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History Worth Preserving - The Quonset Auditorium

By Amber Ridington

When driving past State Street on the 31-W Bypass in Bowling Green the two silver, half moon-shaped Quonset Huts perched on the south bank of the Barren River along the route of the old Dixie Highway are a familiar sight. The larger Quonset Hut now houses the Bale Tire Center, but it was originally constructed as an entertainment venue called the Quonset Auditorium. Between 1946 and 1959 the Quonset Auditorium was known as the "Most Happening Place in Town" to both black and white audiences, and its pink neon sign marked the city's north entrance for those traveling the Dixie Highway.

The Quonset Auditorium was built in 1946 by three members of the legendary Bowling Green band Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers, brothers Joe and Kenny Marshall and Floyd Dunn. It was originally built as an auditorium to house the band's weekly square dances and concerts that had previously taken place at the Armory on Chestnut Street. Joe Marshall remembers that when the Armory burnt down in 1946 the three Roving Ramblers "bought a Quonset because they were prefab buildings, you could put them up quick" giving them a permanent place to perform. The Marshalls also took over the professional wrestling matches that had been at the Armory. The prime location on the Dixie Highway, at the time the only throughway between Nashville and Louisville, and the large size of the venue contributed to its success. In addition to the Ramblers regular concerts the Quonset was soon booking large acts from out of town and packing the 750-seat auditorium.

The Rovin' Ramblers named their auditorium after its architectural type known as a "Quonset Hut." The name Quonset derives from a Navy base in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, where the prefabricated huts were manufactured during WW II. The huts were designed for the military by the George A. Fuller Company to house troops and equipment and to be easily assembled. Quonset Huts have a main frame made of semi-circular steel ribs which are covered with sheets of corrugated steel. They are placed on concrete foundations or simply on the ground and can be easily moved or taken apart. During the war, 170,000 Quonset Huts were produced at the Quonset Point naval station and shipped to U.S. bases all over the world where they endured sand, wind, rain and snow storms alike. Once the war was over, the buildings were sold as surplus and have endured in vernacular use not only as
The Quonset Auditorium (continued)

The Quonset Auditorium and packed the house. A rectangular addition on the side of the Quonset with the room that was built to accommodate bleachers for viewing the wrestling. Other bookings in the auditorium over its 13 years of operation included roller skating, church revivals, and private parties. University students often booked the auditorium for balls, homecomings and fraternity events. A short-order concession at the front of the Quonset was expanded into a small restaurant that became a popular stop for people traveling the Dixie Highway.

The Quonset closed as a music and wrestling venue in 1959. It was sold by the Marshall brothers who had bought Dunn out early on and was used by its new owners first as a warehouse and later as an automobile service station and tire store. Since 1959 the building has undergone only minor alterations, both externally and internally. It still maintains its original false front constructed of both concrete and glass blocks. The recessed double doors at the main entrance are framed by the glass blocks in a curvilinear Art Moderne style popular in the 1940s. The original ticket window is still set in the glass blocks on the left side of the double doors and serves as a visual reminder of the building’s original function. The Quonset operated during a time of racial segregation, and the modest African-American entrance on the side of the building that bypassed the restaurant is also extant and reminds us of how history has changed over the post thirty years.

Today the Quonset building serves as a local landmark because of its distinctive silver color, half-circle shape, longevity in this location and association with famous wrestlers and both local and national music legends. The Quonset Auditorium was important to both the white and black communities of Bowling Green and the building evokes strong memories for those who remember it as the “Most Happening Place In Town.” The architectural details of the Quonset can be interpreted and used to remind us of the building’s rich history - a history worth preserving.

Amber Ridlington is a graduate student in Folk Studies at WKU. She has been conducting archival research and collecting oral histories about the Quonset Auditorium over the last year and a half for use in public exhibits and programs as well as her M.A. thesis. Her work has been supported by the WKU Yeager Scholarship, a WKU Graduate Student Research Grant and a Transcription Grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission. If you have any memories about the Quonset Auditorium or know of any surviving memorabilia (photos, programs, posters) from it, please contact Amber at 796-4137 or ridinfa@wku.edu

Front entrance to the Quonset Auditorium. Notice the ticket window to the left.

Otho Dandrith Porter

Otho Dandrith Porter, the son of Robert H. Porter and Amanda Poster, was born shortly after the Civil War and educated in Bowling Green's African-American public school. As a young teacher, he witnessed Warren County's dire need for educated health professionals and consequently enrolled in the preparatory department at Fisk University. On the train to Fisk he met another student, W. E. B. DuBois, who was impressed by Porter's neat appearance and friendly manner. The two became roommates and remained friends after DuBois began his distinguished career as a civil rights leader and editor of the NAACP publication The Crisis. Despite financial difficulties which required him to continue teaching, Porter received his bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1891. He earned a medical degree from Nashville's Meharry Medical College in 1894 and set up his practice, one of the first by an African-American physician, on State Street near Bowling Green's public square. Porter became active in his state medical association and only a few years after commencing his practice was elected president of the National Association of Colored Physicians, Dentists and Pharmacists (now the National Medical Association). On 9 April 1895 Porter married Carolyn "Carrie" Bridges, a native of Mississippi who had also attended Fisk University. He established a new office on a lot which he purchased in 1899 on East Main Street between Center and Kentucky Streets. In March 1901 the Porters moved from their frame home on State Street between 4th and 5th Streets to a two-story brick dwelling at the corner of 5th and State (439 State Street). Dr. Porter also achieved greater visibility for his practice in 1906 when, after a fire destroyed his office, he rebuilt it as a two-story building which also housed other businesses. Until it was razed in the early 1980s, the Porter Building at 227 East Main Street stood just west of the U.S. Courthouse (William H. Natcher Federal Building).

