

The Phantom of the Pocatello Opera House

An empty building stands quietly on East Center street in Pocatello, Idaho. Once home to the thriving Southeast Idaho Furniture company and later East Idaho Home Interiors, the building and the lot it's built on have a much more vivid and volatile past than many Pocatellans know.

In the early days, when Pocatello was a rough and rowdy railroad town helping to forge the frontier west, before a way had even been built over the railroad tracks, visitors passed regularly through town and needed a variety of amusements to while away the time until their next train. A playhouse was built at 237 E. Center¹ and Pocatello culture expanded beyond drinking and gambling and carousing. That 'original Pocatello play house' mysteriously burned down on July 19, 1892².

By that time, Pocatello fancied itself a respectable town and the wealthy citizens wanted that respectability on display. The Pocatello Opera House was built on the same site and opened with a Conductor's Ball on Feb. 20, 1893. The first performances were given later that week, beginning on Feb. 24 with a concert by the Boston Operatic Concert Company. For six years, the citizens of Pocatello put on their finest clothes to attend lectures, concerts, plays, political speeches, and other events at their opera house. However, on Oct. 7, 1899, another mysterious fire swept through the Opera House leaving only the exterior walls intact. The Fire Phantom had struck once again!

The Pocatello Tribune announced on 12 May 1900 the formation of the Auditorium Corporation, Ltd., a company made up mostly of prominent Pocatello citizens and businesses. It took possession of the Opera House site and remaining structure, contracting with architect W. E. Weare³ from Salt Lake City to revitalize the burned-out shell and Col. G. A. Hannaford to supervise the reconstruction. Renamed the Auditorium Theatre, the new building could accommodate 850 patrons between its main floor, four boxes, and two balconies. The Boston Lyric Opera Company initiated the new house on 25 Jan 1901 with a performance of Victor Herbert's *The Idol's Eye*.

The Auditorium served as a premier venue in Pocatello for the next 28 years, hosting many civic events, local shows, headline performing acts, and touring companies. The eternally iconic Harry Houdini and internationally celebrated soprano Ellen Beach Yaw were among those who appeared on the Auditorium's stage. As Pocatello continued to grow and the number of theaters and other large halls increased, the Auditorium still brought in big names and draw large crowds.

Great changes in the 1930's brought more fights and wrestling matches than vaudeville shows and famous performers to the Auditorium. The venerated ING of the Pocatello Tribune commented in December 1932⁴ on the theatre's "woebegone appearance" and the important part it "once played in the life of the community". Like the rest of the country, the Auditorium had fallen on hard times, but at least the Fire Phantom seemed to have moved on.

¹ Some Polk City Directories later list the address as 239 E. Center.

² *Pocatello Tribune*, 25 May 1939 p.1

³ Another source gives the name as 'Ware'. *Weekly Pocatello Tribune*, 26 Jan 1901 p.1

⁴ *Pocatello Tribune*, 5 Dec 1932 p.3

It hadn't moved too far! On January 21, 1937, the nearby Rialto Theatre was destroyed by fire and by February 2 contracts for Rialto film showings were being fulfilled at the Auditorium. The Rialto was commonly known as "the poor man's theater", often allowing those unable to pay to attend film showings anyway. It was a far cry from the full-dress pre-World War I audiences but the Auditorium was once again full and its shabby glory hinted that, with the right investment, it could be a real showplace once again.

Perhaps it was in a bid to compete with the forthcoming Chief Theatre that the Auditorium was spruced up and rechristened the Paramount, opening on 22 Oct 1937. Once again, a mix of live shows and cinema was steadily offered, but times had changed. Audiences weren't as interested in vaudeville. New management was announced in March of 1938 and the live acts were dropped. Two months later ads for the Paramount disappeared from the Tribune altogether.

Local theater owner and impresario Ned Grossman did not easily admit defeat. The Paramount was remodeled again and re-opened as the Roxy Theatre at 1 pm on 24 Dec 1938. The Roxy and the Rialto were billed in the Tribune as the "East Side Theatres". With movie-going at its most fevered pitch, it was the last moment of theatrical glory for the old building. The Fire Phantom made sure the moment was a short one.

A fire on the morning of Thursday, May 25, 1939 gutted the theatre, leaving behind the building "walls and a few rooms at the rear of the second floor"⁵. Although plans to reopen the venue as a movie theater were announced, they never came to fruition. The building sat vacant until 1945 when John Sterling purchased it from Grossman⁶. Sterling renovated it by removing the remains of the third floor and installing "show windows"⁷ in the first-floor front façade, and used it to house his Southeast Idaho Furniture Company.

When the Chief Theatre burned on March 20, 1993, it seemed the Fire Phantom was once again exacting revenge for some unknown grievance. Sadly, the Chief wasn't saved, but its memory lives on every night as the lighted sign shines over the sidewalk mosaic. As for the remains of the once-glorious Pocatello Opera House/Auditorium Theatre, perhaps its transformation into a furniture store is what saved it from a complete demise. However, when the wind whistles through the alley past the ghostly shell, it seems to ask the question: will the Fire Phantom ever strike again?

⁵ *Pocatello Tribune*, 25 May 1939 p.2

⁶ *Pocatello Tribune*, 8 Jul 1945 p.7

⁷ *Pocatello Tribune*, 7 Dec 1945 p.5