

Jimmy Burns and his Theater Gem of the West

By Thomas E. Daniels



Had it still been standing in downtown Colorado Springs, the Burns Theater building would have been one-hundred years old this coming May 8th. The story of its construction and the man who built it are just as interesting as why it was built in the first place.

James Ferguson Burns was born in Portland, Maine in 1853 and was raised in Portland. He was a classic good looking slender man with a high raspy voice and snow white hair. His younger days were spent in the cane sugar business in South America and Cuba. When asked about his white hair, he replied that he had fallen into a pit on his Cuban plantation that was dug for catching wild animals. But at the time he fell in, there was a Boa Constrictor in it and as workers raced to get ropes and ladders to pull him out, the Boa Constrictor started moving toward him. In those few seconds, Jimmy claimed his hair turned a dazzling white and stayed that way the rest of his life.

After the sugar business, Jimmy moved to New Orleans for a while and then came to Colorado Springs to watch out for his three sisters and brother Tom. He found a job driving a road grader and worked as a steam fitter and a plumber. In 1890, he eventually went to work for the Colorado Springs Hook and Ladder Company No. 1 based out of City Hall. He was elected foreman soon afterward.

He ran into an old friend of his, Jimmy Doyle, who was also born and raised in Portland. They had both heard about the gold fever in Cripple Creek and like everyone else in those days, they went up to try their luck. After several failed attempts (because neither one of them even knew what gold looked like, let alone where it was in the ground), they finally staked a claim just above W. S. Stratton's mine (the Independence) on Battle Mountain in Victor, CO. With the help of a third partner who showed them how to find gold, they hit pay dirt and became millionaires. They named their mine after their hometown—the Portland.

Jimmy Burns has always had contempt for high society such as the way millionaires lived. He claimed it took more brains to fix a toilet than to speak bad French or tour the world twice a year. When W.S. Stratton asked Jimmy what he was going to do with all his money, Jimmy replied "I'm going to marry a beautiful wife, send my brats back east to school and build a house as big as General Palmer's." (In reality, Jimmie's mansion which still stands today as an apartment house at 1315 Wood Avenue, was only about one fourth the size of Palmer's Glen Eyrie castle).

In 1900, Burns built the first Washburn Field for Colorado College which seated eight-

Continued on page 3

Old Colorado City Historical Society

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WEST WORD

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1 South 24th Street

Colorado Springs, CO 80904-3319

or Don Ellis - splderwort@pcsys.net

SUBMISSION DEADLINE IS THE 15th OF EACH MONTH

MISSION

Revised April 2004

The Old Colorado City Historical Society was founded as a volunteer organization to recognize the historical significance and unique culture of original Old Colorado City and early El Paso County. This spirit is perpetuated through the preservation of artifacts and archival materials, encouragement of research, education of the children and the community, through the membership and the operation of the History Center at 1 South 24th Street, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

MEMBERSHIPS

Memberships are welcome at any time. Membership renewals are due on the anniversary date of the initial membership. Members receive the *West Word* newsletter, discounts, local meetings and programs.

Annual membership classifications are:

Student	\$15	Lifetime	\$150
Individual	\$25	Business	\$50
Family	\$30	Corporate	\$250

Funds from a Lifetime membership are placed into a Perpetuity/Endowment Fund to be used only for projects which have been approved by two-thirds of the membership. Only the interest will be used for current expenses. We welcome gifts to this fund, which will be credited to the donor or as a memorial.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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MEETINGS

OCCHS Monthly Meeting & Program is held at 11 a.m. on the second Friday of each month, except during June, July, and August. The History Center opens at 10 a.m. on the day of the meeting for refreshments and visitation. The program begins at 11 a.m. This meeting is free and open to the public.

WELCOME TO OCCHS! ~ NEW & RENEWING MEMBERS

Paul Clingen

Karen Converse

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Nettie Daniels

Glen F. Driscoll

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Barbara Sweat



Burns continued from page 1

hundred. Between 1900-01, Jimmy went in with Irving Howbert and built the Colorado Springs and Cripple Creek District Railway (commonly known as the Short Line) for a cost of 3.5 million. In August, 1901, they made the trip to Cripple Creek on the Short Line with then Vice-President of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt. It was on this trip that Roosevelt gave the railroad its famous slogan, "The trip that bankrupts the English language." Six weeks later, President William McKinley was assassinated and Roosevelt became the 26th President of the United States.

