

The Ancram Opera House

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published in *Columbia County History & Heritage*

Winter, 2004

Until September 11th, 2001, I had never thought to get a place in the country. But when the soul of New York City burned and an acrid odor crept across the East River toward my home in Brooklyn, I considered seeking headquarters out of town. An ad in the New York Times real estate section described an old Grange Hall in the foothills of the Berkshires, three floors, 4600 square feet, “suitable for artist’s studio.”

I drove up with a friend to see it in mid-October on a sparkling autumn morning, following directions to a town I’d never heard of. When I got my first look at this huge, charming edifice, I gazed at the gold-lettered sign over the entrance. Owner Larry Healy walked me onto the main floor to see its small theatre. The walls were alive with public history and personal memories.

Larry, a very tall carpenter known as “Stretch,” was living a loving, frayed single dad life there with his teenage daughter, Cat. They slept in the three-bedroom loft on the top floor, Larry used the daylight basement for work and storage and the main floor’s theatre as his wood shop. The sound of music playing highlighted the room’s great acoustics, enhanced, I later learned, by the walls and ceiling of hickory wainscoting.

But their living room, with its home entertainment center was oddly pitched on the theater’s tiny raked stage. I wondered how someone could tolerate their sofa and TV being on a slight angle, and understood only after I moved in and tried, with much help and no success, to get a couch up the narrow stairs to the top floor.

A basketball enthusiast who coached the kids in town, Stretch encouraged the very tall Cat to develop her basketball skills. Willing and driven, she practiced on the theatre's hard maple floor, and Stretch gradually moved the basket higher as she grew. (She's now a basketball phenomenon at SUNY New Paltz.) He'd also used the theatre for local community benefits and celebrations. The day I first saw it, it served as a wood shop with a touch of faded grandeur, woodworking projects in various stages balanced on rows of saw horses where an eager audience had once been.

People ask me, "Did you immediately fall in love with the Opera House?" Well, no. It was a lovely old building in a charming town, but, as the first place I saw, I assumed that it was but one stop on a long odyssey. Someone else had a binder on it, and it seemed more a curiosity than a possibility.

Still, for me, coming from a long career in dance and movement education, the sight of a big empty room with lovely tall windows and a cute little stage was exhilarating. The floor was in perfect shape, with nary a crack or warp. Here and there I saw posters reflecting the changing times: one announced a 1938 July 4th Chicken Supper at the Ancram Grange for 75 cents, another the opening of light opera, another a more recent run of *Pump Boys & Dinettes*. I could teach here, have room to dance, work with private clients and be in a rural town where music, performance and people's sequential dreams had found a space to flourish.

The other buyer's binder fell through and, on a crisp day in February, 2002, I closed on the Ancram Opera House.

Not long after, a local architectural historian gave me a 1976 *Ancram Standard* with Mssrs. Hayden and Chapin's rambling account of their rescue and renovation of the building. A friend found one of their 1975 Opera House programs at a tag

sale in Hudson. For this article, I sought out Clara Van Tassel, Ancram's Town Historian, for information on its inception. That took me back to its origins as a grange hall, giving me a feel for rural life at the beginning of the 20th century.

Town records note that the Ancram Grange No. 955 - a chapter of The National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry (formed in 1867) - was organized in 1903 with 39 charter members. Regular meetings were held in the parlors of Dr. G.W. Rossman's farm house. Though the minutes describe more procedure than content, there are glimmers of lively interchange. On March 19th, 1903, "Brother Dr. Rossman made an able address on the use and abuse of the ballot box and advised all Grangers to remember the Golden Rule: Love your neighbor as yourself."

In 1927, the Grange voted to build a home of its own. "Dr. Rossman," says a town document, "donated a lot and the present commodious building was erected at a cost of Six Thousand Dollars." Sitting on a half acre of land up the hill from the town's lone intersection, the Ancram Grange Hall was dedicated on June 26th, 1929.

Muriel Parsons, a 90-year-old Ancram resident and retired schoolteacher who was a member of the Grange for about fifty years, was once its secretary. "It was a social organization of farmers and their families," she told me, and remembers exciting trips to the Chatham County Fair, where they displayed splendid arrays of produce.

In 1866, after the Civil War, President Andrew Johnson sent Oliver Kelley Hudson - a Bureau of Agriculture clerk, Minnesota farmer and activist - to evaluate the South's economy. Hudson returned disturbed by the widespread poverty and backwardness he saw. "Farm life in the 19th century," says one web source, "was marked by a tedium and isolation relieved only by church functions and weekly trips to town for supplies."

