



THE ARTS PART OF THE SOLUTION

PEMBERVILLE OPERA HOUSE *Restoring the Heart of a Community*



It was the wildest and most inhospitable portion of the Northwest Territory and made for excellent hunting grounds for its original inhabitants—the Iroquois, Wyandot and Ottawa Indians. They first occupied what we now call Wood County in rural northwestern Ohio where the Portage River forks as it winds its way toward Lake Erie. In 1812, General William Henry Harrison came and encamped there with his army. By 1854, settlers had followed and in 1876 the Village of Pemberville was incorporated. By 1892, it had an opera house.

Quite modern by the standards of the day, the Pemberville Opera House was a grand facility, complete with hand-painted backdrops, three dressing rooms, a small ticket booth under the stairs and seating for 250. Early performances featured local talent and professional entertainers, traveling medicine shows and vaudeville routines, concerts and operettas. By the 1920s the opera house was hosting dances, lectures, graduation ceremonies, Boy Scout meetings and political debates. But during World War II the attention of the town turned elsewhere, and the community stopped using its opera house.

After sitting vacant for decades, restoration began in 1998. Local volunteers held bake sales, donated their time and money and began working. Thousands of feet of wire were replaced. Water-stained plaster walls and ceilings were repaired and wall colors and stenciling were all dutifully restored to their original grandeur. And on October 23, 1999, the entire community celebrated as the Pemberville Opera House re-opened to once again serve the citizens of Pemberville.

Today, the opera house is a central gathering place for the community and Wood County, and is believed to be the oldest operating opera house in Ohio. It hosts annual art shows, festivals and recitals, and showcases nationally known performers as well as local talent and students. Community member Deb Schaffer says the opera house is “unique and draws people to the community that wouldn’t normally come to Pemberville.” With the help of an Ohio Arts Council grant, gospel, bluegrass and big band have all graced its stage in recent years, as have historical re-enactors, live theater and family entertainment. The opera house—and the arts and cultural activities it hosts—are truly at the heart of the community again.

In 1921, an 11-year-old girl named Dorothy Steffen performed at the Pemberville Opera House in a local production of *The Mikado*. By the time Dorothy entered her 30s, her opera house was empty and abandoned, as it would be until nearly the end of the century. But after the tireless work of her community—and with some support from the state of Ohio—that opera house is alive and thriving again, and today’s young people can again grace its stage. One such young performer is Elena Kirkbride, another 11-year-old girl, who performed on that same stage in 2008 in *Fairy Tale Courtroom*. It is a wonderful example of a community returning to its roots—Little Elena is Dorothy’s granddaughter.

Bringing
Unity to
Communities

Downtown
Revitalization

WOOD COUNTY
Pemberville Opera House
Pemberville, Ohio



“I think it’s a great benefit to the community...it is a focal point for community efforts promoting history and the arts.”

Deb Schaffer, community member