



"A future with a past"

LANDMARK REPORT

VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 3

LANDMARK ASSOCIATION OF BG/WC

FEBRUARY 2002

History Worth Preserving - The Quonset Auditorium

By Amber Ridington

When driving past State Street on the 31-W Bypass in Bowling Green the two silver, half moon-shaped Quonset Huts perched on the south bank of the Barren River along the route of the old Dixie Highway are a familiar sight. The larger Quonset Hut now houses the Bale Tire Center, but it was originally constructed as an entertainment venue called the Quonset Auditorium. Between 1946 and 1959 the Quonset Auditorium was known as the "Most Happening Place in Town" to both black and white audiences, and its pink neon sign marked the city's north entrance for those traveling the Dixie Highway.

The Quonset Auditorium was built in 1946 by three members of the legendary Bowling Green band Joe Marshall and his Rovin' Ramblers, brothers Joe and Kenny Marshall and Floyd Dunn. It was originally built as an auditorium to house the band's weekly square dances and concerts that had previously taken place at the Armory on Chestnut Street. Joe Marshall remembers that when the Armory burnt down in 1946 the three Roving Ramblers "bought a Quonset because they were pre-fab buildings, you could put them up quick" giving them a permanent



The Quonset Auditorium

place to perform. The Marshalls also took over the professional wrestling matches that had been at the Armory. The prime location on the Dixie Highway, at the time the only throughway between Nashville and Louisville, and the large size of the venue contributed to its success. In addition to the Ramblers regular concerts the Quonset was soon booking large acts from out of town and packing the 750-seat auditorium.

The Rovin' Ramblers named their auditorium after its architectural type known as a "Quonset Hut." The name Quonset derives from a Navy base in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, where the prefabricated huts were manufactured during WW II. The

huts were designed for the military by the George A. Fuller Company to house troops and equipment and to be easily assembled. Quonset Huts have a main frame made of semi-circular steel ribs which are covered with sheets of corrugated steel. They are placed on concrete foundations or simply on the ground and can be easily moved or taken apart. During the war, 170,000 Quonset Huts were produced at the Quonset Point naval station and shipped to U.S. bases all over the world where they endured sand, wind, rain and snow storms alike. Once the war was over, the buildings were sold as surplus and have endured in vernacular use not only as

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Landmark Report is published three times a year by:

The Landmark Association of Bowling Green - Warren County P.O. Box 1812
Bowling Green, KY 42101
(270) 782-0037

Landmark Report encourages unsolicited articles or suggestions for articles and will consider all for publication.

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The Quonset Auditorium *(continued)*

auditoriums, but as barns, community centers, houses, warehouses, skating rinks and churches just to name a few of the ways they have been reused.

The Quonset Auditorium here in Bowling Green became a roadhouse on the regular tour routes of rhythm and blues, gospel and Grand Ole Opry musicians in the post-World War II era when live performances were a key part of selling records. Local audience members remember seeing famous performers such as Ike and Tina Turner, Ray Charles, James Brown, Little Richard, T-Bone Walker, Roy Milton, Ivory Joe Hunter, Mahalia Jackson, Fats Domino, Ernest Tubb, Wally Fowler and the Oakridge Quartet, Cowboy Copus, Paul Howard, Pee Wee King, Johnny Maddox, Hank Snow, Bill Monroe and others on the small stage in this entertainment hall.

Local radio played a role in the success of the Quonset Auditorium as well. The Rovin' Ramblers hosted a daily radio show on Bowling Green's WLBJ while the Quonset Auditorium was in operation. During their broadcast the Ramblers performed live and were able to maintain their local fan base. They took the opportunity to announce both their performance schedule and the headlining recording artists whom they booked at the Quonset.

The Quonset also regularly featured professional wrestling through the National Wrestling Alliance and eventually the Marshall brothers began promoting wrestling themselves. Legends such as Jackie Fargo, Andre the Giant, Gorgeous George, Farmer Jones, Ada Ash and Bambi were among the top wrestlers of the 1940s and 1950s who competed in matches at the

Quonset Auditorium and packed the house. A rectangular addition on the side of the Quonset can still be seen today that was built to accommodate bleachers for viewing the wrestling. Other bookings in the auditorium over its 13 years of operation included roller skating, church revivals, and private parties. University students often booked the auditorium for balls, homecomings and fraternity and sorority events. A short-order concession at the front of the Quonset was expanded into a small restaurant that became a popular stop for people traveling the Dixie Highway.

