

## BUHRER OPERA HOUSE AND HARDWARE STORE

### GENERAL

The Buhrer Opera House and Hardware Store was constructed c.1886,<sup>1</sup> and is said to have cost \$12,000.<sup>2</sup> The architect and builder are currently unknown, though much of the rest of the stone work in the area was done by stone masons from the Swedish settlement at Pleasant Hill,<sup>3</sup> essentially a "suburb" of early Enterprise. The Buhrer building is the tallest building in downtown Enterprise. It is a 2-story commercial block, in the Victorian Italianate or Bracketed style, built of native limestone with a brick front. It has interesting metal "stars" that tie the second floor joists to the sides of the building. There was also a metal lean-to attached to the south outside wall of the building. The lean-to was razed in 1978. The building is on lots 6 and 8, block 4, of the original town of Enterprise. The lean-to was on lot 10. It is on South Factory Street, the main street of Enterprise, Kansas. The first floor of the building is divided into two stores, one approximately 25'x40' (the "north store"), which included a manually operated freight elevator; and the south store, approximately 25'x100'. The stairs to the second floor are accessed from an outside door on the south end of the front of the building. The second floor of the building contained the Opera House and meeting room. The floors of the first floor are covered with linoleum, but the floors in the opera house appear to be maple. The ceilings are painted 1x12" boards, with a scalloped profile. There is wainscoting in Opera House. The remaining walls are plaster throughout the building. There is an additional storefront, complete with display windows and exterior door, all well below street level, in the south basement. Records discovered so far do not mention this, but it is there. That storefront is accessed from a stairway in the front of the south store. There is another set of stairs to the south basement at the back (SE) corner of the south store. So far, no access to a north basement has been discovered, though recollections of persons associated with the store indicate there was one. Rollin W. "Cookie" Cook, who had a business in the building in the 1950's, indicated the freight elevator went to a basement in the north store.

### OPERA HOUSE

The Opera House had a large room (~40'x40') that was used for meetings, dances, plays and other "entertainments." There was also a smaller room

(~20'x40') on the second floor, apparently for some time used for display of Buhrer's line of buggies, wagons, and other vehicles.<sup>4</sup> The city of Enterprise in 1883 was described as a "live, prosperous, thriving town with a population of 500."<sup>5</sup> The January 1887 issues of *The Anti-Monopolist*, a city newspaper from 1884 to 1888, revealed that in January of that year the building hosted a meeting of the Enterprise Board of Trade; the Amateur Club of Abilene performed the play, "Among the Breakers," on January 18th; and coming on February 14th was the Ladies Social Club's Third Annual Masked Ball. In 1889, a Congregational Church was organized in Enterprise, and they used the Opera House for their meetings<sup>6</sup>. The Opera House was an important social center in the city.

#### HARDWARE STORE

The hardware store was also a social center as well as a place of considerable business. In 1981, Ruth Keller, a daughter of Mr. Buhrer, reminisced that, "When it was too cold for the men to sit outdoors on the benches in front of some of the buildings, they would come to Dad's store. Dad had about eight old-fashioned captain's chairs and the men would come in and talk about gossip."<sup>7</sup> Mr. Buhrer stocked a full and complete line of heavy and shelf hardware, agricultural implements, harness goods, saddles and bridles, carriages, wagons, windmills, pumps, stoves, silver, dishes, pots, pans, tin and granite ware, and iron pots. He also installed bathrooms and sinks, and repaired implements.<sup>8</sup> There was a tinner's shop the north store; Jake Muenzenmeyer, Charles Ball, and Roy Hottman were among the tinner's working there.<sup>9</sup> A.S. Chandler and John Ostberg did clerical work in the store.<sup>10</sup> The store is reported to have had a stock of \$3,000 and done an annual business of \$13,000 in 1883.<sup>11</sup> Ten years later, annual business was cited at \$30,000.<sup>12</sup>

#### SUBSEQUENT USES OF OPERA HOUSE

Though currently available sources are unclear on the details, it appears that eventually Mr. Buhrer used the majority of the space for his carriage, wagon, and buggy display. Peterson also states, "for a period this floor served as a Print Shop." However, when period this was is still unknown. The I.O.O.F. Lodge and Rebekahs used the Opera House for meetings from 1926 until 1961, when the Lodge combined with the Abilene I.O.O.F. Lodge and sold the building. Many

people have reminisced about the public Saturday night dances the Lodge held, and all have said that the dances were discontinued because they shook the building so badly.<sup>13</sup> During the 1940's the International Moulders and Allied Workers Union Local #20 rented the Opera House for it's meetings.<sup>14</sup> In the 1960's, the building was used for offices and storage by C-E, the successor to the Ersham Company. Some accounts say that the Opera House was used for storage of huge foundry molds from either C-E or the North Central Foundry in the 1970's.<sup>15</sup>

