the storefronts, while the performances take place on the second floor. The third tier of windows looks out from the balcony, while the dormer windows are part of an attic that no one has figured out how to enter, said Lisa Reilly, the opera house's executive director.

The building is easily identifiable by the bold letters underneath its gable.



ALBERT FANNING/Contributing photographer

EARLVILLE

FROM PAGE 4

house. He died in 1965.

And Red Raville — "the pre-eminent musician around here," Caton calls him — talks about the renewed vigor in the town's relationship with the opera house.

"This group of leaders really knows where it's going," said Raville, also a retired music teacher from Sherburne-Earlville schools who moved to Earlville in 1958. "Years and years ago, this place seemed to be a mess. Now the quality of the programs is great. And I love the variety."

Raville has brought two of his bands to the opera house stage, a 15-piece dance band and the 35-piece Mid-York Concert Band.

"That's in the last 10 years," he said. "For the last 20 years, there were the singing duets."

He, too, remembers the first times he laid eyes — and ears — on the place.

"I brought the kids up there before it was refurbished," he said. "We were amazed to see this theater upstairs in a building like this."

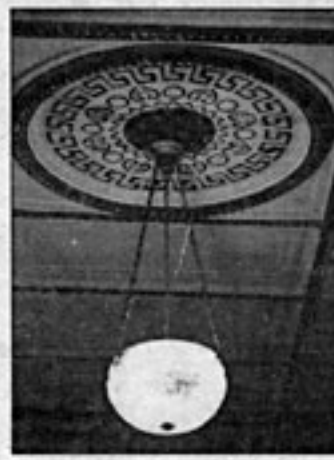
In fact, if you blink once after hanging a left on East Main Street from Route 12B South, you'd think the opera house was just another in a long line of Central New York red-brick storefronts.

The Little M grocery store, Bagnall's Hardware and Computel Consultants — Caton's business — hold offices on the first floor, along with the opera house's art gallery, which opened in 1991, and opera house administrative office.

The businesses bring in about \$10,000 a year in rent for the opera house, about a quarter of the corporation's annual budget.

Once you walk up to the second-floor theater, you

A pressed-tin ceiling, painted in maroon and cream, and hanging lights illuminate the opera house.



ALBERT FANNING/Contributing photographer

know there's more than apples, bolts and technology to this block.

The lobby features the photos, the member placard and another tribute to the more than 100 volunteers that help run the projects cooked up by Reilly, Caton and the board. A courtyard garden is being built out back, rough-cut Southern Red Pine boards lying crosswise in the gravel awaiting the completion of a 7-foot-high fence. Finished on the wall is a framed, elaborate blueprint titled "Proposed Garden," signed by the architect, James Keefe, son of board vice president Joan Keefe.

Inside, the theater is simply elegant: It is free of the gargoyles and ornate decor of huge entertainment palaces such as Syracuse's Landmark Theatre, but with painstaking detail in wall stenciling, an 1892 pattern resembling a fleur-de-lis that also adorns the seat backs.

Of the 250 seats downstairs — 50 more fill the tiny balcony — the 154 front and center have been restored with lavender cushions and dark wood backs. On each seat back lies a simple brass plate, engraved with the name of the person or business who contributed \$35 in the seat sponsorship program.

"It cost me \$34.75 to restore each seat," executive director Reilly said with a smile. "It's been very successful. I think people like the idea that when they give money to the opera like this, they'll see the result."

A bronze plate on the back, however, does not guarantee a fanny in the cushion. Even seat donors have to buy tickets along with the rest of the public.

The pressed-tin ceiling is painted cream and maroon. The floors are natural wood. They sandwich wonderful acoustics.

At the rear of the theater, stained-glass windows shed light on the balcony.

In the front, a baby grand piano — a Chickering from Boston donated a couple of years ago by Colgate University professor and professional pianist Vivian Harvey Slater — awaits visits by the two local musical theater groups that rehearse and perform at the Earle Opera House. Hamilton Music Theatre performs "See How They Run" on Aug. 13 and 14 as a benefit for the opera house, and after the regular season ends, Sherburne Music Theatre will use the opera house to present "Kiss Me Kate" on Sept. 17, 18, 24 and 25.

"We'll rent out the house on any weeknight to any local group for \$100," Caton said. Takers so far have included gospel singers and a big band.

The talent brought in for the weekend shows is big-time; they love the theater big-time, too.

The Epic Brass, which visits on Saturday, spread their five pieces throughout the place during their first trip, in 1989.

"You had brass coming at you from every direction, from up in the balcony, from the side boxes (flanking the stage)," Caton said.

When the avant garde folk-rock trio The Nields played the house two weeks ago, they decided during the afternoon sound check to chuck the amplified sound system.



ALBERT FANNING/Contributing photographer

"With them totally acoustic, it was so quiet in here that the crowd hung on every word. It was beautiful," Caton said. And funny, too. The Nields sent one member up to a side box to play a wounded Mary Jo Buttafuoco in a modern-day version of "Romeo and Juliet," inspired by the story of Long Island's Amy Fisher.

Of course, all of it was acoustically superb.

"For choral, especially, it's a special space," said Raville. "It's a live space. When the Syracuse Opera performed here, they sang effortlessly. It was great even for my concert band of 35 pieces. Must be the size and contours."

Or the nooks and crannies. That's where Keefe, the board vice president, sees something very special at the beginning of every season.

"It's such an emotional thing," says Keefe, throwing her hands up toward the spirits surely poking out from every corner.

"When I close up the theater at the end of every season, there's a sadness. But when I open it again for a new season, there's almost a ghost. There's a presence of what's happened before here, and what will happen again." ■

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— Red Raville
local musician