In 1901, Jimmy's brother Tom obtained a baseball franchise from the Western league and he put together Colorado Springs first baseball team, the Millionaires. Jimmy Burns, W.S. Stratton, and Ed Giddings went together and built the town's first baseball stadium - Boulevard Park in 1902.

Jimmy joined the exclusive El Paso Club.

One night he had an argument with Walter Cash while playing poker. Cash was the former captain of the Princeton football team and easily won the argument by dangling Burns by the feet over the staircase at the club. Both were expelled for a month for un-gentlemanly like conduct.

One night in 1910, Jimmy Burns wanted to hold a social event that required enough space for about two hundred people. He attempted to rent the Colorado Springs Opera House on North Tejon Street. But his standing in Colorado Springs society was not recognized as worthy by the powers to be that could grant such a request and he was turned down. This turned out to be the best gift high society ever made to the people of Colorado Springs. The decision made Burns so mad, that he vowed to build his own Opera House. He bought land at 21 E. Pikes Peak Avenue and in the fall of 1910, ground was broken for the Burns Opera House.

Burn's announcement of the construction included that the structure would be one-



hundred percent fireproof, with a frontage of 115 feet by 180 feet deep. The stage will be 96 feet wide and 69 feet deep. The main auditorium will be 74 feet wide and 74 feet deep and contain two balconies. The seating capacity will be 1,400 and the entire theater can be emptied in less than three minutes. The front of the building will be finished in terra cotta and white Italian Marble will be used on the interior throughout the entire building.

Nineteen months and \$350,000 later, the gala premier was scheduled for May 8, 1912. The first performance would feature the Russian Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Conductor Modest Altschuler. Featured selections were from Wagner, Puccini, Rinsky-Korsakow, Verdi, Rubenstein and others. After the intermission, the orchestra performed the 1812 Overture. All 1,400 seats were sold out for the first performance. Burns Opera House held twice the capacity of the Colorado Springs Opera House and was four times the size of it. Burns only allowed legitimate operas and road shows, the theater being dark in between. Because of Colorado Springs close proximity to Denver, many touring companies playing the mile high city came to the Burns before leaving Colorado, and Burns was able to present a steady bill to his patrons. But Jimmy Burns

died in 1917, and the theater was sold to other interests that had different ideas.

The new company opened it up to the Pantages and Orpheum Vaudeville circuits and projection equipment was installed as films were now becoming popular with audiences. Early footage of World War I was high in demand by ticket purchasers. A new marquee was installed and patrons now knew this to be the Pantages Theater. However, "The Burns" name still appeared on one of the terra cotta tiles at the top of the building and remained there until the building was demolished. Road shows, operas, vaudeville and films prevailed during the 1920's. Top names appeared at the Pantages/Burns such as Lionel and Ethel Barrymore, Eddie Foy, Ted Lewis, Fred Allen, Harry Langdon, Leo Carrillo and many others. Lon Chaney, who was born and raised in Colorado Springs, started his show business career at the Burns as a stagehand. In 1927, the theater became part of Paramount's theater chain and received its' first remodel. \$50,000 was spent in supplying the interior with new carpeting drapes, heating/ventilating equipment, spotlight system, new projection equipment and some structural alteration. A new Wurlitzer theater organ was installed (unfortunately it got very little use as talkies were just over a year away.) Live shows, operas and vaudeville came to an end as Paramount only allowed for the showing of films. Paramount dropped its' affiliation in the mid 1930's and a few road show productions were booked, but it was mostly movies from that point on. In 1935, it was renamed the Chief Theater and became a movie palace with a few live shows well into the early 1950's.

In 1947, the theater closed on November 30th for another remodel (new curtain, relocated snack bar) and reopened on Christmas Day of that same year. The organ was under a tarp in the orchestra pit and not used at all. Some of the biggest crowds the theater ever saw were in 1952, when *Bwana Devil*, a film in 3-D opened and the curious turned out in droves. In 1954, a new screen had to be added to accommodate the new wide screen process and stereophonic speakers were installed. All of these additions in the 1950's were for only one reason. Television! By the mid '50's, Colorado Springs had three TV stations residents could watch at

FIRST PERFORMANCE

The Burns

MAY 8TH

SYMPHONY, CHORAL AND
DANCING

(HOUSE SOLD OUT)

Doors open 7:30 p. m. Performance at 8:30 p. m., sharp.
Please take your seats early.
Reservations must be taken
out by noon, Tuesday, May 7.



home, and competition had begun. Westland theaters, which now owned the Chief, Peak and five drive-in theaters was hurting for ticket buyers. The chain started "bank night" in which all screens went dark for a few minutes every Tuesday night and a seven theater sound hookup told everybody to look at their ticket stub to see if they had the nights winning number for a cash prize.

