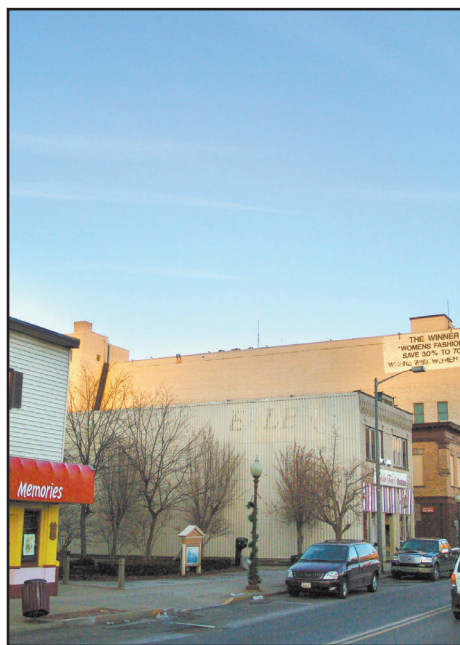


# LT NOW & AND THEN

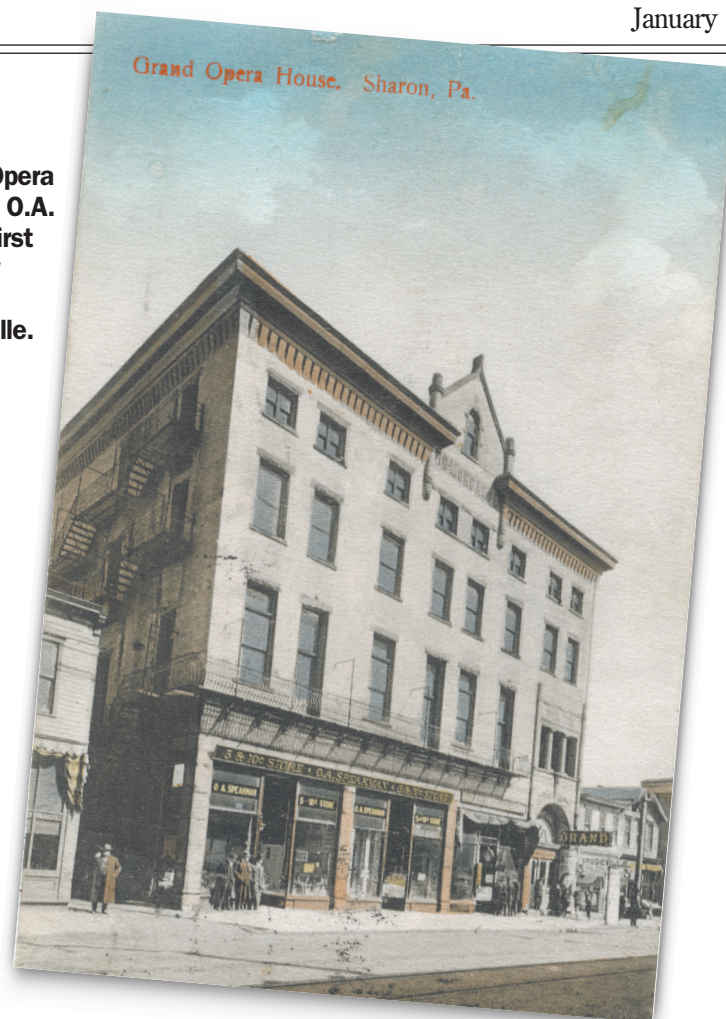


**John Zavinski** of Hermitage is a deltiologist – a collector of postcards – and illustrates historic local images here with modern views of the same scene. He is director of graphics and technology for *The Herald* newspaper and design director for *Life & Times* magazine. Contact him at [jzavinski@sharonherald.com](mailto:jzavinski@sharonherald.com) or 724-981-6100 ext. 235.

This postcard of the Morgan Grand Opera House in Sharon is circa 1907-09. The O.A. Speakman 5 & 10¢ store was on the first floor then. The closest of two one-story buildings at the far right was the Alpha theater, with a sign advertising vaudeville.



John Zavinski/Life & Times



## Single 1981 fire darkens 2 of last Sharon theaters

By John Zavinski

**T**HIRTY YEARS AGO this month on Jan. 29, 1981, downtown Sharon's last major fire wiped out the remnants of one of its 19th-century theaters while closing and leaving the future uncertain for its last 20th century auditorium.

The Morgan Grand Opera House and the Columbia Theatre shared more than just a purpose: Three outer walls of the Columbia were appended to the rear wall of the Morgan Grand, and its long entrance hallway was carved from one of the Morgan's storefronts.

A painted Bull Durham tobacco ad visible on the rear wall of the Morgan Grand in another postcard can still be seen on the brick wall inside the Columbia near the projection booth.

The Morgan Grand was one of the many local opera houses that dotted small towns across the country starting after the Civil War. L.S. Morgan of New Castle built the four-story, yellow-brick block in 1899. Morgan also built a hotel in what is now Farrell. The opera house stood on West State Street between North Water Avenue and Porter Way. The auditorium was upstairs, with storefronts below.

