



Theatrical Entertainment in Early Omaha

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Article Summary: Theatrical activity in the new Nebraska Territory consisted of traveling "artists" attempting to entertain for profit the first residents of a sparsely settled frontier. Even this limited kind of theater helped to satisfy a nostalgia for the culture that the emigrants had left behind.

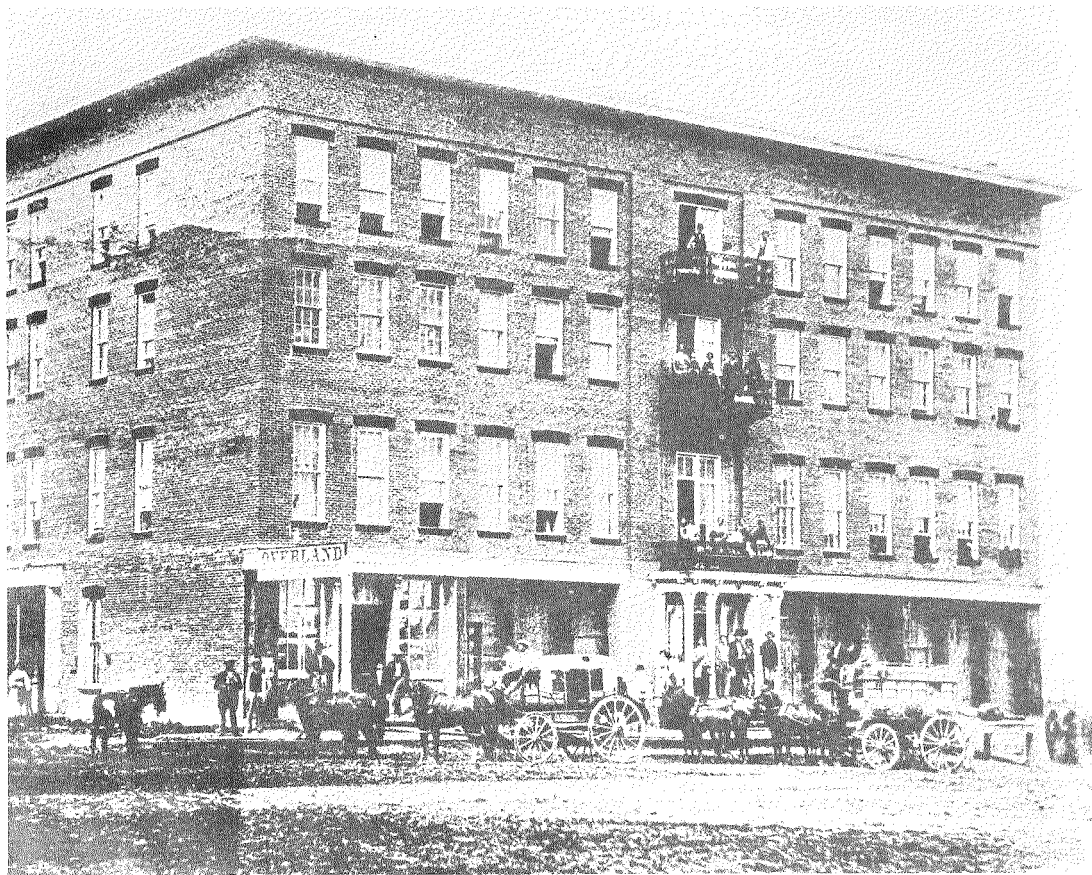
Cataloging Information:

Performers and Company Managers: Wight, Powell, Mrs. Powell, Scott, Mlle Luie, Julia Dean Hayne, Wells' Minstrels, Templeton and Co., National Harmonists, Henry L Raymond, Captain Haskell, Mrs Fanny Hernandez, Evening Star Minstrels, Billy Andrews, W Davis, Carter Theatrical Troupe, Carrie Carter, Eddie Banks, Harry Richmond, Walter Bray's Theatrical and Opera Troupe, John S Potter, R M Johnson, Henry Corri

