

Seeing the Vision

Five years and lots of hard work transforms metal building into The Hangar Performing Arts Center

By Rhonda Mitchell

"If you build it, they will come." Well, it's built, so come on out!"

The Hangar Performing Arts Theater, as its name indicates, is a former aircraft hangar at the former Parsons Airport. Built in the late 70's, the abandoned hangar's renovation began in 2014. Since then, the City of Parsons and all of Decatur County have something to brag about.

The history of the Parsons Airport goes back to December 1959, according to a book, "The Aviation History of Tennessee." It had limited facilities and originally consisted of a 2,900' chert runway. By 1961, the Chattanooga Sectional Chart depicts the field at a length of 3,200' unpaired runway. The airport, "Scott Field" gained a paved runway later. Small hangars were built in 1974, but when larger aircraft needed a home, the small hangars would not accommodate the planes.

According to Sonny Butler, a local retired pilot, the hangar, which is now the theater, came into existence around 1977-78.

"Some men from the FAA came by one day and saw me working on something on the plane out in the sun," recalled Butler. "They said, you need to get a hangar built. I said yeah, but the city couldn't afford that."

The men then left him with a golden nugget of information. The state had money that might be available for the project.

That little nudge started the ball rolling. Butler and Ronnie Maxwell made some trips to Nashville, Parsons City Council approved the project, and with the help of a state grant, it came to be. After the airport closed around June of 2006, when the new Beech River Regional Airport opened, the big hangar was used as an industrial incubator, but Shane Bridges (special projects coordinator for the City of Parsons) and others began "eyeing" it for something a whole lot bigger.

Bridges said at first they were hoping to turn one of the smaller hangars into a theater, but during the 2013 Peavine Festival, bad weather moved in and the festival was moved into the large hangar. City workers placed a trailer inside as a stage. Tables and chairs were arranged and the festival went off without a hitch. Later that same summer, the hangar was used to show student films Bridges had made for Decatur County Middle



Shane Bridges stands in the middle of the stage during early construction of what was to become The Hangar Performing Arts Center. Although Bridges might have had the vision, he says he never could have done it alone. "It takes so many people to make something like the Hangar happen, so many people, it's impossible to give everyone their full due. But most of all, and I think I speak for all involved, I'm so thankful to Mayor Boaz and the City of Parsons for letting us build, 'just a stage,' in 2014!



Raven and Red launched their first entertainment gig in 2013 at the hangar. The "stage" was being set for a new and improved use of the hangar. They returned in July 2019, above, to play on the finished stage and put on a great show.

School. Raven and Red even launched their first entertainment gig that year at the hangar. The "stage" was being set for a new and improved use of the hangar.

The local theater group, The Rivertime Players, formed after the donation of the Toby Show to the City of Parsons. According to one of the original performers, Mark Tubbs, who admits they have not run him off yet, the first couple of years the group only performed annually during the Toby Show, then later a kids show was introduced.

"During those years we had been doing our Young Rivertime Players shows at the Municipal Building, in the council room," explained Bridges. "It was a

lot of work to transform the council room into a theatre, and the little stage was straining to contain our growing program. We were able to get the mayor to consent to us building just a stage in the big hangar. We were overjoyed!"

The hangar is 100'X80' and the envisioned stage would be 70' wide and 20' deep, plus a 4' apron, 16' high with a 3' elevation.

By February 1, 2014, Wayne Lyles, Superintendent of Public Works for Parsons, Joe Singletary and Ed Brasher, public works employees, were brought into the construction picture. A few of the group had some experience doing light carpentry.

"I had built a couple of backyard decks in a previ-

ous life," acknowledged Bridges. "But nothing at this scale."

"Well, all I could see were two massive piles of lumber on the floor in a big massive building and I just thought to myself, Lord, how we gonna pull this off," declared Singletary.

"I couldn't vision it," admitted Brasher. "It didn't make no sense, especially with a stage. I kept asking Shane if he was capable of doing this stuff, then what the ___ was he doing in Parsons!"

"Well, I was all for it and thought it would be good for the community," Lyles stated. "We more or less did whatever Shane wanted."

