



Hidden Gems - The Wildey Theatre

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The Riverbend region is filled with so many hidden gems. It is important to take the time to appreciate all the beautiful areas that surround this region. While I enjoy visiting natural habitats, I also have an appreciation for unique architecture. After an incredible evening with a top performance by Tommy Decarlo and the music of Boston and Journey at The Wildey Theatre, I had to go back and learn more about this impressive venue. In spending time with Al Canal, I was able to learn of the rich history of how the theatre started.

EDWARDSVILLE - In 1909, the historic Wildey Theatre opened as an opera house. It started with a little over 1,000 seats in the venues and attracted acts like Ginger Rogers. The theatre was named after Thomas Wildey who came to the United States in 1817 after the war of 1812. He started the Independent Order of Oddfellows in the United States when he moved to Baltimore.

As the organization grew, many venues around the country were named after him. The Wildey Theatre operated as an opera house and second-floor meeting hall for the Oddfellows group until 1936. At that time, it was transformed into an 825-seat movie theater.

In 1984, the movie theater was closed due to declining business from the growth of multiplexes, the introduction of VHS tapes, and an increase in larger home television sets. In 1986, the building was designated as a “Local Landmark”.

An alderman, named Rich Walker, saw the value of this beautiful venue. He would spearhead a campaign designed to restore and reopen the theatre.

Edwardsville is a multigeneration community. Through the restoration process, young adults that enjoyed the experience of the movie theater had grown with families. They experienced the nostalgic emotion of seeing the theater coming back to life. With so many cherished memories captured, the city moved forward with dedication for reopening the venue.

The Wildey Theatre has been through a few years of growing pains, but it has evolved into a very bright theatre and event center that attracts people from around the country and the world. In 2019, people traveled from 34 different states, Canada and the United Kingdom to attend events there.

Today, this venue serves as a 325-seat performing arts center and concert venue. Entertainment enthusiasts can experience a concert one day and come back to enjoy a classic movie the next day. There are two large event rooms that can serve many events including business meetings, weddings, fundraisers, video conferences, anniversary, holiday, and birthday parties.

The Marquee Room is 40’ x 31’ and can accommodate 75 people for a seated meal or 150 people for an open house reception. The 3rd-floor event space is 45’ x 45’ and can accommodate 130 for a seated meal or up to 200 for an open house reception. Randy Van Wie can be reached at rvanwie@cityofedwardsville.com for more information.

As we walked to my car, I learned that Al came from a history of stand-up comedy. As we laughed through our meeting, I could quickly see how that talent could open so many doors for a person as talented and friendly as he is.

“I got into this business as a total fluke, but my motivation is being able to look at a crowd and see the smile on everyone’s face. I do this to bring joy and laughter to the people that come to experience the events at The Wildey”, Al said.

In the 1970s, Al was called on for a quick stand-up comedy set. With the crowd’s response, he was consistently called back. Al shared many stories of his incredible history. My favorite story was how he got the name that defined his career.

One night he was enjoying time with his friends, and they couldn't figure out why he was so quiet through the night. He told them he had to visit the dentist and needed a root canal. He quickly became known in the region as "Al Canal". The name stuck.

What would you want people to know about The Wildey Theatre?

"We are the friendly concert venue. Everyone that comes here is a guest in my home. They are treated like family and leave with an experience that makes them want to come back," Al expressed.

I can't wait to go back for the next event. To see all their events, visit their website at

www.wildeytheatre.com

Each week I will share my explorations of hidden gems across the Riverbend area. If you want your favorite hidden gem or business to be featured, please email Jackie Duty at: jackie@riverbender.com