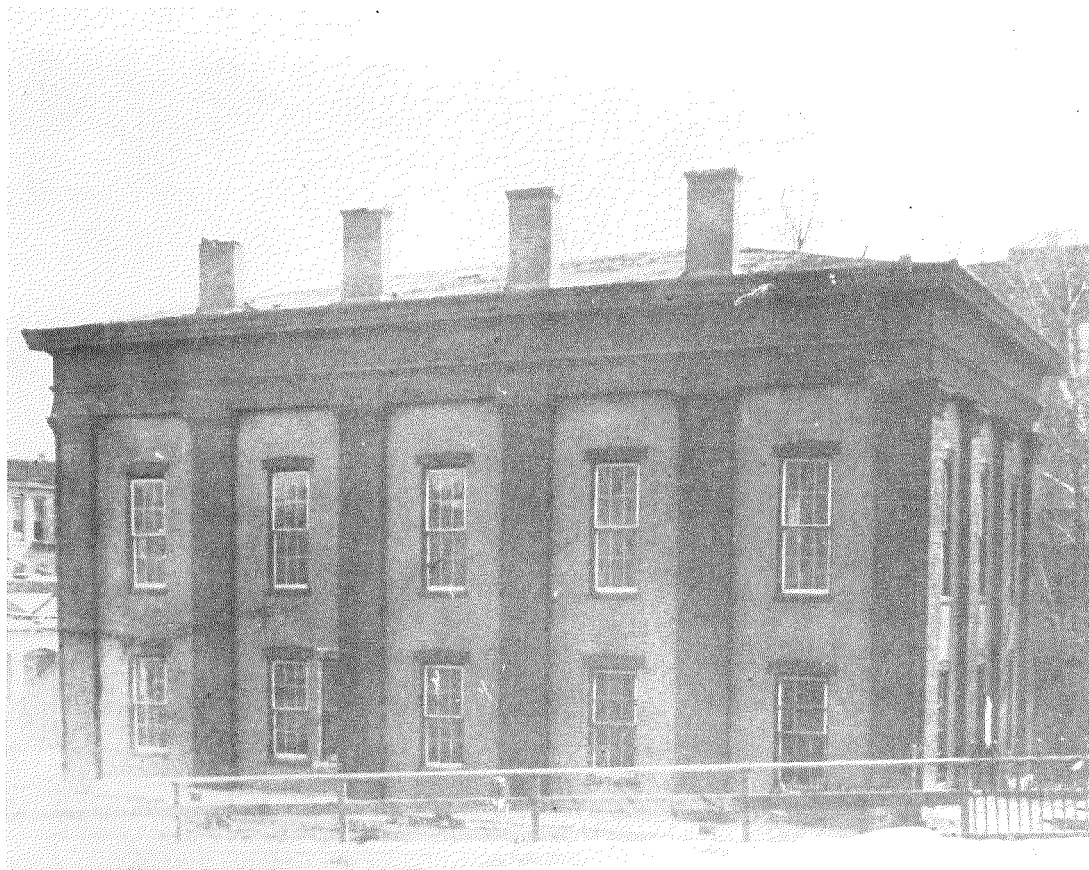
Theatrical Venues: Armstrong & Clark's store, Courthouse, Herndon House hotel, Pioneer Block, Dallow's Hall, Brown's Hall, Omaha Academy of Music

Nebraska Place Names: Omaha

Photographs / Images: Herndon House, erected 1858; Old Court House, 16th and Farnam Streets, erected 1860



The Herndon House, Omaha, erected in 1858.



The Old Court House at 16th and Farnam Streets, Omaha, erected about 1860.

POTTER'S THEATRE.—Notwithstanding the violent storm of wind and snow, the theatre was well attended. The extravaganza is not inappropriately named, and is “the greatest bundle of odds and ends,” and “take offs,” without a beginning or termination—the last might as well have been first, and the commencement last. “The Wandering Minstrel” kept the house in jolly, good humor.—Walter Bray as Jim Bags, educed from his character all of the ludicrous of which it was susceptible. In farco, burlesque and comedy, he never fails to bring down the house. Mrs. and Miss Bray sustained their parts with {their usual ease, grace and success. Mr. Fox and Mr. Taylor, especially acquitted themselves with more than ordinary credit. Miss Davis, since her last appearance here, has made rapid improvement, and we predict for her a successful career upon the stage.

The “People’s Lawyer” and the “Persecuted Dutchman,” make an attractive bill for to-night. The former is said to be an excellent piece; the latter is familiar to our play-goers. Walter Bray appears as the “Ham-Fat Man.” The room is kept warm in every part.

Dramatic criticism in the year 1867.

