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Article Summary: Between 1880 and 1920 hundreds of "opera houses" provided entertainment and culture to thousands of rural and small town Nebraska residents. People gathered for dances, lectures, minstrel shows, or political meetings.

Cataloging Information:

Opera House Sites Discussed: Diller, Auburn (New Opera House), Falls City (Gehling's Theatre), Kearney, Omaha (Boyd Opera House), Fremont (Love-Larsen Opera House), West Point (The Auditorium), Bloomfield (Popeshil Theatre)

Keywords: stock companies, production companies, vaudeville, minstrels, lyceum bureaus, syndicate, proscenium arch, drop curtain, ad curtain

Photographs / Images: Anna C Diller Opera House exterior and view from the balcony; Table Rock Opera House stage; Auditorium front drop curtain; Geneva Opera House proscenium arch; Love-Larson Opera House top balcony and ceiling detail; Steinauer Opera House wall detail; McIntyre Opera House ticket window; Clay Center Opera House ceiling detail (2 views); Oshkosh Opera House old settlers' dance, 1915; ZCJB Opera House (Clarkson) rolled scenic drops; New Opera House exterior and window detail; Liederkrantz (Grand Island) exterior detail; York Opera House exterior; Gehling's Theatre exterior; New Opera House (Ponca) exterior; inset advertisements for events at the David City Opera House: musical comedy "The Butler County Fair" (*Butler County Press*, October 15, 1914) and "The Shepherd of the Hills" (*Butler County Press*, November 27, 1913); inset advertisement for performances of the Big Minstrel Troupe at Tecumseh Opera House (*Tecumseh Chieftain*, November 24, 1883); Pospeshil Theatre exterior, Pospeshil Orchestra, and Pospeshil theatre being used as a motorcycle repair shop; Allen's Opera House (Cozad) exterior; illustration showing Boyd Theatre proscenium arch and drop curtain (*Omaha Daily Bee*, August 31, 1981; Bruning Opera House exterior; Janacek Theatre (Schuyler) exterior; Kearney Opera House exterior; inset advertisement for the Opera House Saloon at Schneider's Opera House (*Snyder Banner*, April 22, 1910); Thorpe's Opera House (David City) exterior and ad curtain; Lawrence Opera House exterior; Dave Gourley's Opera House (Rushville) exterior



Anna C. Diller Opera House. (NSHS-8611/8-37) . . . (below) From the balcony of Diller Opera House. (NSHS-8611/9-9) Photos by Chris Ehlers.



SECOND FLOOR, BRICK BLOCK: NEBRASKA'S OPERA HOUSES

By D. Layne Ehlers

INTRODUCTION

The coming of the railroad and an influx of settlers seeking land sparked a wave of town building in Nebraska during the 1870s and 1880s. As Nebraska towns grew, their citizens sought polished, professional entertainment like that available in Chicago, Kansas City, Omaha, and Lincoln. Expanding rail networks meant that touring theatrical companies could make connections within a reasonable time at a reasonable price. But first-rate companies would not perform in the makeshift wooden halls erected early in the life of most small towns. Any community desiring regular dramatic activity—professional or amateur—needed an “opera house.” Between 1880 and 1920 hundreds of so-called opera houses on main streets throughout Nebraska became the principal purveyors of entertainment and culture to thousands of rural and small town residents.

Nebraska opera houses hosted a variety of entertainments including performances by production and stock companies, musical programs, specialty acts, minstrel shows, and lyceum courses. Most theatrical performances during the opera house era were presented by production companies consisting of actors, managers, advance men, and their entourages. The com-

panies took a single play for a year's run across the country. “Going on the road” was respectable; it could also be lucrative.

Production companies brought all types of plays to the culture-hungry Plains residents. Rural dramas or “beautiful plays” found particular favor with audiences. Melodramas had their adherents as well. After the turn of the century, as legitimate theatre was forced to compete against vaudeville, motion pictures, and musical comedy, shows offering pretty girls, thin plots, and risqué costumes became popular.

Stock companies were troupes of actors, usually organized in New York, who prepared a repertory of popular and classical plays during the summer and toured the productions during the season, which extended from September through May. There were few such troupes in Nebraska before the 1890s, but more began to appear as opera house managers found it advantageous to bring in a company that would present a different play each night over a run of several days.

Some opera houses did present operas and other fine musical entertainment, most often based on popular music of the day and not grand opera in the classical sense. Vaudeville first appeared as a diversion between acts of stock company plays and eventually replaced legitimate theatre as the standard fare offered at many opera houses.

“Knights of the Burnt Cork,” or minstrels, were a mainstay of rural American theatre in the nineteenth century. The blackfaced interlocutors

and end men delighted audiences well into the twentieth century. Although minstrelsy's strongest appeal was in small towns, sophisticated big city theatres were not exempt from the craze.

Nebraskans who lived in Omaha or Lincoln regularly saw glittering stars. Actors and plays of national and international repute arrived several times each month for runs of several days. Smaller communities like Fremont, Grand Island, Hastings, and Kearney often booked these top attractions for a one- or two-night stand, trading on their strategic rail line locations between major metropolises like Kansas City, Omaha, Denver, and Minneapolis.

Late in the nineteenth century, small towns with limited economic bases were offered an entertainment option by booking agencies known as lyceum bureaus. For a set price, usually \$500, a season of four, five, or six edifying evenings could be purchased. Often sponsored by high schools or commercial clubs as fund raisers, these entertainments consisted of musical performances and lecturers. The various lyceum bureaus took pains to put together attractive packages, which relieved small town opera house owners of the burden of selecting entertainment. Lyceum bureau performances were guaranteed: If performers could not meet a date, another act would be sent to take their place.

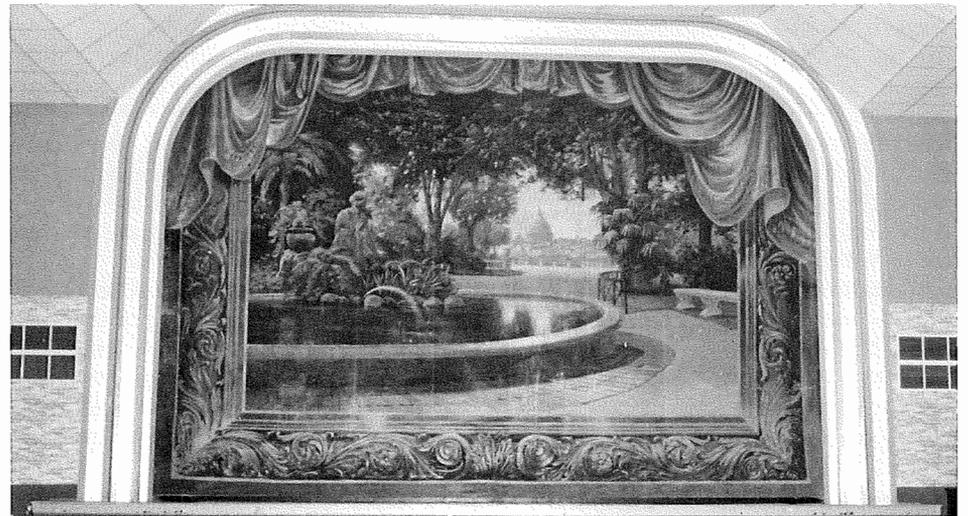
At least once a year most Nebraska communities staged a home talent production with local citizens. These plays received as much buildup as did the professional touring companies and

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Table Rock Opera House. (NSHS-8611/6-2) Photo by Chris Ehlers.

