

## Rupert Bradburn left his mark in grand, operatic style

Posted 13 days ago

One hundred years ago, Peterborough was going through a creative age, and there are buildings still standing that reflect the creativity of some of the people who lived and worked here. For example, there is a house at the southeast corner of Rubidge and Charlotte Streets that was once the home of Rupert Bradburn, theatre owner extraordinaire.

Rupert Bradburn was part of a large and enterprising family whose ties to Peterborough went far back into the 19th century. The Bradburns were responsible for building the spectacular Bradburn Opera Hall in 1875 and were some of the largest holders of real estate in the city through to the early 1900s. Rupert was responsible for running the opera house, as well as theatres in Port Hope and Cobourg (Victoria Hall). By the early part of the 20th century he was also responsible for having the Grand Opera building constructed in downtown Peterborough. With a hold on the local and regional entertainment business, and with theatre and singing acts gaining in popularity, Bradburn had decided on

another piece of extravagance for downtown Peterborough.

The Grand was built in 1905, and was just next to the J. J. Turner Building near the northeast corner of George and King Streets. The theatre seated 1,500 in its main floor, gallery, and second gallery. The orchestra pit was directly in front of the stage and artists' dressing rooms were in the basement under the stage. The stage was one of the largest in Canada and could accommodate plays with casts of up to 90 actors, as well as the 45 local people who were employed as stage hands, carpenters, and electricians. According to the Peterborough Examiner, the second gallery was known by school boys as "the gods or nigger heaven" because the boys would flock "into the alley just south of the building night after night to squeeze into line and work their way up to the top gallery where the seats were cheapest." They would also try to smuggle peanuts in to throw at those below, despite signs proclaiming that taking peanuts into the gallery was strictly forbidden.

Just before the time of the Grand's construction, it appears that Bradburn had a house built for himself which would be situated not far from the theatre. We know the house was not there in 1899 (the records show a vacant lot), but the 1906 city directory lists Rupert as living here. Just down the street from the Cox Terrace, near the railway station, and at the corner of the busy intersection of Rubidge and Charlotte, the house would have been an ideal location for an entrepreneur like Rupert trying to make a go with a new theatre

His house is built in the popular -though declining by this time -Bay and Gable architectural style, with Queen Anne and Classical influences. It is an aesthetically well-proportioned house of red brick construction, with a curving front bay on one side, a sharply triangular (and slightly heavy-looking) gable above the bay, and a lovely wraparound veranda. Worth noting are the tall windows, the interesting and detailed fish-scale pattern within the inset of the gable, the slightly rounded section of the veranda above the front entrance, and the wonderful little garage on the south side of the house. All round, it is extremely pleasing to look at.

You would think that once he had built a new home for himself and a new opera house for the city, Rupert would have been content to settle in and profit from his efforts. But in 1907, just two years after the Grand Opera opened, he packed it all in and went off to California, perhaps to take part in the newly emerging film industry. He died in Los Angeles in 1939.

Fast forward through the century, and one of the more notable people to have occupied the house was Tom Symons, founding president of Trent University. It was his office while he was running a commission on Canadian Studies from about 1972 to 1984. Fast forward a little further, and we find today that the house at 314 Rubidge St. is in good condition, still sitting at a busy intersection, is fashionably within walking distance of downtown, and is still being used for creative purposes. It is the offices for lawyer Jack McVicar's firm. And it has been the inspiration for local artist James Lasenby, who has drawn a "portrait" of the place. Mr. Lasenby once worked for one of the many industries that helped Peterborough grow, but has now decided to go into art full time, in particular, drawings of old city buildings. And so the creative product of the past has spawned new creativity. It provides us with ideas as to how heritage buildings may inspire the creative economies of tomorrow.

Andrew Elliott is an archivist and freelance writer with an interest in architectural heritage issues in Peterborough and elsewhere. [ajg.elliott@utoronto.ca](mailto:ajg.elliott@utoronto.ca).

---

Copyright © 2009 Peterborough Examiner