

Empire Arts Center

The Empire Arts Center was a work in progress in April of 1997. An old movie theater that closed when the new movie plex opened in town, the theater was in the middle of a major renovation to become a performing arts center. The Flood of 1997 almost ended that dream.

The Empire Theater closed in April of 1994. It had shown movies almost continuously from its opening in 1919. A group of local citizens, led by Hal and Kathy Gershman, thought that this would be a great space for a performing arts venue. They started a drive to raise funds for the renovation process. Midcontinent Media, owners of the theater, donated the building for the cause. Approximately \$1,000,000 was pledged for the renovations.

Work began in the fall of 1996. In April 1997, right in the middle of the renovations, flood waters filled the theater and burning embers fell on the roof. The Red River of the North took over downtown Grand Forks, including the Empire. Water was almost 4 feet deep in the lobby and on the newly built stage. More than \$200,000 worth of damage was done to the renovations. Fortunately, the seats had been shipped out of state to be refurbished. That kept the damage totals from being much higher.



The group in charge of the project had a choice to make. They could drop the project and probably let the building be destroyed, or borrow the money and finish the project. It would have been easy to drop the project with so many other needs in the community. But the group thought that a newly renovated performing arts center could be one of the keys to the



redevelopment of the destroyed downtown area. They decided to go ahead with the project.

The Empire Arts Center opened in March of 1998. It was one of the first businesses to open in the downtown area after the flood. It soon developed its own niche in the community. Several local arts groups started using the theater for performances. The Grand Forks Public School district started using the facility for music and theater events that did not fit well in their own facilities. And the theater showed movies that were not available at the local movie theaters.

The Empire is now a very important part of the local and regional arts community. The Greater Grand Forks Symphony Orchestra, Crimson Creek Collegiate Players, the North Dakota Ballet Company, Fire Hall Theatre and others perform at the Empire on a regular basis. Other groups use the theater on an annual basis or for special events. Several school districts in the region use the theater for movies, music and theater. A number of departments at the University of North Dakota use the facility for concerts, theater, presentations and showing movies. Individuals and businesses rent the facility for events. And many regional and national artists have performed at the Empire, including Leon Redbone, Leo Kottke, Roomful of Blues, Leon Russell, Walter Trout, Maria Muldaur, Bo Diddley and many, many more.

Ten years after the flood, downtown Grand Forks is busier than it has been in years. Businesses are open, people are moving downtown and the nightlife has returned. Thousands of people attend events at the Empire Arts Center every year. The dream has come true and the Empire has become a jewel in the heart of downtown Grand Forks.