Front drop curtain at The Auditorium, West Point. (NSHS-8704/2-29) . . . (below) Proscenium arch. Geneva Opera House. (NSHS-8703/2-26) Photos by Chris Ehlers.



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often were used to raise money for local civic or charitable organizations. Sometimes the local talent even toured in surrounding communities. Minstrel shows were sometimes offered by local talent because the singing, jokes, and blackface were simpler for the amateur casts.

Nebraska opera houses also hosted many nontheatrical activities, particularly when stock or production companies were not in "season." Dances occurred more than any other amusement, particularly in the winter. In the fall, opera houses were given over to political meetings. Well-known candidates like William Jennings Bryan regularly spoke before opera house audiences. A popular form of entertainment, often part of a lyceum bureau package, was the lecture. Audience members had a chance to hear about foreign lands and exotic lifestyles.

Most small town opera houses were intended to serve a variety of community needs. School plays, declamatory contests, and athletic events were held in the opera house, often the only facility in town large enough to accommodate the crowds.

Beginning in the mid-1890s, small town opera houses found it more difficult to book major attractions. A group of New York businessmen formed a theatrical syndicate in 1896 to control both the productions and the outlets in which they were presented. The Syndicate overpowered the theatrical stock system, freezing out most small companies that had catered to opera houses in the Midwest.

By 1910 the role of the community opera house was changing rapidly. Vaudeville consistently outdrew theatrical events, and fewer touring companies were working. In the smaller towns, lyceum bureaus and home talent productions were about all that remained to provide live entertainment.

After World War I the excitement once reserved for live theatre was generated by moving pictures on a



Top balcony (above, NSHS-8611/7-9) and ceiling detail at Fremont's Love-Larson Opera House. (NSHS-8611/7-10) Photos by Chris Ehlers.

screen. Although local opera house proprietors showed movies as a novelty at first, smaller ground floor theatres designed exclusively for motion pictures soon cornered the market. Motion pictures were much less expensive than live theatre, and as more films became available, theatre managers could offer patrons a variety. Comedy, melodrama, farce, cartoons, and an adventure serial could be shown in the same week for less than the cost of a single live production.

The demise of the opera house came swiftly. While movies gave entertainment seekers more variety, the automobile gave them more mobility. Audiences no longer had to restrict themselves to whatever fare the local opera house manager could provide. Opera houses lost patrons, and many of those that were not adapted for use as movie houses were closed.



OPERA HOUSE DESIGN

Most Nebraska opera houses were large rooms with a stage at one end and movable seating, which could be arranged in rows for performances on stage, along the side walls at dances and sporting events, or at tables for banquets and meetings. Some had a balcony.

Late nineteenth century Nebraska opera houses were usually on the second floor of commercial buildings. Few entrepreneurs took the gamble of erecting a single purpose structure devoted to the performing arts; since running a theatre was not always a paying proposition in a small town, owners made sure that the ground floor could support the building's expenses. The upper floors were often shared by offices or meeting rooms.

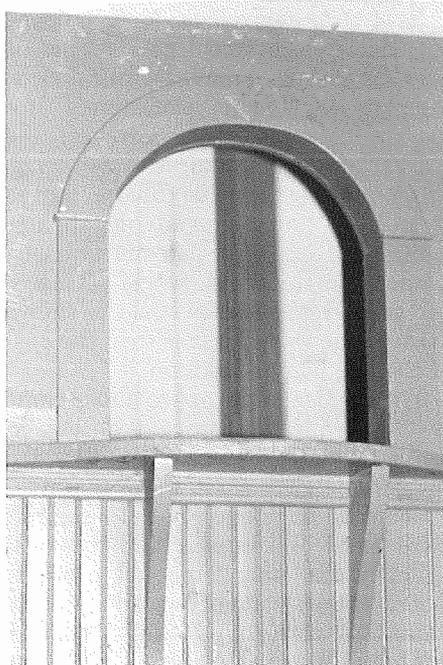
At the beginning of the twentieth century, a trend away from second story theatres took place. In Nebraska cities with a population of more than 5,000, no opera houses were built above the ground floor after 1903, the year Chicago's "fireproof" Iroquois Theatre was gutted by flames. The ensuing changes to New York City theatre building codes eventually spread across the nation.¹

Factors other than safety help explain this trend. It was economically justifiable; since fewer materials were needed to construct single story structures, the overall cost was less. Lower costs put an opera house within the financial reach of even towns which were not railroad stops.² First-floor theatres also had a slightly greater seating capacity than second-floor opera houses; this meant more money could be generated from ticket sales.

Despite this move away from second-story opera houses, the economic advantages of placing a theatre above a retail business still played a prominent part in the choice of location for new theatres and halls, particularly in small villages. Nearly one-third of all Nebraska's second-floor opera houses were constructed during this century, and more than forty per-



Wall detail at Steinauer Opera House. (NSHS-8611/8-32)... (below) Ticket window, McIntyre Opera House, Wolbach (NSHS-8703/2-9) Photos by Chris Ehlers.



cent of all opera houses built after 1900 were above the street level. However, these figures are deceptive; the majority of second-floor opera houses built during the twentieth century were located in villages with populations of less than 600. Combining two enterprises in one building, despite safety and convenience drawbacks, made sense for communities with small economic bases. Larger population centers followed the national trend toward first-floor theatres.

Facades. In most small towns, commercial districts were not architecturally linked by uniform styles. Expense and availability of materials determined the elaborateness and size of the buildings. According to architect Richard Longstreth, this is true of main street architecture across the United States; he further contends that the front face of the building—the facade—is the most important part of an American main street building. "The facade does not just contain essential elements," he writes. "It boasts of ornament, signs, and other distinctive features. It exhibits the best materials and workmanship."³

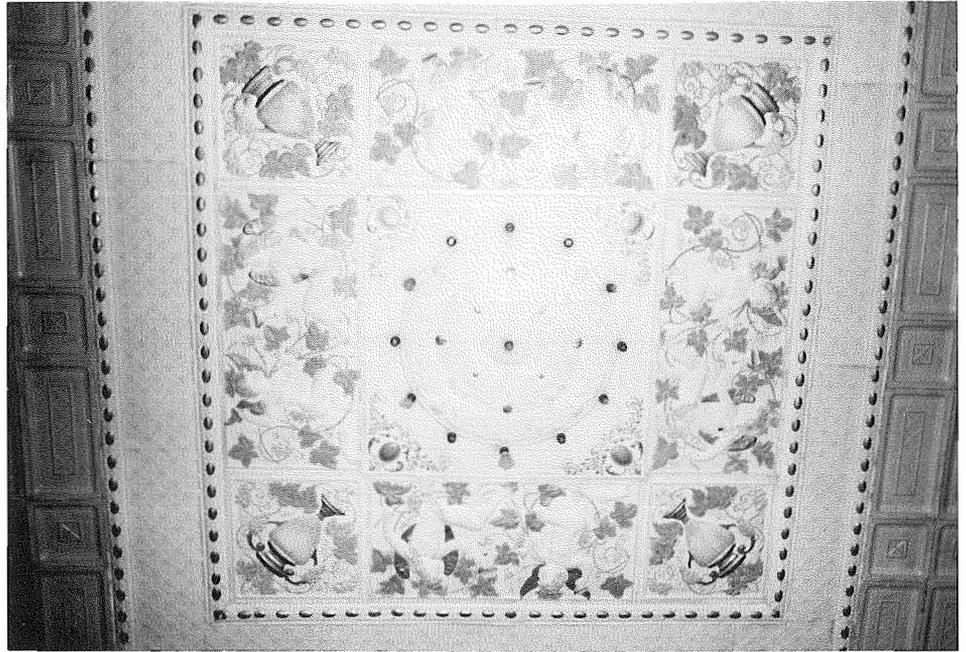
Nebraska opera house facades fall into several groups: (1) two-story commercial blocks, usually brick, with the opera house above a retail space (2) first-floor opera houses (3) grand opera palaces, confined to the larger cities.