(From *The Nebraska City News*, January 25, 1867)

THEATRICAL ENTERTAINMENT IN EARLY OMAHA

BY ROBERT D. HARPER

ALTHOUGH Nebraska's first permanent theatre—the Omaha Academy of Music—was not opened until 1867, the year of the state's admission to the Union, there had been for a decade prior to this time sporadic theatrical activity in the new territory, most of it in Omaha.¹ The questionable achievement of the early dramatic troupes along the Missouri River adds little to the history of the American stage, but to the pioneer history of Nebraska it adds a modest chapter—a chapter made colorful less by legitimate drama than by the human drama of “artists” attempting to entertain for profit the first residents of a rugged and sparsely settled frontier. Unlike the pioneers of the gold and silver camps farther west, early Nebraskans had few spare dollars to give to strolling players, but, like all emigrants to the American West, they brought with them a nostalgia for the culture they had left behind and a determination to re-establish it as soon as possible in their new communities. One of the important elements in this culture was the theatre.

During Nebraska's territorial period (1854-67), the drama was rapidly expanding into the West. By the middle Fifties,

¹Other settlements in the state which were frequently included in the itineraries of traveling dramatic companies during territorial days were Nebraska City and Brownsville. Since the Missouri River was the main artery of traffic in the prerailroad period, most troupes approached Omaha from the south, stopping at any town which appeared to be large enough to furnish an audience.

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Chicago, St. Louis, and San Francisco had become important theatrical centers, and as early as 1860, the third year of its existence, Denver had its own stock company. These were the days of the so-called star system, under which a well-known actor or actress, traveling alone, would customarily perform in town after town, supported by the local company, if one existed. However, in areas not sufficiently populated to appeal to important stars, little was offered beyond the talents of small third- or fourth-rate troupes, which offered singing, dancing, juggling, blackface comedy, and, less frequently, legitimate drama. It was on groups of this sort that the earliest settlers of Nebraska had to rely for public entertainment, and, unsophisticated as they were, these pioneers were often disappointed and occasionally indignant over the quality of the performances they witnessed.

Theatrical beginnings in many areas are lost among the nebulous and conflicting reminiscences of early settlers, but due to the unwitting foresight of a pioneer newspaper editor, the first professional dramatic performance in Omaha—and Nebraska—can be dated with some certainty. On June 3, 1857, the *Omaha Nebraskian* carried an item which would appear to settle all doubts on the matter:

First Theatre in Nebraska—On Thursday evening last [May 28], the first dramatic entertainment ever given in Nebraska, was witnessed in this city by a large audience, in Armstrong and Clark's new frame store room. The company, a small one, consisting of Messrs. Wight, Powell and Scott, and Mrs. Powell, have been playing in numerous towns in Iowa and Missouri, during the past winter. They gave three entertainments in this city, but the unfavorableness of the weather Friday and Saturday evenings unquestionably prevented them from playing to as full houses those evenings, as the first. We would, in all kindness, suggest to the company, that a higher order of plays would be more acceptable to a refined audience, than the "Merry Cobbler," or "Box and Cox." But we do not wish to criticize the first theatrical performance in Nebraska.—There must be a beginning—as well as an end—to all things. Three years ago, the streets of our city were trodden by the deer and the timid prairie wolf, and our "corner lots" were the homes of the gopher. Three years hence and our population of 1800 may have increased to almost as many thousands, and "stars of the first magnitude" may be proud to play at our theaters.²

²*Omaha Nebraskian*, June 3, 1857.

Not an auspicious beginning, perhaps, but an early enough one to have preceded the construction of the city's first public hall, even its courthouse. The productions mentioned are of the farcical sort often produced by the typical variety companies of the time, but references to the troupe in an Iowa newspaper make it clear that its repertoire included a number of serious dramas.³ Perhaps the actors underestimated the sophistication of their Omaha audiences; or, more likely, only a part of the troupe crossed the river, and it was thus impossible for them to render their more difficult pieces. The names "Wight," "Powell" and "Scott" are not luminous ones in the galaxy of the American stage, and the area in which they were playing would suggest that they may have met with failure in the East. If the fame of any of them rests on a more solid achievement than discovering Nebraska before others of their profession, the fact is not revealed in any of our theatrical histories.⁴ They belong, perhaps, among the unsung heroes of the western frontier.

