



The Velma V. Morrison Center for the Performing Arts: Past and Present

Harry W. Morrison first conceived of and dreamed about the establishment of a performing arts center in his hometown of Boise many years ago. During the 1960s his wife Velma embraced that dream and vision. Upon Harry's untimely death in 1971, Velma rallied support from friends, associates, and family in the quest to establish a performing arts center.

Following many years of often-frustrating efforts to find the right combination of community support and a suitable location, the Morrison Center opened on the banks of the Boise River on April 7, 1984. The two-thousand-seat Center, with its ten-story stage house, is a significant architectural feature at the west end of the Boise State University campus. The academic wing of the structure is home to the University's Music and Theatre Arts Departments.

In 1980 and 1981 the Idaho legislature appropriated funds totaling 5.25 million dollars. These funds were added to 6.5 million dollars from the Harry W. Morrison Foundation and 3.7 million dollars in pledges and gifts from the community, including a one million dollar gift from Jack and Esther Simplot. Ground was broken on October 12, 1981.

The Endowment

Mrs. Morrison and the founding Board of Governors recognized that in order to assure a stable operating budget for the Morrison Center an endowment would be necessary. Once again the Harry W. Morrison Foundation stepped up with seed money. The Foundation also provided matching funds for public gifts and pledges made through October 1985. Today, the Morrison Center Endowment has assets in excess of fifteen million dollars. No appropriated public funds are used for either maintenance or operation of the Morrison Center. The goal is to cover all expenses with box office revenues and rental fees, though subsidies are sometimes required from the Endowment. Since the late 1980s the Endowment has supported the local arts groups that use the Center in reduced fees totaling millions of dollars. This is combined with grants to local arts groups for new and expanded use of the Center. Foundation funding also allows the Center to present a full spectrum of other performing arts.

The 1984 Premier Season

Thousands of volunteer hours throughout the 1970s made the Morrison Center a reality. The University Community Arts Association played a leading role, as did the Premier Season Committee. The long-awaited premier month of April 1984 was marked by numerous performances and gala activities.

The official dedication and inaugural performance on April 7 featured the Morrison Center Musical Theater's production of *My Fair Lady*, under the direction of the Center's original Executive Director and creative force Fred Norman. Capacity audiences enthusiastically received all five performances. The premier month also featured a beautiful staging of *Carmen* by Boise Opera, and the Boise Philharmonic's performance of Verdi's *Requiem*. Later in the month the University of Idaho provided an evening of musical entertainment, and Boise State University's Music and Theatre Arts Departments performed on three evenings.

From the moment the Morrison Center opened, audiences and performers alike have raved about the design of the hall, about the superb acoustics, about the grand lobby, and about the overall ambiance. Architect Ernie Lombard succeeded in reaching his goal of designing a building that "really...is a performance in itself."

The Morrison Center Volunteers

Another dedicated group of individuals continues to play a strong supporting role in the operation of the Center. The Morrison Center Volunteers operate the lobby gift shop and refreshment centers, and provide ushers and ticket takers for all performances. The men and women in the Volunteers contribute over nineteen thousand hours of service annually, as well as monetary contributions to the Endowment and Center.

And the Beat Goes On

The Morrison Center provides a home stage for such local arts groups as the Boise Philharmonic, Ballet Idaho, Opera Idaho and Boise State University's Music and Theatre Arts Departments. It has hosted such greats as Isaac Stern, Itzhak Perlman, Harry Belafonte, Bill Cosby, Jerry Seinfeld, David Copperfield, Hal Holbrook and countless others. The hit Broadway show *Wicked* had a record-breaking 24-performance run in 2014 and numerous other Broadway productions have played since 1997 as part of the Center's Broadway in Boise series.

Since opening, the Morrison Center has had an economic impact on the greater Treasure Valley in the tens of millions of dollars, with hundreds of thousands of patrons attending thousands of performances over the course of its existence.

And now, having celebrated its Silver Anniversary in April 2009, the Velma V. Morrison Center continues to fulfill its mission of cultural enrichment.