#### SUBSEQUENT USES OF HARDWARE STORE

Mr. Buhner ran his hardware business until the early 1920's, when he sold the inventory to A.S. Chandler and C.B. Myers, who in turn sold to Vern Ford.<sup>16</sup> In either 1924 or 1927 (accounts vary) Louis Mulanax of Denison, Kansas, purchased the inventory and remained in business until about 1942, when he closed the store. His son Alvin ("Si") helped in the store, and his son Ernest ("Shorty") engaged in plumbing and tinning.<sup>17</sup> According to Velma (Mrs. Ernest) Mulanax in 1981, "In 1942,<sup>18</sup> my husband's father closed the store. It was World War II and they couldn't get supplies."<sup>19</sup> Ernest "Shorty" Mulanax continued to run a plumbing business from the lean-to until his death in 1972. "Shorty" was also a volunteer fireman in the city for over 20 years.<sup>20</sup>

From the mid 1940's until \_\_\_\_\_, the south store housed a radio and television repair shop owned by Carl Hacker. Incidentally, Mr. Hacker first opened his radio shop in Enterprise in 1923, and in 1953, purchased the first television set in Enterprise.<sup>21</sup> From 1953 to 1957, the north store housed a Gamble store owned by Rollin "Cookie" Cook. In the 1960's, C-E, the successor to the Ersham Company, had offices in the building.

#### PHYSICAL CHANGES

The lean-to was razed in 1978, and the metal awnings supported by poles in the sidewalk were also removed, probably in compliance with a 1917 city ordinance banning sidewalk-supported awnings. A building-supported cloth awning on the south store shown in a picture from the mid-1930's is also gone. From that same mid-1930's picture,<sup>22</sup> it appears there were small glass panes above the doors and front windows of the north store, and may have been boarded

over or replaced on the north store. No earlier picture yet located allows a view of that part of the building, however an etching reproduced in the December 28, 1899 Enterprise Journal confirms the presence of these panes<sup>23</sup>. "Louis Mulanax Hardware Implements Plumbing" was once painted across the front of the building, just above the first floor. That has since been painted over.<sup>24</sup> There appear to have been no other changes to the exterior of the building. No old pictures have yet been located of the interior of the building.

#### RECENT HISTORY-ENDANGERMENT

In approximately 1981, the City of Enterprise seriously considered condemning the building,<sup>25</sup> but found the \$30,000 cost of demolition to be prohibitive.<sup>26</sup> The building has not been maintained for some years. The building was vacant from sometime in the late 1970's until probably 1985, when it was used by Lloyd Cummings as a piano restoration workshop. It has again been vacant (except for a large pigeon population) since at least 1991. There are numerous large holes in the roof and the rain and snow fall right into and through the building. There are also large holes in both floors, and broken beams in the basement. There is even one big hole that goes from the roof and all the way through to the basement. It looks like a huge object crashed through. The bricks are coming loose on all sides, and the north wall (partly in common with another building) is in need of stabilization. Other structural work probably needs to be done, but estimates are not yet completed. It needs an engineering survey. At least a new roof and re-pointing of the brick and stone are necessary to stop the deterioration of the property. Though standing now, the building may not stand for many more years without repairs.

#### PLANS FOR RESTORATION/REHABILITATION

No changes are contemplated for the outside front and sides of the building, simply repairs and removal of cosmetic changes previously made to storefront windows. Major changes are not planned for the outside back of the building, though the basement entrance and fire escape will need fixing. Proposing design for the inside is currently scheduled to be a project for one of the interior architecture studios at Kansas State University as a community service experience project. We anticipate making two or possibly three apartments upstairs, taking full advantage of the architectural character and beauty of the building. We also

anticipate making the two first floor stores into small offices with reception and secretarial services. There is a demand in the area for both apartments and office space, and the city does not have enough traffic to keep a retail store alive. The immediate need, however, is to stabilize the building.

#### CHAIN OF OWNERSHIP OF LAND<sup>27</sup>

The building is situated on lots 6 & 8, Block 4, Original Town of Enterprise. The lean-to was on lot 10.