In 1961, a small group of theater organ enthusiasts restored the Chief theaters' Wurlitzer organ and held a concert which was only enjoyed by a few hundred people. Local organist Lee White broadcast a few fifteen minute shows over a local radio station in the 1960's and the theater even used the organ during intermission of certain blockbuster hits when it was necessary to open up the second balcony for seating.

By the early 1970's, the single movie screen concept was becoming a thing of the past and young people didn't care if they saw a film in a grand old movie palace or a box the size of a Hollywood screening room. On

Saturday, Sunday, Monday
July 25 to 27

—ON THE STAGE—
**"WHIRLWIND
FOLLIES"**
COMPANY OF 30
—ON THE SCREEN—
Jessie Matthews
In
"It's Love Again"
With Robert Young

Coming Friday, July 31
**"THE GREEN
PASTURES"**

CHIEF
A WESTLAND THEATRE

October 31, 1972, on Halloween, the Chief Theater/Burns Opera House rolled their last movie through the projector and dimmed the lights forever. The name of the film was "Outdoor Rambling" with Slim Pickens. During the Spring and Summer of 1973, the massive auditorium and office building were slowly demolished by the wrecking ball and it became a drive-through bank facility for the financial institution just east of it.

It had been hoped that the building could have been saved for use by the Colorado Springs Symphony, but they discovered unstable beams in the old Western Union office near the front of the building and the repair costs would have been substantial. Fortunately the Wurlitzer organ was removed from the theater before demolition and now resides in the City Auditorium where it can be heard most Thursdays at noon. Colorado Springs was lucky to have Jimmy Burns and the theater he built out of spite. Had it not been for "high society" snubbing its' nose at Jimmy in 1910, the city would never of had such a gem as the "Burns Opera House."

Tom Daniels January, 2012



CANDIDATES FOR ELECTION TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

BETTY BAKER—has been a Colorado Springs resident since 1949; and a Westsider since 1955. All Betty's children attended Westside schools. She is a retired Farmers Insurance underwriter and trainer. Betty enjoys singing in chorus groups and serving her church. She lists Vice-President, B and B Chairman and Membership Chairman as formerly held Board of Directors positions. Betty is currently serving on the Vision Committee and thinks OCCHS has a bright future.

BRIAN COPELAND—and his partner, Judy, have owned a residence on the Westside since 2000 and recently relocated here full time. He is semi-retired and looking forward to a return to college in the fall to complete a history degree. Brian's special interest include the American Civil War and the incredible population migration west during the 19th century. He is a runner, hiker and beer taster. Brian currently is filling a vacant board position and looks forward to helping bring Westsiders together to understand and appreciate their history better.

BEVERLY DISCH—is a retired Colorado Springs school teacher. She is a current board member and has volunteered for many years at OCCHS serving as both President and Treasurer and continually rounds up volunteers to work in the bookstore and at all special events. Her major interests are history and politics!

PHIL MCDONALD—is a past OCCHS President and bookstore volunteer as well as a retired middle school history teacher. He is well known as a Pillar instructor and is very interested in railroad history. Phil has volunteered to portray various historic figures at many OCCHS events including the Jacob Schmidt fundraiser and several Cemetery Crawls.

CATHY MURPHY—and her husband, Gerry, have lived on the West side for the past three years. Cathy stated that she still feels like she is on vacation in Colorado. She currently works as a freelance editor and during previous years was an antique photography studio manager, travel agent, graphic artist, and more. Her current passion is history, particularly Old Colorado City. Her vision for OCCHS is to have its reputation grow and the center become a place where history, culture and commerce meet and mingle to benefit the entire community.

SUZANNE SCHORSCH—Susie is retired from Deloitte and Touche which makes her very qualified to fill her present position of treasurer for the Board of Directors of OCCHS. Since becoming a member of OCCHS, she has acted as bookstore manager, worked on Territory Days and Founders Day as well as the Cemetery Crawl. She also organized our first Writer's Rave for local authors. Her special interests include Victorian times; skiing and books.