Kelley believed that scattered, independent farmers – at the mercy of merchants for farm supplies and distribution of crops – needed a national organization to represent them. He sparked formation of the Grange (an old word for granary). The fledgling organization became a political force after the Panic of 1873 when, according to U-S-history.com, “farmers in all areas were plagued by low prices for their products, growing indebtedness and discriminatory treatment by the railroads.” The Grangers advocated cooperatives to purchase equipment and supplies at better prices. To avoid dependence on corrupt banks, they pooled their savings and formed early credit unions.

Another aspect of the Grange’s mission was “to develop a better and higher manhood and womanhood among ourselves.” What I imagined as sober meetings of farmers discussing soil, equipment and techniques also featured uplifting recitations of poetry and song. “Mrs. Allan Downing gave us both instrumental and vocal music,” say the March 30th, 1903 minutes. “Mrs. Henry Downing read Hiawatha’s ‘Fasting’ and ‘The Blessing of the Cornfield.’”

Among the list of male Grange officers – Master, Overseer, Lecturer, Steward, Chaplain and Gate Keeper – were three women holding more mysterious titles: Ceres, Pomona and Flora. “Flora,” Mrs. Parsons explained, “referred to the flowers, Pomona to the fruit and Ceres to the grains.” The three women who served in these roles, she said, “were what we called Graces.” I gleaned from her that the Graces conducted pageants and rituals, perhaps marking the seasons and nudging the forces of nature to draw forth the earth’s bounty.

The National Grange still exists, with headquarter in Washington, D.C. and its motto: “In Essentials, Unity – In Non-Essentials, Liberty – In All Things, Charity.” But as agrarian life faded, so did the Ancram Grange. Mrs. Parsons, who

joined at age 15, saw some of its functions shift to the town's fire company. "Maybe the automobile caused the trouble," she said. The isolation that had made the Grange such a vital community force was forever broken. "My goodness," she said, "you've got the automobile, and you don't have to stay in town."

Over the years, the Ancram Grange hosted minstrel shows, picnics, dances, benefits, art exhibits, vaudeville shows and films. Betty Hamilton, proprietor of Ancram's convenience store, recalls voting there.

In 1970, the building, then in dire need of repair, was sold to John Peter Hayden and Donald Chapin, who put it to a very different purpose. The cousins shared a fantasy of turning Ancram into a Victorian tourist village. Though they called their project one of restoration, they gave the Ancram Grange Hall a sheen it never had.

They went to work creating an unlikely haven for opera in a farm community, and in the process saved the building. They replaced the roof, installed electric baseboard heat and, to give the theater an illusion of scale, added faux box seats in which no adult could possibly sit. They obtained chandeliers from Czechoslovakia (still there), a grand drape from the Rebecca Harkness Dance Theater (now vanished) and hired German carpenters to build a graceful front porch. They renamed the building and used it for evenings of operetta and formal grand balls, earning national awards and extravagant national coverage. They transported and restored a Victorian gazebo from the Astor Estate in West Copake onto the property, surrounded it with rose gardens and used it, says Hayden, for "musical performances, a few weddings, and for people to enjoy."

But many of their projects, like the unfolding of their dream, were deeply flawed. The well they had dug wasn't deep enough. The grading beneath the porch

guided water toward the foundation, so seepage rotted its base. Among the local merchants, they left a trail of grumbling and unpaid debts. When they went bankrupt in 1978, a local paper noted that, “Thirty-two area residents and businesses are among the 169 creditors with unsecured claims totaling \$453,350.04.” The Hudson City Savings Institution foreclosed on the Opera House.

Rinny and Dick Staber heard that the Ancram Restoration had gone belly up, and that cheap properties were available. Dick, an accomplished folk musician, saw it as a place where he could perform and his wife Rinny could build a ceramics studio. In 1980, they bought it from the bank for a song – \$42,000.

Dick could not make a go of his hoped-for concert series, says Rinny from her present home in Naples, Florida, “so we closed off the theater and gave great parties there.” She used an adjacent shed for her salt glaze gas-fired kiln. Now, where it once stood, her hand-painted blue and grey tiles still form a circle in the cement floor. She used the basement as her studio and a playroom for their son, Polo, and daughter, Remembrance (a Pilgrim name). They renovated the top floor from an empty shell to a charming living area including a kitchen and three bedrooms, highlighting the dramatic contours of the building’s post and beam construction. Her daughter Memi’s bedroom lacked a window, so the potter negotiated a deal with Ed Herrington and his wife: Rinny would make them a set of unique dinnerware in exchange for the skylight that now lets in the sun from the south.