The New Opera House, erected on the north side of Auburn at a reported cost of \$20,000, typifies the two-story commercial block of the late nineteenth century. It includes two large arched windows at the center of the facade, each brick arch crowned with a classical style mask. Stone border rows are strategically placed along the facade. The upper third of the facade includes latticed brickwork, decorative stone in the shape of leaves, and two highly decorative pediments, which proclaim "18" and "90."

Another elaborate nineteenth century brick block was that erected by the Gehlings of Falls City, who made their money from a brewery and a bakery.

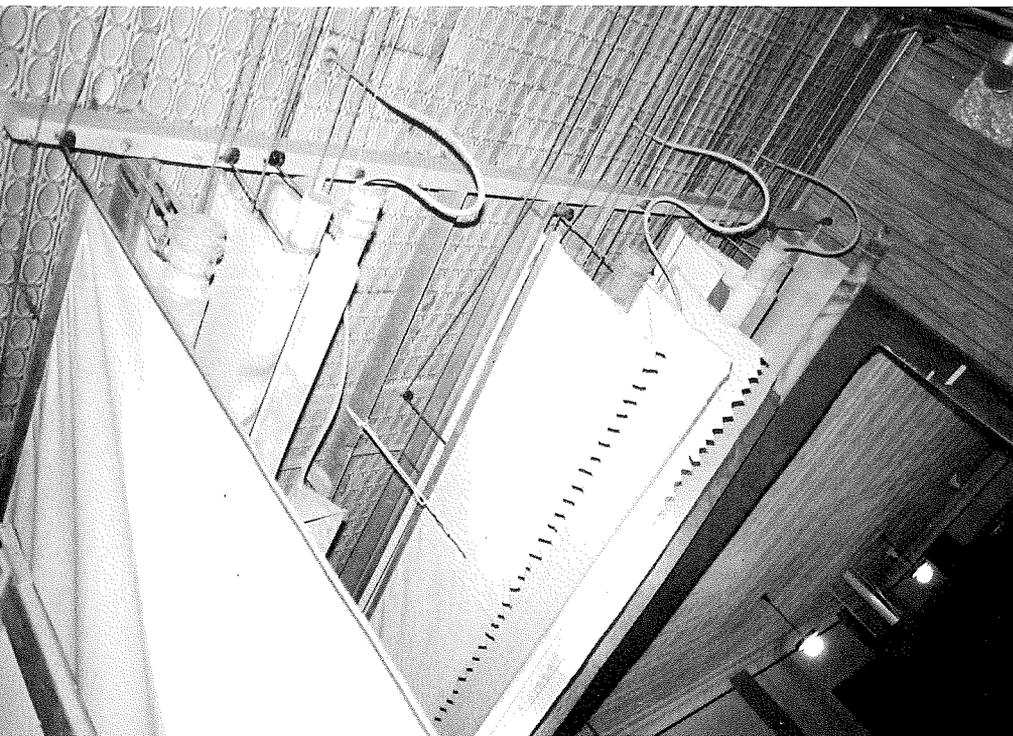
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Ceiling details, Clay Center Opera House. (NSHS-8705/3-9) Photos by Chris Ehlers.





Old settlers dance at Oshkosh Opera House (now the Silver Hill Museum), February 10, 1915. (NSHS-8705/4-5) Photo by Chris Ehlers.



Rolled scenic drops, ZCBJ Opera House, Clarkson. (NSHS-8704/2-15) Photo by Chris Ehlers.

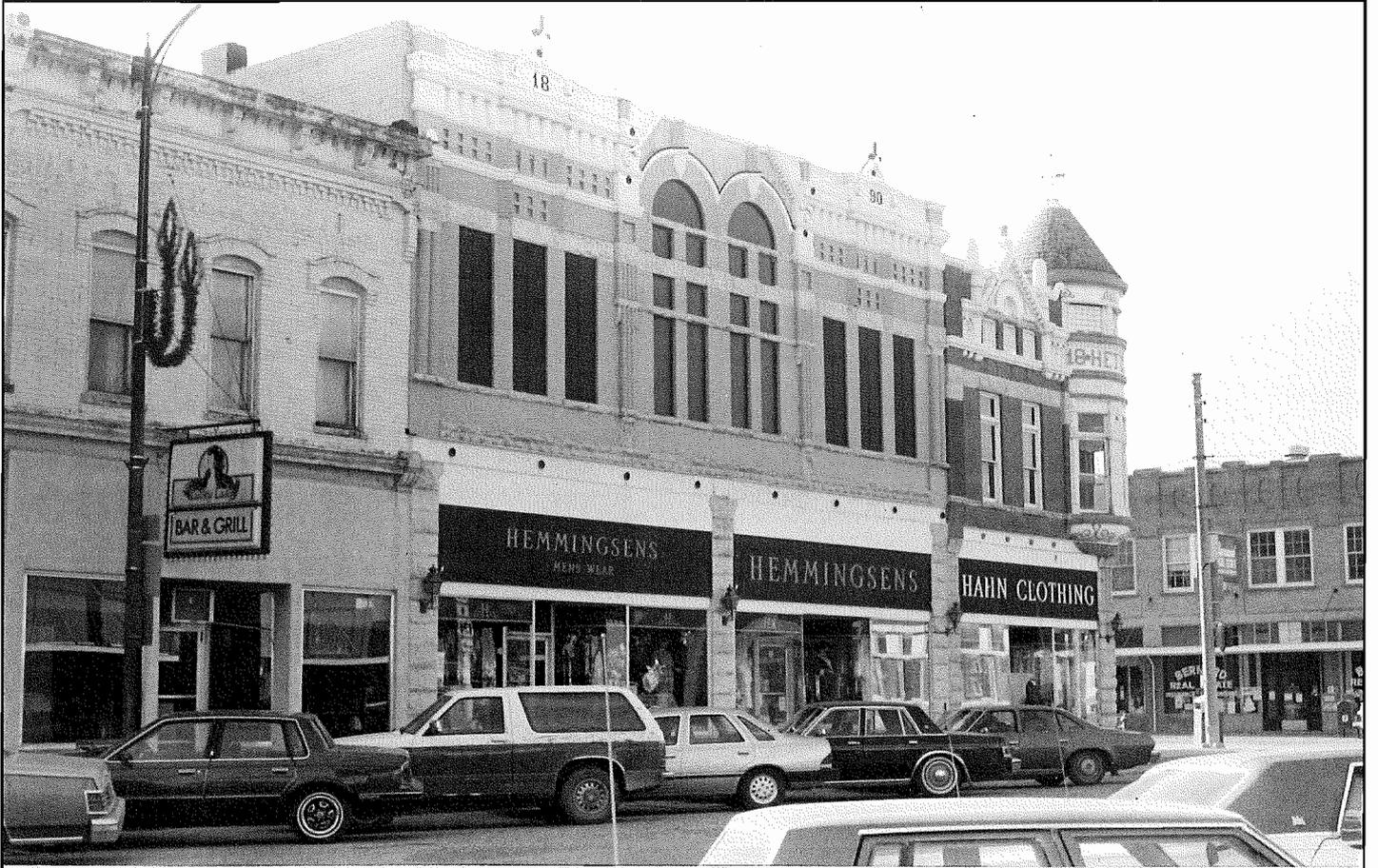
Constructed in 1892-93, the facade features windows decorated with brick arches, stone trim, stepped cornice with turrets, and "1892" and "Gehling" set into the top in stone.