"We had some angst, not completely certain we

knew what we were doing, but we watched a lot of Youtube," laughed Bridges. "It's amazing what you can learn from Youtube!"

"Probably the biggest challenge of the build was constructing an erecting a 70 foot box truss to go across the top of the stage opening," continued Bridges. "Luckily for us, Superintendent Wayne Lyles had worked at Raney Truss previously. We were all very skeptical as to whether or not we would be able to get this thing up in the air and mounted in one piece. When the time came to do it, Dennus Tolley was in the bucket truck holding a rope tied to the center of the truss, while the rest of us were pulling

on ropes attached to pulleys we had attached here and there. It got very real very fast, and I was pretty certain it was going to end in disaster. Mayor Boaz and Branson Townsend were our audience, and they were greatly entertained by all the yelling, grunting and running around. But, in the end, we were successful. I think this gave us all a measure of confidence that we could actually do this."

On March 28 of 2014, two months after beginning the construction of the stage, Rivertime Players did their first show in the Hangar, Hydrangea Albright.

"It was a great show, except that it was very cold in March of that year," recalled Bridges. "We had no heating system in the Hangar, so we ran these big, noisy diesel-powered jet heaters in the theatre before the show and during intermission. They were too loud to use during the show, and the fumes were probably more than a little toxic!"

"In addition to HVAC, we were also without dressing rooms in our backstage area," continued Bridges. "We had a tent backstage that the girls were using to change their costumes, and the boys hid behind a shower curtain in a corner behind the stage. It was guerilla theatre. We also had no restrooms, so cast and patrons had to use the very cold port-o-johns outside. But, we had a theatre, and that was what mattered."

Progressing right along, by 2015, the next project was the backstage area. With the aide of their "architect," Mark Tubbs, blueprints were put together for dressing rooms, bathrooms, a green room, a shop to build sets and a place to store props and costumes.

"Mark gave us blueprints he put together in Photoshop and the price was right, too-FREE!" Bridges stated. "We worked our tails off all winter and finished all the framing and the rough electric, but alas, we weren't able to take on the drywall in time for the Peavine Festival." Drywall was put on hold for a little while.

"That was probably our biggest challenge, getting the drywall up since none of us had done it before," admitted Brasher.

In 2015, the Young Rivertime Players had a summer camp, basically a Junior Toby Show, entitled "Kody Korn." They made do with plastic draped stud

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walls for dressing rooms. They had no centralized heat in the winter, and no air conditioning in the hot summer.

"We left the Hangar doors open and had fans everywhere during the camp, blowing air like a hundred hair dryers," described Bridges. "When it came time for the show, however, we had to close the Hangar doors because the afternoon sun was blazing onto the stage, and let me tell you, it was miserable. Dale King had gotten a surplus military fan, one of those big industrial misting machines, and we had that running during the show. The whole audience sat in the little section of seats where it was blowing."

Winter of 2016 rolls in, and the crew began working to turn the Hangar into a show place. Bridges' and Tubbs' vision was more detailed than some of the men originally thought.

"We framed 16 foot walls all the way around and built an elevated light booth," said Bridges. "By this time, we were getting pretty good at this! Our big fear was drywall. I had done enough drywall to know I wasn't any good at it. I tried to convince the mayor to hire someone to do the drywall, and he countered that if we would hang the drywall, he would hire someone to finish it (mudding and sanding). Only problem was, we finished construction too quickly. Mayor Boaz suggested we give drywall finishing a try. Back to Youtube we went. Now, keep in mind, this wasn't a little drywall job. In the auditorium we had 16 foot walls around a 4000 square foot room. We also had to finish the drywall

backstage, six rooms and hallway. It was a slow go, but Wayne Lyles and his apprentice, Joe Singletary, mudded and sanded, mudded and sanded, until we got it done. And it looked pretty good, too. Ed Brasher, David Alexander, Wayne Newlon and Dennus Tolley painted it up really nice. The auditorium looked good! It was down to the last minute, but we got it done just in time for the Peavine Festival that year."

According to Bridges, Tolley was always doing quality control, and can do just about anything, including drywall.

