KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 641, Covington, Kentucky 41012

BULLETIN OCTOBER 1997

KCHS MEETING

October 23
7 PM

Simon Kenton: Frontiersman

A Dramatization by Mel Rankin

Co-Sponsored by NKU Education Center and Kentucky Heritage Speaker Series

at Northern Kentucky University Covington Campus 1401 Dixie Highway

Funded by KHC & NEH

Minerva is Rescued: The Covington Public Library Becomes The Carnegie Art Center

Story begins on Page 2.

Relief, above Carnegie entrance, of Minerva, Goddess of Wisdom and Skill, sheltering youths symbolizing the fine arts and useful arts.

From The President

The Society's election this September has appointed me your new president. I insisted I would not accept unless John Boh stayed on the Board. He did. John has contributed immeasurably to this Society. He was there at the founding in 1977; he has been president for as long as I have been a member; he is our region's HCK representative; and he has helped spearhead the annual History Days at NKU. I expect to lean on his experience for my tenure.

We wish to thank Ruth Eubanks for filling the Treasurer's position when she was sorely needed. We welcome Dorothy Colwell to that office with much enthusiasm. She is a trained genealogist and will bring much expertise to the Board. Carol Wenger has been elected as a new Board member. She helped write the grant that obtained our new photocopier in cooperation with Behringer-Crawford Museum.

There is much to do to market the Society within Kenton County. As a comparison, Pendleton's Historical Society has a membership equal to 1.2% of their county's total population, while we, with ten times the population, have only managed to attract less than 0.2% of our county population! The Board and I hope to define more clearly in the coming months new goals and needs for the Kenton County Historical Society.

Karl J. Lietzenmayer

Minerva is Rescused:
The Covington Public Library Becomes The Carnegie Art Center

(Part 2 Continued)

by Jo Ann C. Brown

There were "no immediate plans for the old Covington Library." So reported the Kentucky Post. The new library had been finished and the 1974 New Year's Day Closing Party was held in the seventy-one year old library building funded by Andrew Carnegie.[1]

It was an era when many historic buildings had already been victims to the wrecker's ball. The threat to the Carnegie building's demise was there. Behind the scenes, however, Covington city fathers and arts enthusiasts envisioned an arts facility in Northern Kentucky. They had already formed the Kentucky Arts Council, had a lease on the old Carnegie library, and had gotten it on the National Registry for Historic Buildings.

In almost 100 years, the 2,509 Carnegie public library buildings have undergone extensive changes, some positive and some negative. A typical enthusiastic comment found in the files of the Carnegie Corporation was from Corsicana, Texas. The book stock rose from 600 to 9,000 volumes during the first eight years of operation; sixty percent of the town's 10,000 residents had library cards; and monthly circulation was 35,000 books.[3]

In contrast, a complaint about the Huntsville, Alabama library came from Norah Davis, a well known author: "The city government has shifted all library responsibility to a library board, pays only salaries, heat, and light, without funding books and magazines, and rents out books for two cents per day." They were open, only on weekday afternoons. On top of this, Norah Davis was expelled from the library for neglecting to give her chauffeur ten cents to pay for her library card renewal. She asked the Carnegie Corporation to deal with this undemocratic situation. They referred her to the State Library Commission.[4]

In Corbin, Kentucky, the floors of the Carnegie Library buckled and the walls cracked soon after its 1913 construction. Water had been left standing in the basement for weeks at a time so that the building was too damp to use. The majority of townspeople had never been in the library. In short, the correspondent wrote, the library was not fulfilling the role Carnegie had in mind.[5]

In many communities, the Carnegie buildings are a source of pride. As cities grew, new main library buildings were built and the Carnegie originals became branches. As library science expanded, library buildings needed expansion. Some construction altered the classic architecture of 1900 so much so that one could not find the original. Of the nine Carnegie libraries in Cincinnati, seven are still being used as libraries. The library branch in Corryville at Vine and Daniels just recently reopened after being restored to its original style. The West End building at Eighth and State was sold in 1947 to Ross Printing Company, later to be demolished for a service station. The East End branch on Eastern and Donham Avenues was sold to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, but has recently been rehabbed and renamed the Carnegie Center by the Columbia-Tusculum Economic Development Corporation and used as a community center. Newport's Carnegie Library at Fourth and York Streets with its small auditorium is still in use as a library and is a branch of the Campbell County Library System.[6]

The Carnegie Library of Lexington became the Carnegie Center for Literature and Learning in 1991. A number of Carnegie buildings have become art centers.

