

The Past is still visible: The Kahn & Stanzel Opera House

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The idea that Hallettsville needed a local opera house was first reported in the Hallettsville Herald as early as 1891. Mr. Charles S. Eberhardt, representing the firm of Gordon & Laub, San Antonio architects, was in Hallettsville in May of 1891. During his visit, Eberhardt displayed, in the newspaper office, a drawing of the front elevation of the opera house and double store room which Kahn & Stanzel proposed to erect on the west side of the square.

For unknown reasons, the actual building of the opera house did not begin until May of 1896 when the existing Kahn and Stanzel building was torn down to make room for the new three story opera house.

The first building on this site was built in 1858 and housed a drug store owned by Dr. East and James Ballard. After the Civil War, the site was occupied by Green, Posey and Shoemaker as a general store. Prior to its destruction, the building had been used for several years as a saloon.



The local newspaper applauded the plucky and enterprising duo of Kahn & Stanzel for taking on the project of providing Hallettsville with a decent opera house. The Herald was also pleased to note that the contract had been awarded to McKnight Bros. because they were local citizens and M.A. McKnight had worked on the project for months and was instrumental in bringing about its consummation.

The 70 X 110 ft. three story structure of modern Romanesque style architecture was designed by renowned architect J. Riley Gordon. The building would cover all the space from the Newbury brick to the narrow walk south of Vesmirovsky & Co., including an alley that was being used for a shooting gallery.

The first floor would consist of store space with the main entrance to the opera hall in the center. The Kahn & Stanzel saloon would occupy the rear of the first floor. The second and third floors would be in one and fitted for a modern theater with gallery, boxes, a large stage and dressing rooms. Behind the gallery on the second floor would be a tier of offices. The projected cost for the building was \$15,000.00

Work began almost immediately on the building. Stone was being hauled in by wagon from quarries in nearby Muldoon. To give citizens an idea of how large the building would be, in August of 1896, the Herald reported that Gottfried Flury, the artist engaged to paint the scenery for the building, had to erect a temporary building 20 X 40 and with 20 foot walls expressly for the work. The curtains on which Flury was painting the scenery were so large that the high wall was necessary.

In September of 1896, work was progressing slowly. The portion of the ground floor that would be occupied by J. M Vesmirovsky & Co. was nearing completion while the section on the north side that would be occupied by Wm. Umbach and Kahn & Stanzel was several weeks from completion. The galley had been placed on the second floor and the offices on the second and third floor, but several weeks of work were still ahead.

About six weeks later, the Herald announced that the grand opening of the opera house would be held on Monday, October 26, 1896.

In the October 29, 1896 issue of the Hallettsville Herald, the newspaper announced that the largest audience that ever greeted a show in Hallettsville was assembled at the new opera house Monday night, October 26th, for the formal opening by the Otto H. Krause Comedy Co. All day long dozens of hands were busy making the final preparations, arranging scenery, placing the handsome opera chairs, testing the lights, etc. When the audience began to

arrive, the four beautifully gilded electric chandeliers lighted the hall. The handsome curtains, painted by Flury, also were admired and praised.

The auditorium was 50 X 50 ft. and would comfortably seat four hundred people. The gallery commanded a fine view of the stage and would seat two hundred. Along with the chandeliers, the entire building was lighted by electricity including foot and stage lights. The stage was the full width of the building and the curtain opening 17 X 28 feet.

The Otto Krause Company was a huge success and played Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights at the opera house.

The newspaper closed its article with glowing praise for Kahn & Stanzel's enterprise.



In December, 1896, three more massive curtains arrived for the opera house from Flury. One was a lake scene, one a garden scene and the other a New York street scene showcasing the famous 5th Ave.

The opera house remained in operation for decades. In June of 1897, Joe Kahn and Joe Stanzel offered Lavaca County the use of the opera house as an interim courthouse while the new courthouse was being constructed. After some

discussion, Kahn and Stanzel agreed on \$65.00 per month for as long as the County needed the facility.

It was also the site of countless cultural activities such as operas, stage shows, dances and school functions. Over the years its offices were occupied by lawyers such as Ragsdale, Bagby and Schwartz, dentists, saloons, cafes, drug stores, butcher shops and retail stores such as Perry Bros. and Mikulenka store. It also housed the Cole Theatre and the first sound movie Wings was shown there. In 1924, Henry Hruzek bought out Dr. Boethel's Drug Store which occupied the south half of the first floor.

The death of the opera house came in November of 1957, when owner Louis Matula Jr. announced that the combined second third floors of the building was being demolished and the remaining one story building would be remodeled. The second floor of the structure had been condemned as too weak to be safe for any large crowds. Hruzek Drug Store would remain and Matula would retain the remaining section.

Today all the remains of the prestigious opera house is the first floor which is occupied by Lavaca County Office Supply and the Safe House Church.

“Great minds are related to the brief span of time during which they live as great buildings are to a little square in which they stand...”