Despite the "large audience" in Armstrong and Clark's store, this three night stand appears to have been the only "legitimate" theatre in the city before 1860. Meanwhile Omahans were obliged to satisfy their appetites for public amusement with concerts, lectures, and the lower types of variety shows found usually in the saloons. By 1857 a Library Association had been established for the purpose of furthering the city's intellectual and cultural life. During the winter of 1857-58 and again in the following year this group sponsored a series of weekly lectures. That these lectures relied almost wholly on local talent is made clear by the following comment in the *Times*:

... Situated so distant as we are from the great literary centers of the country, we are unable to command the services of the distinguished Lecturers of the East, but are obliged to rely for instruction and amusement upon the talent that we have in our midst.⁵

³Council Bluffs *Nonpareil*, May 9, 16, 1857.

⁴A Mr. D. L. Scott and his troupe were well received in Kansas City in 1858, but we cannot be certain that he is the same Mr. Scott who appeared in Omaha a year earlier.

⁵*Omaha Times*, October 28, 1858.

Among the local luminaries who contributed to the 1857-58 series were The Reverend William Brown, Honorable Samuel W. Black, J. M. Woolworth, General J. M. Thayer, and Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, the feminist whose name has been preserved in our language as a common noun. Titles included "Our Constitution," "Summer and Winter," "Progress," "Emigration," and "Free Thought."

The year 1858 also saw the completion of the first two sizable structures in the city to be utilized regularly for public entertainments—the Courthouse and the Herndon House hotel. In addition, when the nature of the entertainment was properly pious, various churches were utilized as public halls. Musical programs in particular could span the chasm between church and saloon, but rarely did either sacred or profane music receive more than perfunctory praise in the press.

Among the musical and variety shows of the Fifties, one of the few to receive an extended newspaper notice was Mlle. Luie's troupe. After receiving a report from a member of the audience, the editor of the *Times* regretted that he had been unable to attend the performance, which included vocal music and dancing which "fairly shook the building," a sword swallower who "drew forth perfect thunders of applause," and most particularly the accomplished "leg-atto movement of Mdle. [sic] Luie."⁶ Variety performances of this sort were apparently not rare in early Omaha, although they are announced in the newspapers far less frequently than church festivals and temperance lectures. Local editors perhaps found it judicious to enlist on the side of the angels; one wonders how frequently they declined, out of fear or piety, to give publicity to questionable exhibitions of female anatomy. There is ample evidence, however, in the brief and sometimes cryptic notices, that by the early Sixties it was common practice for the city's showier saloons to stage song and dance acts. But such amusements scarcely belong to theatrical history.

Of what may have been the second legitimate dramatic performance in Omaha we have no evidence beyond the memory of a single pioneer resident. Byron Reed, an early realtor and clerk of the City Council, has been quoted in

⁶*Ibid.*, July 24, 1858.

one history of the city as recalling a performance by the noted actress Julia Dean Hayne, which he witnessed at the Herndon House in the summer of 1860—some ten years before players of national reputation began to appear regularly in the area.⁷ The newspapers of the period, however, fail to verify any such appearance,⁸ and Mr. Reed did not recall the details, not even the name of the play. Moreover, it is improbable that an actress of Mrs. Hayne's standing—which at that time was considerable in both New York and San Francisco—would have seen fit to include Omaha on any regular circuit. But it is not entirely unlikely that she passed through the city during the summer of 1860. After establishing herself as a popular emotional actress in New York, she had followed the gold-seekers to California in the early Fifties and had soon become a favorite on the glittering stages of San Francisco. Returning to New York about 1858, she played in that city until the end of June, 1860, when she gave a farewell performance.⁹ She was again in San Francisco in 1862 or earlier. Thus, it is easy to conjecture that she may have spent a night or more in Omaha's Herndon House on her way west in July or August of 1860. The other guests, learning that a noted actress was among them, perhaps demanded and got a performance, which might have consisted of readings from her latest hit or of an entire play, depending on whether she was traveling alone or with a theatrical company. Such an impromptu performance would account for both Mr. Reed's recollection and the absence of newspaper notices.

If Mrs. Hayne actually did perform in Omaha, she was the only player of any reputation to do so in territorial days. Her coming, however, did nothing to stimulate local interest in dramatic art; in fact, after the beginning of the Civil War newspaper notices of traveling entertainers appear even less frequently than before. However, one variety troupe

⁷Alfred Sorenson, *History of Omaha from the Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha, 1889), pp. 193-194.

⁸Virtually complete files of two Omaha papers and two Council Bluffs papers for the year 1860 have been examined for a reference to Mrs. Hayne.

