



Artistic Destination:

Galveston's enduring treasure: The 1894 Grand Opera House

By Julie Catalano
Photography Allen Sheffield

Even in a city brimming with history, the 1894 Grand Opera House in Galveston stands apart. A true survivor, the cherished structure lived through the worst natural disaster in U.S. history, economic downturns, a sad life as a seedy movie house, and yet another devastating hurricane. Today it stands as a testament to stamina,

painstaking restoration, and a dedication to that theatrical battle cry: The show must go on.

Executive director Maureen Patton said it has been that way from the beginning. "The Grand was always a place where restoration was a priority because it was a place of public assembly,



a nonpartisan gathering place for the community as a whole. It was also a place of economic vitality for this city just as it is today," she said. "Through the years, I think that everyone knew that it was important to get it back."

Built during Galveston's heyday as the "Wall Street of the South," the Grand originally was designed as a theater, with a hotel and shops, four stories high on Post Office Street. Opening night was Jan. 3, 1895, and featured classical music and a play, "Daughters of Eve," starring actress Marie Wainwright.

For almost six years the theater, and Galveston with it, enjoyed prosperity and growth until

disaster struck on Sept. 8, 1900, when the Great Galveston Hurricane took more than 6,000 lives and essentially destroyed the city. "The back wall of the stage was blown out," Patton said, "and the entire roof was gone, along with the beautiful cupola, which has never been replaced."

Amazingly, the theater reopened less than a year later and heralded a new live theatrical golden era. The Grand presented productions from American and European stages, and artists such as George M. Cohan, Lionel Barrymore, Lillian Russell, Sarah Bernhardt, Anna Pavlova and John Philip Sousa thrilled audiences. When motion pictures entered the scene, the movies shared the stage with the Ziegfeld Follies, the Marx Brothers, and Burns