

Park Theatre

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Before there was the Park Theatre, there was Sorenson's Opera House, The Montague Opera House, the Burrows & Jones Opera House, the Orpheum Theatre, and the Montague Theater.

W. H. Sorenson built an opera house in Montague in 1874. The location of Sorenson's Opera House is unknown due to lack of newspapers and maps from that time period. However, there was a very brief news item that appeared in the Whitehall Forum on November 19, 1874, which simply stated that "work has been resumed on Sorenson's Opera House."

Sorenson was in business with John Phelps and they had a meat market which was located on the first floor under the Opera House.

On 23 September 1875, Sorenson's Opera House burned, along with several other businesses. The losses were as follows: W. H. Sorenson, Opera House building, \$10,000, insurance \$1,000; Sorenson & Phelps, Meat Market, \$700, no insurance; John Phelps, household goods, \$800, no insurance. John Phelps, harness shop, \$600, no insurance. Thomas Bennett, Boots and Shoe shop, \$1,200, no insurance. Turnbull & Rahaley, Boiler shop, loss in building, tools, and stock, \$3,000, insurance \$1,500.

Charles E. Burrows & Frank E. Jones built a two-story building on Ferry Street prior to 1875 for their grocery business. A map from 1883 indicated that there was an Opera House located on the second

floor of the building. Access to the second floor was thru an entrance between the adjacent building. In August 1883, it was reported the Burrows & Jones were having a partition built dividing the first floor into two stores. Their grocery store would occupy half of the first floor and basement. The other store was for Miss Gibbon's millinery and fancy goods.

In the evening of Thursday, October 16, 1884, H. D. Johnston and James M. Popple saw the flash of flames coming from Miss Gibbon's Millinery shop. They broke in the door and discovered a case of hats on fire. Before they could do anything, all the goods blazed up all through the store. The men barely escaped.

The alarm was given and both departments responded. Despite their best efforts, the fire crept through the woodwork of the Opera House and into C. D. Dowling's adjoining brick building and from there to Ripley's block of some half dozen stores.

When the fire reached Morse & Bell's hardware stock, several dynamite cartridges exploded with such force as to break windows in all the neighboring buildings and the shock was felt on the other side of the river.

It was not until nine o'clock on Friday morning that the flames were completely controlled. Then the once handsome brick block which had been the pride and scene of Montague businesses, was reduced to a heap of smoldering ruins. The west wall of Ripley's block, however, was saved intact.

The fire was clearly the work of an arsonist and was the third attempt to burn the town, the second happening only a few days before. The list of owners, with their loses is as follows:
L.G. Ripley, druggist & stationer, stock of drugs and two blocks, loss \$30,000, insured \$20,000. Burrows & Jones, grocers, stock and opera house block, loss \$20,000, insured \$11,000. J. F. Keiley, general store, goods damaged, \$500, insured. W. H. Ricaby, jeweler, loss on goods \$500, insured. J. R. Conley, ladies furnishing goods, stock damaged \$1,200, insured. Thomas Phelan, clothing, goods damaged, \$500, insured. W. A. Frary, barber shop and residence \$400, insured. J. M. Popple, room, \$800, insured \$300. W. E. Marshall, photographer, \$500, insured \$300. Dr. Switzer, \$1,000, insured \$800. Masonic Lodge, \$500, insured. George M. Duram, musical instruments, damaged, \$300, insured. Dr. Hollis, dentist, \$500, insured \$300. Frank Bracelin, Lumberman printing office and law office, \$3,500, insured \$2,000. Morse & Bell, hardware \$12,000, insured \$8,000. Julia Gibbons, \$1,000, insured. George W. Beck, residence \$500, insured. El. L. Dodge and Wilbur Davis, rooms, each \$500, insured each \$300. Dr. Kenyon, \$2,000, insured. Township Library, \$1,000, insured \$600. The loses reached nearly \$80,000 and were well covered by insurance.

William Osmun and Charles Ohrenberger built the last Opera House around 1901 which was located on the corner of Ferry and Spring where the current City Hall is now located. Unfortunately, it burned on Monday morning, 4 November 1912. The fire was discovered by Ernest Meyers around 2 a.m. He gave the alarm, but the fire had gained such headway it was beyond control. Since the building had not been used since Saturday, it appeared to be of a suspicious nature.

