

# Newburg's Regional Opera Company Theatre

by Helen Berg

*Editor's note: While the Regional Opera Company is a relatively new endeavor, its theater occupies one of the many historic sites in Newburg, the old Lyric Theater building.*

For many, the Regional Opera Company Theatre in Newburg is the prize cultural gem of the Ozarks. There are several important factors supporting the idea. First of all, the squatty old Opera House near the railroad track provides the setting. Newburg, the once lively railroad town, was rapidly falling into oblivion when playwright Jay Turley, a restaurateur, came to town to buy the historic Houston House and found the old movie house three doors down the street. After finding the owner, he was able to go inside where he found a small stage with little dressing rooms and, above all, old brick walls that made for almost perfect acoustics. In spite of the stacks of lumber and bags of cement and forty years accumulation of train smoke, cobwebs and other filth, he promptly bought the old building that townspeople had been saying for years someone should take a wrecker's ball to. He bought it, for after his experience with the Black Sheep Inn Restaurant at Arrow Rock, he knew it and the Houston House would make a fine dinner theater combination.

The trained architect-interior decorator had just bought about all that was left of the original Newburg structures except for a couple of houses. Twenty-five years earlier it was he who began the restoration movement in Arrow Rock. There he bought and restored a number of Arrow Rock's antebellum houses that had been the homes of its early citizens, but it was the old Baptist Church restoration that forever changed Arrow Rock when it became the Lyceum Theater. Still in use is the old loft made for black worshippers. There were no Turley slaves there after 1852, for in that year Jesse B. Turley, the playwright's great great grandfather, had sent a proclamation to every county in Missouri, listing the names of all the slaves he was freeing on Christmas Day, thus being the first Missourian to take such a stand. Realizing that the Lyceum is the most famous repertory theater in the Midwest, Turley believed that old Newburg movie house could be another.

In fact there are Arrow Rock residents who will tell you that their old town would never have had a theater had Turley not presented the idea and generated the enthusiasm to keep it alive during its first years, when board members wondered if each year would be the last. They always knew that the Black Sheep Inn would feed the actors, even when there was no money to pay the owner. So, he now believes the same can be done in Newburg. The man now approaching his three score and ten without any descendants is determined to bring culture to the area.

After serving time as a Navy cadet payroll officer in the South Pacific, he had stayed in the Hollywood area, where he met someone who recog-

nized his talent for playwriting, the thing he did after his day's work was done. There, he also got a taste of acting and directing. Although the Lyceum Theater had used city actors, Jay Turley, recognizing the abundant talent in the area, such as his black cook, Jessie Freeman, and one of his farm hands, decided to use them on the stage at the Old Schoolhouse Theater and at the Santa Fe, an open air theater, which he built on one of his farms. So successful was he there that he knew it could be done in Newburg. So, as soon as he had moved, he began talking theater to everyone he met on the street and at a local cafe about the possibility of a theater. Although there were the usual doubters, he met a number of people with the theater itch. As soon as the Regional Opera Company Theatre was organized, plans were made for cleaning up the old building and putting on a Christmas show. And what a show it was! Although the audience dressed in heavy winter clothing and were still wearing their caps, they sat entranced with the excellent music and the best Christmas play they had ever seen. At intermission a man stoked the old stove in the corner with wood while another even lit a blow torch to raise the temperature a few degrees. Yet after a long ovation, the audience left saying that the performance was the best they had ever seen in Newburg. After trying one other show the next December, the Company decided to be only a summer theater. The building now has central air conditioning. A heating system may come later.

The man is a genius at blending talents he finds in people from all walks of life—from college professors to dishwashers, from infants to the golden-age crowd. He says he likes to use older persons because they are easier to make up than some young thing, who knows so little about life. The audience laughs at and appreciates friends who dare to be theatrical. At times Turley slips into a role. He may play the piano, be a judge or Samuel Clemens' friend.

Long ago Tennessee Williams said of his fellow Missourian's work, "Jay Turley is the Charles Dickens among dramatic writers." It is that flavor that makes Turley's plays so appealing to the Old Opera House crowds. A number of his plays have been produced on stages throughout this country in which well known actors starred. Several are often seen on British and Irish stages. His biographical play, "A Signal for Miss Elizabeth", has been translated into seven languages.

By keeping the Dickens' character, the Company has never had to rent a costume, because Turley finds everything he needs in the many boxes of clothing friends have given. Or the actors find something on their own. Those boxes of old duds, together with a few old wigs, change the actors into believable comic characters. It usually takes ladies several plays to be convinced that the director is right when he says, "Pretty isn't funny." But in spite of what may seem a ragamuffin setup, if the play suggests it, the stage

furnishings include some of Jay Turley's beautiful antiques, paintings and other art objects. In fact he tries to see that his productions are theatrical paintings.