Facades of the grand opera palaces were imposing. The Lansing Theatre, later the Oliver, in Lincoln (1891) included tower-like features. The Parmele Theatre in Plattsmouth (1900) and Paddock Theatre in Beatrice (1889) featured domed turrets and towers. The grandiose Kearney Opera House, erected in 1890-91, used stone shipped from the quarry at Rawlins, Wyoming, and carved at a Kearney stoneyard.⁴ James Boyd's second Omaha opera house, the 1891 Boyd Theatre, was built of stone and pressed brick.

Only one of Nebraska's opera palaces has retained its original, elaborate facade, the former Love (later Larson) Opera House in Fremont (1888). The three-story brick building has a vertical emphasis and is trimmed with stone and decorative pressed metal. Other ornamentation includes patterns of stone and pressed brick checkerwork, stained glass windows used in the upper stories, and a balcony. Two entrances to the theatre are located on either side of the building.

Elaborate pressed metal cornices (ornate moldings along the top edges of buildings) were characteristic of nineteenth century architectural decoration. The cornice and window hoods which remain on Clem's Opera House in Gresham, built about 1891, and the pressed metal cornices on Daugherty's Opera House in Auburn (1886), the York Opera House in York (1888), and Schneider's opera house in Snyder (1900) are excellent examples of decorative pressed metal. Cornices were also corbelled (supported by projecting ornamental devices) as at Clay Center (1894). Some nineteenth century brick blocks went further than decorative cornices topped with finial (ornamental) peaks. The Janecek Theatre in Schuyler (1893) featured a

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New Opera House, Auburn. (NSHS-8611/5-8 . . . (right) Window detail, Auburn. (NSHS-8611/5-10) Photos by Chris Ehlers.





The Liederkranz, Grand Island. (NSHS-8704/3-21) Photo by Chris Ehlers . . . (right) York Opera House, York. Courtesy of Andrea I. Paul.



turret atop the decorative cornice, making it resemble the palatial theatres of larger cities.

Simpler designs were also representative of opera house construction. Stepped cornices were incorporated into the Marquis Opera House at Scottsbluff (1907) and the Pospeshil Theatre in Bloomfield (1906). Some even included pediments—triangular gables—above the cornices, such as the New Opera House in Ponca (1900) or the Temple Theatre in Broken Bow (1906), but most commercial facades after 1900 were plain. Small diamond-shaped concrete patches are the only trim for the Z.C.B.J. Opera House at

Clarkson (1913) and the Auditorium at Geneva (1915), while nothing more than decorative brickwork embellishes the facades of the opera house in Diller (1912), the Lawrence Opera House (1901), and the I.O.O.F. Opera House at Bladen (1912-13).

Not all opera house blocks that included second-floor theatre space were standard red brick. Builders of the Nelson Opera House in Chadron (1888) used multicolored stone in its appealing facade. Others, like Allen's Opera House above the bank in Cozad (1906), were constructed in rusticated concrete blocks, manufactured by local artisan Charles Hart and merchan-

dised as “patent stone.”⁵ The second-story opera house in Lodgepole above Isenberger's Garage (1911) was also built from concrete blocks, but a pressed tin false front with huge letters proclaiming “Lodgepole Opera House” gives the building a more dramatic appearance. The McIntyre Opera House in Wolbach (1903) used pressed metal on the entire front facade and along one side.

The tendency toward community auditoriums represented a coming of age for Nebraska towns. Town councils no longer relied on one upstanding citizen to shoulder the burden of providing a community gathering place;

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rather, they accepted the responsibility, passing bond issues and hiring a part-time manager. Facades seldom contained much ornamentation, perhaps due to cost and dictates of style. Sometimes false fronts were used, as in the Freeman Opera House in Sargent (1907), the San Carlo Opera House in Friend (1909), or the Auditorium in West Point (1911), but generally auditoriums' facades were plain. Some had a vault style front, similar to those on the Bruning Opera House (1907) and the Auditorium at Exeter (1909). Among the many community auditoriums constructed toward the end of the opera house era were those at Norfolk (1900), Clearwater (1900), Wakefield (1902), Osceola (1903), Hickman (1906), Johnstown (1907), Neligh (1907), Laurel (1912), Valentine (1912), and Long Pine (1915).

Although motion pictures were invented in 1889 and the first full-length picture, *The Great Train Robbery*, had appeared by 1903, it was not until after 1910 that movies began to

seriously infringe on the live opera house business in Nebraska. Canny businessmen interested in erecting recreational facilities could see that the day was coming when movies would mean big profits and planned for it by constructing first-floor theatres with permanent seats. Most of these either omitted balconies with audience seating or had projection booths built into the balconies to accommodate the bulky equipment necessary to show movies. Among the Nebraska opera houses built in this style are the Civic Theatre in Hay Springs (date unknown); the I.O.O.F. Opera Hall in Bladen (1912); Gourley's Opera House in Rushville (1914), which featured a combination roller skating rink and dance floor in the basement; the Auditorium in Geneva (1915); and the Martha Ellen Auditorium in Central City (1916). Some opera houses, like that at Hyannis (1911), restricted families with small children to the balcony so that other patrons would not be disturbed.⁶

A few opera houses presented unique appearances and were sources of considerable community pride. The North Opera House of Columbus (1901) boasted the "largest stage between Omaha and Denver." The Liederkrantz of Grand Island (1912) displays massive pillars and a decoratively carved pediment resembling a Greek temple. On a smaller scale, the Surprise Community Hall (1913) also features concrete columns decorating its vault style facade.

The House. Theatre houses, or auditoriums, in extant Nebraska opera houses fall into three distinct categories: (1) general purpose halls, with and without balconies, which have no permanent seating; (2) small-town theatres with opera chairs, built after the advent of motion pictures; and (3) plush opera palaces in cities of more than 5,000 population.

An exceptional hardwood floor was common to most opera houses with movable seating. Since these opera houses were used for a variety of

Gehling's Theatre, Falls City. (NSHS-8611/5-24) Photo by Chris Ehlers . . . (right) New Opera House, Ponca. Courtesy of Andrea I. Paul.



Big Musical Comedy

"THE BUTLER COUNTY FAIR"

100 LOCAL PEOPLE

David City Opera House,
Friday & Saturday Nights, Oct. 16 and 17,

Under the Auspices of the

High School Athletic Association

Directed by CAROLYN ELINOR STALEY

CAST OF CHARACTERS.

