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This old postcard of the Pierce Opera House building in Sharpville probably is from the 1930s, which was about the time the auditorium stopped being used regularly. (The white blob in the center is a tear in the card).

19th-century opera houses gave small towns high culture

By John Zavinski

AMERICA'S GREAT CITIES wouldn't consider themselves great if they lacked proper venues for artistic performance and public assembly. But in the 19th century, the same was true for even the smallest burg.

Civic pride and necessity led to the erection of many fine small-town opera houses, public halls and fraternal lodge auditoriums in the era from the 1860s to 1890s. They were the gathering place for any event requiring seating for a few hundred to a thousand or more – high school graduations, town celebrations, touring lecturers, performers and, yes, the occasional opera. Some

later became places to see silent movies.

Often the halls were nothing more than a flat, ballroom-like space with a small stage. And it wasn't unusual for them to be up a steep flight of stairs on the top floor above retail storefronts, town government offices, or lodge rooms for groups such as the Masons or Oddfellows.

Locally there were such opera houses or halls in Jamestown (built by Dr. William Gibson, the town's leading citizen); Greenville's Laird Opera House; the Mercer Opera House (destroyed by fire in 1920); The Burnett Opera House in West Middlesex; and in Sharon, places such as the Morgan Grand Opera House, Carver Opera House, Thompson's Hall and Armory Hall.

Sharpville is the proud home of one such hall still being used as it was when it opened in 1871: the Pierce Opera House.

A bank still occupies the first floor, while the second story is now a loft-style apartment. But the opera house had been mostly forgotten and unused since about 1930.

About a dozen years ago, then-borough manager Mike Wilson bought the three-story building at North Mercer Avenue and East Shenango Street. He lovingly restored the auditorium with the help of his wife and sons. Piles of debris gave way to polished hardwood floors and revealed old show posters and Victorian graffiti (those darned kids).

In the past couple years the 3,000-square-foot space has come alive again as a performance space for music and small plays – including some by a new resident troupe, the Area Community Theatre of Sharpville.

Wilson recently sold the building to Dr. Francisco Cano, who leads the local group Valley Lyric Opera.

Cano's group, in fact, put on the restored venue's opening show in 2009.

Appropriately, it was an opera. ♦



John Zavinski/Life & Times

The Pierce Opera House fills the third floor of the brick block at Mercer Avenue and East Shenango Street in Sharpville. A bank and storefronts are on the first floor and apartment space on the second.