The Oprheum Theatre was established in the Osmun building which was located between the Franklin House hotel and the Montague Roller Mill in 1915. It was leased to A. J. Straight of Chicago in September 1915. He installed moving picture equipment and had W. C. Barnes run the theatre. By July 1917, Mr. Gasahl was operating the theatre. About half an hour after closing on a July night in 1917, fire was discovered coming from the theatre.

The Montague Theatre replaced the Oprheum in the same building in 1919. At the time, it was the only occupied storefront of the three in the building. This time the entire building was lost when fire struck in February 1921.

The Park Theatre opened on Friday evening, February 20, 1948, to a packed house for both the early and second show. Pictures shown on Friday and Saturday were "Hollywood Barn Dance" and "Buffalo Bill Rides Again". Sunday's billing was "Belle of the Yukon" and "Going to Town."

Construction of the theatre which was built, owned, and operated by William Theiman, began in June 1947, at the site of the former Montague Roller Mill, which was built there in 1865 and burned to the ground on 29 March 1930.

The structure of the theatre was of the Quonset type of architecture and constructed on concrete blocks for a base, and metal exterior walls and dome type roof.

The movie projector and screen were of the latest designs and the sound system was the best obtainable at the time.

The theatre had a seating capacity of 432 patrons, not including the "cry room" designed for moms with small children. This room was in the balcony with 10 large seats and closed off from the rest of the audience so they would not be disturbed should babies cry.

There were 12 seats with earphones and also 8 exceptionally wide seats placed near the back of the theater. All the seats automatically folded up and had deep cushions. There were 2 fire exits at both the front and rear of the theatre.

The stage was 21 feet wide and 11 feet deep with a modern fire-proof screen. The building was equipped with 3 huge air distributors listened to the ceiling which served as heating and cooling units.

The new Motiograph-mirrophonic sound system was designed for better projection and hearing.

In November 1954, the theatre had a new wide screen installed which allowed for the showing of all the new cinemascope pictures. A new aluminum front entrance was also added to enable theatregoers to purchase tickets out of the elements.

In November 1971, it was announced that William Theiman had sold the Park Theatre to Mr. & Mrs. James Oakes.

Ron Paggeot became the new owner of the Park Theatre in April 1973.

In October 1973, the Park Theatre became a classroom for a couple of days for the Whitehall Middle School students. They viewed a new version of Mark Twain's story of Tom Sawyer. After watching the movie, the students then returned to their school and followed up with classroom discussion.

The admission prices at the Park Theatre were reduced to the "cheapest movie prices in the area" in May 1976. Adult admissions went from \$2 to \$1.25 and children through 13 years old from \$1 to 75 cents.

Chuck and Marcia Wells became the new owners of the Park in January 1977. On July 3, 1978, sometime after 10 o'clock in the evening, the Park Theatre was broken into and robbed of approximately \$150.

The Park Theatre changed ownership in July 1980 when Chuck and Marcia Wells sold the theatre to Dale and Susan O'Rear of Whitehall. They also owned the Fremont Theatre in Fremont.

In April 1981, owner Dale O'Rear painted the theatre auditorium as part of a remodeling project. New four-inch cushions were being installed and new mirrors installed on the projectors to provide better pictures.

November 1983, ads for the Park Theatre featured a Game Room inside the theatre. All video games were 2 for 25 cents. A contest was held which offered a free movie pass each week to the highest score of each video game.

The Park Theater "Closed Until Spring", according to an item in the Montague Observer in October 1985. At that time, Stan and Hope Bush were listed as owners. They also owned a gallery and gift shop called "Sundown".

On February 27, 1987, the Grand Opening of the Park Theater Movie Rental was held. All day video rental rates were: 1 movie for \$3; or 2 movies for \$5. VCR rental was also available for \$10 per day.

In October 1987, Montague city officials took initial steps to make major improvements to the downtown. The plans included the purchase of the Park Theatre and its removal for additional downtown parking on the corner of Ferry and Spring street. At that time, Stan Bush was still the current owner of the Theatre. Despite the protests of area students, the building was demolished in March 1988.

Today the area where the Park Theatre had been located is home to the newest Montague Post Office.