A History of the Academy Theatre

Meadville’s Academy Theatre was built in 1885. The institution was the dream of Ernest P. Hempstead, a news-paperman by trade. Born on December 15, 1851 in Dimock, Susquehanna County, PA., Hempstead attended schools in the Philadelphia area. He married Annie M. Warner in August of 1875. The couple had three daughters: Marguerite, wife of Benjamin F. Kingsbury; Louise and Helen.

Hempstead first came to the Meadville area in January 1873 when he took the helm of the Crawford Journal as editor. He held several important offices during his time in Meadville, among them vice-president of the First National Bank, president of the Star Publishing Company, executive document clerk of the House of Representatives (54th Con-gress), and postmaster of Meadville. Hempstead was a life member of the American Unitarian Association, a member of the National Municipal League, the National Academy of Political and Social Science, Civil Service Reform Association, president of Meadville City Hospital, trustee of the Meadville Theological School, Pennsylvania College of Music, and Meadville Business College, a member of the Delta Tau Delta Fraternity, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Country Club.

He was also a lover of art. Hempstead presented the “Academy of Music” to the people of Meadville in 1885 as a testament to the great music and opera he knew the city to be capable of presenting. The building was designed by architect J. M. Wood. Wood stated he strove to create a “new and beautiful Temple of Amusement – a credit to the city and an honor to its proprietor.”

The Academy Theatre was a popular opera house during the late 1880s. The theatre debuted Lillian Mortimer’s “No Mother To Guide Her” in 1901 – a smash hit! Mortimer was a prolific playwright during the time period; not only because she was a woman playwright but because her plays explored themes of violence, sexuality, and evil. Promotional items from this hit performance, the first of many for the Academy Theatre, are now on display in the Academy Theatre Gallery and Lounge. The theatre continued to blossom and grow over the years; at one time hosting vaudeville shows and the first“talkies” in town. Through the years as audiences expanded and changed, the Academy did too. From the 1950s up through the 1980s, the Academy Theatre was a movie house. Many locals can recall sitting in the back row with their sweetheart or catching a matinee with friends.

After damage was done to the building due to a fire in the 1980s, the Academy Theatre closed its doors. But, a dedicated group of Meadville citizens refused to let this architectural gem die. It wasn’t long until the Academy Theatre Foundation was formed – a group whose sole purpose was to breathe life back into the venue.

**A Grand Re-Opening**

In 1989 the Academy Theatre Foundation was established. A newly appointed board of directors began planning and solving the numerous challenges that the physical structure presented. Their first goal was to raise funds that would create a safe environment and to purchase necessary equipment to make the Academy first-rate. Achieving these goals allowed the Academy to open and marked the beginning of a new era for this temple of amusement.

Though the structure had seen two other major renovations over the years, one in 1913 and one in 1957, it was not until the major renovation in the early 1990s that the theater was returned to its original glory.

By 1992, the foundation had raised a sufficient amount of funds to realize their goals and officially reopen the Academy Theatre to the public. Once again, the theatre was providing a wide-range of programming to the community, including theater, concerts, film series, children’s activities, and much more.

With almost $1 million in restoration and improvement work completed, the Academy Theatre once again shines like the gem that it is. The community rallied around the foundation’s mission to revive the theatre. The reopening season saw a record number of patrons and supporters – a swell of support that continues to this day.

The Academy Theatre is honored to continue to be a beacon of entertainment in

Northwest Pennsylvania!

