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D. Layne Ehlers

Bethany College - Bethany

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THIS WEEK AT THE OPERA HOUSE

POPULAR MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT

AT GREAT PLAINS OPERA HOUSES, 1887-1917

D. LAYNE EHLERS

Americans in the years immediately preceding the twentieth century clung to a naïveté reminiscent of the manifest destiny days. Novels, newspaper accounts, and old-fashioned, rousing melodramas on the stage all displayed a predilection for an American way which showed that moral good, coupled with patience, would triumph, providing it remained within carefully proscribed social and ethical limits. "Home Sweet Home," the most popular song of its time, celebrated the simple virtues of hearth and family.

Nowhere was this vision of life more apparent than in the Great Plains. By 1877 the days

when Chimney Rock and Scotts Bluff welcomed trail-weary wayfarers were a distant memory used to regale grandchildren on quiet summer nights. In the years following the Civil War, railroads changed the face of the Plains forever. Immigrants from Europe or travelers from the East arrived with more than dreams: they brought trades, skills, customs, and attitudes on a variety of ideas, including what constituted culture in a civilized American community.

Within twenty years of the arrival of the railroad, towns represented a microcosm of a settled American prairie community. As towns grew, local newspaper editors cheered on citizens to help create a positive image of their towns. The editor of the *Lodge Pole (Nebraska) Express* exhorted:

D. Layne Ehlers' scholarship focuses on regional studies in the Plains. Her published work includes Opera Houses of the Midwest (University of Nebraska Press), and "Frontier Opera Houses," Great Plains Encyclopedia (forthcoming). Dr. Ehlers is Director of Theatre at Bethany College, Bethany, WV.

Believe in your town and talk your belief. If you have any old fogies remember they are in the minority, and that it takes all kinds of people to make a world anyway. Encourage live people to move in by making it worth their while. Welcome outside capital in developing any natural resources the town has. Don't begrudge the dollars the

enterprising man makes, but hustle around and collar a few yourself. Above all, "pull together" and the town will ride the high wave of prosperity over the most discouraging breakers, and every inhabitant will get his or her share of the profit from the voyage.¹

As Great Plains immigration swelled in the 1880s, a professional entertainment venue came to symbolize this communal "pulling together." Proponents of prosperity knew that the makeshift halls erected early in the life of small towns did not project the image needed to attract new citizens. However, construction of a facility designed for the presentation of plays and other entertainments could signal the forward-looking permanence of a community. Entrepreneurs responded to a need in the towns for a well-constructed space for not only musical and dramatic performances but also for dances, box socials, political meetings, fraternal organizations, and even basketball! The time of the opera house had arrived on the west bank of the Missouri.

My research interest in opera houses dates to the spring of 1986 when Professor Tice L. Miller of the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln invited me to participate as Nebraska editor in a theatre history research project sponsored by the Mid-America Theatre Conference (MATC). The scope and taxonomy of the project focused on extant opera houses, artifacts, and relevant bibliographic materials. Subsequently, I contracted with the Historic Preservation Office at the Nebraska State Historical Society to complete a reconnaissance survey of extant opera houses in Nebraska. Preliminary research identified 125 extant structures that previously functioned as opera houses across the state. Each extant theatre, regardless of facade or interior modifications, required a site visit to photograph and map the premises. Following evaluation of these sites, the Nebraska State Historical Society and I selected twenty-six for multiple-property nomination to the National Register of

Historic Places (NRHP) of the National Park Service. In accordance with NRHP requirements, I prepared a thematic historic context for the opera house in Nebraska and completed follow-up research on the property's real estate abstract, construction and physical improvements, importance to the individual community, property description, and photographs of each of the twenty-six nominated properties.