Mrs. Si Perkins..... Mrs. John Eberly
Sally Perkins..... Amelia Albright
Sunny Jim..... Will Schweser
Uncle Josiah Wiggins..... Matt Cram
Aunt Sarah Wiggins. Blanche Clough
Boss Greene..... Herman Sellhorn
Widow Bedolt..... Margaret Wright
Aunt Emeline..... Cecile Sellhorn
Little Johnny..... L. J. Clough
Prof. Slickem..... Thurman Hinds
Mrs. Henpeck..... Hazel Tillma
Mr. Henpeck..... Dr. Anderson
Parson Jones..... Elmer Stephens
Dinah Snowball..... Mrs. John Eberly
Mr. John Davis (Retired Banker).....
George Ball
Mrs. John Davis (a Jealous Wife).....
Mrs. Mary French Maltby
Lillian Russell..... Carolyn Staley
Rosy Jones (Country Bride).....
Lydia Runyon
Willie Jones (Groom)..... Gerald Fenlon
Widower Armstrong..... John Eberly

Other Characters

Mme. Sweetosweet, Japanese performers, Gypsy fortune tellers, Lo Lo (Wild Man of Africa.)
Soloists—Matt Cram, Elmer Stevens, George Ball, Mrs. Maltby, Helen Ren, Grace Etting, Lydia Runyon.
Pianist—Dorothy Wanser.
Chorus Girls—Faye Curry, Ruth Rominger, Dorris Abbott, Vylma Straka, Lucille Westover, Cecelia Brochtrup, Rita Holland, Margaret Holland, Genevieve Nichols, Lydia Runyon, Helen Ren, Grace Etting, Zora Wunderlich, Marion Wright, Ruth Etting, Frances Rosenstock, Donna Hawes.
Chorus Boys—Elmer Straka, Bentley George, Sterling Coe, Wesley Glock, Thurman Hinds, Paul Carlisle, Louis Cook, Edwin Hale, Elmer Stephens.

MUSICAL SELECTIONS.

Selections by the County Fair Band.
Overture.....Orchestra
Take Me Back to Babyland.....
.....50 little girls
Can't You See I Love You.....
.....Metropolitan Opera Company
Garland of Old-Fashioned Roses.....
.....Rose Maid Chorus
Chesapeake Bay.....Levee Chorus
Always Take a Walk With Daisy.....
.....Daisy Chorus
I'm Going Back to Carolina.....
.....Travelers Chorus
Salvation Nell, Salvation Army Chorus
Sail on Sil'ry Moon.....
.....Moonlight Lovers
I Love, Love..... Fluffy Ruffle Chorus
Has Anybody Here Seen Rover.....
Rover.....Boys Chorus
Go to Sleep My Pickanlney Babe,.....
.....Dinah Snowball
Swaanee Shore.....Pickanlney Chorus
I'm on My Way to Mandalay.....
.....Oriental Chorus
When You Tell the Sweetest Story to
the Sweetest Girl You Know.....
.....Swing Chorus
Grand Finale.....Entire Company

Admission, 35c and 50c.

Reserved Seats on Sale at Eight O'clock Thursday Morning at Platz's Drug Store.

activities, including dancing, a solid floor was necessary. Even floors in theatres long abandoned and now relegated to storage, as in Tecumseh and Lawrence, reflect exceptional craftsmanship.

Most of these hall style theatres had limited interior decoration.⁷ Many small-town opera halls featured wainscoting as the main wall decoration. At Lodgepole, the front wall below the stage is wainscoted and also painted blue, as are the proscenium arch and woodwork around doorways. At Allen's Opera House in Cozad, remnants of wainscoting can be seen on the ceiling. At both the Tecumseh Opera House and Schneider's Opera House in Snyder, the walls around the auditorium are wainscoted to a height of about three feet. Wainscoting is used extensively throughout the auditorium of the Pospeshil Theatre. Even the knee-knocker balcony rail at the New Opera House in Auburn is wainscoted. At Steinauer the lower three feet of the house walls are wainscoted; wall decor of pressed tin then continues to the pressed tin ceiling.

Pressed tin decorations were nearly universal in Nebraska opera houses,

David City Opera House
Monday, Dec. 1

Gaskil and MacVitty (Inc.)
announce

THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS

Dramatized from
Harold Bell Wright's Novel

The most popular American book made into the most popular American play.



The company presenting this play are booked for larger cities. They play "The Shepherd of the Hills" in Leavenworth, Kansas, on Thanksgiving day and in Lincoln (the Oliver theater) the next day.

Prices, main floor, 75c and \$1; gallery, adults, 50c, children 25c.

Butler County Press (David City), October 15, 1914... (right) Butler County Press, November 27, 1913.

reflecting a wide variety of patterns and colors. Many such ceilings are still in excellent condition. A unique pattern, found at the Perkin Opera House in Maywood (1903), looks like a howling North Wind. The lobby foyer at the Pace Theatre in Chadron is composed of orange tin in a decorative pattern. At Osceola's Monson (later Morrison) Opera House (1894), pressed tin is used to decorate ceiling supports. The Pospeshil features a ceiling in shades of rust and dark green, with a double border of pressed tin in two distinctive panels circling the auditorium. The most noteworthy example of nineteenth century pressed tin remains at the Clay Center Opera House (1894), which features a large panel in the center of the auditorium, vividly decorated with Greek urns and cupids.

Some balconies, such as those at the Z.C.B.J. Opera House in Clarkson (1913) and Bloomfield's Pospeshil (1906), contain permanent pew style bench seating. At Table Rock and David City, the balcony floors are raked. While many front balcony edges were either straight or only gently curved, some, such as those at Thorpe's in David City and Gehling's in Falls City, were true horseshoe shapes, a type first popularized in Italy during the fifteenth century.⁸

Audience members at opera houses usually sat on wooden folding chairs. At Tecumseh, the original chairs remain on rolling carts in their storage chamber under the stage. At the Table Rock Opera House (1893), racks in the wings on each side of the proscenium arch still hold vintage seats.

In the more pretentious theatres, intended only for theatrical and motion picture performances, owners installed permanent opera seats. Some, such as those at the Diller Opera House (1912), included hat racks underneath. Seats at the Martha Ellen Auditorium in Central City (1916) are particularly ornate. Most, such as those in Diller and Rushville, were wooden, with curved backs and seats. Because sight lines are important in a theatre in which chairs

are bolted to the floor, such auditoriums were usually raked. Some of these later opera houses have balconies which are accessed directly from the main aisles, not from narrow, steep stairways at the rear, such as the 1915 Auditorium erected at Geneva and Dave Gourley's Opera House in Rushville, vintage 1914. At Central City the Martha Ellen Auditorium features an elegant horseshoe tiered balcony.

