

MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY

After going dark for over 30 years, California's First Theatre is on the cusp of reopening.

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Lee Henderson, a scientist and entrepreneur experienced in writing grants for drug development, put those skills to work raising money for California's First Theatre.

DANIEL DREIFUSS

Over 175 years ago, in 1846, English sailor Jack Swan cobbled a house together a little up the hill from the Custom House in Monterey, using pieces of lumber gathered from a shipwreck. A year later he attached an adobe boarding house and saloon. In 1848, former Army officers convinced Swan to construct a small stage where they could put on plays, and thus California's first theater was born.

It was a theater for only two years, producing 10 plays, followed by a series of uses including a lodging house, whaling station, tea room and museum, before returning to a theater once again in the late 1930s. In 1992 the theater went dark, a victim of too many needed repairs and retrofits to keep the building usable and safe. It took 30 years and a determined group of volunteers raising money toward the \$2 million needed for fixes, but California's First Theatre, part of Monterey State Historic Park, is preparing to reopen.

"At long last, we are getting some work done there," says Eric Abma, a local State Parks superintendent. "State Parks had plans to repair it but not all the funding to complete the plans."

The volunteers of nonprofit Monterey State Historic Park Association have raised a combined \$350,000 in grants from the Community Foundation for Monterey County, Monterey Peninsula Foundation and Department of Interior's Save America's Treasures. MSHPA's board matched that amount with association funds for a total of \$700,000. President Lee Henderson, who writes the grants for MSHPA with help from other volunteers, says the theater's story helped raise the money.

"What makes it compelling to me is I talked to a lot of local people who were here in the '70s, '80s and '90s and remember going to performances at the First Theatre," Henderson says. Their memories, combined with the building's interesting history and

MShPA's goal of involving children in learning about history and theater, proved to be a winning combination in attracting grant dollars.

Retrofitting the building to meet earthquake safety standards was already completed using \$579,000 in state funds, says Abma. With money raised by the nonprofit, the fire suppression system was recently repaired and in the last few weeks work began to make the building meet Americans with Disabilities Act standards. The ADA upgrades are expected to take a few months, at which point the building can be reopened for tours and possibly event rentals. "We could use a new roof, but that won't stop us from opening the building," Abma adds.

More will be needed to ready the theater for performances, including mechanical work. "The main thing is to get it open so people can get to enjoy it," Henderson says. He and other MShPA volunteers will continue to fundraise for renovations to come. They see the theater's revival as part of an overall plan to bring in programs that engage the public.

Abma says long term, they hope to partner with a theater company to produce plays and manage food and beverage concessions. He's already looking forward to the annual holiday event Christmas at the Adobes, when the theater will be prominently featured. "Everybody loves the First Theatre," Abma says.

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