

## The Litchfield Opera House



FROM THE CIVIL WAR through the 1920s, cities and towns were considered

incomplete without an opera house. Litchfield, located 60 miles west of the Twin Cities, was no exception. In November 1900, the county seat of Meeker County proudly opened the doors to its two-story, cream-colored brick Litchfield Opera House. Built for \$12,000 with the help of community contributions, the Renaissance Revival building's symmetrical design features red brick and terra cotta patterns, cut-stone trim, and arches above its windows.

Opening night coverage in the *Litchfield Independent* proudly noted the opera house's complete system of 200 electric lights, three hot air furnaces, and up-to-date floor plan. The capacity crowd of 600 viewed a production of the play *The Marble Heart* and heard the theater company's director congratulate the city on its fine opera house.

Though few actual "operas" were performed in opera houses, all hosted theatrical and musical performances, social gatherings, and meetings. Performances during the Litchfield Opera House's early years by Madame Anna Hellstrom, the "Prima Donna Soprano of Royal Opera of Stockholm," in 1906 and the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra in 1913 were typical. In 1936, the Litchfield Opera House was the site of the largest funeral in Meeker County to date, that of former U.S. senator and representative Magnus Johnson. Some 4,000 people celebrated the life of the



Patrons line up in 1908 for an event at the Litchfield Opera House, built in 1900. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)

farmer and Farmer-Labor politician, the only Swedish-born person to serve in the U.S. Senate.

In later years, the opera house was used as a motion picture theater and community meeting place, and housed Litchfield city offices. In 1984, the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, for its significance in politics, government, entertainment, and recreation.

After city offices closed in 2002, the building was vacant. In 2006, the Litchfield City Council voted to demolish the building. Concern over its future led to the opera house's place on the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota's "10 most endangered" historic properties list in 2007.

A group of concerned citizens organized the Greater Litchfield Opera House Association to preserve the building. In 2008, the city reversed its decision to demolish and sold the opera house to the group at a token cost. Volunteers and grants supported the opera house's restoration and ren-

ovation. In 2016, it continues its life as a community and historic resource and home for the arts.

—Linda James

Sources: Litchfield Opera House website, [www.litchfieldoperahouse.com/](http://www.litchfieldoperahouse.com/); National Register of Historic Places website, [www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/mn/meeker/state.html](http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com/mn/meeker/state.html). Opening night coverage: *Litchfield Independent*, November 6, 1900; *Litchfield Review*, November 10, 1900; *Litchfield News Ledger*, November 15, 1900; *Litchfield News Ledger*, November 22, 1900. Early events: *Willmar Tribune*, November 14, 1906; *Willmar Tribune*, April 16, 1913; *Herald-Journal* (Delano), December 30, 2013. Preservation: *West Central Tribune* (Willmar), October 4, 2006; *Post Bulletin* (Rochester), May 5, 2007.

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