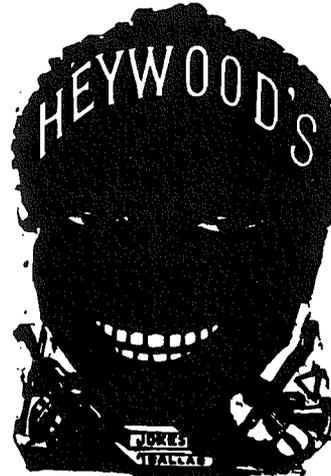
Decoration in these later opera houses was sometimes elaborate. The Diller Opera House contains remnants of stenciling by James Willer and Charles Hansen, southeast Nebraska artists who also decorated Beatrice's Paddock Hotel and Opera House (1889). The Diller walls featured grape motifs and bands of diamond-shaped patterns, while the ceiling included motifs of lilies, roses, bands, and ribbons in shades of blue, green, yellow, and pink. These artists used both stenciling and free-hand painting as part of their fresco process. At the Geneva Auditorium, pre-1935 filigreed murals now decorate the walls, stenciled by Knud Knudsen, a local house painter and owner of the Economy Paint Factory.⁹

Frescoing at the Love Opera House in Fremont, contracted by Minneapolis artists Lindman and McIvor, featured muted maroons and blues, with gold trim and scroll accents. The proscenium arch was surrounded by a three-foot-wide fresco motif, which was carried around the top of the other three walls of the house. A sun burner was suspended from the frescoed dome in the center of the auditorium. The dome of the regal Kearney Opera House was painted sky blue and embellished with fleecy clouds. Holes in the ceiling allowed light bulbs to twinkle in the "sky" of the darkened theatre.¹⁰

Brown tones were favored in the 1881 Boyd Opera House. Boxes and balconies in the theatre were painted in

**THE
BIG MINSTREL TROUPE.
AT TECUMSEH.
ONE NIGHT ONLY.
OPERA HOUSE,
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Return of the famous and world-wide renowned



MASTODONS,

under the same management since organization in 1862. The same name and title for 21 years.

This monster organization will present in its fourfold attraction, first—

Heywood's Mastodons,

A mammoth gymnastic, acrobatic and specialty troupe. Second the Original Southern

Mocking Bird Minstrels,

Accompanied by Mr. J. E. GREEN, the originator of the New Orleans Minstrels in 1854.

Third—The great picturesque

Uncle Tom's Cabin

On a large scale.

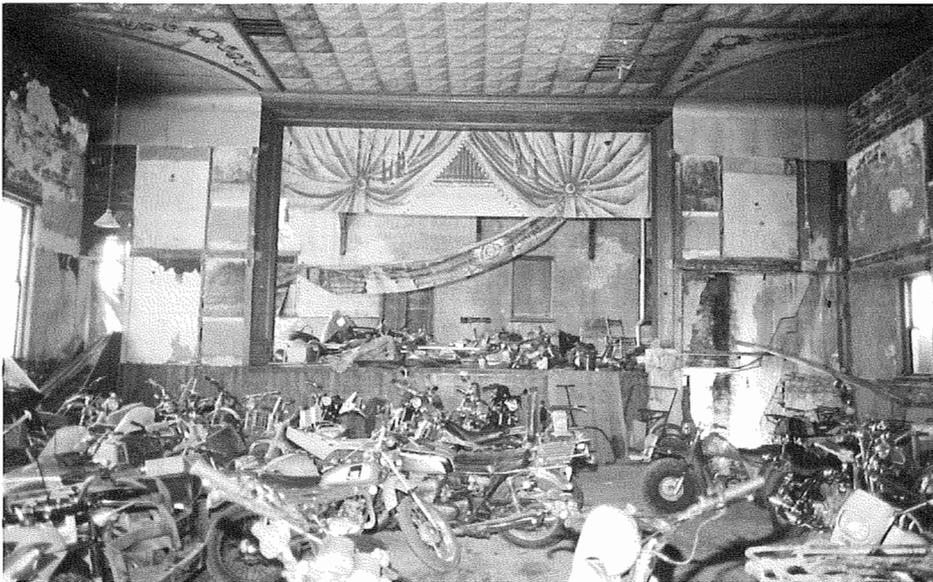
Fourth—Grand Concert by the Musical Brigade Brass and Reed Band, Lone Star Cabin Singers and the Apollo Club.

Admission 50 cents Reserved Seats 75 cents. Tickets on sale at usual place.

Tecumseh Chieftain, November 24, 1883.



The Pospeshil Theatre, Bloomfield, was built about 1900. (NSHS-H673.5-4787) . . . (right) Pospeshil Orchestra in 1907. Band members: Vlasta, piano; John, violin; Rudolph, flute; Tony Turechek, cornet; and Carl Anderson, slide trombone. Courtesy of Rita Drobný. (NSHS-H673.5-4785).



The Pospeshil was once used as a motorcycle repair shop. (NSHS-8705/7-17) Photo by Chris Ehlers.

various tints of browns and blues, while the elaborate hangings sparkled in crimson silk plush and gold raw silk. Carved arches encompassed the boxes. Frescoing by Henry Ranje, borrowed from Indianapolis's English Opera House, was done in warm tones. Figures of Drama, Declamation, and The Arts embellished the proscenium arch, while the dome was done in "cerulean blue with trees, flowers and foliage in Eastlake designs in the foreground."¹¹

For his grand Boyd Theatre a decade later, James E. Boyd once again hired Noxon and Toomey, the St. Louis firm which had designed his earlier opera house. The auditorium walls were sage green and olive; fronts of the olive and gray (or pink and gray) boxes featured bronze and gold protruding edges. Since the decor for this theatre was Arabesque, Boyd hired Austrian frescoist Paolo Pavesich, a muralist who had worked on the sultan's palace in Constantinople and the czar's palace at

St. Petersburg.¹² His pictures were "at once strong and earnest in character, remarkable in the harmony of their colors."¹³

Proscenium Arches. The most eye-catching detail in opera houses was the proscenium arch, or frame, which surrounded the stage opening. Since it focused the audience's attention, it was attractive, even in small, plain opera houses. The utilitarian wooden arch at David City is attractively saucer-edged. At Lodgepole, the arch, like the

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Allen's Opera House, Cozad. Courtesy of James B. Frazier.



PROSCENIUM ARCH AND DROP CURTAIN.

Proscenium arch and drop curtain of Boyd Theatre.
Omaha Daily Bee, August 31, 1891.

rest of the woodwork, was painted blue. Snyder's arch displays wooden "buttons." Some proscenium arches in small opera halls were more decorative. At Auburn the wooden arch includes carved pillars on either side. The arches at both Verdigre and Geneva are gilt, Verdigre's resembling a golden picture frame, Geneva's enclosed by lights.

Like the rest of their interiors, the arches in Nebraska's grand palaces glittered. The arch of the 1881 Boyd Opera House was heavily molded, dis-

playing a "heroic" bust of Shakespeare, with features "worked out with wonderful fidelity, an artistic production of the woodcarver's art."¹⁴ The proscenium arch at Boyd's 1891 theatre featured

two pedestals painted on the broad surface along the sides. Across the top, vases with roses, lilies, narcissus and phlox were arranged in groupings. Above the proscenium arch was a full length, elaborately decorated cornice supported by projecting brackets.¹⁵

Stage Accoutrements. Most stages had ample wing space; some, such as

the Hampton Opera House (1893) and the Z.C.B.J. Opera House in Clarkson (1912), included makeshift wooden dressing rooms, while other theatres, like those at Verdigre and Friend, had rooms just outside the wings which were presumably used by the actors. Since the grand palaces in large cities utilized the space under the stage for dressing rooms, so did moderate-sized theatres like Fairbury's Majestic, David City's Thorpe, Geneva's and Central City's Auditorium, Falls City's Gehling, and probably Bloomfield's Pospeshil. The smallest theatres with the fewest records of traveling companies, like Clem's Opera House in Gresham and the Lawrence and Steinauer opera houses, had no dressing rooms in the theatre.¹⁶

Most stages had rows of battens, which held the rolled drop curtains, a system still in use at the Clarkson Z.C.B.J. and McCool M.W.A. opera houses. Permanent grooves in the floor held the canvas wing scenery. The entire system was known as "wing and shutter." An excellent example remains at Table Rock, where two full sets of scenery are in place in the stage grooves. These demonstrate the ease with which the decor could be shifted to indicate different settings.