"Dennus will give you a measurement down to the 1/64 of an inch, and then laugh as you try to figure out where that is on the tape measure," admitted Bridges. "His fingerprints are all over the Hangar, figuratively and literally. I can't imagine how out-of-square everything would be if he weren't there."

"We were down to the wire trying to get the backstage finished before the Peavine Festival in 2016," recalled Bridges. "Mark, Joe Singletary and I were pretty much working round-the-clock trying to finish up, and right out of the blue one Saturday, there comes Dennus to save the day. We couldn't have done it without him."

"Every step of the way, with every little bit of progress, we were getting closer to having a real performing arts space," stated Tubbs.

But, alas, the Hangar was still not finished. There were no public restrooms and the public was not really hip on using the outside port-o-potties!

Fortunately, all their

hard work paid off. People were taking notice of the nice venue the group had constructed and wanted to contribute to its success. Decatur County Chamber of Commerce director Charles Taylor helped to get a 3-Star grant to purchase a projector to show movies on the screen that was donated to the center by UT Martin, Parsons Center. They were then awarded a Placemaking Grant by the Tennessee Arts Commission, which allowed them to purchase a grand drape for the stage and black curtains to hide the Hangar doors. Tennessee Economic and Community Development provided \$50,000 to build a lobby with a ticket boot, concession stand, and finally-public restrooms!

"He's (Bridges) just a better visionary than we are," admitted Singletary.

"We got it done, did it right and got it done on time," declared Brasher.

"We took pride in it," acknowledged Lyles. "We always try to do that in everything. We worked off the clock a lot. Now, we hope that everyone will utilize it. Hope that people will realize just what they have here in Parsons."

"It's impressive," Singletary said with a hint of pride. "It's impressive that a community as small as us can have something like this. When we started out, I didn't think of this being here, but now, I think-WOW! This little group accomplished some impressive things."

"Yep, it's impressive when you walk in," Lyles added. "I invite everyone to take that step. They'll be surprised!"

"I can't say enough about Wayne and his



According to Shane Bridges, Dennus Tolley, far left, was always doing quality control, and can do just about anything. "Dennus will give you a measurement down to the 1/64 of an inch, and then laugh as you try to figure out where that is on the tape measure."

crew," Bridges bragged. "Most people refer to them as the Street Department, but they do so much more than that. Make no mistake, Wayne and his crew have worked on the streets, and made some streets from scratch, as well as some bridges and box culverts, things most towns contract an outside company to do. They do a lot of maintenance at various city facilities and on city vehicles and heavy equipment. They do plumbing, electric, and HVAC, but just look at the Hangar Performing Arts Center. Show me another street department that can do that! I'll wait!"

"Most days, I'm amazed at what we were able to build here inside the hangar," concluded Tubbs. "But, I'm very proud of what we have accomplished."

"In addition to the Hangar being beautiful (if I do say so myself), it is also chocked full of bells and whistles that would make some other theatre companies green with envy," asserted Bridges. "That's all Mark Tubbs. Mark has a great



"We took pride in it," acknowledged Wayne Lyles. "We always try to do that in everything. We worked off the clock a lot. Now, we hope that everyone will utilize it. Hope that people will realize just what they have here in Parsons." From left, Wayne Lyles, Shane Bridges, Joe Singletary and Ed Brasher.

aptitude and affinity for technical theatre, and if you've come to see any of our shows and said, 'Wow, that's pretty cool,' I'm pretty sure it was in reference to something Mark had done."

"Throughout this five year process, I periodically found myself going to the Hangar in the middle of the night, finding a seat, putting my feet up, and just looking around in awe of what all of us have built together," concludes Bridges. "I have been an actor most of my adult life,

and an actor's life is always hoping someone will let you act on their stage. Now look at this stage that I get to act on any time I want! It's truly a dream come true."

Visualization is the first step in making a dream a reality. Now, not only is the dream of a performing arts center in Parsons a reality, it is a bragging point for all those who helped and its supporters. It is said that dreams without actions are only a wish in a fairy tale world, well, this fairy tale has a happy ending.