The amount of the gift was stunning for a town as small as Eureka Springs: $34 million. That's what the Walton Family Foundation is giving to fund a facility for Opera in the Ozarks at Inspiration Point, an institution that has been around for more than seven decades.

The historic Opera in the Ozarks complex is just west of town along U.S. 62. The massive Walton grant will fund design and construction of a 300-seat theater, rehearsal hall, production shops, practice rooms and faculty housing. Completion of the project will be in time for the 2025 summer season.

What started as a summer camp now attracts music students from around the world. Alumni of the program such as Latonia Moore, Leona Mitchell and Mark Delavan have gone on to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. As one might expect, the general director of Opera in the Ozarks, Nancy Preis, calls the gift "transformational."

"It will offer artists a stage worthy of their talents," she says. "Our new home will also be a welcoming space for audiences to enjoy an intimate and high-quality performance."

Inspiration Point overlooks the White River. Four weeks of rehearsals generally are followed by several weeks of performances of operas with full orchestra, full costumes and full staging. It's another of the amenities that make Eureka Springs unlike anywhere else in this part of the country.

I've long thought that some of the vast wealth of nearby Northwest Arkansas should be invested in polishing the jewel that's Eureka Springs. Perhaps this gift will provide the impetus for investors to renovate its hotels, motels, restaurants and other attractions. Such improvements would draw a higher demographic of visitors.

With the right kind of investors — those with a heart for historic preservation — it's possible to take this quirky town to the next level without losing its charm.

In the early 1900s, a German-born engineer named Charles Mowers came to the Ozarks to hunt. He bought land known as Big Rock Candy Mountain in 1928 and began construction of a structure that would resemble the castles he remembered back in Germany. He used stone quarried on the property.

The stock market crashed in 1929, and Mowers abandoned the project. It was finished in 1932 by Rev. Charles Scoville of the Disciples of Christ for use as a retreat. Scoville named the spot Inspiration Point because of its beautiful views.

"After his death in 1938, his widow gave the property to Phillips University in Enid, Okla., to use as a conference and retreat center," Janet Parsch writes for the Central Arkansas Library System's Encyclopedia of Arkansas. "Ten years later, the project was abandoned."

"Henry Hobart, dean of fine arts at Phillips, joined Gertrude Stockard, director of music at Eureka Springs High School, to organize a music camp, Inspiration Point Fine Arts Colony. It held its first opera camp in the summer of 1950. Hobart and his wife Ellen financed extensive repairs to the building with loans and donations from Eureka Springs businesses."

Music clubs from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri also provided financial support. The enterprise was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1959 with a 99-year lease on the property.

"As the organization grew, it began offering instruction to more advanced students with the focus exclusively on opera," Parsch writes. "The facility featured dormitories for men and women, faculty cabins, a cafeteria, office building, practice cabins and a red barn that eventually became a storage facility for costumes and sets."

"Hobart hired outstanding teachers and coaches, who often remained on the staff for many summers. Hobart continued as administrator until his death in 1966. Isaac Van Grove was artistic director from 1955-78. He composed six operas on biblical themes suited to the voices of the younger singers."

A history on the Opera of the Ozarks website says of Van Grove: "His accomplishments as an opera composer, conductor of leading opera companies, voice coach and accompanist for several world-famous singers qualified him as an opera director of the highest order."

"For 20 years, up to her death in 1976, Joan Woodruff, wife of Van Grove and an internationally known choreographer and ballet instructor, taught advanced ballet, stage action and stylized dance forms at Inspiration Point."

Van Grove died in 1979 at age 86, but Opera in the Ozarks lives on.

Now, thanks to the Walton Family Foundation, its profile will be higher than ever before, drawing visitors from across the country to Inspiration Point each summer.

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Senior Editor Rex Nelson’s column appears regularly in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. He’s also the author of the Southern Fried blog at rexnelsonsouthernfried.com.