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The Opera House Theatre Building: A Colorful Past, 1903-1998

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***THE OPERA HOUSE THEATRE
BUILDING....***

A Colorful Past 1903-1998

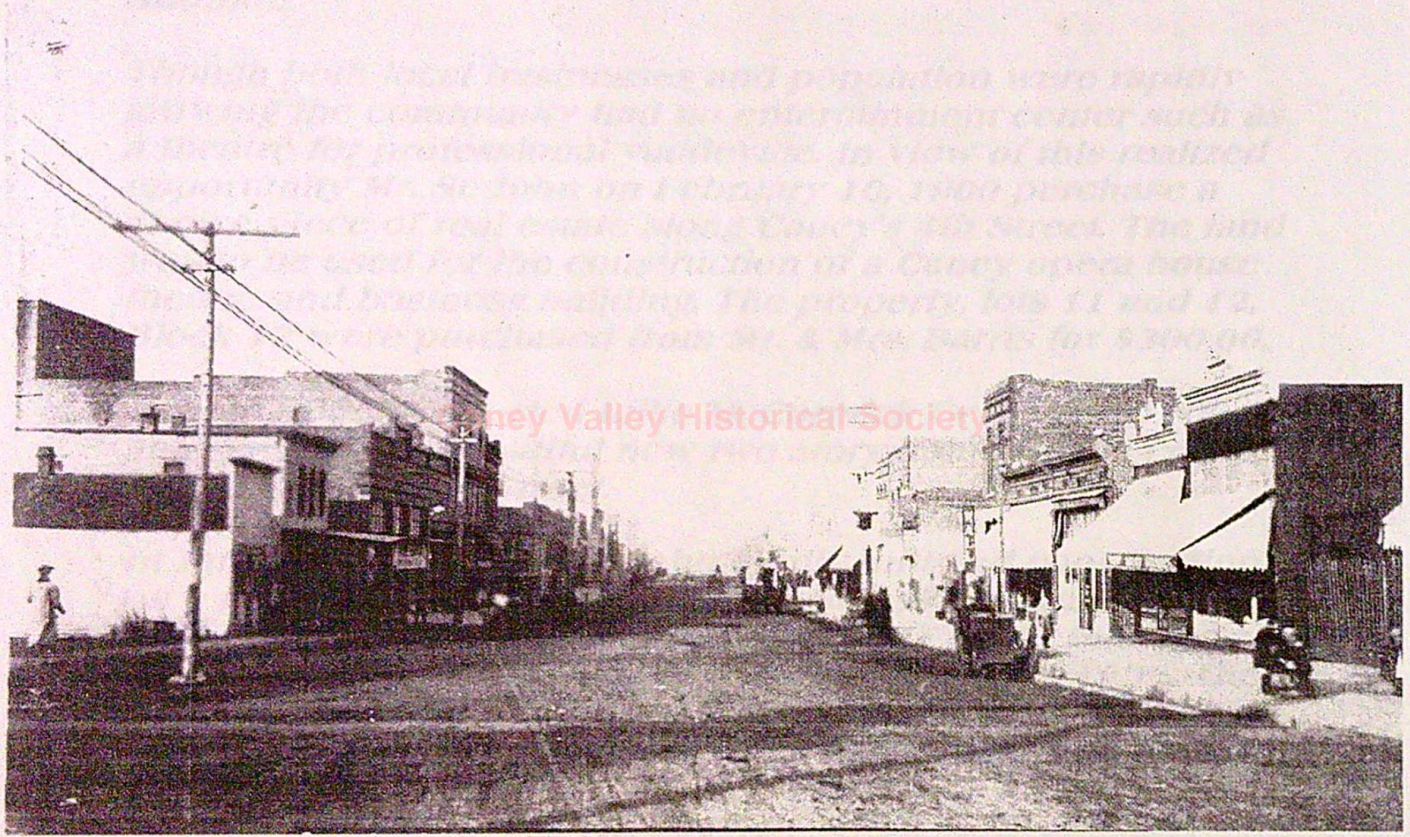
Caney Valley Historical Society

THE CANEY VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Elmer House, 1910

by [illegible]

The Elmer House, 1910. The house was built in 1910 by Elmer [illegible] and [illegible]. It is a two-story house with a [illegible] roof and [illegible] windows. The house is located on [illegible] Street in [illegible].



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The Opera House Theatre Building... A Colorful Past 1903-1998

By: O.J. Bridenstine

George F. St. John came to Caney in 1896 as an attorney and pharmacist, opening St. John's Drug Store. He was a true visionary and quickly engaged in other Caney businesses such as the Caney Gas, Oil & Mining Co. and a real estate ventures where he developed and platted the Caney St. John Addition.

Though both local businesses and population were rapidly growing the community had no entertainment center such as a theatre for professional vaudeville. In view of this realized opportunity Mr. St. John on February 10, 1900 purchase a choice piece of real estate along Caney's 4th Street. The land was to be used for the construction of a Caney opera house theatre and business building. The property, lots 11 and 12, Block 12 were purchased from Mr. & Mrs. Barris for \$300.00.

George St. John married Lillie McCormick October 1, 1900 and they built a beautiful new two story home on the corner of 300 South State Street.

In January of 1902 the St. John family initiated construction on a large two story brick theatre-business building. And following a major delay in the delivery of certain building materials the structure was completed in January 1903. The new elegant second floor opera house was complete with a colorful stage, seating, adjustable gas lights and wood heat.