⁹For an account of Mrs. Hayne's New York career see George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage* (New York, 1927-1950), Vols. VI & VII.

did receive considerable attention during the winter of 1861-1862. Wells' Minstrels, who pretensively called themselves a theatrical company, held forth for some months in the Pioneer Block, at Eleventh and Farnam Streets. The entertainment, which consisted of "Songs, Dances, Burlesques, and Ethiopian Delineations,—with a change of Programme every night" was pronounced by the *Republican* as "first class, in every particular."¹⁰ These minstrel shows, with their Ethiopian—or blackface—acts, became popular in the Forties, and by the late Fifties had reached such proportions that in some western cities they threatened to drive legitimate drama from the boards. Minstrelsy was definitely a higher art than the sort of variety entertainment generally found in the saloons. That the Wells troupe was still in Omaha in April, 1862, some six months after it had opened, attests to the popularity of this sort of entertainment on the frontier. But for its first considerable stand by a competent legitimate company, the city had to wait still another year.

In September, 1863, the *Nebraskian* proudly carried the following item:

Theatrical.—We are able to announce to the pleasure seeking portion of the community that something really worthy and attractive in the theatrical line is coming to our city in a few days. Templeton and Co., the very popular proprietors and managers of a Theatre at Leavenworth, are to perform in this city for a series of nights. They have chosen Kansas City, Leavenworth, St. Joseph, Council Bluffs, and Omaha, as the principal points in their circuit, and at intervals will play at other towns. . . .¹¹

Two weeks later we learn that "Court House Hall is crowded every night to its utmost capacity to witness the Theatrical exhibitions of Messrs. Templeton and Co."¹² Although this company, under the management of John Templeton, never became noted beyond the Missouri River town, it offered by far the best drama that Omaha had yet seen. Its opening production was Bulwer-Lytton's immensely popular sentimental drama, *The Lady of Lyons*, and its repertoire included such current favorites as *Camille*, *The Stranger*, *Black-Eyed Susan*, *The Chamber of Death*, *Ingomar*, and *The Hunchback*. Missing from this list are plays of American authorship, a

¹⁰*Nebraska Republican*, October 31, 1861.

¹¹*Omaha Nebraskian*, September 25, 1863.

¹²*Ibid.*, October 9, 1863.

not unusual omission from the repertoires of nineteenth century troupes. With a few notable exceptions, the American dramatist had not yet come into his own.

Although there can be little doubt that Templeton and his company were warmly received by amusement-starved Omahans, they apparently never returned to the city, and we have no record of their playing elsewhere after 1863. But John Templeton passed on such dramatic talent as he possessed to his daughter Fay, who achieved nationwide fame in the Eighties as a singing comedienne and who was to visit Omaha after it had become a first-class theatrical town.

The year 1864 offered Omaha nothing in the way of entertainment but concerts and several variety shows of a low order; however, with the end of the war, in 1865, theatrical fortunes soared everywhere, and Omaha was no exception. The spring of that year witnessed the arrival of a string of miscellaneous entertainers, including the National Harmonists, a vocal and instrumental troupe; Henry L. Raymond, a noted Boston organist; and Captain Haskell, a ventriloquist, who packed the Courthouse for a week. In the fall came Mrs. Fanny Hernandez with her Rocky Mountain Troupe of child actors. This unusual group had been recruited in Denver two years earlier and had achieved a considerable following in the Colorado mining camps. Although the children played to large audiences in the Courthouse, they received only brief notices and few plaudits from the Omaha papers, and there is no reference to the titles of any of their productions. Mrs. Hernandez, however, made the local headlines three years later, when, during a return engagement in the city, she was shot by her husband and ultimately died of the wound.

The fall of 1865 also saw what was apparently the first attempt to establish a permanent theatre in Omaha. On November 29 of that year, the City Council granted to Ebenezer Dallow, a local resident, a license "to open and keep a Theatre in his building on block 119 in said City..."¹³ For some weeks prior to this time a variety troupe, the Evening Star Minstrels, had been performing in this building, which was known as Dallow's Hall, and they continued there until the first of the year. The headliner, Mr. Billy Andrews,

¹³*Proceedings of the Omaha City Council*, November 29, 1865.

was applauded nightly for his Ethiopian songs, and was honored by a benefit performance on December 4, which affair was declared wholly successful.¹⁴ After the troupe left, at the end of December, Dallow's hall was apparently converted into an ordinary saloon, for in 1866 Mr. Dallow advertised ale, but no entertainment.

