



Case Study Highlights

Quantity 550 Chairs

Product *Stellar Classic 216* with Victorian End

Location McPherson Opera House, McPherson, KS

Architect Andy Steffes

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American Seating began manufacturing its first seating products in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1886. At the time, the company was known as the Grand Rapids School Furniture Company and specialized in education seating solutions. But very quickly, the company soon entered other markets, including performing arts and entertainment.

Today, 125 years later, American Seating continues to provide high quality and elegantly designed products for the entertainment market. But what may be more remarkable than this success and longevity is that one of the company's first entertainment customers, the McPherson Opera House, recently specified American Seating products as part of its multi-million dollar restoration – 123 years after it initially specified product from the Grand Rapids School Furniture Co.

A Classic Past

Located in the downtown heart of McPherson, Kansas, the McPherson Opera House was originally built in 1888. The three-story brick building, designed in the eye-catching Richardsonian Romanesque architecture style, boasted a large auditorium with two balconies and could seat 900 people. With its elegance, second-to-none acoustics, and as one of the first entertainment facilities with electricity, it soon became the region's cultural center. Over time the opera house played host to a steady stream of performers, suffrage meetings, political rallies and local productions and events.

By the early 1980s, however, the opera house had lost its commercial viability, falling into disrepair and neglect. In 1983 the last tenant vacated the building, and the once-proud McPherson Opera House was in jeopardy of being destroyed in favor of a parking lot. Fortunately, in 1986 the building was saved from destruction by the McPherson Opera House Preservation Company (now the McPherson Opera House Company). This organization, comprised entirely of local citizens, had a long list of requirements in order to restore the classic building back to its original grandeur and commercial success. Over the next 24 years, restoration of the building was accomplished piece by piece.

Making a Connection

In 2003, John Holecek, then the director of development for the preservation company, attended a Kansas Historical Theater Association meeting in Topeka. American Seating National Sales Manager Mark Wretschko was presenting, and it was then that American Seating and the McPherson Opera House "renewed" their acquaintance.

"I remember Mark giving this excellent presentation about the preservation of historical theaters – he is very knowledgeable on this subject and it's a passion for him. And that's when we really made the connection with American Seating," recalled Holecek, who now serves as the executive director of the opera house.

At the time, Holecek and his preservation company colleagues were busy completing the renovation of the building's façade and any work to the interior, especially the seats, was still years away.

"It was about 2004 when we actually began to discuss the kind of seating that might be appropriate for the opera house," said American Seating Sales Representative Gene Sibley. "Obviously, the chairs are the last thing to go into a space. But we decided to work with John and do some discovery on what the original seats might have been."

According to Holecek, a very small piece of an original chair was found in a long-forgotten storage area of the building. Photos of the piece were sent to Grand Rapids for verification. Finding the markings "Grand Rapids S.F. (School Furniture) proved that the original seats were indeed from American Seating.

Continued on Page 3...



A

Project Partners

- John Holecek, recent director for the McPherson Opera House preservation company
- Mark Wretschko, American Seating Sales Manager
- Gene Sibley, American Seating Sales Representative
- Andy Steffes, Architect

A: The Stellar 216 with Victorian ends brought out the elegance of the theatre.



B

"We knew there weren't a lot of companies making theater seats back in the late 1800s, so we had a good feeling that the original seats could have been ours. We were very excited to have this confirmed," said Sibley.

This development created an even stronger connection between the preservation company and American Seating, as Holecek and his colleagues now had a unique historical tie-in: They could put new seats in the renovated auditorium from the same company that manufactured the original seats more than 100 years ago. A nice sentimental element for sure, but more importantly, it could also help recreate the original look and design of the opera house auditorium.