Nearly all larger theatres had at least one trap door for special effects; some were called the "star" or "vampire" trap. Others were simply referred to as the "center" (for its location on center stage) trap. At both remaining Z.C.B.J. opera houses (Clarkson and Verdigre), the center front area of the stage includes a prompt box, a small square opening leading to a trap where a prompter could stand to cue actors.¹⁷

Scenery. All opera house scenery was painted on canvas, first rolled curtains which could be dropped into place and later free-standing "flats," painted canvas stretched across a lumber frame. Most opera houses which featured traveling performers owned four sets of curtains depicting front room, back room, timber, and town locales. Larger theatres had much

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*Bruning Opera House, Bruning . . .
Janecek Theatre, Schuyler . . . (right)
Kearney Opera House, Kearney. Cour-
tesy of Andrea I. Paul.*



more extensive scenic decorations: Kearney boasted eighty-seven separate pieces of scenery; Fremont offered eleven sets comprised of eighty-three pieces; and the 1891 Boyd Theatre ordered seventeen full sets from the St. Louis firm of Noxon and Toomey.¹⁸

In the grand opera palaces the magnificent front drop curtain was the most impressive, since it greeted patrons upon their arrival and often between scenes. At Fremont's Love Opera House, this curtain was of painted velvet with side curtains, fringed and draped back too realistically, showing a most foreign and formal balustraded garden, with meticulously placed and clipped trees standing in lined array about a fountain. The piece d' resistance (sic) of this was a statue 'Aphrodite' (without any nighty [sic]) taking her daily shower, and of which two unembarrassed, strolling lovers took no notice, their amours obviously occupying them.¹⁹

The drop curtain at Kearney depicted "The Rajah's Triumphal Entry Into Singapore."²⁰ Noxon and Toomey also provided the drop curtain for the Boyd

Opera House, a landscape of "rich Italian sky and transparent water surrounded by an Eastlake design with Oriental vases containing exotics."²¹ The gorgeous drop provided for Boyd by the company a decade later featured "The Festival of the Madonna" enclosed by a wide Florentine frame.²² One such curtain remains in Nebraska, on display at the West Point Auditorium. Although the back of the curtain has been coated with dark paint to strengthen it, Kansas City Scenic Company patented light units dated 1908 (backstage at the Auditorium) suggest that this company provided the front drop as well. The drop features a fountain with a dome in the distance, framed in ornate gilt and embellished with green draperies.

Most small-town opera houses, which couldn't afford such extravagant curtains, featured their alternative, the advertising or "ad" curtain. Some of these were purchased from traveling salesmen for companies which provided a drop curtain with a decorative landscape in the center, surrounded by shapes, which a local artist could then letter with the names of local businesses which purchased the advertising space. In Bloomfield, the original ad curtain was decorated with "a street scene in Bloomfield with paintings of five of Bloomfield's big brick buildings. Advertising spaces went like hotcakes; there didn't seem to be enough to go around."²³

From the smallest opera hall at Steinauer with its makeshift pros-

cenium to the elegant and gracious Boyd Theatre in Omaha, the opera houses represented the entire spectrum of midwestern theatre architecture. The buildings themselves were important as the hub of community entertainment, but it was the events, not the space, that left a warm glow in the memory of those who participated.

EPILOGUE

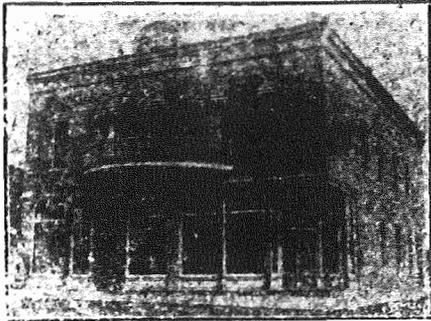
The future of Nebraska's remaining opera houses is uncertain. Only about one fourth of the state's 513 identified opera houses remain; some of those now gone have fallen to fire, wind, or water, but most were torn down because they were safety hazards or to make way for new buildings or parking lots. Omaha's elegant Brandeis Theatre, for example, was replaced by a parking structure in 1960. Some still stand only because the owners cannot afford to dismantle them. The Review Opera House in Dunbar fell to a wrecking crew in the summer of 1987, sold for its bricks, because the cost of bringing the building up to electrical code was prohibitive.²⁴ The auditorium of the once-elegant Pospeshil Theatre of Bloomfield now has a concrete ramp instead of a wing on the left side of the stage, an addition made to accommodate a tenant, who used the space as storage for his motorcycle repair shop. The Diller Opera House, praised as "a great boon to the town" when it opened in 1912, has become a haven for birds because its owner claims the building as a one-story structure for tax purposes and has not repaired broken windows on the upper floor.²⁵ The palatial Love-Larson Opera House in Fremont had all interior accoutrements—stage, boxes, seats, pits, dressing rooms—except the top balcony removed in the 1920s, when its owners converted it to apartments; renovating efforts by its current owner, the nonprofit Friends of the Fremont Opera House, are hampered by the disappearance of virtually all interior photographs of either the Love Opera House or the Larson Opera House.²⁶

CARL BARZ

PROPRIETOR OF

THE OPERA HOUSE SALOON

FINE
WINES
LIQUORS
AND
CIGARS.



FAMILY
TRADE IS
MY
SPECIALTY

FREMONT BEER ON HAND.

SNYDER. NEBRASKA

Schneider's Opera House, Snyder, was featured in this period advertisement. Snyder Banner, April 22, 1910.

Most opera houses which survive are barely reminiscent of their heyday. In nearly half, the theatre has been torn out, replaced by apartments. Some which still retain part of the auditorium and stage are useful only for storage, like the old opera house above Tecumseh's Chief Drug Store, since the buildings no longer meet structural or safety codes for public meeting places. The words "Opera House" or the construction date, memorialized in stone, sometimes decorate the main facade. Facade embellishments which are damaged by weather are seldom repaired.²⁷

Twenty-five of Nebraska's remaining opera houses were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in the fall of 1988.²⁸ These opera houses were recognized both for their architectural and for their historical value. Selection of the properties for the

nomination was based on a number of factors, including the presence and condition of the stage, including trap doors, prompt boxes, scenery grooves, battens and rollers for canvas drops, and dressing rooms; auditorium accoutrements, such as balcony, walls, permanent original seating, fixtures, hardware, and orchestra pit; the similarity of the current floor plan to the original; the presence of ticket windows or box offices; interior decorations like stenciling and pressed tin ceilings; graffiti from touring companies of the opera house era; condition and integrity of the facade; and other considerations unique to individual facilities.

