

### Ole Olsen Memorial Theatre

"May you live as long as you laugh and laugh as long as you live." These were the words coined by Ole Olsen, and how the Peru native lived his life. The people of Miami County have continued to make audiences smile at the Ole Olsen Memorial Theatre in Peru to honor this legendary stage and screen actor.

The theatrical troupe began their four decades long love affair with the arts with their first production back in 1964 at the old Peru High School auditorium.

"We started out very literally a not-for-profit," said James Walker, member of the group and Mayor of Peru. "We would go to the scrap lumber yards for materials to build sets." They would hold rehearsals in homes. Local businesses and schools would help by storing props and many of the sets would come straight out of the members' living rooms.

Native son John Sigurd (Ole) Olsen was born on November 6, 1892. He was a classically trained violinist and graduated from Northwestern University with a degree in music. While on the Vaudeville circuit he met his future partner Chic Johnson, a ragtime pianist and the two formed a fast friendship that led to the comedy team of 'Olsen and Johnson.' They hit the big time with their Broadway show *Hellzapoppin*, setting new records for attendance on Broadway and gaining notoriety for their zany anything goes antics. *Hellzapoppin* was later adapted to a Hollywood movie production.

Olsen and Johnson moved on to radio, more movies and even early television, replacing Milton Berle for a 1949 summer break on the Texaco Star Theatre. They finished their careers with shows in Las Vegas until Chic's death in 1962. Ole died the next year but never forgot his childhood home and made frequent trips back to visit his sister who continued to live and work in Peru.

"What makes us special is we are a very diverse group. Everybody wants to be involved to provide folks with an enjoyable evening. The thing that makes me proud is that for two hours their stress is gone and they feel better than when they came in the doors. We make them smile. When people come up and say 'I really enjoyed myself' that makes me feel really special," said Jim.

The Ole Olsen Memorial Theatre has come a long way in those 41 years and the Miami County Community Foundation is proud to have helped them with \$14,000 awarded in the 2004 Fall Granting Cycle. These funds were made possible through the Miami County Unrestricted Fund, the John A. Nixon Unrestricted Fund and the Donald A. Ferrara Fund.

Jim Walker's enthusiasm for the group comes through when he speaks of the legend of Ole Olsen, "Ole lived life with a smile, and that's what he wanted to give to everyone who came to see him perform."



*Chic Johnson and Ole Olsen*