In Covington, the Carnegie Library Building still stands proudly on Scott Street, renamed The Carnegie.

The theatre was the real motivator for saving the old Covington library. The Catholic Theatre Guild of Northern Kentucky, which used the performing arts facility at Mother of God School, had previously used the Carnegie auditorium in the 40s and 50s for productions such as Desert Song, Naughty Marietta, and Showboat. They knew the acoustical value of that space. The last function held there was a political rally in 1956.

In 1970, plans were announced that the performing arts facility at Mother of God School would be demolished. The news distressed members of the Theatre Guild. Bernie Moorman, a member of the Guild, and Ralph B.

Grieme, Jr., elected Vice Mayor in 1969, got a few interested parties together in Bernie's living room on Greenup Street. They discussed the lack public arts facilities in Northern Kentucky. Kentuckians looked often to Cincinnati for their art forms, musical and visual. At the time, the Baker-Hunt Foundation in Covington was the principle public arts facility. The Berhringer-Crawford Museum was very small and was not used for art purposes as it is now. The Stained Glass Theatre of Newport had not formed yet. There was no Northern Kentucky Symphony, no Arts Collaborative.

The group formed a steering committee which met and worked at Baker-Hunt for several years. Their goal? To create an umbrella organization for the arts of Northern Kentucky and turn the old library into a first class arts institution for its headquarters. They achieved the first goal on November 30, 1971, incorporating the Northern Kentucky Arts Council. The same year, they got to the first step of the second goal, putting the Carnegie building on the National Registry for Historic Buildings.

The Council called on Richard Gibeau to be its president. At that time, Gibeau held the position of Vice President and Development Officer of Thomas More College. When he lived in Fort Wayne, he served as director of the successful Fort Wayne Arts Council when it was in its infancy.

When the Library moved to its new quarters in 1974, the decision was made to take the contents of the 1902 Carnegie cornerstone to be put into the cornerstone of the new library. Members of the Arts Council watched in dismay as the fire department cut into and ripped out the cornerstone from deep inside the walls of the northwest corner of the historic building. Chunks of brick and plaster flew out; plaster dust settled into a thick white coat, leaving a ghostly pallor over everything[7].

The Carnegie building was a mess. Debris from the move was everywhere. The marble floors were dark with dirt and wax buildup. The long rows of bookshelves left black crusty marks built up over seventy years. Pieces of stained glass from the curved dome above scattered over the floor. Some windows had been broken by vandals.

The theatre, however, was a disaster. It had been neglected, used by the library only for storage. It had literally rained inside the theatre. Thieves had stolen the copper roof. The plaster was falling off the walls; the wood floor had rotted and fallen through. The metal theatre seats, each with the initials "CH" (Carnegie Hall), had fallen through into the abyss. Small trees actually grew inside and vines were hanging from the balcony. [8]

The group called an acoustical expert from New York City to survey the damage and make suggestions. Surely they must have wondered if it was worth restoring, and how many millions of dollars it would cost. The architect, however, told the group that the building was one of the finest examples of any Car-negie Library in the country. The eastern expert found the building to be basically sound and the theatre was "among the most acoustically perfect throughout the world for a theatre of its size."[9]

The building had been leased in 1973 from the City for $1 per year with the agreement that the City maintain the outside of the building only. Insurance was paid by the City for fire and liability protection with the provision that the building be brought up to code.[10]

The Kentucky Arts Commission actively supported the Council's goals. They served as advocate and advisor as well as awarding financial grants. The Kentucky Arts Commission and the Model Cities Program funded a study of the building and funded design plans for its renovation. Although the City did not want to take on a long range project such as the monumental restoration of the old building, they gave $75,000 for partial renovation and for seed money to attract arts funding. [10]

The Arts Council started renovation of the main building first. It houses a large amount of exhibition space. At the top of the two spiral staircases, four galleries surround the rotunda: the Upstairs, the Duveneck, the McCarthy/ Northlight, and the Corner galleries. Combined, they make up 9,000 square feet of gallery space. The main area is appropriately called the Downstairs Gallery and lends itself to large art works and sculpture. Partitions are added for more exhibition space. The openness to the glass dome above creates a gracious airiness.

One of the Council's first arts projects was an Arts Preview in August of 1975 to give the community a glimpse of plans for the future. Tours of the theatre were given.

