

Before the Catron, there was the Grand #OperaHouse....



Original Opening Ball Invitation; Grand Opera House, West Plains, MO, November 1885

DISCOVER YOUR OZARKS: West Plains Grand Opera House

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Written & Photographed by V. Warren-Martin

In its illustrious history, West Plains, Missouri has seen many of its citizens come and go—and with every departure, tokens of this notorious Ozarks town have gone along for the journey. As luck would have it, one extremely rare such token

found its way back to where it's origin story began.

It showed up in the museum's mailbox with a postmark from San Bernadino, CA, where it had ended up in the hands of the [Needles Regional Museum](#) in Needles, California, a mere 1,452 miles away from its' Southern Missouri home. Inside, tucked between two vintage postcards, was an original invitation to an **Opening Ball** at the **Grand Opera House, West Plains, Missouri**, dated **Friday Evening, November 6, 1885**.

In 1885, West Plains was well on its way to becoming one of the storied boomtowns that developed out of the transcontinental US railroad construction of the late 19th Century. The Kansas City, Fort Scott and Memphis Railway Company arrived in West Plains in 1883 and brought with it, over the next several years, a deluge of people looking for opportunity and community in the now more readily-accessible midwest.

While many of us who grew up in West Plains are aware of the beautifully restored building widely known as the [Catron Opera House](#), built in 1893 for O.H.P. Catron & Thomas Johnson, there is little knowledge to be found regarding the Grand Opera House.

It is recalled to have been located on the 200 Block of E. Main St., approximately in the current location of the [Historic Post Office's](#) eastside parking lot. During its time, it is said that the building was occupied by a machine shop on the first floor, with the theater-like Opera House space upstairs—later, McFarland's Undertaking would occupy space in the same building. While it's highly unlikely that the Grand ever hosted an actual opera performance, as the term *opera house* was a common name in those days for any large theater-like space where the citizens could gather, it is likely that with the population hub West Plains became in that era, such a

space would have been the setting for many a community event, performance, dance, meeting, and celebration as the first such space of its kind in West Plains, MO.

The front cover of the once folded 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ " ivory invitation, now in two separate pages that both still feature the finest line of gold-gilded splendor along the outside edges of the paper, announces in a red and black mixture of plain font and occasionally elaborate script,

"The Pleasure of Your Company is Requested

AT THE

OPENING BALL

FRIDAY EVENING

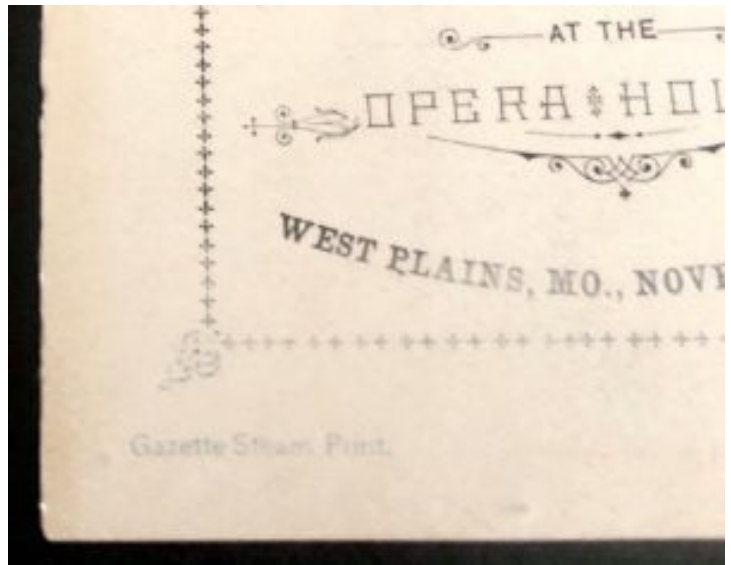
AT THE

OPERA HOUSE

West Plains, MO, November 6, 1885"