My research for the Nebraska opera house NRHP nomination relied on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including atlases, books, centennial publications, correspondence, field work, interviews, newspapers, periodicals, photographic records, *New York Times* theatre reviews, serial publications, and assorted unpublished works. Results of this work are contained in my master of arts thesis and in the documentation for the successful multiple-property nomination.² In addition to dozens of personal interviews and hundreds of newspaper records available on microfilm at the Nebraska State Historical Society that related to the specific opera houses in my study, I also consulted unpublished studies of Nebraska opera houses³ and published opera house materials.⁴

Although the primary focus of my original research centered on the vernacular architecture of these structures, I also studied the aesthetic systems aspects of opera houses. Opera houses represented a sense of "arrival" for communities that began only a few years before with wooden false fronts and a makeshift railroad depot. As a permanent nondenominational structure dedicated to the town's betterment, opera houses in small towns presented a variety of professional and amateur entertainment—home talent, lyceum courses, minstrel shows, stock companies, musical entertainments, and traveling troupes.

For purposes of this article's inclusion in a special symposium issue on Great Plains music and dance, I chose to limit discussion to the opera house as a musical performance venue. All communities, unless otherwise noted, are in Nebraska, central to Great Plains



FIG. 1. Love-Larson Opera House (1888), Fremont, Nebraska. Photograph by Christian H. Ehlers.

emigration and settlement. Emigrants in wagons traveled on both banks of the "Great Platte River Road" through the state to reach California, Utah, and Oregon; later, the Union Pacific and other railroads crossed its prairies as well, making the state representative of this burgeoning new portion of the country.

Railroads, needing population for profits, brought life to Plains towns. Besides bringing a power source such as coal or lumber and taking away produce to eastern and western markets, the lines carried new citizens—immigrants fleeing conditions in Europe or travelers from the East, all anxious to start over on lands free for the working, thanks to the Homestead Act, or for sale by the railroad companies. The settlers wanted "civilization," which included libraries, newspapers, finery, conveniences—and entertainment. Opera houses,

often on the second floor of the first brick structure in town, became the centers of leisure life, the railroad providing connections for the best touring entertainers the town could afford. Towns built the theatres first, believing that the quality entertainment they longed for would follow.

When it reported the opening of the grand Love Opera House in Fremont, Nebraska, in December 1888, the *Fremont Weekly Herald* summed up both the community idealism represented by a new opera house and the appreciation offered to the person behind the building:

A building of this character is more to the city than a structure of equal cost and size and appearance designed for many another purpose. Theatricals have become almost

an indispensable adjunct to the civilization of to-day and of course whatever tends to elevate their character is to that extent a public blessing. Mr. Love has shown a commendable public spirit in the erection of his fine temple of histrionic art and every one will wish him full measure of the more tangible benefits which he expects shall accrue from the investment.⁵

According to the taxonomy of both Reynolds and Longstreth, and verified by the field studies of myself and others connected with the Mid-America Theatre Conference opera house research project, opera house structures in most Great Plains communities are best described as a "utility hall" or "opera hall" housed on the second floor of a commercial block. Primarily located above retail establishments, these halls contained permanent stages, but careful planning ensured that the space suited social events, too—an important consideration in communities that often had only one such building in town.

In most Great Plains towns, commercial districts were not architecturally linked together by skilled city planners; they developed gradually, relying on builders of limited expertise, using local construction crews of varying abilities and experience, working with materials of irregular quality. Some brick came from local kilns, other had to be hauled in; lumber came from other parts of the country. Expense of materials directly determined the embellishments and size of buildings. The type of building common for the earliest opera house was the one-part wooden commercial block, which often utilized a false front to create a more imposing facade. Not built for permanence, most lasted only a few years before they were torn down to make way for more imposing and permanent structures.

By the time most brick opera houses went up, towns had reached the point in their growth when citizens looked to the permanence of brick and stone as a symbol of the community's solidity and growth potential. The town builders demanded an imposing institution citizens

could take pride in, not an insignificant building tucked between the general store and the saloon. Most brick opera houses in this phase of a town's development could be found at or near the main intersection of the town, often near the depot. Usually two to four stories tall, designated as a two-part commercial block by Longstreth, this retail establishment divided into two distinct zones, or blocks, neither bearing much similarity of treatment to the other. The horizontal division point most often fell between the first and second stories, regardless of the total stories in the building.

Retail establishments played an important role in the location decision. The proprietor of the store usually also owned and managed the theatre, a prudent and sensible decision. The street level had a public, money-making function, while the upper floors remained private or did not receive heavy daily traffic. Research shows that lodges, meeting rooms, and professional offices used the street-front side of the second and third stories of the buildings. Following the economic downturn of the 1890s, the two-part model virtually disappeared from references to new construction.