O. D. Porter's office building at 227 East Main Street. Courtesy of Kentucky Building, WKU.

The Landmark Association of Bowling Green-Warran County

A non-profit organization established in 1976 as a community advocate for preservation, protection and maintenance of architectural, cultural and archaeological resources in Bowling Green and Warren County.

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Establised in 1976 as a community advocate for cultural and archaeological resources in the Community. The Quonset Auditorium was in operation. During this period the Ramblers performed live and were able to attract their local fan base. They took the opportunity to announce both their performance schedule and the headlining recording artists whom they booked at the Quonset. The Quonset also regularly featured professional wrestling through the National Wrestling Alliance and eventually the Marshall brothers began promoting wrestling themselves. Legends such as Jackie Fargo, Andre the Giant, Gorgeous George, Former Jones, Ada Ash and Bambi were among the top wrestlers of the 1940s and 1950s who competed in matches at the Quonset Auditorium and packed the house. A rectangular addition on the side of the Quonset with the room that was built to accommodate bleachers for viewing the wrestling. Other bookings in the auditorium over its 13 years of operation included roller skating, church revivals, and private parties. University students often booked the auditorium for balls, homecomings and fraternity events. A short-order concession at the front of the Quonset was expanded into a small restaurant that became a popular stop for people traveling the Dixie Highway.

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Important Preservation Legislation Introduced

The governor said he established the state tax credit program to promote "healthy downtowns and strong neighborhoods." The first credits are for certified rehabilitation of property located in a historic district or listed on the National Register. Since owner occupied residential property is currently not eligible for the federal tax credit, Patton is proposing a 30 percent state tax credit for rehabilitation of these residences. Secondly, commercial property would be eligible for a 20 percent credit of one million dollars or the appraised value of the property. Patton said the third credit is a 10 percent credit for qualified new construction in historic districts.

Because affordable housing is key to quality growth, the fourth tax credit adds to Patton's commitment to making homeownership within the reach of all Kentuckians. A tax credit, of 10 percent of the appraised value of renovated property, would be available for qualified redevelopment of property in a neighborhood redevelopment zone (with a minimum investment of less than or equal to $80,000).

Patton also announced the creation of an advisory group to advise the administration on quality growth strategies and develop private support by the end of his administration so that it can become a freestanding, non-profit entity. "This commission could become the keynote growth what the Prichard Commission has been for education reform in Kentucky," Patton said.

In addition to the legislation, Patton will issue an executive order that will further position the state to lead by example by directing the continued next page
Important Preservation Legislation Introduced (continued)

Ora F. Porter
by Sue Lynn Stone

Ora F. Porter was born in Sugar Grove, Butler County, Kentucky, and moved to Bowling Green at the age of 10. Miss Porter graduated from nurses' training at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute. Founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881, the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, is considered one of the first important coeducational African American institutions of higher education. Graduating in 1901, Miss Porter returned to Bowling Green to live with her mother, first residing at 351 Kentucky Street.

In her early years as a professional, Miss Porter worked at the St. Joseph hospital at 633 East 12th Street. Dr. J. N. McCormack and Dr. Arthur McComb organized this state-of-the-art hospital, which opened its doors on 2 September 1908, but admitted patients of all Warren County physicians who participated in the Orange Park Mission.

In like fashion, she often took charge of preparing the patient's meals. During the typhoid fever epidemic in 1922, Porter enhanced her reputation, earning an additional title as an "expert typhoid nurse." She retired in 1960.

Moving to 715 College Street around 1902, she enjoyed her rose garden and fruit trees. Her skills in handwriting led her to teach her craft to a local ladies club. Active in the Taylor County Historical Society, Danville Church, and Church Women United, Miss Porter also took an interest in inter-racial and civic activities. As an organizer of the Inter racial Commission in 1949, she served as a member of its board of directors for the three years the commission existed. Not only did Miss Porter participate as one of the organizers of the George Washington Carver Youth Center located at 201 Center Street, she remained an active member of it Board of Directors for many years. At the age of 90, Miss Porter died on 4 February 1970 at City-Country Hospital. She was buried in Mount Moriah Cemetery.

