

THE ELKS OPERA HOUSE FOUNDATION
RETROSPECTIVE
NOVEMBER 2012

The citizens of Prescott first initiated an opera house for the Elks Building on East Gurley Street, and raised \$15,000. to assure that one would be built while the Lodge was planning their new rooms, office space and store fronts. The year was 1904, and by April a cornerstone was laid, a celebration held, a parade was led by the Eagles Lodge, and the construction of a major building in downtown Prescott commenced. This was the next brick and masonry building to be constructed in Prescott after the fire of 1900, following the buildings replacing the burned wooden structures around the Courthouse Plaza which had been completed within the first three years after the fire.

The theatre was opened on 20 February 1905 with a sold out play produced by a traveling troupe featuring diva Florence Roberts in a melodrama titled "Marta of the Lowlands, by a Spanish playwright.

There followed all forms of entertainment at the opera house as well as weddings, funerals, graduations, political rallies and then films, the silents and the talkies, as that form of entertainment swept the country. The Elks Opera House, converted to a movie theatre, presented films more than any other form of entertainment well into the twentieth century.

The Elks Lodge sold their building to a law firm and the theatre fell into differing management and disuse over a long period of time, being revived by the law firm seeking to introduce a Shakespearean residential company as well as making significant interior changes to the house. *theatre*

When the law partners concluded they did not desire to be in the theatre or movie business, a deal was made with the newly organized Arizona

Community Foundation to sell the theatre on a condominium basis, leaving the remainder of the building as offices and commercial space owned by the law firm.

The Arizona Community Foundation leased the theatre for more than twelve years to Yavapai Community College and Prescott College. Then, a committee of the Prescott Area Arts & Humanities Council sought to revive an active theatre over several years of struggle.

When the City of Prescott acquired the opera house, and subsequently the entrance and marquee, The Elks Opera House Foundation was incorporated and achieved tax-exempt status to acquire funds to restore the house, the foyer and the marquee. The two lobbies had been renovated through the city historic preservation office using federal, state, and city funds after the theatre was brought up to code by the city with similar funding sources.

Upon completion of the restoration, the foundation resolved to continue as a producer with the goal of encouraging other producers to provide a wide variety of performing arts experiences for Prescott residents and visitors. The foundation Guild, in costumes of the eras represented in the more than a century of The Elks Opera House, staffs the theatre to operate the box office, and conduct tours four days a week, and provides ushering and security services during all performances.

Today, with the staff of one and two part-time employees of the city, staff has booked more than sixty events in the last quarter of 2012, with significant increases in the number of producers and the variety of uses in prospect for the coming months and years.

ELISABETH F. RUFFNER, PRESIDENT

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