Lot 6: Oct. 27, 1883 from C. Hoffman to B.F. Hilliker

Mar. 19, 1884 from B.F. Hilliker to Jacob F. Buhner

Lot 8: Mar. 19, 1884 from C. Hoffman to Jacob F. Buhner

Lot 10: Jan. 25, 1882 from W.T. Smith and wife to Jacob F. Buhner.

Jul. 25, 1944 from Marie Kemp Chandler to E.L. Mulanax.

Jun 19, 1978 from Velma Mulanax, et al, to Patricia B. Ersham.

Dec 28, 1984 from Patricia B. Ersham to Marianne D'Avino & Ralph (gift).

Apr. 11, 1985 from Marianne & Ralph D'Avino to Thomas E. & Florence P.

Jones.

Apr. 2, 1990 from Thomas E. & Florence P. Jones to Ingrid Carpentier (with other property)

Lots 6&8: Jun. 5, 1926 from J.F. Buhner & wife to Edward C. Banham, et al, Trustees, Enterprise Lodge No. 140, Odd Fellows

Sep. 27, 1961 from Trustees of Odd Fellows, Abilene, consolidated with Enterprise Lodge, to J.B. Ersham & Sons

Nov. 21, 1968 from J.B. Ersham & Sons Manufacturing Co. to The Ersham Co.

Oct. 30, 1979 from The Ersham Co. to the City of Enterprise

Aug. 17, 1981 from the City of Enterprise to Patricia B. Ersham

Dec. 20, 1985 from Patricia B. Ersham to Lloyd Cummings

Nov. 25, 1991 by Sheriff's Deed to First Finance, Inc.

Jan. 27, 1993 from First Finance, Inc., to John R. Nickel and Barbara L. Mee, present owners.

#### JACOB F. BUHRER

J.F. Buhner was one of the leading citizens of the city. He was born in Bibern, Canton Schaffhausen, Switzerland, on December 20, 1846, and came to

the United States with his parents in 1863. The family initially settled in Ohio, and moved to Dickinson County in 1871. J.F. Buhner moved into Enterprise in 1877. He married Harriet Weckerly in 1870 or 71 in Fulton County, Ohio. They had one child, Charles Lester who died in 1887, just before his 15th birthday. Harriet Weckerly Buhner died in 1878, and in 1879, Mr. Buhner married Sophia Staatz, the eldest daughter of J.F. Staatz. He and Sophia had one child, Herrietta Louella, in 1880, but she died in 1883. They subsequently raised two motherless girls, Marie Kemp (Mrs. A.S. Chandler), and Ruth Howdyshell (Mrs. D.B. Keller). His father, Jacob Buhner, was a shoemaker, and wanted to pass that trade on to his son, but Jacob F. is said to have hated the work, and after three years, he could not even make a boot.<sup>28</sup> While in Ohio, he engaged in boring artesian wells. When he moved to Kansas, he became a farmer in the Rinehart community. When he came to Enterprise, he engaged in business as a merchant. He first formed a partnership with A.G. "Doc" Eyth, in the drug and grocery trade. After a year and a half, he sold out his stock of drugs, but continued in the grocery business, moving his stock across the street in a wheelbarrow. He carried on for about two years, when with his father-in-law, J.F. Staatz, he erected a double store at a cost of about \$5000. He continued as a grocer, but also added a stock of hardware.<sup>29</sup> He then built the Hardware Store and Opera House, and continued the hardware business on his own. He also remained in partnership with his father-in-law in a furniture business in Enterprise.<sup>30</sup> Mr. Buhner was also Vice President and a director of the Dickinson County Bank from the time of its organization in 1894 until 1936.<sup>31</sup> He was Township Treasurer (\_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_), Mayor of Enterprise for two non-consecutive terms<sup>32</sup> and Councilman for many terms, (\_\_\_\_\_) including in 1889 when a city ordinance was passed calling for the establishment of a water works system for the town.<sup>33</sup> He was one of the early directors of the Mt. Hope Cemetery.<sup>34</sup> He was also a member of the Masonic Fraternity. He was a charter member of the Enterprise Lodge No. 437, A.F.&A.M., chartered in 1924.<sup>35</sup> He belonged to the Blue Lodge at Enterprise and the Consistory and Shrine at Salina. He was made a 33rd degree Mason on December 7, 1921. J.F. Buhner died at the age of 90 on June 28, 1936, five years after his wife.