Architectural Details

- Keep in tune with current preservation issues and tools by attending the 2002 Statewide Preservation Conference, "In Tune with Preservation," August 1 through August 3 in Danville. Coordinated by the Kentucky Heritage Council with the support of Heart of Danville and Danville College, this three-day conference will focus on historic preservation, downtown revitalization, smart growth, community development, historic military sites, heritage education, preservation law, heritage tourism, interpretation, and museums.
- Preservation studies. This year's program will include keynote speaker, Joseph Riley, Mayor of Charleston, South Carolina; opening night reception featuring Downtown Danville's Great American Main Street, McDowell House, and Constitution Square with terrific food and music; exhibit area and preservation bookstore; Preservation Kentucky’s Advocacy Breakfast, silent/live auction, and special event; three days of interactive education sessions, and tours of area landmarks, including the three National Historic Landmarks. Conference registration will be available in May. For more information on this program contact Becky Shipp at the Kentucky Heritage Council (502) 564-7005 or becky.shipp@mail.state.ky.us.
- At the 2001 Realtors Association of Bowling Green & South Central Kentucky installers' banquet, Landmark member John Perkins was recognized for forty years of membership in the organization.
- At the 2000 Bowling Green Convention Center's annual dinner, former Bowling Green mayor and former Landmark Association board member Polly Sloan. The Center's board noted: "We felt strongly that the convention center should bear the name of someone who was instrumental in the development of this venture."
- Nominations for Landmark's awards are due by February 28. Please send those to Landmark at PO. Box 1812, Bowling Green, KY 42103.
- The Association sends kudos to the Downtown Redevelopment Authority for their recently unveiled masterplan for "The District", which includes a great deal of the downtown area from the Barren River to WKU. In addition, the lion's share of $5 million created by area banks will be a boon to restorations in this area. The banks participating are: South Central Bank, American Bank & Trust Co., Farmers National Bank, and Monticello Banking Co. For more information on this program contact Cheryl Blaine at 782-0222.

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Landmark Releases Mt. Moriah Cemetery Book

The Landmark Association is pleased to announce the publication of Mt. Moriah Cemetery: A History and Census of Bowling Green’s African-American Cemetery compiled by Jonathan Jeffrey and Mike Wilson. The 247-page book is the first comprehensive look at this venerable cemetery.

Before 1865, African-Americans were often buried outside the boundaries of white family cemeteries in unmarked graves. In Bowling Green, blacks were buried in Pioneer Cemetery on College Street. On older maps this burying ground was known as Repose Park on Summer Street. Unfortunately, the intermittent records for Pioneer Cemetery are non-existent, except for a three-year period between December 1860 and December 1863. This record contains ten pages of white death notices (many of these soldiers who died from disease during the Civil War) and four pages of burial records for “Black Persons” and “Negros”. Because most of the blacks listed were slaves, other families voiced complaints about the cemetery’s unkempt appearance. The St. Joseph Cemetery Association voted to sign an agreement that would allow the city to maintain the cemetery and collect burial fees in the summer of 1894.

The compilers transcribed the stones in the cemetery, the city’s burial certificates from 1877 to 1913, the cemetery’s old sexton’s book, and various funeral home records listed until the mid-1980s when the city offered to take over the cemetery’s maintenance and bookkeeping. This came after some irregular accounting practices related to the cemetery’s operation surfaced and families voiced complaints about the cemetery’s unkempt appearance. The Mt. Moriah Cemetery Association voted to sign an agreement that would allow the city to maintain the cemetery and collect burial fees in the summer of 1894.

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Landmark Author & Journalist to Speak to Association

Northern Ireland journalist and author Billy Kennedy will speak on the Scots-Irish diaspora in American on Sunday, March 10th, at 2:30 at the Kentucky Building. The presentation is being made possible by the Landmark Association, the Southern Kentucky Genealogical Society, and the Kentucky Library. Kennedy has written six books on the topic, and his seventh The Making of America: How the Scots-Irish Shaped a Nation has just been released. In it he charts the Ulster Presbyterian influences in the series of historic, mold-breaking events which resulted in the creation of the United States.

The Scots-Irish were in the vanguard of American patriot involvement on all fronts of the Revolution, but it was on the frontier that they made their most significant contributions. Quite uniquely, as a challenge of the American frontier—a historic, which released. In involvement by the Landmark Association, the Southern Kentucky Building.

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Margaret Sastion

Ms Janet Schwarzkopf

Alice Siewer

Ms Imogene Simpson

Alwin Espouse

Dan Stone

Sue Lynn Stone

Rou Maudey

Barbara Strobe

Vernon White

Brenda M Willoughby

Hilda Willoughby

This information dates from February 14. If you have questions about membership, please contact our office at 782-0037 and leave a message.

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Landmark Report 10
Perhaps you could pass this newsletter along to someone you think would be interested in supporting Landmark's efforts in historic preservation advocacy.

I (we) want to support the Historic Preservation efforts in Bowling Green and Warren County.

Name ____________________________________________

Mailing Address _______________________________________

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I have enclosed $____________________ to support the Irene Moss Sumpter Preservation Endowment Fund.

Checks should be payable to: Landmark Association
PO. Box 1812
Bowling Green, KY 42102-1812

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