

A HISTORY OF THE
WOODSTOCK
OPERA HOUSE

Built in 1889 and beautifully restored, the Opera House offers a variety of rental opportunities. Enjoy a unique experience with charming atmosphere and historical elegance. The fully modern facilities and professional staff will make public & private functions, special events, meetings and parties a pleasurable experience for participants and hosts. For information on renting the Opera House call 815-338-4212.

"Towering over a Square full of Civil War monuments, a bandstand, and a spring house . . . is a very rustic and rusticated thing: a real, old honest-to-horse hair Opera House."

- Orson Welles

Owned and operated by:
City of Woodstock

The Foundation of a Community



Actress, Patti Rosa

In the year 1888 a proposal was made to build a City Hall worthy of the town of Woodstock and its citizens. Mayor Merritt Joslyn cast the deciding tie breaking vote and the decision was made to construct a City Building that would house several official elements of the community, including the City offices, police and fire departments, a public library and a central gathering place for the community, the Opera House. Smith Hoag, an Elgin area architect, was hired to draw-up plans and to complete construction for a fee of \$26,000. Simon Brink, whose family had long been connected to the city, was hired to oversee construction in 1889 and on September 4, 1890 the grand opening of the Woodstock

Opera House was held with an inaugural performance of "Margery Daw" presented by the Patti Rosa Player's

The Opera House quickly became McHenry County's center for entertainment and hospitality. The City offices, library, police and fire department occupied the first floor of the building and the Opera House was contained in the second and third floors. Through the next few decades, the Opera House hosted touring vaudeville, minstrel and dramatic companies as well as a variety of other activities including, concerts, weddings, dances, wrestling matches and graduation commencements.



Woodstock Fire Crew 1890's

In 1926, a young man came to Woodstock and was enrolled at the local Todd School for Boys, his name was Orson Welles and between the ages of 11 and 16 he learned much of his craft on the Opera House stage. After a few years of traveling abroad in Europe, Welles returned to the Opera House in 1934 and presented a summer of dramas and Shakespeare plays. Welles directed and starred in these productions opposite noted actors Michael MacLiammoir and Louise Prussing whom he had brought with him from his travels in Europe.



Orson Welles, Michael MacLiammoir & Louise Prussing

The creation of "The Woodstock Players" in 1947 drew graduates of the Goodman Theater in Chicago for several seasons of summer stock theatre. Through the early 50's notable actors such as Paul Newman, Tom Bosley, Geraldine Page, Lois Nettleton, Betsy Palmer and Shelley Berman honed their skills on the Opera House stage each evening while holding day jobs at local shops in Woodstock.

A Historic Landmark

In 1960 the Junior Civic Arts League was founded as a group of young people dedicated to presenting plays and investing time and effort into battling the increasing deterioration of the auditorium and stage. The League gave rise to other supporting organizations over

the next decade such as the Woodstock Fine Arts Association, founded in 1961. In 1972 the Opera House was declared a "landmark" by the city and was quickly followed in 1974 by the placement of the building on the National Register of Historic Places. The Woodstock Opera House Community Center Inc. was established as a fundraising body and the building received an extensive restoration in 1976 at a price of \$500,000 with Architect John Vincent Anderson overseeing the efforts. The building



National Register of Historic Places designation 1974

reopened as the official Woodstock Opera House Community Center in February, 1977.

Looking to the Future

Through the following decades, the Opera House transitioned into the modern facility it is today. Professional staff was hired to operate the theatre and additional projects, including the 1999 restoration of the front portico which had been absent from the building for almost 70 years, and replacement of the original firehouse barn doors in 2013, further enhanced the beauty and historical accuracy of the building. A product of its own success, a new annex was also added to the Opera House in 2003, on its adjacent lot, providing disability access to the stage, a freight elevator, additional back stage areas, offices and the very popular Stage Left Café. Today the



Woodstock Mozart Festival concert

Woodstock Opera House plays host to over 500 events and activities each year and it continues to serve the community as a gathering place for programs of every shape and size, as it has done for more than a century.

Whether you call it the "Opera House;" "Old City Hall;" the "Crown Jewel of McHenry County;" or in the words of Orson Welles, "The Grand Capitol of Midwestern Victorianism," the Woodstock Opera House continues to endure and flourish as a leading center of the arts in northern Illinois.