## SUMMARY

The Buhner Opera House and Hardware Store were important to the social and commercial development of the city of Enterprise, and so contributed to our history. Further, the building is a virtually unaltered example of the Italianate or Bracketed style popular in the Victorian era. Buildings of this type have disappeared from America's large cities and will disappear along with America's small towns if not preserved and put to use to help revitalize the economies of the small towns. Registration is the first step in recognizing the value of the building and giving it the stature to make it worth investment from both public and private sources.

<sup>1</sup>Various building dates show in various records discovered so far.

Ellen Welander Peterson, *A Kansan's Enterprise (The Story of Enterprise, Kansas)*, 1957, states "in the '70's." Cecilia Harris, *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, October 29, 1981; and Helen Dingler, *Enterprise Journal*, November 12, 1981; both say 1878. Chapman Bros., *Portrait and Biographical Record, Dickinson, Saline, McPherson and Marion Counties, Kansas*, biography of Jacob F. Buhner, 1893, says 1886. Tax records so far available show a value of \$150 on the land in 1884, \$300 in 1885, and by 1888 the value was \$1150. Records of the years 1883, 1886, 1187 and 1889 exist, but have not yet been reached in the storage area.

<sup>2</sup>Chapman Bros, op cit; Dingler, op cit; Harris, op cit.

<sup>3</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>4</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>5</sup>A.J. Andreas, *History of Kansas*, 1883; quoted in Edward G. Nelson, *The Company and the Community*.

<sup>6</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>7</sup>Harris, op cit.

<sup>8</sup>The list of stock was compiled from Chapman Bros., op cit; Harris, op cit; and Peterson, op cit.

<sup>9</sup>Peterson, op cit

<sup>10</sup>Peterson, op cit

<sup>11</sup>A.J. Andreas, *History of Kansas*, Biographical Sketch of J.F. Buhner, 1883.

<sup>12</sup>Chapman Bros., op cit.

<sup>13</sup>1993 reminiscence of "Red" Mulanax, Helen Dingler, and others.

<sup>14</sup>Peterson, op cit. Nelson, op cit, notes a "short but effective" strike at J.B. Ersham & Sons, Manufacturing, Inc., in 1943, but not the union or the cause.

<sup>15</sup>1992 reminiscences of Helen Dingler and "Red" Mulanax.

<sup>16</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>17</sup>Peterson, op cit; Harris, op cit; and 1993 reminiscence of "Red" Mulanax, Louis' grandson and son of "Shorty." Dates among these varied. Either 1924 or 1927.

<sup>18</sup>Peterson, op cit, says 1943.

<sup>19</sup>Harris, op cit.

<sup>20</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>21</sup>Peterson op cit.

<sup>22</sup>Copy of picture at enclosure.

<sup>23</sup>Copy of etching at enclosure.

<sup>24</sup>Visible in current pictures at enclosure.

<sup>25</sup>Harris, op cit; Dingler, op cit; and "Teller Tales," a weekly ad/column placed in the *Enterprise Journal*, by The Dickinson County Bank, September 10, 1981.

<sup>26</sup>Verbal information from Joyce Chartier, City Clerk of Enterprise since 1975.

<sup>27</sup>From land transfer records of the Dickinson County Registrar.

<sup>28</sup>Chapman Bros, op cit.

<sup>29</sup>Chapman Bros, op cit. Does not appear in other references.

<sup>30</sup>Chapman Bros, op cit. Does not appear elsewhere.

<sup>31</sup>"Teller Tales," the *Enterprise Journal*, January 17, 1963, shows 1894-1936; Peterson, op cit, says " from the time of its organization until about 1934 when he resigned due to ill health."

<sup>32</sup>"Teller Tales," the *Enterprise Journal*, April 1, 1965. No dates are given, and the town records burned in approximately 1944. Buhner is listed as the 7th and 10th entries. The city was incorporated in February 1878, and according to Nelson, the first city election was scheduled for the first Tuesday in March. "Irregularities in election procedure and a very light vote raised some doubts about the legality and the validity of the March election. A new contest was set for April at which time a mayor and a city council were elected to oversee and direct civic activities at Enterprise. C. Hoffman was elected mayor at the April election." Assuming a two-year term for each mayor since C. Hoffman's election in 1878, Buhner would have been mayor from 1888-1890 and 1894-1896. That, however, is an awfully big assumption.

<sup>33</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>34</sup>Peterson, op cit.

<sup>35</sup>Peterson, op cit.