

Nufer-Adams Theatre – The Playhouse

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Nufer-Adams Theatre shortly after opening in 1916

Ruggles Opera House was opened in 1882 on Colby Street and was the place to go for all types of entertainment. However, it burned down in the Fire of 1890.

Between 1908 and 1917, there were several other smaller theatres that popped up, like the Savoy in 1908 and the Vaudette from 1908 to 1911. Fred M. Walker was the proprietor of the Vaudette. It was located in the former Wood and Phillips Saloon building.

John Darby operated the Princess theatre in 1909. From 1911 to 1916, George Dixon and then Fred Walker operated the Idle Hours. George Dixon originally bought it from L. E. Lourie.

C. W. Lasher operated the Empress Theatre from October 1916 until February 1917. This is the only theatre that listed a specific location – one door west of the Post Office. Around that time, the Post Office was in a building next door to what is now Posh. In March 1917, George Haverkate was the manager. No other information is available about this theatre.

In March 1915, James Julius Nufer, then President of the White Lake Dramatic Club, made a public announcement that a new opera house for Whitehall was an assured fact. On April 29, 1915, E. M. Duttenhofer offered a lot and a half adjoining the Cottage Grove on Mears for a sum of \$1,400. Ground was broken on April 6, 1916. The opera house was designed after the LaSalle Theatre in Chicago. Plans for the theatre were drawn by Lowe and Bollenbacher, architects of Chicago. Work on the theatre was done by local craftsmen: masonry work was done by Emil Kroll; carpentry by John Jensen; plumbing by D. VanVolkenberg; and electrical equipment by W. E. Pierce and Arthur Ruggles.

The Grand Opening of the Nufer-Adams Playhouse took place on Tuesday, September 26, 1916. It was named for James J. Nufer and Frank R. Adams, Playwright. It opened as a silent movie and live stage production theatre. Talking movies did not become available until 1927.

From 1917 until around 1937 it appears that Whitehall High School held their Commencement Exercises at the Nufer-Adams Playhouse.

By the 1930s, movies were only shown on the weekends, rather than every day. In June 1935, a full week schedule was announced for the summer months. The White Lake Dramatic Club held two evening productions in August 1935. In 1939, Sunday Matinees began.

In February 1939, there were plans in the works to build a modern theatre building in town to be called Midtown. The idea came from Charles W. "Chuck" Bissell of Grand Rapids, who was the grandson of the founder of the Bissell Carpet Sweeper Company. By June, 1939, however, nothing had materialized and there was no further mention of the Midtown.

At the same time Bissell proposed the Midtown, Walter Fisher, the Playhouse proprietor at the time, was also planning a new theatre building. He was looking at a location on Division and Colby. He was dissatisfied with the acoustics and seating arrangements in the Playhouse and was hoping to either make major improvements or erect a new theatre.

In November 1940, the Playhouse received minor damage after a fire broke out under the stage near the dressing rooms. Damage was estimated at \$2,000. Remains of the damage were discovered during the recent renovations in 2018.

In 1952 live stage plays made a return to the theatre in addition to the movies. Dance recitals were also held.

In June 1960, Miss Nancy Anne Fleming was crowned as Miss White Lake. She would go on to become Miss America.

By 1973 the theatre was targeted for a possible sale or to even be torn down. It was then that Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp showed an interest in it. In March 1973, the theatre became a White Lake Community Fine Arts Center operated by Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp. After being remodeled, it was reopened in December 1973 under the name "Howmet Playhouse".

In 2006, Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp donated the theatre to the city of Whitehall. In 2017, a \$3.7 million expansion and renovation project began on the historic theatre – the most extensive remodel in the history of the Playhouse.

On June 26, 2019, the Grand Reopening of The Playhouse at White Lake was held.



June 26, 2019 – The Grand Reopening of The Playhouse at White Lake