

# A New Life For An Opera House

The Phoenix rises from the ashes a second time, and thanks to the efforts of a caring community, her past glory is restored.

By Jon McGraw  
Alloy Casting Co. Inc.

In 1882 the Phoenix Opera House was built in Rushville, IL on the ashes of original pioneer structures. The brick building consisted of two stories, and as was the custom of the time, there were commercial stores on the street level and an auditorium on the second level. Below the roofline there were a series of cast iron designs placed to decorate the facade. It is these cast iron designs that we were ultimately asked to duplicate and cast. The original opera house is shown in Fig. 1, complete with dirt streets.

From 1882 until 1910 the opera house provided Rushville with vaudeville, a variety of live entertainment, and a home for community gatherings. But, with the introduction of movies in the early 1900s and the subsequent decline of vaudeville, the Phoenix closed its doors.

From 1910 until 1926 the opera house was inactive. In 1926 it was remodeled as a Masonic Lodge and was used in this capacity until 1956. From 1956 until 1975 the auditorium was abandoned. In 1975 a community playhouse theater was born and while looking for a home, they rediscovered the auditorium above the local variety store. As a result of this rediscovery, a group dedicated to the rebuilding and restoration of the opera house was incorporated. For nine years this group solicited contributions, and in 1984, they were finally able to buy the building.

Between 1984 and 1989 restoration was under way. In 1989 the opera house reopened and provided Rushville with

FIG. 1: The original opera house was built in 1882, and served the public for many years until its audience was lured away by movie theatres. Efforts to revitalize the building in the 1990s were well underway until a lightning strike badly damaged the building in 1995. Despite this setback, the building renovations continued, and in 1999, Alloy Castings Co. Inc. was called in to replicate the castings that once adorned the facade.

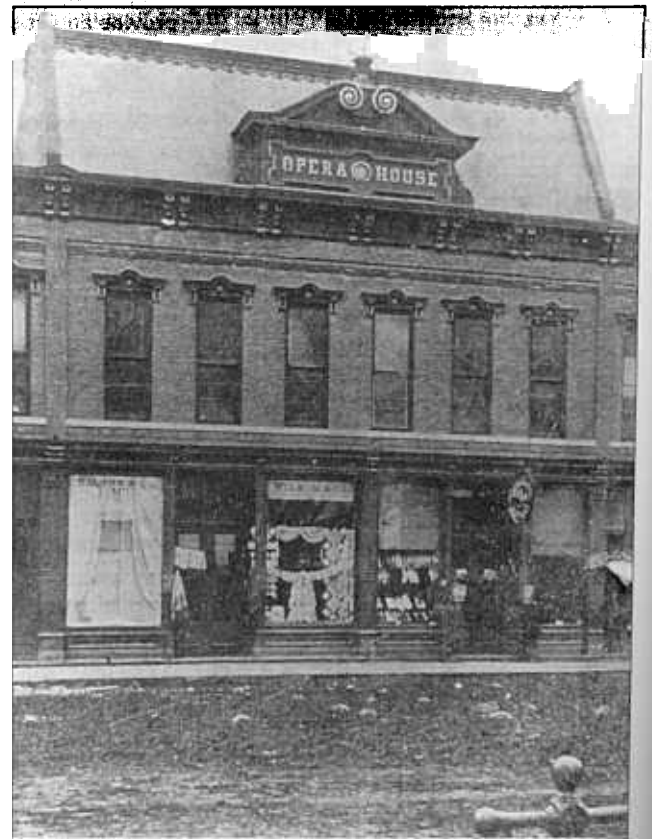
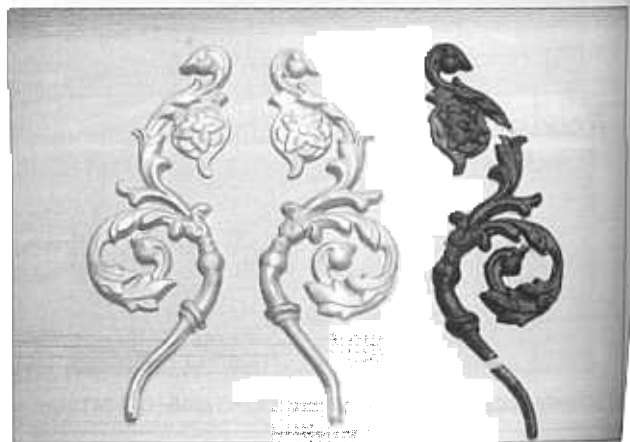


FIG. 2: After the long years and fire had taken their toll, there was little left of the facade castings. Only one broken and fire damaged piece was available for making the new patterns.



a downtown location for meetings, exhibits, receptions, and pancake breakfasts. By July 1995, the Phoenix Opera House had become very popular and had 39 events booked for the rest of the year.