The next two theatrical attempts in the city met with artistic and financial failure, causing some resentment among the local citizenry. In May 1866, there appeared a Mr. W. Davis, billed as a "celebrated Irish Comedian." But the *Herald's* account of one of his performances leaves little doubt that he was celebrated for reasons other than his histrionic talent:

. . . Mr. D. was a little bemuddled and had a "big cowld," the attendance was quite "select," and would be larger if Davis had kept sober the days previous. The ticket seller was surrounded by a lot of Harpies to whom the "great comedian" owed bills for liquor (these were many and tall,) for printing, music, board, and other et-ceteras, besides the rent and lighting of the Hall. The receipts were soon gobbled up. We are some dollars out, but let them go! The Programme opened with a "Drinking song" which out [sic] to be rendered in a sympathetic manner, but the vocalist excused himself on the ground of being "too drunk" but informed his hearers, if he "was sober, he could sing bully." In the second, the singing of "Trust to Luck," surveying the small house, he stated, the idea was appropriate, in the middle, he broke down, and scratching his head, making a prolonged pause, he raised his dexter hand and exclaimed "Hould on! now, I have id!" and changed the tune to "Teddy Regan." . . . He played a "dead beat"—"the boys" put out the lights—the audience skeddaddled—the doorkeeper pocketing the receipts, buttoned his coat and absquatulated in haste to lands unknown. "Alas! poor Yorick!"¹⁵

Omahans saw no more of the "celebrated Irish Comedian."

Some six weeks after this disaster, the Carter Theatrical Troupe arrived from Nebraska City to play in the Court-house and was warmly received by the editor of the *Republican*, who commended the acting of Miss Carrie Carter and singled out for special praise the performance of Master Eddie Banks, "the infant Blondin," who doubled as a tight

¹⁴*Nebraska Daily Republican*, December 5, 1865.

¹⁵*Omaha Weekly Herald*, May 25, 1866.

rope artist and an Ethiopian delineator.¹⁶ But the troupe attempted more than variety acts, one night's bill including "the beautiful comedy of 'The Morning Call,' and the third act of the great tragedy of Othello . . ." ¹⁷ There was also an unscheduled act in the Mayor's office, where Mr. Carter paid a fine of \$34 for giving his first performance without a license.¹⁸ The license was apparently procured, for the company remained for nearly two weeks and continued to receive at least mild praise from the *Republican*. The *Herald*, however, felt otherwise, and on July 20 published the following item:

The "Theatre."—We are always gratified to see a respectable and legitimate amusement come here and carry off our surplus dollars and dimes. We encourage such. Nothing is more conducive to happiness than healthy amusement. When such come among us it receives our hearty endorsement and a liberal public patronage. The Carter Theatrical Troupe—an extensive troupe of three players!—played Box and Cox or something of that nature before a sparse house last night. They are "dead beats." A company that seeks to evade our municipal laws is not worthy of our patronage. Don't throw your dimes away by attending such a farcical humbug.¹⁹

A week later the *Republican* bade farewell to the troupe, admitting tacitly that it was perhaps something less than a first-class dramatic company:

Carter's theatre closed its brief season in our city Tuesday night. We learn that the company play [sic] in Council Bluffs on Saturday evening, and that on Monday Mr. Carter starts for New York City, where he will re-organize his troupe, adding to it new members and making it more efficient, with the intention of returning to Omaha and establishing a permanent theatre here.²⁰

Mr. Carter apparently never returned with his strengthened troupe, but by the winter of 1866-67 Omahans were clearly ready for a permanent theatre. Construction was already under way on the new business block on Douglas Street, which was to contain the city's first large and well-

¹⁶*Omaha Daily Republican*, July 14, 16, 1866.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, July 14, 1866.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Omaha Weekly Herald*, July 20, 1866.

²⁰*Nebraska Republican*, July 27, 1866.

equipped public hall, and by the first of the year at least four out-of-town theatrical managers had considered the possibility of establishing themselves in Omaha. During the second week in September, Mr. Harry Richmond, the colorful tragedian of Denver's successful stock company, arrived in Omaha en route to the East and stayed over several days to give Shakespearian readings at the Courthouse. The readings were well received, but of more interest to one newspaper was Mr. Richmond's announcement of his intention to settle permanently in Omaha:

We are informed by Mr. Richmond, the tragedian, that he has in contemplation the establishment of a theatre in this city next winter, and is now negotiating for a building for the purpose.