By the turn of the century, most new opera houses were built by communities themselves, rather than by individual entrepreneurs. That this was a tax- and bond-driven project dedicated to a leisure function helps explain the shift away from two-part blocks back to a more permanent version of the one-part block. Given the relatively small tax base and limited use of the community halls—still called opera houses—a simpler, stand-alone model held greater attraction for town fathers than the retail-oriented, two-part block. Several factors made this the more attractive choice:

- A single-story opera house would use fewer materials and lower the building costs accordingly. To illustrate this trend, my research showed that forty-five Nebraska communities with populations under five hundred built opera houses between 1900 and 1917, nearly double the number constructed during the previous thirty years.

- Most towns had public water and electricity by the turn of the century, or had active plans to acquire them. A single-story structure was simpler to electrify and equip with indoor plumbing.
- Ground-floor opera houses had a larger capacity—an average of about fifty seats more than second-story theatres. The new model would generate more potential income.
- Forward-thinking entertainment entrepreneurs at the turn of the century saw more promise in a new medium—pictures that moved—and demonstrated less willingness to take on the complex planning and financial risks required to contract for live professional performances. They preferred narrow ground-floor buildings with no windows, an ineffective model for opera houses.
- Second-story opera houses required a significant amount of seldom-used space in a building, raising the costs of upkeep without guarantee of substantial profit. Few private individuals could afford to shoulder that burden by the end of the century. As the original owners went out of business or retired, few moved in to take their place as entertainment providers, so the responsibility for providing public entertainment gradually fell to Commercial Clubs and other civic organizations.
- Ground-floor theatres were easier to maintain and safer in case of fire. By the turn of the century, many older second-floor opera houses in small towns could not structurally support large crowds of people and the owners could not justify the cost of a new building with room for a performance space. The typical extant Great Plains opera house survives not out of a sense of nostalgia but because the building owner closed off the second floor when it no longer passed a building safety inspection, using it for storage space for whatever business occupied the ground floor.

Village opera houses, with an average seating capacity of under five hundred, served all

community needs. Essentially large rooms with a stage at one end and perhaps a balcony, these spaces were equipped with movable seating that could be arranged as needed—in rows for performances, along the side walls at dances and sporting events, or at tables for banquets and box socials. In most communities, opera houses saw fewer than half a dozen professional entertainments in any given year. Yet communities deemed these halls so necessary that, by the end of the century, most had shifted them to public ownership. Such gathering places represented the heart and soul of a community's dreams and aspirations, exemplified by a spirit of celebration, often accompanied by music and dancing.

Any excuse would do to hold a dance. Early settlers originally gathered in homes, barns, stores, restaurants, courthouses, dining rooms, and even on the open prairie to dance,⁶ but by the opera house era on the Great Plains, most notices in newspapers reported that dances took place in the opera house throughout the fall and winter. Admission, which was fifty cents to a dollar for the evening, with ladies sometimes admitted free, covered the cost of the band, the hall, and additional capital for the sponsoring organization. Fire departments, dancing schools, lodges, bands, commercial clubs, and ball teams all rented the opera house for dances. Even bad weather did not deter hardy citizens in search of a good time: "A fair-sized crowd gathered at the opera house Thursday evening regardless of the cold, damp weather and a fine time was had by all participating."⁷ Newspapers took pains to chronicle the dances at some length, such as the 1895 Hampton Christmas Ball at the opera house, which drew "young people from almost every place in this and York County," and featured the music of the Hudson Dever Hunt Orchestra. "Strains of some beautiful waltz from its instruments would make the faces of the dancers fairly beam with pleasure," ran the report. "Not only a success socially," it concluded, "financially she was a hummer."⁸

"The opera house fills a long felt want and marks the progress of the material develop-

ment [of our community]. Every citizen is proud of it.”⁹ Such platitudes sum up the affection townspeople felt for their local theatre. Although it met other community social needs most often, the times the traveling troupes or home talent trod the boards are the first in memory of many folks who remember the heyday of the opera house. Stage entertainments meant a time for people to get together, to forget troubles with money, with weather, with the railroad, with keeping food on the table. Friends gathered at the opera house, where for fifty cents each—sometimes less—the whole family could watch their neighbors put on a play for a good cause, thrill to the exploits of Eliza and Uncle Tom as they fled the horrors of Simon Legree, see a favorite novel brought to life, laugh at a minstrel show, or enjoy a lyceum course event. Musical performers touring during the opera house years fell into three broad categories: combination companies, home talent, and Lyceum Bureau artists.