Now by owning the Old Opera House the Company is unique in another way. While most theater groups are constantly asking the public for donations, they have never sought assistance from individuals or merchants, nor have they asked for Arts Council funding. They operate entirely on the gate donation, which takes care of all expenses and has allowed for major building improvements. One will not find a list of patrons on Company programs nor will there ever be any. Hoping all may attend, those donations are kept at the modest sum of \$4.00 for adults and \$2.00 for children.

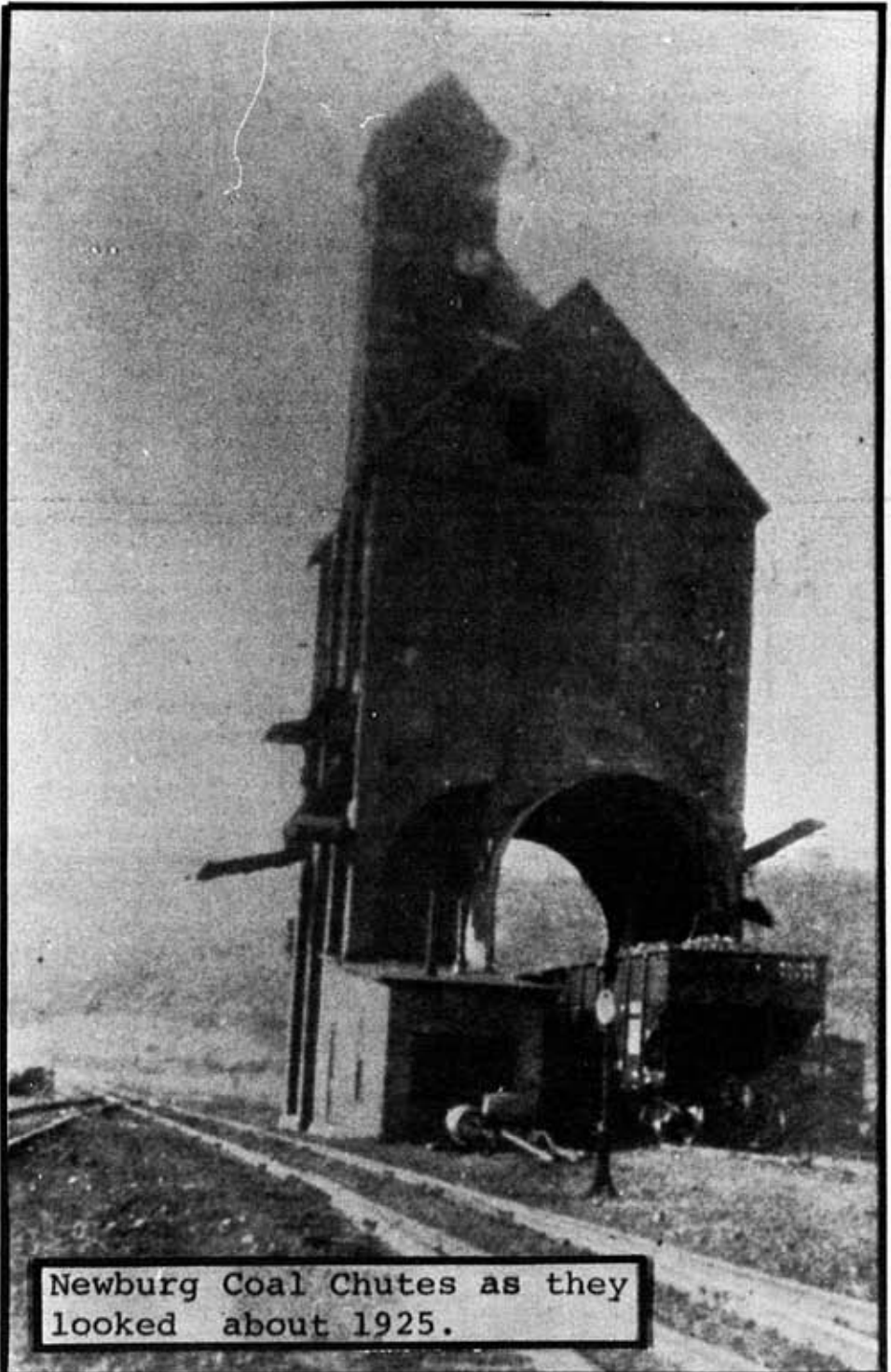
This is all possible because Turley neither accepts royalty for his plays nor is he paid anything for his direct-

ing. In times past he has called himself a freebie thespian; and as far as the Company is concerned, he is that, for he is a volunteer like the actors.

