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## NEWS

# A look at Blairsville's entertainment history

JEFF HIMLER | Sunday, May 13, 2012 12:00 a.m.

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BLAIRSVILLE--Market and Liberty streets, and its revived bandstand, will be the focal point for music and other entertainment at this weekend's Diamond Days festival here.

For more than a century after Blairsville's start in 1818, that "Diamond" intersection was the preferred spot for celebrations.

Then, as the town prospered and development headed east on Market Street, several other venues arose where citizens could enjoy their leisure hours.

Though its primary purpose was to house municipal services, Blairsville's Town Hall or Market House, erected in the early 1800s at the southeast corner of Spring and Campbell streets, also provided an early location for entertainment.

According to the Historical Record of Blairsville, published in 1947 by the Young Men's Volunteer Fire Department, the hall's second floor had a large room with a stage.

Among the programs there were traveling medicine shows -- which often included music, magic tricks and comedy routines, as well as a sales pitch for the latest cure-all tonic.

Indiana County historian Clarence Stephenson, in his more recent review of Blairsville's past, indicates a "singing school" leased the town hall for its meetings in 1836 for 62 1/2 cents per month.

In 1858, the Blairsville Coronet Band was allowed to use the hall for an annual rent of \$15 -- and agreeing to keep the doors closed during practices.

Later known as the Blairsville City Band, the group also performed many of its concerts at the original bandstand.

The town hall was razed in the 1970s to make way for expansion of the fire hall.

Stephenson notes Samuel Ray bought an old hotel at the southeast corner of Market and Walnut streets and turned the second floor into an auditorium in 1862. Today, the spot is occupied by the local Masonic lodge.

Entertainers enjoyed a grander showcase in 1888, when brothers Michael E. and Thomas C. Brown built a three-story building which still stands on East Market Street.

The top floor housed the first Blairsville Opera House -- with the Brown family meat market and Lintner's clothing store occupying the first floor and the offices of the Blairsville Telephone Co. and the Maher Coal Co. filling out the second floor.

An historic survey of downtown Blairsville, completed in the early 1980s by IUP's Center for Community Affairs, noted the "Brown Block" was "the most imposing building yet built on Market Street." The central bay tower in the facade was capped by a pyramid roof and finial, now long gone.

According to the 1947 history, the Opera House hosted "many traveling shows of many types" with a stage, flies (for stage backdrops), scenery and "permanent folding seats inclined toward the stage ... Later the seats and the false floor were removed and the auditorium became a dance hall."

A forerunner of today's cartoons -- animated pictures produced by Thomas Edison's Projectoscope -- kept audiences amused during a three-day run at the auditorium in April 1897.

Eventually, IUP researchers indicate, the third floor was converted to apartments. But other portions of the building continued to provide diversions for the public.

By 1909, a vaudeville theater occupied a first floor storeroom that now is home to Vicki's Hair Care. Movies were screened by 1929, after an addition to the rear of the building.

The Brown Block passed through the hands of various entertainment exhibitors, including the Indiana County Theatres Company and Lipsie Bros. Enterprises. It is currently owned by local resident Karl Walker.

Among today's Blairsville residents, the building more commonly recognized as the "Opera House" is a four-story structure developed by Reuben Einstein in 1904. It remains a landmark at the southeast corner of Market and Stewart streets, topped by a pediment revealing its origins as the "Einstein Block."

According to the files of the Historical Society of the Blairsville Area, Meadville native Einstein came to Blairsville in 1892 and prospered in the clothing business before constructing his building, the tallest structure in town.

The first floor had Einstein's dry goods shop and a jewelry store. The top three were devoted to the Opera House, which boasted electric lights, an orchestra pit and seats for 1,100, including boxes and balconies.

Also featured, Stephenson notes, were an organ and a chandelier "suspended from the center of a star design."

Einstein's entertainment palace was graced by touring theater companies which stopped to perform on their way from New York to Pittsburgh.

Opera House audiences took in vaudeville acts, travelogues and hypnotists, as well as amateur shows by the Blairsville Women's College, the town's high school and such community organizations as the Elks and the Library Association.

