



Boothbay Region Historical Society

Researching and preserving our history

August 2018 News

From Our Collections



A car is shown leaving the Opera House building after an event in the 1940s. Dewey Spofford, Wendell Barlow, and West Lewis are among the men on the steps.

The Opera House

By Barbara Rumsey

Written in July 1999, the year a permit to demolish the building was obtained by the owner and a group formed to fundraise to save the building. A few years later Cathy Sherrill, her board, and volunteers put the building on a consistent stable footing as a gathering and performance place.

The opera house was built in 1894, the same year the United States became the greatest industrial producer in the world. Despite the panic of 1893, it was a time of optimism in Boothbay Harbor, and the opera house was an indicator of both the town's prosperity and the great expectations for its future. Boothbay Harbor was feeling its oats, its leading businessmen confident they had jumped on the train of prosperity in time to lead the town to economic and cultural glory.

There were many reasons for the confidence: the town of Boothbay Harbor, created in 1889, had cut itself free of Boothbay, which it perceived as backward and against development; the industrial revolution was transforming the country; progress was bringing centralized utilities, such as gas and water, to even small towns; and the 1880s summer resident and tourist boom was continuing unabated. Land that had been in the same family for 150 years was moving fast and at a good price to non-residents. The expected "advent of people of wealth, culture, and refinement" (April 28, 1888 Boothbay Register) was being realized.

The opera house was intended to be a nineteenth-century civic center. Luther Maddocks explained in his booklet, *Looking Backwards*, that he and nine others thought "It was necessary to have better accommodations for our lodges and town meetings." Its birth was formalized February 28, 1894 when a certificate of organization for the "Pythian Hall Company" was written. Its purpose was "to buy a lot and build and maintain a public and two lodge halls." Attached to the certificate, recorded in the Lincoln County deeds was a list of the stock purchasers and the ten directors who spearheaded the effort. The directors were the leading businessmen in town: C. J. Marr, Alonzo Nickerson, Joseph L. McCobb, Cyrus R. Tupper, Herman Hartung, Luther Maddocks, Alvah C. McKown, James F. Dunton, Frank R. Rowe, and William H. Reed. Serving as treasurer was William J. Winslow. There were 76 shareholders from the Harbor, 12 from Boothbay, four from Southport, and five from elsewhere, owning a total of 125 shares.

Nearly two months later, two members of the Smith family who owned a large tract of land between Oak Street and Townsend Avenue, sold a lot to the Pythian Hall Company. It was about 125 feet by 70 feet, and the opera house was to occupy nearly all of it.

According to the April 26, 1894, *Lincoln County News*, work immediately started on the building, which was designed by Fassett of Portland. The foundation and drains were dug by Byron Giles of Boothbay Center in April, and the granite walls were installed around the ground floor of natural blue clay which was left in place. Charles Dodge, a mason who lived on Eastern Avenue, cemented up the brick walls for the basement. And the lumber came from Gardiner and Wiscasset mills. According to Luther Maddocks, chairman of the building committee, the building cost \$14,000 and was built in 70 days. When it was completed, the Masons and Knights of Pythias occupied the upstairs, while the town rented the downstairs auditorium and a room for a town office.

The opera house became the center for almost all local public events: town meetings, elections, plays, traveling shows (minstrels, choruses, magic, vaudeville, plays), dances, concerts, sporting events, graduations, and movies when they were invented. Mildred Webster's sister, Ina Delano (Mrs. Richard) Murray, played the piano during the silent movies. Virginia Gamage and Hilda May recalled other repeated opera house events: baccalaureate, graduation ball and grand march, and Saturday night dances with local bands, including fellows such as Lawrence Lewis and Albert McKown. Their minstrel show memories include players Dr. Sprague, George Gregory, Freddy Curtis, Lawrence Bennett, and John Arsenault, the top local tapdancer. The biggest sporting event Virginia remembers was the Harlem Globetrotters' appearance about 1930.

Virginia had an opera house responsibility when she worked in Porter's drug store in the late 1920s and 1930s. She took reservations for events, such as minstrel shows or the senior play,

and those reservations were indicated on a hardwood board which always sat on the counter. The board was laid out with numbered and lettered holes for the seating arrangement. When a seat was chosen, a peg was placed in the hole. Virginia's biggest problem with keeping reservations straight were the "loafers" who sat at the counter and played with the pegs.

A typical week was that of March 3, 1930, a time when "talkies" were coming in: on Tuesday "Untamed" with Joan Crawford and James Montgomery played with Paramount News, Fox Movietone News, and Universal News; March 5 was a basketball game between the Boothbay Bears and the Oakhurst Athletic Club; and Friday and Saturday was an all-talking drama, "Madam X" with Ruth Chatterton and Lewis Stone, talking news, and two vaudeville shows.

After local non-profits came into being, such as the library, hospital auxiliary, and humane society, they too used the building for fundraising events. In the 1950s I saw my mother act in Little Theater Group plays there. In 1960 the YMCA started using the building for activities, and I remember rollerskating and playing basketball there.