Owners of some opera houses, wishing to preserve their buildings' historical value, keep the buildings open to the public. Several former opera houses are museums operated by local

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historical societies, such as the Table Rock, Orleans, and Oshkosh opera houses.

A number of these old halls are still used as theatres and public meeting places today. The I.O.O.F. Opera House in Bladen, the McCool Opera House in McCool Junction, the Civic Theatre in Hay Springs, The Palace in Long Pine, the Liederkrantz in Grand Island, the Hyannis Opera House, Queen's Theatre in Scottsbluff, the Auditoriums in Laurel, Giltner, Geneva, and West Point, the Norman Opera House, and DeMerritt's Opera House in Alexandria still reflect the spirit of community gathering which typified opera houses in the fifty years following statehood. Now restored, Thorpe's Opera House in David City serves as a fine arts performing center. The Z.C.B.J. Opera Houses, in Clarkson and in Verdigre, remain virtually unchanged from the early years of the century.

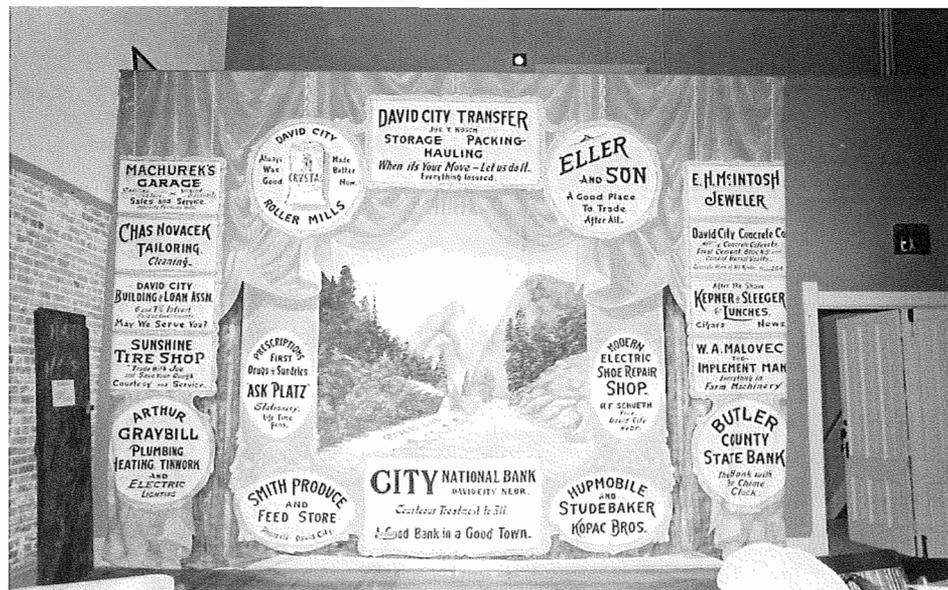
Society has moved away from the times when the whole town got together to celebrate at a dance, applaud an edifying lecturer, or laugh at a minstrel show. Yet such events are remembered fondly by those who were there. Opera houses, as the visible remains of the days when theatrical troupes crossed the country on rails, should be preserved as a warm and vibrant piece of Americana.

NOTES

"Second Floor, Brick Block" is the result of two years of study and assimilation of material relevant to Nebraska's opera houses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The research, known as the Opera House Buildings in Nebraska (OHBIN) Project, was funded under a federal grant from the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, administered by the State Historic Preservation Office of the Nebraska State Historical Society. The OHBIN Project culminated in the fall of 1988 with the nomination of twenty-five opera houses to the National Register of Historic Places. The complete study is available for review at the State Historic Preservation Office.

¹Mary C. Henderson, *Theatre in America: 200 Years of Plays, Players and Productions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 244.

²The number of villages with populations of



Thorpe's Opera House, David City (right, NSHS-8611/1-10); with ad curtain (above, NSHS-8611/1-17). Photos by Chris Ehlers.

under 500 erecting opera houses doubled in the years following 1900.

³Richard Longstreth, "Compositional Types in American Commercial Architecture," *Prospectives in Vernacular Architecture, II* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 15.

⁴Alice S. Howell, "The Opera Houses—Part II," *Buffalo Tales* (Sept. 1986), 3.

⁵Lane Hart, interview with author, Apr. 11, 1987.

⁶Judge Kaschube, interview with author, May 22, 1987.

⁷Rita M. Glass, "The History of the Thorpe Opera House" (Masters' thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1981), 47-48.

⁸The horseshoe sides at David City no longer remain.

⁹Bill Turek, interview with author, Mar. 14, 1987.

¹⁰Alice S. Howell, "The Opera House—Part II," *Buffalo Tales* (Sept. 1986), 5.

¹¹Keith Allen Reynolds, "19th Century Theater Structures in Iowa and Nebraska, 1857-1900: A Classification of Selected General Utility Halls, Opera Halls, and Opera Houses as Described in Local Newspapers and Histories" (diss., Florida State University, 1981), 227.

¹²*Ibid.*, 340.

¹³*Omaha Daily Bee*, Aug. 31, 1891, 5.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1881, 2.

¹⁵Reynolds, 341.

¹⁶Steinauer's proscenium arch was not built into the theatre, as is the usual practice. The Steinauer opera house has virtually no wing space, indicating that only the simplest productions could have been staged there.

¹⁷Z.C.B.J. opera houses regularly presented home talent productions—in Czech. As more and



Lawrence Opera House, Lawrence. (NSHS-8704/2-6) Photo by Chris Ehlers.



Dave Gourley's Opera House, Rushville, now an interdenominational mission. (NSHS-8705/5-29) Photo by Chris Ehlers.

more residents stopped speaking Czech, the promoter had to cue amateur actors with the foreign dialogue.

¹⁸Howell, 5.

¹⁹Robert A. Schanke, "Fremont's Love Opera House," *Nebraska History* 55(1974):227.

²⁰Howell, 5.

²¹Reynolds, 229.

²²Ibid., 344.

²³*Bloomfield Monitor*, Aug. 23, 1906.

²⁴Gene Hobbie, interview with author, Nov. 15, 1986.

²⁵Clay Vaughn, Jr., interview with author, Febr.

21, 1987.

²⁶Loell Jorgensen, interview with author, Jan. 14, 1987.

²⁷Another example: a missing chunk of the cornice of Schneider's Opera House in Snyder, which features a decorative frieze of spoked wheels, has never been replaced.

²⁸Thorpe's Opera House, David City; Surprise Opera House, Surprise; Lodgepole Opera House, Lodgepole; Z.C.B.J. Opera House, Clarkson; Army Theatre, Fort Robinson; Allen's Opera House, Cozad; Love Opera House, Fremont; Schneider's Opera House, Snyder;

Creighton Theatre, Omaha; the Auditorium, Geneva; Hampton Opera House, Hampton; Anna C. Diller Opera House, Diller; Tecumseh Opera House, Tecumseh; Pospeshil Theatre, Bloomfield; Z.C.B.J. Opera House, Verdigre; Martha Ellen Auditorium, Central City; New Opera House, Auburn; Lawrence Opera House, Lawrence; Steinauer Opera House, Steinauer; Table Rock Opera House, Table Rock; Gehling's Theatre, Falls City; Warren's Opera House, Friend; Gourley's Opera House, Rushville; I.O.O.F. Hall and Opera House, Bladen; and Clem's Opera House, Gresham.