From this pinnacle of progress in mid-1995, the remaining part of the year produced double catastrophes. The building was hit by lightning on July 25, 1995. The resulting fire burned the roof and second floor auditorium. All remaining spaces were severely water damaged. Just three months later while the group and the Phoenix Opera House were recovering from the lightning, a 70 m.p.h. wind storm blew down the second floor parapet walls and destroyed all foyer areas. There was not much left of the original building.

From this low point in late 1995, the Phoenix Opera House Community Center Inc. rebuilt the structure, and in 1999 they requested the assistance of Alloy Casting. We were brought in to help restore the decorative pieces that enhanced the outside facade, just below the roof line. The originals were made of cast iron but the replacements were made of cast aluminum.

The original cast iron pieces in the building were a left hand and a right hand matched set. They were 7 inches wide by 20 inches long and flat on one side. From the many pieces that were originally on the building, only one broken, fire damaged piece was recovered (Fig. 2). From this one piece the pattern maker made a new original pattern and a matching mirror image pattern.

The duplication process consisted of repairing the one original casting with epoxy, making a mold from the original, and making a new epoxy pattern from the mold. Using the one good left side pattern as a guide, a new right side pattern was carved from wood and used as the missing match. The original left side and re-carved right sides are indistinguishable. The one epoxy duplicate and the one wooden re-carved piece were then mounted to wood pattern boards. Aluminum castings were made from the boards. The project was accepted on August 25, 1999 and the final shipment of 20 left castings and 20 right castings was made September 29, 1999. Figure 3 shows the left and right pieces on the finished facade.

The scope of this renovation and



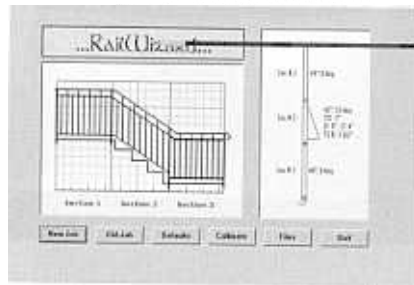
FIG. 3: The left and right pieces form a delightful pattern on the recently-completed facade.

restoration project is very typical to many projects in which we have been asked to take part. Fire damaged or missing articles have been re-tooled, cast in aluminum, and returned for installation where the new product matches perfectly the historical designs. In some

cases, no original pieces have been available and we have worked from historical drawings, pictures, or newspaper photographs.

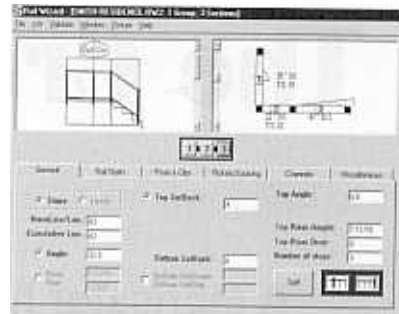
*This article is part of an ongoing series on custom castings. Mr. McGraw's last article appeared in Sept.-Oct. 1998.*

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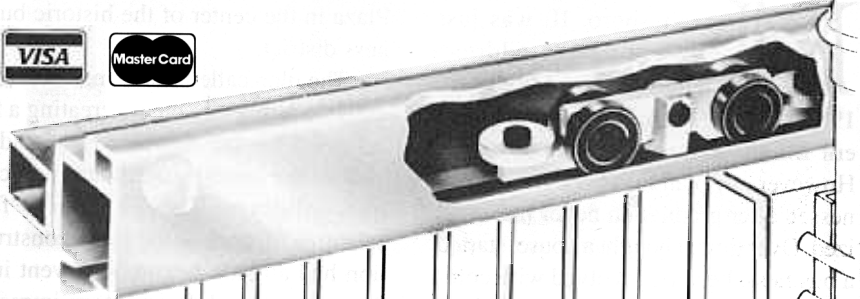


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