

Art Center started with fund drives in the 1950s

By Kathy Jordan

Mesa County, with its spectacular natural scenery, has always had its own small artists' colony. But until the early 1950s, nobody did much to display that beauty.

A few years after World War II, several civic-minded people had a vision of an art center for Western Colorado and set about making their dream a reality. No one in the group trying to put together the center was a noted artist, and most of them painted mainly because they loved painting.

Among that original group were: Al Nestler, a Grand Junction house-painting contractor; Verona Burkhard, a transplant from New York; local homemakers Helen Martin and Ruth Moss, according to Mary Louise Giblin Henderson, who covered the origins of the art center for The Daily Sentinel.

As the diverse group of hopefuls set about developing an idea, plans didn't always go smoothly. There was quite frequent discord because everybody had a different idea about what an art center should entail.

However, after many planning meetings, the fund drive for the new Mesa County Fine Arts Center was announced in April 1953.

An item in The Daily Sentinel on Jan. 3, 1954, announced a campaign sponsored by the Mesa County Fine Arts Center Inc. to have each school child in Mesa County contribute 25 cents, the cost of one cinder block, to go toward building a center. This drive raised \$800.

The art center was originally to be built on Mantey Heights on land donated by Fred Mantey, a prominent, long-time resident of that area. There is little indication in newspaper stories of that era why the idea was shelved, but construction costs probably entered into the decision. Instead, when a rundown two-story house on the Seventh Street site of the present art center became available in May 1960 for a reasonable price, the art center board decided to purchase that property.

The old house, renovated and upgraded mostly by volunteers, opened as the Mesa County Fine Arts Center in November 1960. Numerous shows and receptions took place there the next several years.

One of the biggest fundraisers for the new art center in those early years was the annual Artists' Ball, organized by the Brush and Palette Club, a group of local amateur artists.

A Jan. 4, 1954, item in the Daily Sentinel announced that the Brush and Palette Club was planning the second annual Artists' Ball, to be held in the Green Room of the La Court Hotel,

where the Grand Junction Convention Center now stands. The first Artists' Ball had been held the year before. Proceeds from both events went to the art center. The 1954 event was to be a costume ball featuring a novelty floorshow.

When plans for the 1955 ball were announced, it seemed that this event was going to be bigger than the one the year before. The 1955 ball was to be at the Flame Room of the Café Caravan, located on the southwest corner of First and Main Street. It was to feature a 10:30 p.m. floorshow followed by a midnight buffet supper.

A week later it was reported in the paper that there would be a guessing contest .

Posters were placed in the store windows the first poster showing a pair of legs in black stockings. That was then replaced by another poster showing a different pair of legs. The third poster was of a different person with a grotesquely made-up face.

On the night of the ball the three posters were on display, and the person who guessed the identities of the three was to win a prize. There was no follow-up newspaper story to show whether there was a winner.

Pictures that ran in The Sentinel after the three balls would indicate that those who attended were having a wonderful time. However, the annual ball was apparently shelved, as there are no newspaper reports of a fourth such event.

While Mesa County artists waited for an art center, Grand Junction City Hall became a gallery to show their work. The art groups were also allowed to use the front lawn at city hall, the La Court Hotel and the Mesa County Library.

By the late 1960s, the art center had outgrown the remodeled house and members of the art center began to talk of expansion. In February 1969 they announced that construction would begin on a new building.

Thanks to a grant from the Carl Purcell Memorial Trust Fund, \$5,000 from the Lions Club, a \$15,000 grant from the Boettcher Foundation, \$1,000 from the Grand Junction Rotary Club and numerous fundraisers by the member of various art clubs in Grand Junction, the present art center became a reality.

The original Art Center has been expanded numerous times as it continues to grow. No doubt those who had the dream of such a center are delighted at its success.