Professional troupes that carried all actors, scenery, and costumes by rail across the country to prearranged bookings called themselves *combination companies*, a format proven profitable during the late 1880s by Charles Frohman of the Theatrical Syndicate. These represented the “top of the heap” in turn-of-the-century entertainment, but small theatres found them prohibitively expensive. For example, the Love-Larson Opera House in Fremont, Nebraska, could afford only one or two performances of combinations, Lincoln might be able to muster three or four, and only Omaha could generate enough audience to offer a combination company the traditional week’s run.

Did opera houses ever live up to their name and present opera? Sadly, no. While most professional singers and small musical ensembles included popular arias in their repertoire, the company that offered grand opera was rare. Theatre managers who contracted with these companies had to rely on previous experience or word of mouth to determine whether a company would live up to its sometimes elaborate billing. Guessing wrong could be disastrous for owners of small theatres, and sometimes

opera house managers were duped by publicity releases. James Pace, owner of the Pace Opera House in Chadron, Nebraska, published the following disclaimer in 1916 to explain why he unexpectedly closed down a performance by a touring opera company:

The closing of my Opera House was for the sole purpose of preventing my patrons from being swindled into believing that the Opera of Ill [sic] Trovatore would be presented by a regular company when in truth and in fact I learned on the morning of that day that the promotor [sic] thereof was to be the entire company. I consider the return of money far better than to allow my house to be used for any bunco performance such as that promised to be.¹⁰

Combination companies with booking rates low enough to make them affordable to small communities were always a gamble, never the A-list entertainments. In an effort to provide quality entertainment for small towns, local entrepreneurs sometimes felt they had been “taken” by the visitors if the paid-for performers didn’t measure up to expectations. The editor of the *Butler County (Nebraska) Press* went on at some length about how the Schubert Symphony Club manager had “taken” him:

Their manager is wise to canvass each town for some fool (like ourself) who can get a lodge or church to pitch in and do all the work, furnish the hall and the audience and give them all there is in it. Had it been a new scheme we should not feel thoroughly sold, but it is an old graft, so if any of the Tribe of Ben Hur insist on kicking us for the amount of useless hard work or unsophisticated stupidity imposed upon them, we feel too humble to resist their just wrath.¹¹

Not everyone, of course, had such bad luck with professional companies. A committee of Snyder, Nebraska, businessmen secured