In 1976, the Council hired its first Executive Director,

Dr. Henry Glover. He was one of four employees of the Council paid by grants. The Board was made up of Cincinnatians as well as Kentuckians and enjoyed a diversity of artist participation. The future looked bright for the Northern Kentucky arts community. [11]

One of Dr. Glover's first projects was a series of one-day workshops in July and August of 1976, for $2.50 each. Funded by the Kentucky Arts Commission, it served as employment for professional artists and arts education for large numbers of community residents by introducing various media .

In the late '70s, a contemporary sculpture made of steel alloy material was installed near the Scott Street entrance to complement the classicism of the Carnegie. With its copper additive, it was designed to form its own protective patina from the elements of our 20th Century atmosphere. Called " Where Does Truth Lie?" by Warren Hall, this "Truth" was found lying in a garbage heap at Edwards Products Company. It had been exhibited at the Contemporary Art Center in 1976, but a buyer for the $12,000 piece of art could not be found. Bernard Schmidt, Carnegie Arts Center Community Development Director, rescued it. The Kentucky Arts Commission paid for transport and installation of the piece at one tenth of its value.[12]

In 1977, a new director was hired, Tom Oldendick. He had been in Costume Design Production at Cincinnati Playhouse In The Park. He came to the Carnegie with a big splash of publicity to promote the philosophy of the Council which meant making art available to a wide variety of people in Northern Kentucky and providing a place for Greater Cincinnati artists to exhibit and perform. He pushed Northern Kentucky for less dependency on Cincinnati for its cultural values and promoted more local creativity. "My main function at the moment is to create close co-operation where regionalism has long been a problem," he was quoted as saying. He cited as examples three Northern Kentucky organizations which had commissioned the Arts Council individually to bring the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra to Northern Kentucky to perform. "All three groups received state funding to do this. Each group had to do its own event promotion. In all cases, the sponsors attracted fewer than 1500 people to the concerts."[12]

In 1976, Paul Zappa, a PhD student from Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, founded the Center Civic Opera Company. Its premier performance at The Carnegie was in February 1977 with five concerts to follow. Since the theatre was still in need of renovation, a raised platform was built in the rotunda for the performances.

The Arts Council promoted and arranged for concerts throughout Northern Kentucky as part of its goal to make the arts more readily available to more people. One of the first projects was the Affiliate Artists Program, a Sears-Roebuck project which brought Karen Hunt, Soprano, to perform in Kentucky.

On June 26, 1977 they sponsored the first Art in the Park, a festival in Devou Park. Dance performances and concerts were the hit of the day accompanied by visual art exhibitions at the Carnegie Center.

The Arts Council had 300 members in 1977, and it was on the social calendar of many Greater Cincinnati residents. The Single Ladies Reading Society, a group of 30ish swinging singles, sponsored two fund raising dances in the rotunda at the Center.

The Kentucky Post called it a "major coup" on the part of the Carnegie when it sponsored a gala party in honor of Andre Watts, world reknown pianist, and Sarah Caldwell, the first woman to conduct the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. That same evening the Cincinnati Playhouse hosted a party honoring Celeste Holm. They noticed a sparse crowd, and discovered that many of the expected guests were at the Carnegie. Many people, however, attended both parties.

In December, the premier performance of "The Emperor's New Clothes" by the American Repertory Theatre took place. Called Peanut Butter Theatre, it was dinner theatre for kids who sat on the floor of the rotunda, enjoyed box lunches of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a cookie; then enjoyed the play. A full series of six productions was presented the following year.

Also in 1978, a survey was facilitated by the Northern Kentucky Arts Council and sponsored by The Kentucky Arts Commision. A Northern Kentucky Regional Arts Panel was formed specifically to oversee the survey to ascertain the cultural and artistic needs in eight Northern Kentucky Counties.

The building was continuing to receive attention while these art promotions were going on. The first phase of a $700,000 planned

renovation took place. The ruined wood floor in the theatre was replaced with cement. Eventually, they planned to overlay it with a wood floor. [13]

Work on the glass dome, a miniature of the dome in the Library of Congress, was a major project. The Kenton County Fiscal Court included the Carnegie in its budget and awarded $50,000 for several rehab projects including the restoration of 400 feet of gold stained glass. The work was done by Artisan Richard A. Stewart. His wife and business partner said, "It is the biggest restoration project anyone involved in stained glass has undertaken in this area." They did extensive research to follow specifications of the original dome. In order to find the correct glass, they had to drive their truck to New Jersey to haul it back to Covington. Shaping the glass was the hardest job. Stewart built a pie shaped mold using wood and poultry netting as a skeleton. That frame was sprayed with polyurethane insulation material. After a series of cuttings and weldings, the glass maintained its necessary curve. It was also not easy to find a foundry willing to reproduce the lead rosettes and shield medallions which accent the structure's geometric design.[14]

The '80s were a dark period in the history of the Northern Kentucky Arts Council and the Carnegie Arts Center. Funding for the arts was being cut back by government agencies. The lack of government grants reduced the staff from four to two. After the end of the Comprehensive Employment Training Act, no clerical or janitorial help could be hired much less a development officer or program director. By 1980, they had hired their third director, Chris Kellogg.