No amplification is permitted in the old two hundred seat theater. Its old brick walls allow a good actor's whisper to be heard anywhere in the audience. Since it is so small, audiences often feel that they are a part of the cast. In fact, at times part of the cast is on the floor; and on occasion a character shakes hands with people sitting on the front row.

Audience members are often able to relate to the setting for Turley's play, which may be in Blackwater, Boonville, St. Louis or nearby Devil's Elbow, or again in Dallas or Pot Hole, Texas, or even the vice-president's living room in Washington, the home of a St. Louis ragpicker, or opera star, or again the temple of a well known phony preacher in L. A.

Understanding that the legitimate



Newburg Coal Chutes as they looked about 1925.

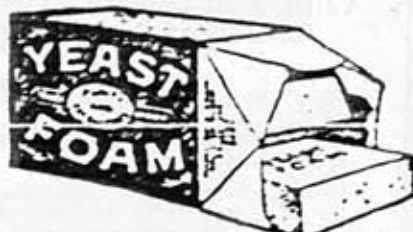




theater must include all kinds of drama. Turley's plays include biographical and historical plays, comedies, and mysteries. Some critics might very well have classified "The Last Voyage" a tragedy. His vaudevilles including showboat specials are by far his most popular. Often his satires, which cover a wide variety of subjects, are comparable to a Mark Russell show. Of course, to some people they are too close to home for their comfort. He is now completing "Ozark County", which rather than belittle the Missouri citizens of that pristine area, tries to portray them as people who faced the Great Depression with great dignity by making do with what they had. He has made several trips to the Gainesville area, where he mingled with the county's older citizens. We can expect the exact words from the conversations, but we'll probably never know which were lifted from the natives and which are those of the author himself. All of his plays are sent to the Writer's Guild in Berkeley, California, for registration, but not before they have been thoroughly researched. "Ozark County" will be premiered at the Old Newburg Opera House before Turley takes it to the Dade County Community Theater in Greenfield and the Stained Glass Theater at nearby Houston, where he also directs summer theater. Those very special Missourians can expect themselves in a musical version of "Ozark County", as Ernie Hayes, a well known St. Louis musician, has been preparing the music for such a production. Turley will retain the right to produce the play without music on the small rural stages he is now directing.

It is most doubtful that anyone can find another thespian group quite like the Regional Opera Company Theater. Surely there is no playwright in America so determined and dedicated to spreading his brand of theater to the Missouri heartland as is Jay Turley.

The Regional Opera Company Theatre was founded in 1983. This year's production schedule includes "Arrow Rock Anthology", a humorous, revealing diary of smalltown America, which will be performed the last two Fridays and Saturdays in August. More information is available by calling 762-3010 or 629-6092.

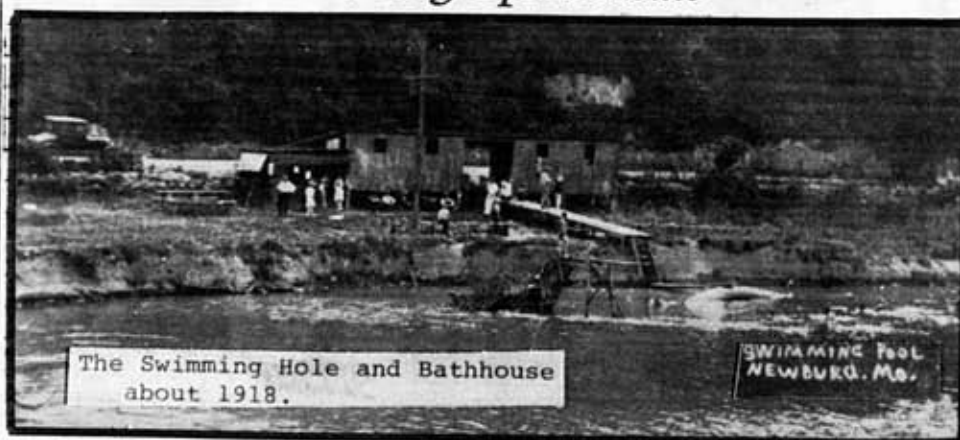


#### STRANGE BUT TRUE IN '92

(Rolla New Herald, April 2nd, 1892, reprinted from the Dixon Echo)—Crocker has a young lady, in the person of Miss Katie Murphy, that has more courage than any other young lady in Pulaski county. About a year ago, a young man had his foot crushed, near Crocker, and it was amputated. On last Thursday Miss Murphy concluded that she wanted the foot, and went out where it was buried and dug it up, took it home and boiled all the flesh off of the bone, and is now going to fasten the bones on wire in its proper shape. If there is another lady in this county that has that much nerve we will like to hear of her.



Newburg Opera House



The Swimming Hole and Bathhouse about 1918.

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