The Quonset closed as a music and wrestling venue in 1959. It was sold by the Marshall brothers who had bought Dunn out early on and was used by its new owners first as a warehouse and later as an automobile service station and tire store. Since 1959 the building has undergone only minor alterations, both externally and internally. It still has its original false front constructed of both concrete and glass blocks. The recessed double doors at the main entrance are framed by the glass blocks in a curvilinear Art Moderne style popular in the 1940s. The original ticket window is still set in the glass blocks on the left side of the double doors and serves as a visual reminder of the building's original function. The Quonset operated during a time of racial segregation, and the modest African-American entrance on the side of the building that bypassed the restaurant is also extant and reminds us of how history has changed over the past thirty years.

Today the Quonset building serves as a local landmark because

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Front entrance to the Quonset Auditorium.
Notice the ticket window to the left.

of its distinctive silver color, half-circle shape, longevity in this location and association with famous wrestlers and both local and national music legends. The Quonset Auditorium was important to both the white and black communities of Bowling Green and the building evokes strong memories for those who remember it as the "Most Happening Place In Town." The architectural details of the Quonset can be interpreted and used to remind us of the building's rich history - a history worth preserving.

Amber Ridington is a graduate student in Folk Studies at WKU. She has been conducting archival research and collecting oral histories about the Quonset Auditorium over the last year and a half for use in public exhibits and programs as well as her M.A. thesis. Her work has been supported by the WKU Yeager Scholarship, a WKU Graduate Student Research Grant and a Transcription Grant from the Kentucky Oral History Commission. If you have any memories about the Quonset Auditorium or know of any surviving memorabilia (photos, programs, posters) from it, please contact Amber at 796-4137 or ridinaf@wku.edu



Otho Dandrith Porter

by Lynn Niedermeier



O. D. Porter's office building at 227 East Main Street. Courtesy of Kentucky Building, WKU.

Otho Dandrith Porter, the son of Robert H. Porter and Amanda Foster, was born shortly after the Civil War and educated in Bowling Green's African-American public school. As a young teacher, he witnessed Warren County's dire need for educated health professionals and consequently enrolled in the preparatory department at Fisk University. On the train to Fisk he met another student, W. E. B. DuBois, who was impressed by Porter's neat appearance and friendly manner. The two became roommates and remained friends after DuBois began his distinguished career as a civil rights leader and editor of the NAACP publication *The Crisis*. Despite financial difficulties which required him to continue teaching, Porter received his bachelor's degree from Fisk in 1891. He earned a medical

degree from Nashville's Meharry Medical College in 1894 and set up his practice, one of the first by an African-American physician, on State Street near Bowling Green's public square. Porter became active in his state medical association and only a few years after commencing his practice was elected president of the National Association of Colored Physicians, Dentists and Pharmacists (now the National Medical Association).

On 9 April 1895 Porter married Carolyn "Carrie" Bridges, a native of Mississippi who had also attended Fisk University. He established a new office on a lot which he purchased in 1899 on East Main Street between Center and Kentucky Streets. In March 1901 the Porters moved from their frame home on State Street between 4th and 5th Streets to a two-story brick dwelling at the corner of State and 5th (439 State Street). Dr. Porter also achieved greater visibility for his practice in 1906 when, after a fire destroyed his office, he rebuilt it as a two-story building which also housed other businesses. Until it was razed in the early 1980s, the Porter Building at 227 East Main Street stood just west of the U.S. Courthouse (William H. Natcher Federal Building).

O. D. Porter practiced medicine until his death at home on 21 January 1936. He and his wife had no children. Had his wife predeceased him (she died in 1968), Porter planned to leave his estate to his two schools, Fisk and Meharry. His will also directed that "a modest monument [be] provided at my grave."