The Council's budget was dependent on money from The Governor's Challenge Grant for operating expenses. When private contributions waned, they were disqualified from receiving the grant. In addition, art gallery hours were shortened to afternoons only, Tuesdays through Saturdays.

Appeals by the Board were made to many funding groups. In June of 1981, Judge-Executive James Dressman submitted his budget. It included $24,500 for the Council. Because of its desperate financial situation, the Court allowed $10,000 of this money to be used for operating expenses.

In July of that same year, the Council was shocked to hear that funds from the National Endowment for the Arts were frozen. The freeze was imposed because funds for arts organizations were to be regulated by a citizens group which was the Kentucky Arts Commission, not a government organization. Governor John Y. Brown signed an executive order abolishing the Kentucky Arts Commission to establish a state Art Department, automatically eliminating NEA funds for Kentuckians. Five of the seventy-eight NEA grants were to come to Northern Kentucky. It all worked out eventually, but not until a new citizens panel had been established in the state.

In spite of all the financial problems, art went on. In 1981, a Smithsonian touring exhibit of paintings by Mary Bruce Sharon received much acclaim. This primitive artist began painting in 1949 when she was 70 years old. She painted many of the scenes she remembered as a child living with her grandfather, Henry Bruce, Jr. on Covington's Sanford Street in the 1880s. Later in 1986, Hallmark Cards reduced their Collections and remembered that the Mary Bruce Sharon paintings had been borrowed for the Smithsonian exhibit. They decided to send the twelve Mary Bruce Sharon paintings from their collection to the Carnegie Art Center. They felt that Covington was a fitting place for the paintings. The paintings became The Carnegie's first permanent collection.

In 1982, the Director, Chris Kellogg left the Center to follow her new husband to a new city. Money was at an all time low and the Council needed a new director. In 1983, Arlene Gibeau stepped in.

Next Month: Setting the Vision for the next 100 Years

Sources for article were interviews and news clippings. A full list of endnotes will accompany the last part of the series.

Kenton County Historical Society membership dues are $10 per year, $5 for students and Senior Citizens.

Subscriptions for Northern Kentucky Heritage Magazine, a semi-annual magazine of regional history covering ten counties, are $12 a year for members; $15 a year for non-members.

To subscribe to the magazine or become a member of KCHS, please mail check to KCHS, P. O. Box 641, Covington, KY 41012.

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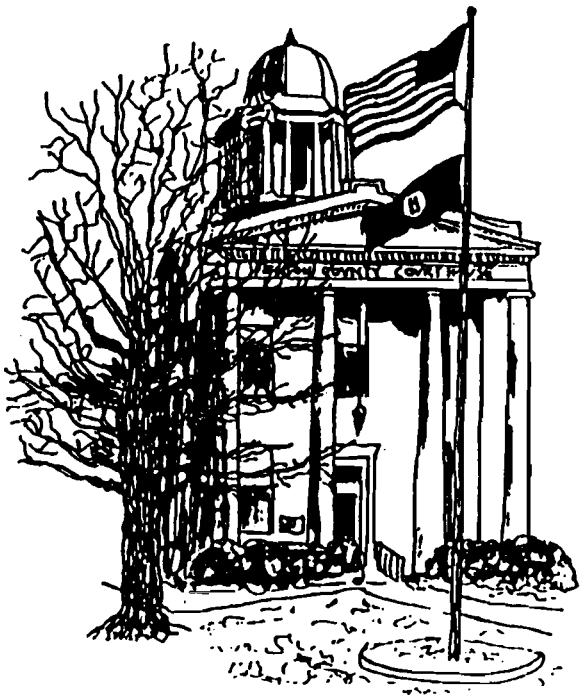

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Celebrating the Society's Twentieth Year

Dedicated to preserving our heritage as the "Gateway to the South"