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Opera houses were also community centers

Historic Risingsun building is well preserved

By Macey Fix, Special to the Sentinel-Tribune
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File. Risingsun city hall building.
Photo by J.D. Pooley/Sentinel-Tribune

RISINGSUN — Historic opera houses are sprinkled in small towns throughout the country and serve as a reminder of the history of their respective communities.

Despite their names, these beautiful buildings functioned in a variety of ways, and were not solely limited to opera performance.

“You had lectures, you had performances, you had basketball games held in the opera houses, commencement ceremonies, that sort of thing,” said Michael R. Hurwitz, of Historic Opera Houses. “These opera houses at the turn of the last century were built in small communities to be a community center, to provide entertainment and were the heartbeat of the community. (An opera house) truly was the community rallying point and the community center for all of these small towns throughout America.”

All historic opera houses have a connection to the rich history of their communities, but some boast especially significant ties to national history. An example of this is the Risingsun Opera House with its connection to actress Lillian Gish.

“Risingsun is historic, it is well preserved, and it has the cache of having Lillian Gish, who in theatrical circles and motion picture circles is truly one of the great pioneers of American theater and American film who performed on that stage. It’s a very significant piece of our history — Ohio’s history — but also theatrical history,” Hurwitz said.

Gish, nicknamed “The First Lady of American Cinema,” had her very first performance on the stage of the Risingsun Opera House when she was 5 years old.

Along with this association to Gish, the Risingsun Opera House is notable because it is very well preserved.

Hurwitz, a theater technician, describes it as still being in “remarkably good condition,” as it appears to still be structurally sound and still has the stage, seating and balcony intact.

However, to maintain the condition of the opera house, Hurwitz did suggest that it be restored.

“There has to be restoration to keep it preserved, but it would be a very modest restoration,” he said. “Because of its historical significance, I think efforts should be made to maintain it, to do some restoration work, and to actually have kind of a regular schedule.”

Currently, the Risingsun Opera House does not host any regular programs. It is now home to artifacts from the town’s past, but does not hold any of the events or activities that it used to. Hurwitz said that he believes that restoring the theater would not only sustain the beauty of

the building, but also bring the community back together in the ways that it once did.

“I think a modest restoration could get people back in there, and having community events back in there would be a wonderful tribute not only to Miss Gish but to the community,” said Hurwitz. “They’ve done a tremendous job, and this is very important too, the community has done a very good job in not allowing it to deteriorate. They realized what they had, they preserved what they had, and I think they treasure what they have, they’re prideful of what they have and that’s very important.”