The 1970s was a crisis time for the opera house, with the YMCA leaving for its new building on the Meadow, and the town no longer willing to rent the auditorium for town purposes. Those who were responsible for the building foresaw that without rent from the town, the lodges could not carry the building. In the February 25, 1971 Register, Gordon Harrington, president of the Boothbay Lodge Corporation, wrote, "Are the residents of this town ready to let this building which for 75 years served the townspeople not only as its town hall, but has always been available for thousands of civic services, shows, dances, basketball games, and numerous benefits for charitable organizations, be closed down and sold?" The answer was eventually yes, though the town stayed on a few more years. Another letter went in the paper the following year, signed by all lodge officers, including Dick McDougall. Again they laid out for the townspeople the good the building provided and how the rent money paid by the town was returned in, among other ways, taxes and water and sewer bills. In 1978 the elementary school was built and available, and the town finally left the opera house for the new building.

Over the decades and years, all the organizations that used the opera house built their own buildings, including Saul Hayes's 1928 movie theater and the 1956 Meadow high school with its gym; consequently, the need for the opera house space steadily shrank. Soon there were multiple gym/auditoriums, large meeting rooms, a Masonic hall, a K.P. hall, a playhouse, and a post-1970s movie theater. If the whole town had conspired together in the 1970s to make the opera house obsolete, it could not have done a better job.

Various attempts were made to use the opera house in non-traditional ways when it was sold in the 1970s. Some of those ways: it was renovated into a mall/pavilion of small shops, which never drew the hoped-for crowds; part of it served as a recycling center for a while; and it most recently housed a restaurant and antique shop.

Other Maine towns that leveled their opera houses now look with envy at ours. A couple of decades after having lost its identity as a town center, people here realize it could be that again.

For more articles by Barbara Rumsey check our website

www.boothbayhistorical.org/out-of-our-past

CAKE AND CULTURE TOUR: A History of the Boothbay Region in Ten Objects

Thursday, August 16 at 11:00 am



This pewter plate brought to Boothbay from Antrim, Ireland in 1718 by the Fullerton family is one of the objects discussed on the Cake and Culture Tour at Boothbay Region Historical Society.

Are you curious about the Native American tribes of the region, who the first European settlers were and what their lives were like, how the American Revolution and Civil War affected life in Boothbay? The emphasis of this tour is on the people who lived in Boothbay and how the tenor of their lives changed over time. At the end of the tour participants are invited to share their own memories of Boothbay over a slice of Victorian seed cake.



The tour is hosted by Kathy Goldner, Outreach Manager at Boothbay Region Historical Society and admission is free to all.



photo caption: The summer crew at Tilton's Dairy in June 1952. Pictured from left are, front row: Bruce Grover, Ronnie Richardson, Dickie Latter; back row: Red "Flash" Brewer, Evie Richardson, Richie Richardson (Ron's father), Mike Christopher. Courtesy of Ron Richardson

SPEAKER SERIES: 1950s Minstrel Shows Rise Once More!

Thursday, August 23 at 4:30 pm

“Richie” Richardson, owner of Tilton’s Dairy on Eastern Avenue in Boothbay Harbor from 1945 to 1965, produced and directed minstrel shows for many years in the 1950s. This included Rotary Club Minstrels, the ladies Periwinkles Minstrel and the Boothbay Harbor High School senior classes. In 1955 Richie directed the last minstrel show with his son Ron’s high school senior class. On Thursday, August 23 at 4:30 pm, Richie’s son Ron Richardson will share his memories of those shows in his talk *1950s Minstrel Shows Rise Once More!* at Boothbay Region Historical Society, 72 Oak Street, Boothbay Harbor. Admission is free.



Ron Richardson

**Our heart felt THANK YOU
to the generous donors and bidders
who made the Silent Auction and Bake Sale
a HUGE success this year!**

**And thank you to all the volunteers for making this successful fundraiser
possible.**

Members' Corner

Welcome to our new BRHS members:

Dian and Robert Post, Easton, Maryland

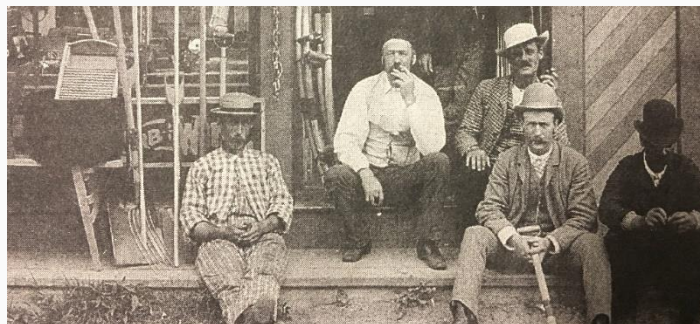
Michael Boyd, Easton, Pennsylvania

Carole and Bill Paul, Boothbay Harbor, Maine

Kevin and Suzanne Roche, Charlestown, Massachusetts

Thank you!

Your membership helps preserve our cultural heritage.



Not a member yet? We now accept credit cards.
[Join now!](#)

And where do your membership dollars go?



One of the crucial ways your membership helps us is in maintaining our building, the 1874 Elizabeth F. Reed House. In early June Paul Davis and two members of his “Odds N' Ends” crew worked on our bay window’s leaking roof and started to chase the rot along the eave on either side of the window.

Thank you!



Come visit us.

**Boothbay Region Historical Society is open all year,
Thursday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 2:00 pm.**

For more information

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72 Oak Street

Post Office Box 272

Boothbay Harbor, Maine 04538

207.633.0820

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