Editions of the Julius Cann's Offi-

cial Theatrical Guide listed the stage as 38 feet deep with a proscenium opening height and width of 33 feet. The seating capacity was about 1,300, not too much smaller than the Columbia and on par with today's Sharon High School auditorium.

The opera house was only open a couple years when it was gutted by fire on Oct. 31, 1902. Newspaper accounts say only the four walls were left. Nonetheless, it was rebuilt by the following March. At least one other fire, in 1913, heavily damaged it.

Entertainment at the opera house included nationally touring acts and local gatherings such as political rallies. During 1913, the nationally known repertory group the Chester Wallace Players was in residence performing plays for 42 weeks.

The Morgan Grand also showed early silent films. "Birth of a Nation" played for three days in March 1916.

But the theater had only a 20-year run, one third that of the Columbia's.

In 1919, brothers George and Max Gluck of Farrell took over the Morgan Grand. By the end of the following summer they converted the space into Mercer County's biggest department store, with three floors and a basement. A story at the time said the Glucks' efforts ended a rival, unan-

nounced plan to build a seven-story department store across the street.

Within a month of the Gluck announcement, Columbia Amusement Co. of Erie announced it would build the Columbia Theatre on the site of a livery stable behind the Morgan Grand, with an entrance hall within the west side of the Morgan building. The \$350,000 Columbia opened Nov. 29, 1922, and was the finest vaudeville and movie house Sharon ever had.

The Gluck store didn't last long, though. It closed in mid-1923.

Enter Harry Forbes of the New Castle Dry Goods Co. He and investors took over the site on Oct. 6, 1923, and opened three floors and the basement as The Sharon Store, a department store that became *the* shopping destination for generations.

In 1929, the store remodeled the fourth floor into retail space and leased the Columbia basement for stockrooms, giving the store a total space of 40,000 square feet.

In March 1938, The Sharon Store moved down the street to its own, new building, which is now The Winner. That building was later expanded upward and northward in 1947.

In 1954 St. Louis-based May Department Store Co. bought the busi-

ness, transforming it into Strouss' Sharon Store and eventually moving it to the Shenango Valley Mall in Hermitage, where it became Kaufmann's and now Macy's.

Back at the Morgan Grand building, Montgomery Ward quickly leased the space. Its general-merchandise store was there for 21 years until moving to the Hickory Plaza in Hermitage in November 1959.

It was vacant until June 1961, when Sam Bohm of Sharon opened the Downtown Mart discount department store, which only lasted a few years.

In 1968, Rembrandt Studio and Camera Shop – which Bohm coincidentally had founded and formerly owned – moved across the street into the Morgan Grand building.

Meanwhile, the Columbia changed hands a few times among chains and local owners. By 1981 – like its peers nationwide – the movie house was challenged by newer suburban multiplexes and rarely able to fill anything remotely near its 1,648 seats.

On Friday evening Jan. 29, 1981, less than a dozen people came for the 9:30 show of "Hanger 18" when



Courtesy of Doug Abbatiello

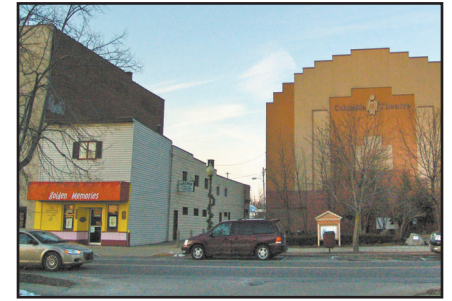
**Ice covers the ruins of the Morgan Grand building in Sharon on Jan. 30, 1981, the morning after fire gutted it and the lobby entrance of the adjacent Columbia Theatre. A thick brick wall saved the Columbia from fire damage. In 1989, the group working to restore the theater built a park on the site.**

smoke was discovered coming from the Rembrandt's building. Within hours, that building was a total loss. Among the ruins: Many couples' wedding photographs (including those from Life & Times editor Sarah Adams' first marriage).

Even before the fire, local residents had begun work to convert the Columbia into a performing arts center. Despite years of volunteer efforts (I

was among those involved), the movie and vaudeville palace got some renovations and restoration but never reopened. It's now owned by the Vocal Group Hall of Fame, an organization that itself has an uncertain future.

After writing last month's column, I spoke with Dr. Francisco Cano, the local opera aficionado and producer who is the new owner of Sharpsville's



John Zavinski/Life & Times

historic Pierce Opera House. We concluded that other than the vacant Oddfellows halls on Sharpsville Avenue in Sharon and on courthouse square in Mercer, the Sharpsville opera house is the last survivor of Mercer County's many small-town opera houses and town halls.

He told me the opera house is about to get heat and eventually air conditioning for the first time. The third-floor auditorium for more than a century had been unheated, leaving productions to the mercy of the weather – generally spring and autumn.

But when the temperatures were comfortable, it was quite the venue, he said, with ideal acoustics for the pre-sound-system age.

Another project on his list: Getting a grand piano up three flights of stairs, which a moving company has assured him is possible. ♦

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