Staying In Touch and Finding Solutions

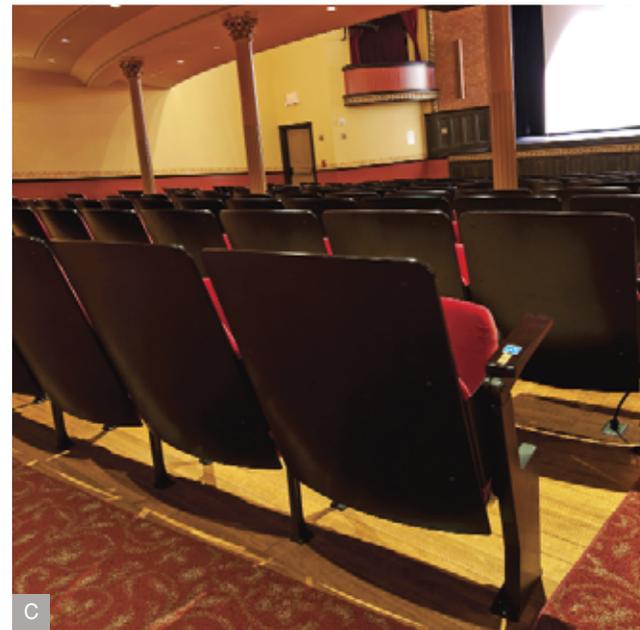
For almost four years, American Seating stayed in touch with Holecek and his colleagues as work progressed on the building.

"They really did an excellent job of staying in touch with us," said Holecek.

"They hadn't even gotten the job yet, but they were constantly keeping their eyes open and coming up with ideas to help us."

One idea that paid big dividends was quick thinking by American Seating. Due to a complete renovation of The City Arena in Great Bend, Kansas, hundreds of chairs that were more than 70 years old were about to be discarded. It was discovered that these were classic American Seating chairs. When Holecek saw the arm rests he immediately knew they would be perfect for the seats he ultimately wanted to put in the opera house's auditorium.

"These were sturdy American Seating chairs with beautifully crafted scrolled wooden arm rests; I knew they would match the stately and Victorian interior we were recreating in the auditorium," said Holecek.



C

B: Being the same manufacturer of the original seats created sentimental bond.
 C: Chairs look like originals from the 1880's with modern amenities.

Continued on Page 4...

In all, more than 600 arm rests were painstakingly removed and sent to Grand Rapids to be refurbished. "By being proactive and finding this solution for us, we not only saved thousands of dollars, but we got exactly the kind of arm rests we wanted."

Work Begins

By September of 2008, much of the building had been restored and focus now turned to the auditorium, which included selection of the seats.

Holecek and the architect for the project, Andy Steffes, both selected American Seating's *Stellar Classic* chair in the Victorian style with a wood back. Sibley worked with them closely on the fabric swatches to ensure the proper seat cushion and back. The finishing touch was the Victorian end standard, which features a richly curved sculpture with gold highlights.

"The Victorian end standard closely matched the historic design we were going for," Holecek said.

"The chairs look like they are from the 1880s, but they have all of today's modern amenities, including superb comfort, best-in-class ergonomics and self-rising seats," said Sibley.

By the end of 2009, 550 American Seating chairs were installed in the auditorium and balcony of the completely renovated McPherson Opera House.

Lifting the Curtain

On Jan. 28, 2010, after 24 years, millions of dollars and countless hours of devotion, the McPherson Opera House opened its doors to celebrate its remarkable turnaround. More than 400 people came out to the grand opening to share in the achievement and enjoy a variety show.

Today, the opera house steadfastly retains its original late 19th century charm, but is now truly a 21st century building. It not only hosts entertainment and artistic performances, but it also features commercial retail space, business meeting facilities and a vibrant arts center. It is on the National Register of Historic Places and is considered one of the best examples of opera house architecture in Kansas.

"I think the McPherson project shows American Seating's passion and expertise for the entertainment market, especially for historical theaters," said Holecek. "We had other seating companies approach us and send us samples, but we were set with American Seating. They truly cared about the project and we knew we would get a seating solution that would last and provide great durability. Plus, there was the historical and sentimental connection," said Holecek.

"It is great to be associated with such a historically important restoration," said Sibley. "By listening to the customer, paying attention to details and working to find solutions, we truly created a winning partnership." A partnership between two venerable organizations that now spans more than 120 years.



D: January 2010, after 24 years and countless hours of devotion, the McPherson Opera House finally opened its doors.

E: Auditorium prior to renovation.