If his negotiations terminate successfully, he will probably engage his company during his visit to the East, which way he is now traveling, and open his establishment early in the season.²¹

Winter came and went, however, without the return of Mr. Richmond, but less than a week after his departure, the *Herald* reported that three parties had been negotiating for the use of "the new hall in the Caldwell's Block" for theatrical purposes.²² One of these negotiators was a Mr. J. S. Collins, promoter for Walter Bray's Theatrical and Opera Troupe, whose interest was welcomed by the *Herald*, which looked forward to "an intellectual amusement like the drama to while away the tedious hours of a dull winter's night in Omaha."²³ When this company actually did arrive, in December, it was under the management of Mr. J. S. Potter, but it never occupied the "new hall," which was not completed until the following May. On December 19, the City Council approved a resolution to the effect that "the Mayor be authorized to issue a license for said Theatre at the rate of Fifty dollars per quarter."²⁴ Potter conducted this theatre in a small, makeshift, auditorium known as Brown's Hall.

John S. Potter, who was to give Omaha the best drama of its territorial days, had behind him a theatrical career that extended back to the 1820's. In 1841, after a career as a boy

²¹*Ibid.*, September 14, 1866.

²²*Omaha Weekly Herald*, September 21, 1866.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Proceedings of the Omaha City Council*, May 19, 1866.

actor, he had come west and built one of the first theatres in Chicago. Later he moved south to Memphis and New Orleans, and finally on to San Francisco, where he managed a string of small theatres. Shortly before his arrival in Omaha he had been manager of a successful troupe in Salt Lake City, which had as its leading lady the same Julia Dean Hayne who may have appeared at the Herndon House in 1860. That Potter gave Omaha a drama of a calibre it had not previously witnessed is made abundantly clear by laudatory notices in both the *Republican* and the rival *Herald*, which could at last agree on a theatrical matter. The former stated that "Mr. Potter has presented to the play-loving citizens of Omaha by far the best theatrical entertainment which has ever been put before an Omaha audience.—His troupe is one of more than usual excellence, and Walter and Flora Bray have taken the heart of our people by storm."²⁵ The rival paper was even more lavish in its praise:

Omaha has such a representation of the Drama in POTTER'S Theatre as would be more than respectable in any city in the country. Mr. John S. Potter is a veteran manager and leaves nothing to be desired on that head. In opening his theatre in Omaha, he suffered the disadvantage of being preceded by an irresponsible company, that soon established the high character of his own by bringing to the baptismal boards of the first theatre in Omaha entitled to the name, a class of artists whose personal [sic] respectability and talents at once placed them in favor with our people. This accounts for the satisfactory success thus far achieved by Mr. Potter, who, under the material disadvantages of want of a suitable Hall, has been able to give to Omaha what every well regulated city will have, a First Class Theatre. . . .²⁶

By the end of March, 1867, Potter, restless as always, had apparently left Omaha, but the company remained a while longer, passing to the management of R. M. Johnson. Unfortunately we have no full repertoire for the group, the only productions mentioned specifically by the press being *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Napoleon's Old Guard*, the latter a farcical afterpiece. We can assume, however, that such an experienced manager as Potter would offer a large and varied list of titles, concentrating perhaps

²⁵*Nebraska Republican*, January 4, 1867.

²⁶*Omaha Weekly Herald*, January 4, 1867.

on Shakespeare and the current popular melodramas. Before he left town Potter had apparently strained his amicable relations with the press. On March 15, the *Republican* announced that the local printing offices had suffered considerable losses "from the failure of theatrical and other public amusements to pay their bills," and gave notice that henceforth all such business must be accompanied by cash in advance.²⁷ Perhaps the receipts had been decreasing, for after Potter's departure, little further is heard of the troupe's Omaha stand. In May, however, the Brays were again playing for Potter, this time in Kansas City.

Meanwhile, a few days before the tenth anniversary of Omaha's first theatrical performance in Armstrong and Clark's store, a more competent company than Potter's was brought from St. Louis by Mr. Henry Corri to open the new hall, which, under the name of the Academy of Music, was to become Omaha's first permanent theatre. Here, within a few years, were to appear many of the leading players in America. But this is another chapter in the theatrical history of the city, which, with Nebraska's admission to the Union on March 1, had passed from a territorial outpost to the metropolis of a new state.

²⁷*Omaha Weekly Republican*, March 15, 1867.