

THE COLUMBIAN THEATRE

GRAND REOPENING, NOVEMBER 6, 1994, WAMEGO, KANSAS

G. L. Dybwad and Joy V. Bliss (#1926)
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The Columbian Theatre was built in 1895 in Wamego, Kansas, a town 100 miles west of Kansas City, by J. C. Rogers, an active banker. Rogers had spent a great deal of time at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and it impressed him greatly. After the Fair closed, he purchased several complete Exposition buildings as well as architectural elements from others. He stored them in Kansas or had them reassembled, such as the Wisconsin Building, which was re-erected in Kansas City as a men's club and later the Elks Club.

Roger's native limestone Columbian Theatre contains artifacts from the World's Fair: iron columns from the Illinois Building, urns from the Victoria (Great Britain) Building, windows from the Brazilian Building, and 11 x 16 foot murals on canvas from the U.S. Government Building. The first floor was used as a mercantile store, and the theater was on the second floor. Movies were shown in the theater until 1950, when the second floor was closed. Rogers also placed two statues from the Fair in the Wamego Park a few blocks from the theater's Lincoln Avenue location.



The Columbian Theater Facade, Wamego, Kansas



One of the Restored Paintings with Joy Bliss

In 1990 a group of amateur and professional historians unlocked the second floor theater

to examine its contents. The six large paintings by Ernest Behr, a Chicago painter and sculptor, were found exactly as they had hung for 95 years. They also found many artifacts from the theater and the Columbian Exposition including fourteen more paintings. Another painting was found whited out (and not recoverable) —it had served as the screen for motion picture viewing. The citizens of the community and others formed the Columbian Theatre Foundation to buy the building from a relative of Rogers and renovate it. The plan of the Foundation was to restore the building to current code and use the Theatre as an art center, and to stage plays and musicals. Hence, the building would serve the community both historically and functionally.

The six mammoth paintings have been restored completely and re-hung in the Theatre on the second floor. The stage was refurbished including the word "Columbian" in old script on a frieze above the stage and below the tin ceiling. The first



Part of Another Restored Mammoth Painting with G. L. Dybwad

floor now serves as office space, meeting area, art gallery, and gift shop. Many local residents have donated memorabilia from the Columbian Exposition and the Theatre for later display.

Opening concerts and a breakfast were held for sponsors and patrons prior to the grand opening on Sunday, November 6. We attended the public reopening which commenced about one o'clock with a choral presentation from the second floor outdoor balcony. A brief account of the Theatre was read, followed by the cutting of the long red ribbon by over 30 members of



One of the Columbian Statues in the Wamego City Park

the Foundation who lined up in a long row in front of the double entrance doors. Spectators streamed in to see the restoration and the six huge, colorful paintings. Visitors were greeted by a rousing concert held on the stage. More details about this living artifact from the WCE can be found in the publication: *The Columbian Theatre Museum and Art Center : Grand Opening Commemorative Guide*. Contact the Columbian Theatre Foundation, 521 Lincoln Ave., PO Box 72, Wamego, KS. 66547. Price \$2.

The Book Stops Here, 1108 Rocky Point Ct NE, Albuquerque, NM 87123-1952. (505) 296-9047; gldybwad@comcast.net; visit our website, www.bookstopshere.com, to view our Columbian Exposition publications



Grand Opening Ribbon Cutting Ceremony, Columbian Theater, Wamego, Kansas