Later, shows were staged at the Blairsville High School auditorium on N. Walnut Street, which was converted to a junior high before being closed in 1994.

In its heyday, the Einstein Opera House had no trouble filling its seats, the Historical Record indicates. When tickets went on sale for a popular show, lines would form at the box office as early as 5 a.m.

Lectures also were well-attended, with an eager crowd packing the house for a 1907 appearance by statesman/presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.

Special trains were chartered to bring people from Indiana for the occasion.

A contemporary newspaper account noted the Brotherhood of the Blairsville Presbyterian Church, which sponsored the lecture, "realized handsomely ... despite the fact that they paid Mr. Bryan \$300."

But those glory days were brief. Facing competition from "moving pictures" at three town nickelodeons, Einstein closed his hall in 1916, converting the space into apartments.

Now owned by an Indiana firm, the Opera House's first modern movie theater opened in 1923, on the first floor of the three-story Moose Temple. The Moose lodge occupied the third floor before moving across the street and a block or so to the east.

Fronting Market Street were two stores on either side of the theater entrance. Currently, the office of state Rep. Jeff Coleman and Blairsville Pharmacy's medical supplies occupy the original storefronts, while Piper Photography is in business in the theater entrance.

The theater went through several name changes, including the Richelieu, the Penn and the Manos. For many years it was operated by the Lipsie family and later by Blairsville resident Don Peace, before closing in the 1970s -- no longer able to compete with multiplex cinemas at the malls.

Blairsville's Mike and Linda Gwinn, current owners of the theater building, are using the interior and top floors for a mix of residential apartments and commercial office and computer assembly space.

Remnants of the old movie house still are apparent, including the stage, the projection booth and a downstairs lobby.

The couple restored an original tin ceiling in Coleman's office and recently spruced up the building's facade with fresh paint.

Other buildings where entertainment occasionally could be found include the town's recently closed armory on North Walnut Street and the former Legion post at North Avenue and Stewart Street, now the Blairsville Community Center.

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Those who preferred active, rather than passive, recreation, also had an array of choices in Blairsville and its outskirts.

According to Stephenson, residents at one time came to "The Rink," a large unpainted building at East Lane and Brown streets, for a variety of activities -- including roller skating, dances and basketball games.

Another skating venue was Art Cicero's Modern Rink, which operated in a former slaughterhouse at Brown and Liberty streets. Noted in the 1947 Historical Record, the Cicero rink later was converted into dormitory housing for students at Vale Tech, the precursor of Wyotech.

A roller skating rink was one of the amenities at the popular Campbell's Mill park. Picnics, and boating and swimming in the adjacent Black Lick Creek also were enjoyed until the local resort was inundated in the St. Patrick's Day flood of 1936.

Ice skating was available seasonally at Campbell's Mill and was later provided for in the former Charley Park area off Blairsville's Johnston Avenue.

That also was the location of Blairsville's first public swimming pool before the 1950s -- when construction of the Conemaugh River Dam downstream near Tunnelton placed the area under federal flood zone regulations.

A new pool was constructed atop the hill east of the town, next to Blairsville's football stadium on a site which at one time had been the annual location for a local county fair. But that swimming structure also has closed due to chronic leaks and concerns about undermining.

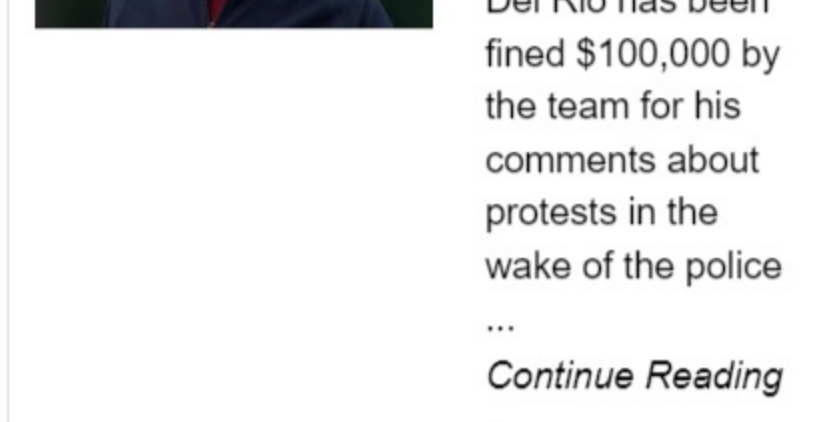
In recent years, the Blairsville Recreation Board has been working with the borough and county to develop recreational facilities at the former Charley Park and a new park and playground behind the community center.