St. John's Opera House Theatre opened in early January, 1903 with a popular vaudeville troupe presenting "Coon Town Society". The Caney Chronicle reported, "The unique character of the show provided fun and lots of it... funny songs, a cake walk, dancing, etc." The cost of admission was 25, 35, & 50 cents.

On July 18, 1908 the successful business venture was sold by George and Lillie St. John to the H.A. Truskett Estate, Ida Truskett, Executrix for \$8,000.00.

T.E. Smedley, theatre manager announced January 28, 1910 that the theatre was closing and may not reopen considering

the high cost of a city license and low patronage. The new license expense was reported to be \$50.00 and small box office receipts frequently didn't pay total expenses.

On October 29, 1910 the Truskett Opera House and several adjoining businesses were completely destroyed by fire. It was reported that the fire started by a small boy playing with matches in the rear of Will Toner's Livery on South Spring. The boy ran and told some of his friends to "sound the alarm and see the fire department run."

The fire destroyed the stable, burned fourteen horses, spread to the Truskett Opera House, leaving it in ruins.. It gutted the Hait Furniture Store and burned the Desgain Restaurant. Also, it damaged the Tom Young Hardware, the Opera House Drug Store and the adjoining Electric Theatre.

Following the disastrous fire the Truskett building was rebuilt except for the opera house. The second floor was then a large open space and called "Athletic Hall". It was used as a city gym for a two year period of time.

The building was again sold September 1, 1913 by Ida F. Truskett to M.G. Waring & wife Eunice and W.D. Edwards & wife Kate for \$6,000.00.

The Benevolent Protective Order Of The Elks, #1215 of Caney, Kansas engaged in a lease for the second floor of the building., effective April 23, 1914. The agreement called for extensive construction, such as a complete kitchen, powder room for the ladies, reception room and parlor off the front of hall including a cloak room, etc.

On April 5, 1915 W.D. Edwards & wife Kate purchased the building interest of M.G. Waring & wife Eunice for \$6,000.00

The building was later purchased by G. W. Connelly & wife Mabel on May 9, 1916 for the sum of \$8,000.00. The Caney Elk's lease continued until June 10, 1921 when the building's second floor was purchased by that organization. The Elk's were quite community active sponsoring many social functions such as dances, school programs, etc.

One of the most notable events that took place in the lodge hall was when Captain George H. Wark organized Caney's Company "D" (WWI) May 19, 1917. And one of the most

tragic events was when Nip Vann on November 12, 1913 was arrested at an Elk's dance and while leaving murdered Caney's town marshal, John McInroy.

The building's first floor engaged many different businesses over the years such as an arcade, sewing shop, meat market, etc. However, a ten year lease was obtained, February 20, 1917 by G.W. Connelly for housing the Caney U.S. Post Office, requiring one-half the building's first floor space. The annual rent paid was \$600.00 annually to be paid in quarterly yearly payments.

Now, reflecting back for a moment, following G.F. St. John's sale of the Opera House Theatre in 1908, he continued to operate his local drug store until about 1920. Selling the store, the family moved to their farm north of Sedan, Kansas and later moved to Winfield, Kansas where they were engaged in the restaurant business. In 1925 the St. John family returned to Caney establishing a drug store at the NW corner of Fourth and Spring Street. About 1930 the drug store was moved to the ground floor of the Connelly building (old St. John Opera House). By 1942 George St. John's health was poorly and the drug store was sold the same year to the Elbert Baker family.

The Caney Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks agreed to purchased their second story lodge hall in the Connelly Building for \$5,000.00. and took title June 10, 1921. However, hard times forced the county to foreclose (\$60.00) on the lodge property for delinquent taxes. The Elk's Trustees bought the property back at the county tax sale and later sold it to C.A. Lloyd & wife Goldia March 28, 1939.

The second story building property was then sold February 9, 1946 to representatives of the Ernest Brown Post No. 138 American Legion, Inc. They in turn transferred title to the Ernest Brown Post August 29, 1947 following their financial reimbursement. The legion hall was very popular following WWII as many veterans returned home and actively joined the organization. The facility provided both a lounge for food and drink plus recreation. The large meeting room was used for dances and bingo parties.

W.G. Connelly died November 7, 1945 and the Connelly Building remained in his estate with Mabel C. Connelly and Charles I. Gause as Executors. Following their deaths, August 2, 1961 and December 8, 1947 the estate Executrix

became Claire Louise Connelly Wallingford. On January 30, 1964 she sold approximately half of the ground floor to Dr. R.F. Moore & wife Betty who maintained a medical office at that location.

A number of individuals or families have had title to the building or maintained business there since the 1960's. A few of these Caney business people have been Dr. Doyle Burch, J.C. Young, Elgie Williams, Dr. R.F. Cole, Jane Phillips Medical Center, Shepherd Center, Hair Concepts by Donna and others.

This building has maintained a "unique condition." When the structure was built in 1903 there was no internal stairway going to the second floor opera house. The building adjacent to the west was the native sandstone "Stradley Building" built in 1895. This structure had a stairway going to its second floor so an agreement was made to access a large doorway in the east second floor wall of the "Stradley Building" into the "St. John's Opera House". AFTER NINETY FIVE YEARS THAT SAME STAIRWAY AND ACCESS IS USED TO ENTER THE SECOND STORY OF BOTH BUILDINGS!

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