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Contact the History Center bookstore

President's Letter

Dear Friends:

Trains, trains, trains---in the past I have felt that, in the Colorado area, there were so many train companies, lines, engine types, depots, roadhouses and more that I could never get my brain around them all. Easter Saturday, I went to the Midland Symposium up in Divide and saw a whole new world. The event was a fund raiser to help with the preservation of one of the only Midland depots left in the area. The presentations were clear and organized and although I am still no expert, I do have a new appreciation for the railroad systems and the role they played in settling and growing the west. We'll have more on this in the months to come. This May, Mel McFarland will be our guest speaker, talking about all types of "Getting Around the Pikes Peak Region". He will present twice on Friday, May 11--11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Please call OCCCHS to let us know which time you will attend. We will also have elections of the Board of Directors and our annual meeting that day.

Our "Tuesdays in July", this year, will be a "Salute to the Arts" with all presentations related to the arts--authors, cowboy poets, musicians, drama and more. Most events, if not all, will be in the early evening. Come join us for some summer fun!

Our membership is growing---18 new members since the first of the year. New member's coffee on May 19, Saturday at 9:30 a.m. Welcome to you all!

The program presented by Steve Veatch in April was another eye opener for me. Now I am excited about geology. Who would have thought?? Thank you, Steve. I like ROCKS!!

Looking forward to seeing you all May 11.

Sharon Swint, President
OCCCHS Board of Directors

Treasurer's Report March 2012

Suzanne Schorsch

GREAT NEWS! Luana Clark, a long-time member to the Historical Society, has moved back to Colorado and with 30 years of bookkeeping experience she will be working for OCCCHS as an Assistant Treasurer. One thing I have wanted as Treasurer is to have more than one person trained to do all the bookkeeping for the Society so that we have checks and balances and clarity on all financial matters for our Society. When you see Luanna around the Museum welcome her and let her know how much we are glad to have her.

The bookstore was able to transfer \$2,000 in profits to the main OCCCHS operating account this month and even with "winter hours," profits are up over last year at this time. Three new books by OCCCHS members have arrived this month and all three authors have been lined up for Tuesday in July for a lecture and book signing. The books subjects are Garden of the Gods, Red Rock Canyon and the Ute Indians. Another member who has written on ghost stories in Manitou has a new book coming on ghost stories in Colorado Springs this fall and will do a special bookstore event near Halloween. We thank all bookstore supporters.

Checking Account	\$ 10,369.68
Endowment Account	\$103,345.85
Savings & Designated Accounts	\$ 16,513.64
Bookstore/Event Account	\$ 3,688.87
Total Accounts	\$133,918.04

Year To Date Income is \$7,469.53 with Year to Date expenses of (7,002.36) for a profit of \$494.17 for the General Operating Account.

WANTED: Event chairperson to organize the Cemetery Crawl

Please call Sharon Swint at 630-8384 if you are interested. Thanks!

The Old Colorado City Historical Society's Board of Directors meets regularly on the third Thursday of the month.

Interested visitors are always welcome at the Board meetings.

The next Board meeting and election of Board officers will be Friday, May 11 after the 2:00 program

OLD COLORADO CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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May Calendar

Friday, May 11
10:30 A.M. and 1:30 P.M.

Annual Membership meeting and election of new Board members. Member check-in and refreshments 1/2 hour before either meeting

Friday, May 11
11:00 A.M.
and
2:00 P.M.

Program: Getting around in the Pikes Peak Area .. An illustrated program on how locals and tourists got around in this area from 1860 - 1960. This transportation story begins with walking and then continues through horse and wagon, carriage, street car, train, tour car and city bus. Presented by railroad historian Mel McFarland.

OCCHS Members FREE. Non-members \$2.

Reservations required. Call 636-1225

Saturday, May 19
10:00 A.M. - noon

OCCHS Members' Tour: McAllister House Museum
Meet at the Old Colorado City History Center at 9:45
Cost \$10 per member - includes box lunch

Saturdays starting in June

Arts & Crafts on Pikes Peak Avenue
On Farmers' Market Saturdays

Old Colorado City History Center

1 S. 24th Street, Colorado Springs, CO 80904 - (719) 636-1225 - <http://www.occhs.org>

Museum Hours: Tues. thru Sat. 11 - 4 Free Admission. Donations greatly appreciated.