Other groups, working with federal and state agencies, are hoping to encourage renewed recreational use of the Conemaugh riverfront and development of a biking/hiking trail linking Blairsville to other regional trail systems.

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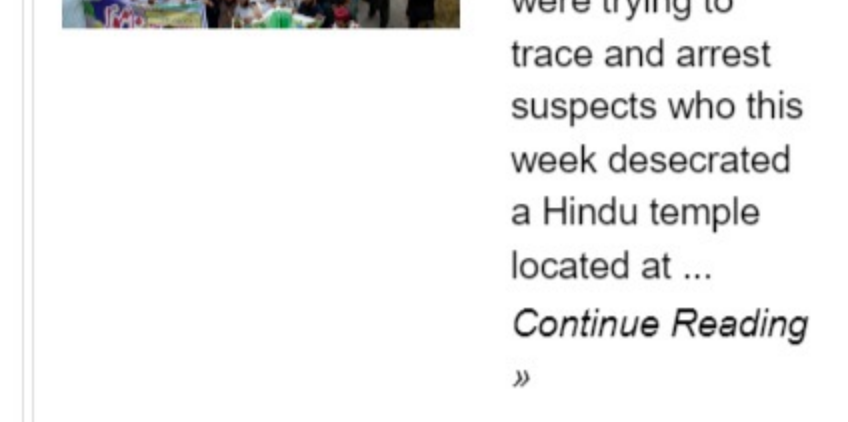
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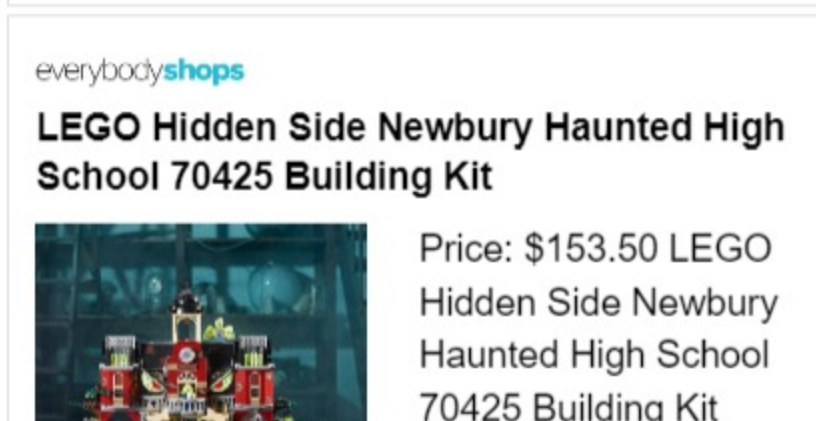