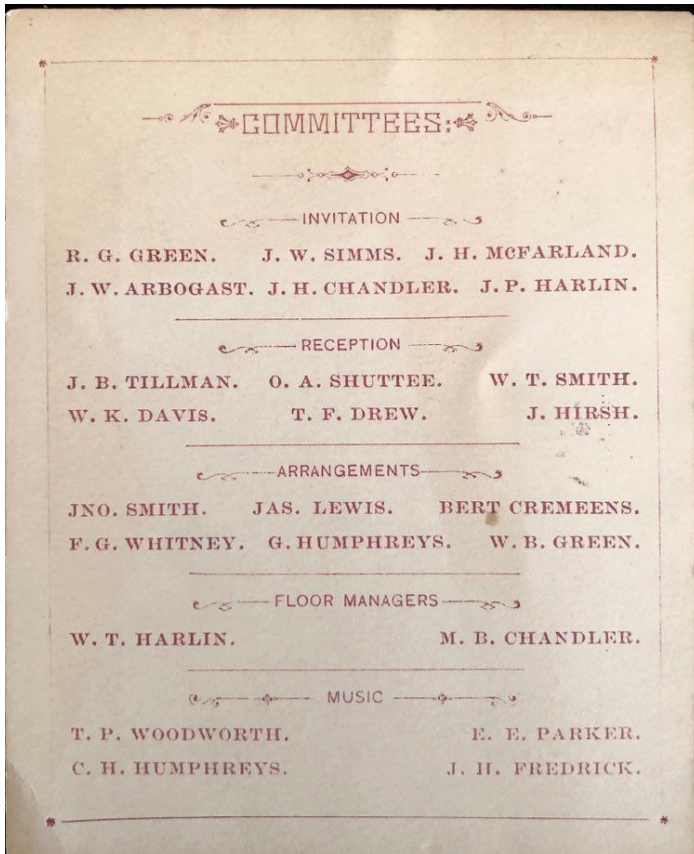
Front Cover of Grand Opera House Opening Ball Invitation



Closeup of front cover shows the printer's mark for Gazette Steam Print

Below the decorative typeface, in the bottom lefthand corner of the invitation's cover page in tiny, plain type is the faded printer's mark:

Gazette Steam Print



Inside Front Cover of Grand Opera House Opening Ball Invitation

The inside pages of the invitation feature, on one side, the names of the multiple committee members who played a part in organizing the ball that November night. Many prominent and long-standing Howell County family names appear on the function's Committee List of those who came together to provide their neighbors, family, and friends with a night of music, dancing, and merriment:

R.G. Green, J.W. Arbogast, J.W. Simms, J.H. Chandler, J.H. McFarland, J.P. Harlin, J.B. Tillman, W.K.Davis, O.A. Shuttee, T. F. Drew, W.T. Smith, J. Hirsh, JNO. Smith, F.G. Whitney, JAS Lewis, G. Humphreys, Bert Cremeens, W.B. Green, W.T. Harlin, M.B. Chandler, T.P. Woodworth, C.H. Humphreys, F.E. Parker, & J.H. Fredrick.



Inside Back Page of Grand Opera House Opening Ball Invitation

Also included, on the facing inside page, can be found the order in which the many different types of dances planned for the evening would be played:

1. Quadrille
2. Schottische
3. Quadrille
4. Varsovienne
5. Quadrille
6. Waltz
7. Schottische
8. Quadrille
9. Polka

10. Quadrille
 11. Waltz
 12. Quadrille
 13. Schottische
 14. Quadrille
 15. Opera Reel
 16. Quadrille
 17. Waltz
 18. Polka
 19. Waltz
 20. Quadrille
 21. Waltz
 22. Quadrille
 23. Schottische
 24. Varsovienne
 25. Quadrille
 26. Home Waltz
-

A truly intriguing artifact whose overall good condition certainly belies the many years that have passed between the time it was originally printed and now! And, while we have yet to find any additional records pertaining to the era of activity regarding the Grand Opera House of West Plains, we know there are likely some out there—and we encourage you to let us know what you find!!.

We are certainly grateful for this long-kept and well-preserved piece of history that gives us a glimpse into our town during one of its most abundant periods of growth, promise, and hope. ***May the West Plains spirit of community that those citizens celebrated 135 years ago remain alive in our hearts, today and always.***

Post-publication note:

With the assistance of Sarah Wittenauer over at [FGS-Surveyors / Riggs & Associates, Inc.](#), we have found the location of the Grand Opera House platted on a June 1893 map of downtown West Plains, MO, located in the [University of Missouri's Digital Library](#) archive. It shows the building to be located due east of the spring (now located beneath the Historic Post Office building) with a machine shop on the 1st floor and the opera house on the 2nd, across the street, and up from the Commercial Hotel.