“Then,” says Rinny, “my marriage went under, and my alimony was the Opera House.” Now managing the building on her own, she says, “I really needed to do something with it.”

While working at *Publisher’s Weekly*, Milenah Hering came to Ancram on weekends to the house she shared with writer Leanne Schreiber. Originally from

South Carolina, Milenah had come to New York City, MFA in hand, to be a theater director. To her chagrin, she says, “I couldn’t get arrested. As an actress, I had some success in the commercial world and off Broadway, but not as a director, which is a lot harder.” The Opera House just up the hill immediately captured her attention. Since the theater was unused, Milenah spoke to Rinny about putting on a play there, “just to see if anything would fly.”

She staged *A Couple of White Chicks Sitting Around Talking*, casting herself and another New York actress. “With the help of a friend who was a carpenter,” she says, “we built the set on this tiny little stage and borrowed very rudimentary lights.” The run of performances completely sold out the 100 seat theater.

“We got lots of attention from the local press,” she says, “and the next thing I knew, people started asking, ‘What’s the name of your company? And I’d answer, ‘Well, it’s really just one play.’ Then I thought: if I’m not getting directing work in New York, I’ll quit my magazine job, move up here full-time and start a theater company.” She chose the name Leap Productions, apt for a venture requiring a giant leap of faith.

Milenah installed bathrooms in the basement and created an area for the audience to circulate during intermission. She raised money and rewired the theater, upgrading it to 400 amps, expanded the size of the stage, created proper wings backstage, purchased lighting and partitioned the basement to accommodate dressing rooms and a scene shop.

In the fall of 1989, the Opera House doors opened to Leap’s first performance. For five years, this little company in a rural hamlet with no restaurant or trendy bed and breakfast did four or five plays in an astoundingly long season – from April to Christmas – culminating with a children’s holiday show.

Miraculously, they ended each year in the black. People came from Albany, Poughkeepsie, Greene and Dutchess Counties, from Connecticut and Massachusetts to see dramas, comedies or musicals. Plays included *Painting Churches*, *Pump Boys & Dinettes*, *Cahoots*, *Smoke on the Mountain*. Some productions moved on to the Egg in Albany, a real theater with a real budget, providing unprecedented income for the company and its actors.

Rinny was thrilled with the arrangement. “The theater took off,” she says, “my studio was great and my best friend took over the concession stand downstairs. We made brownies and lemonade, and all my friends helped out.” During intermission, audience members browsed through Rinny’s studio and bought her pottery. “For me and for the theater,” she recalls, “it was a golden time.”

Every year during Leap’s tenure, Milenah would choose the season, start her grant writing and fund-raising, and rehearse one show while another was running. “When I look back on it,” she says, “I can’t believe I was able to keep all those balls in the air. If I had a trust fund, I’d still be doing it. I had a wonderful time.”

That era came to an end when Rinny moved to Florida to care for her aging parents. Milenah was burned out and ended Leap’s memorable run, returning to New York and a job at Advertising Age. Ultimately, Rinny sold the building to Stretch who, seven years later, sold it to me.

The Opera House needs a new roof. Until I can restore it, the gazebo – the most divine place to sip cool white wine on a summer day – is shielded from the weather by a tarp. The rose gardens, graceful front porch and topiary are gone. In a recent windstorm, the giant elm in the yard knocked over the chimney. Like any old building, it needs work, but I feel buoyed up by the town’s affection for this historic center, and the welcome of good neighbors.

I have never resided in a building so alive with the voices heard there. As others have before, I hope to shore up its flaws and brighten its facade. Next summer, I'll be using it to teach yoga classes and workshops. I'm grateful to be in a place that so comfortably holds creative energy in its weary, seasoned embrace.

Last summer, I brought a friend, a fellow salsa dancer, to the Opera House. We christened the floor to some Latin music, somewhat incongruous with the rural peace outside. As we danced on that well-worn maple floor, polished smooth by so many feet, there was something in the play of the late afternoon light that made us look, again and again, toward the entrance. It seemed as if someone was opening its doors, as if people were coming again to the Opera House to see what the next phase in its life would be.