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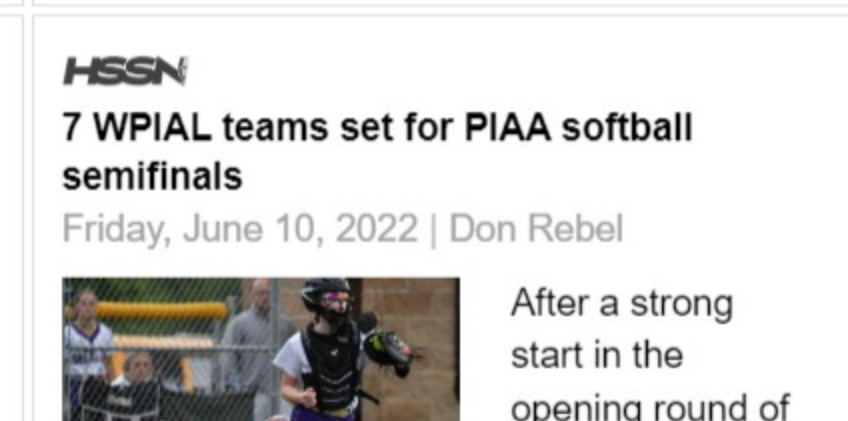
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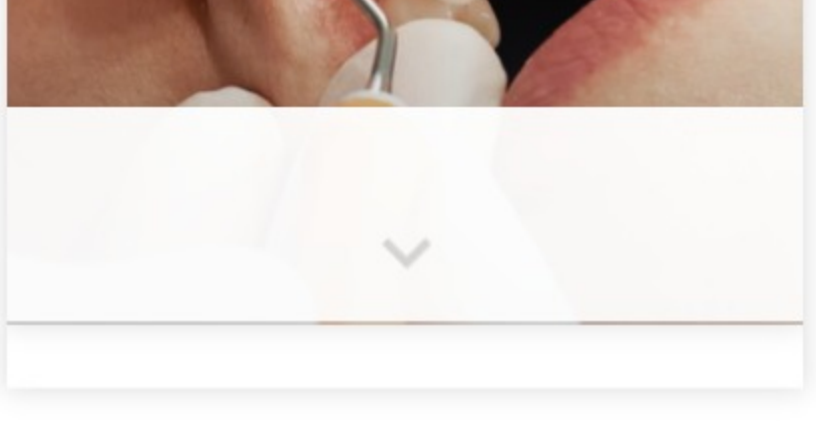
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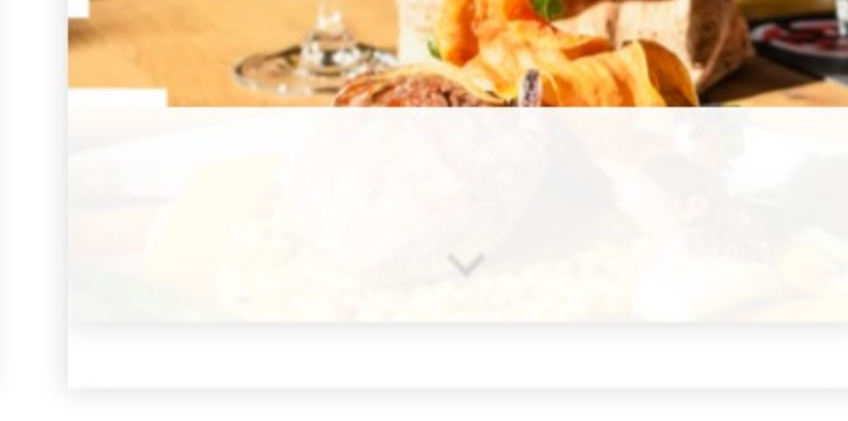
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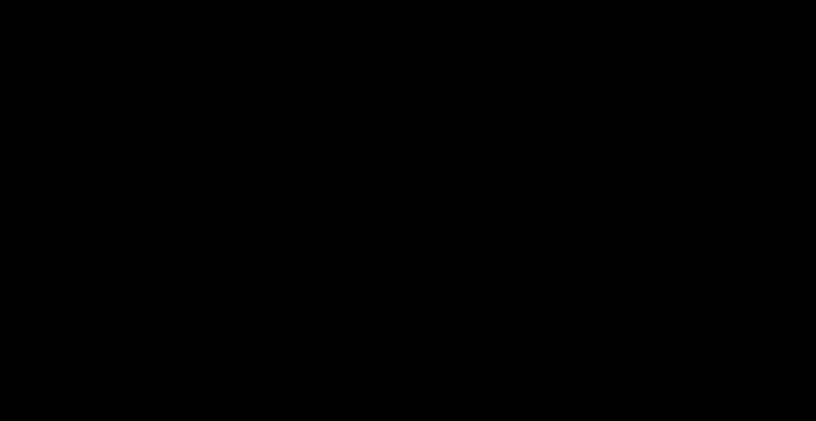


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