Morrison Center Dates in History

1957 – Harry Morrison put his company to work reclaiming swampland along the Boise River, constructing the 155-acre Ann Morrison Memorial Park. Set aside in the middle of the park were 15 acres reserved for something Harry Morrison longed to see in Boise – a performing arts center.

1959 – After Harry Morrison’s donation of the park and its dedicated site, a \$1.5 million bond levy was proposed to construct a civic auditorium. That levy failed.

1969 – Velma Morrison met Fred Norman.

1970 – Velma Morrison asked Fred Norman to be her confidante and to help complete Harry Morrison’s dream of building a center for the performing arts.

1972 – Jim Nelson and Fred Norman opened a P.O. Box with \$50 each and started the Gallery Playhouse. Katie Stein was the treasurer. This box was used until the opening of the Morrison Center.

1973 – Fred Norman directed *Fiddler On The Roof* at the Boise High School auditorium. This show planted the seed that a performing arts center was needed in Boise. Monies from this show were given to the art gallery, as the plans for the center were not finalized.

1974 – Velma Morrison asked Ralph Comstock to lead the way for a bond election to acquire money for the project.

1974 – Fred Norman directed *Jacque Brel Is Alive And Well* at the Rodeway Inn and then the Crystal Ballroom in the Boise Hotel. Jim Nelson produced it and the proceeds were \$27,000.

1974-1975– Fred Norman directed *Oklahoma*, again at Boise High School, with proceeds of \$40,000.

1975 – Lost the first bond election by 1%. The money from *Oklahoma* was given to an Iowa group brought in to help prepare for another election. They stayed one day, said to do nothing, and took the money.

1976 – On the first Tuesday in May, the 2nd bond election was lost soundly. Velma Morrison left town on May 10, and as Fred Norman took her to the airport, he convinced her the project was too right to be wrong.

1976 – Funds, chaired by Peter O’Neill had voted to give their money from the auction to the Morrison Center. After the defeat of the bond election, the Funds board voted to hold the money for one year. Approximately \$300,000 was put aside.

1977 – \$200,000 was donated to MSTI for a linear accelerator for the play *Shenandoah*, directed by Fred Norman. Velma Morrison told the cast backstage the first night of the performance, “Maybe we are bringing the Morrison Center out of the ashes.”

1978 – John Keiser became president of Boise State University.

1978 – University Community Arts Association was formed with Ralph Comstock as president. The concept of the Morrison Center to be situated on the campus was discussed.

1980 – Fred Norman directed Side By Side By Sondheim. Each night before the show, Dr. John Keiser and Ralph Comstock informed the audience of the UCAA.

1980 – JR Simplot donates \$1 Million dollars for the Morrison Center.

1980 – In April, Fred Norman gathered a group together to discuss his thoughts for a Vaudeville show. As a result, 255 people from the community helped put on Vaudeville Revisited which Velma felt was the real turning point to acquiring the Morrison Center.

1981 – Ground breaking for the Morrison Center, October 12. Just before the ground breaking, Ralph Comstock persuaded Fred Norman to step away from Chairman of the Theatre Department at Boise State University and become Executive Director of the Morrison Center for the Performing Arts. Fred Norman later hired Frank Heise, a Professor in the Theatre Department, to join him as Director of Operations.

1984 – April 7, opened the Morrison Center with Fred Norman directing My Fair Lady. Velma Morrison made an announcement to pledge another \$2.5 million dollar for the creation of a \$5 million dollar Endowment with a community match.

1986 – The community completed a fund drive to create a \$5.25 million endowment to support the operation of the main hall.

2009 – The Center celebrated its 25th Anniversary with a series of special events that culminated with the burial of a 25-year time capsule near the main entrance.

2013 – Two of the Morrison Center's brightest luminaries, Velma Morrison and Fred Norman, passed this year. The Center hosted a local memorial service for Mr. Norman in August, followed in September by a tribute to Mrs. Morrison. In addition to eulogies from family and friends, Tony Award Winner Brian Stokes Mitchell performed a selection of her favorite Broadway tunes in concert with the Boise Philharmonic.

2017 – At the annual Mayor's Awards for Excellence in Arts and History, Mayor David Bieter named the Velma V. Morrison Center for the Performing Arts as a City of Boise Cultural Ambassador for a two-year term.