

AN HISTORIC BUILDING REBORN

Built in 1926 by the local chapter of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.), this building was once the home of the Clatskanie post office, the Avalon Theatre, professional offices, and the upstairs facilities used by the Odd Fellows and other local organizations - a kitchen, dining room and lodge hall, the scene of many public dances and classes. It opened with dances, live vaudeville acts and silent movie showings as the new year of 1927 dawned, and continued to serve as a center of community life and entertainment for over 60 years.

By 1990, however, the membership of the I.O.O.F. had dwindled; the theatre was no longer able to compete with larger cinemas in nearby cities; the professional offices had moved to better-maintained sites, the post office relocated, replaced by a floral shop, and the once-grand brick facade was beginning to crumble. No longer able to support the building's operation, the last of the local Odd Fellows sold it into private hands.

Unfortunately, a series of private owners only escalated the once-grand edifice's decline. The theatre space was badly damaged by an illegal marijuana-growing operation, and the entire building was subsequently gutted in the beginning stage of what was ultimately an unsuccessful restoration effort. By the turn of the 21st century, the hall had become a warehouse for an absentee owner's hoard of junk. All of the upstairs walls had been removed and stripped down to the concrete. The only remaining interior element was the once-beautiful maple ballroom floor. Downstairs, the theatre was unrecognizable with the slanted floor removed down to the dirt and a few shards of curtain the only remnants of the space that had provided entertainment for generations of local residents. Without any maintenance, the outside appearance continued to decline.

Then, in the fall of 2005, C. Keith Birkenfeld, a descendant of local pioneers, passed away. The Clatskanie Foundation learned that he had bequeathed \$500,000 to the non-profit, 501(c)3 organization with the stipulation that the money be used for a "bricks and mortar" project. Foundation board member Deborah Hazen, a friend and distant cousin of Birkenfeld's, suggested that the potential of transforming the old I.O.O.F. building from the eyesore it had become into a multi-purpose theater, ballroom, and new home for the City of Clatskanie, would fit well with Birkenfeld's intent and his interest in history, culture and civic affairs. The rest of the Foundation's board of directors quickly embraced the vision, believing that the rebirth of one of Clatskanie's most prominent buildings would be of great benefit to the community.

Donating his expertise, Andrew Niemi of Lower Columbia Engineering expressed his opinion that the building was worth saving. Foundation directors Mike Engel, a retired general contractor, and Dave Hicks, a retired Wauna Mill engineer, concurred. Around the same time, Hazen's daughter Erika Weisensee, who subsequently donated her grant-writing skills, uncovered the original architectural drawings in the archives of the Oregon Historical Society. The architect, Ernst Kroner, was a leading designer of large public buildings in the early 20th century. Spurred by that discovery, Hicks and Hazen began a successful two-year effort to have the building designated on the National Register of Historic Places.

Located next door to the I.O.O.F. hall, the Clatskanie City Hall - part of which was originally a fire truck garage - no longer met the needs of the city - not enough office space, not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements, and moldy. City leaders caught the vision of partnering in the project and moving into a new suite of offices in the historic building.

The Clatskanie Arts Commission, which has presented annual performing arts series at bargain prices for over a quarter of a century, never had a home of its own. While the 450-seat Clatskanie Middle/High School Donavon Wooley Performing Arts Center served as the venue for the performances, the auditorium is too large for the average 120 to 150 attendance. Throughout its existence, the business of the arts commission had been conducted out of the home of its leaders, Dee and Elsa Wooley. Elsa also serves on the Foundation's board of directors.

So the vision took shape. The building would be restored with a multi-purpose, 175-seat theatre - home to the arts commission, as well as community theater, movie showings, recitals, events of all kinds, including weddings. The space that was originally the post office and later a floral shop, would be a business location, the rental from which would help support the non-profit uses of the building. Upstairs, a 2,600 square foot suite of offices and council chambers/courtroom for the City of Clatskanie would be constructed. In lieu of 30 years' rent, the city would donate and pay for the demolition of its old building and the construction of a parking lot. The city also donated the installation of water and sewer lines, and is providing those utilities to the non-profit portions of the building. The lodge/dance hall, with its beautifully-resurrected maple floor, would become a 2,400 square foot ballroom - available for not only dances, but receptions, banquets, auctions, etc.

In early 2008, the purchase of the building was finalized. With the remainder of Birkenfeld's \$500,000 bequest, and an over \$200,000 bequest from the late Dr. Charles "Bert" Grayson, a complete engineering report and architectural plans were developed, the first phase of seismic upgrades were accomplished, and the facade restoration was completed in 2010, vastly improving the building's exterior appearance.

In early 2011, the fundraising drive began with Hazen serving as chair of the capital campaign committee that included Foundation directors Engel, Hicks, Rich Larsen and Elsa Wooley, joined by Dee Wooley, Phil Hazen, Kathy Engel, Erika Weisensee, and Mayor Diane Pohl. Boosted by \$500,000 grants from the C. Keith Birkenfeld Memorial Trust and The Ford Family Foundation, over \$3,180,000 had been raised by August of 2015 from large and small foundations, local businesses, industries and individuals. Joining the other committee members to develop the details of the project were Clatskanie City Manager Greg Hinkelman and Finance Manager Sharry Hilton.

Under the guidance of Engel, who worked as a full-time volunteer construction manager for over a year and a half during the final construction phase as well as during the earlier facade

restoration, and Hicks as project engineer, plus the expertise of the mainly local craftsmen and artisans who were employed on the project, the restoration of the historic hall was accomplished in August of 2015 within its \$3,155,000 budget. All money raised above the cost of construction, equipment and furnishings went into a long-term maintenance fund.

The Clatskanie Cultural Center has been operating successfully since then. The Birkenfeld Theatre is the prime venue for Clatskanie Arts Commission performances as well as movies, plays, dance recitals, weddings, memorial services, and more. The Ballroom has hosted scores of banquets, dances, meetings, receptions, etc., while the City of Clatskanie conducts its business out of its upstairs suite of offices and council chambers. The Reach the Stars dance studio occupies the street level retail space.