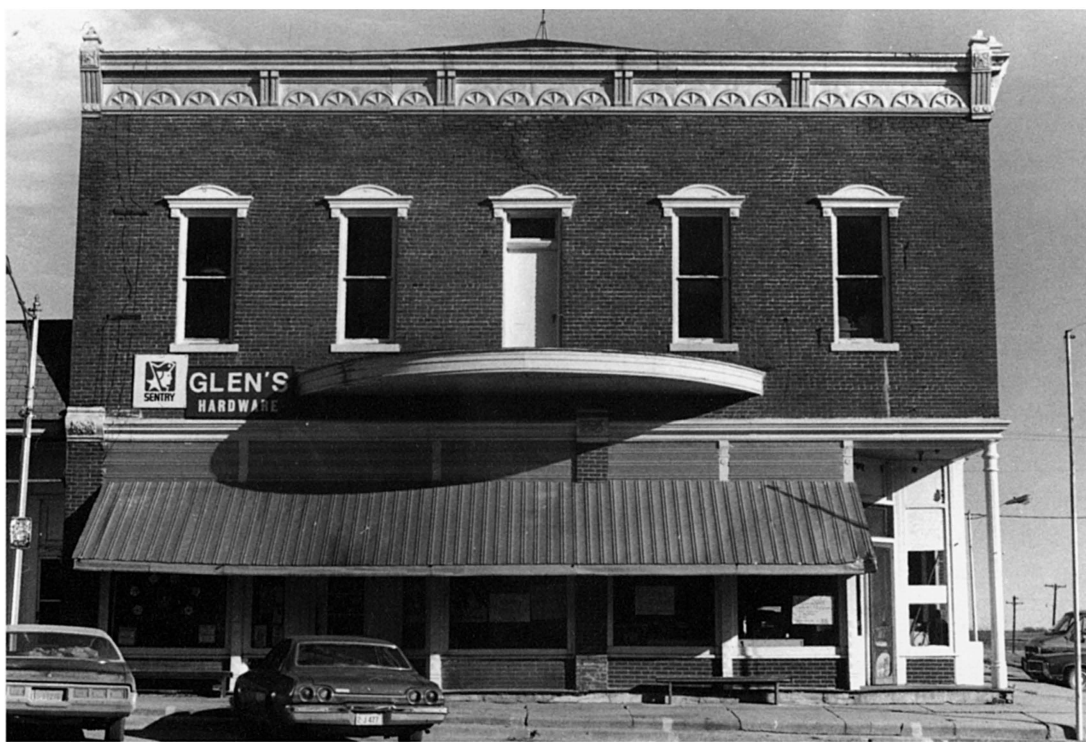


FIG. 2. *Schneider's Opera House* (1900), Snyder, Nebraska. Photograph by Christian H. Ehlers.

Ferguson's Dixie Jubilee Singers in 1909 to combat the growing "menace" of "fake moving picture shows." The performers were described as "colored ladies and gentlemen of culture and refinement, who furnish a class of music given by no other organization," and the businessmen guaranteed they were not traveling "fakirs who make a living by passing a hat." The newspaper excoriated "the fake moving picture shows which have for so long been bleeding the public" and promised

What will be seen and heard will be talked about for months afterwards. . . . A Snyder lady said the other day that she had heard the Dixies twice and intended hearing them again if she could possibly do so. [They have] been packing large auditoriums to the doors in every large city in the U.S. and never fail to please, no matter who hears them,

whether it be the highly educated or the common hearer."¹²

At the opposite end of the financial spectrum for opera house managers, *home talent* was always greeted with pleasure by local audiences and resulted in a significant turnout. These performances gave residents an opportunity to "strut their stuff" and to raise money for a community need. Newspapers regularly promoted such events with prideful admonitions: "Our citizens, by patronizing this entertainment and others which may follow, are certainly taking a good long step in the right direction to make our Concert Band one of the best in the state."¹³ These home-talent musical festivities included local band performances, the "Queen Esther" cantata, church choir concerts, and more elaborate musical entertainments. Sometimes several



FIG. 3. *Table Rock Opera House (1893), Table rock, Nebraska. The stage with authentic 19th century scenery.* Photograph by Christian H. Ehlers.

local music groups came together to present a concert, as when the band, orchestra, and mandolin club in Tecumseh united forces to present the Tecumseh Choral Union,¹⁴ or the vocal concert of the David City Choral Club, consisting of forty voices, two lady choruses, and two male choruses, described as "good musicians, and good looking women by lamplight," who performed "The Hallelujah Chorus," "The Heavens Are Telling," haymakers, "The Anvil Chorus," "The Miller's Wooing, Boatman's Good Night," and "Hit the Shallop."¹⁵

Music teachers could arrange to use the opera house for a reasonable price to present the work of their pupils. The Bloomfield Juvenile Band, under the auspices of bandmaster Edward Durbin, offered winter concerts and

recitals. Miss Blanche Faber and her pupils presented a musical program of piano and vocal work in Lodge Pole (now Lodgepole) in 1911, including recitations in costume and music drills. Emma Clemma and her music classes booked the hall in Table Rock at Christmas 1898, though the paper reported it "not by far a success," since most of Miss Clemma's students did not show up. However, "Miss Clemma bore her disappointment exceptionally well and gave a most interesting talk upon Music and Education."¹⁶

Occasionally, musical performers from one community would tour to another in the same or a nearby county, as when the Pawnee Concert Company appeared at the Table Rock Opera House in November 1900, featuring the whistling solos of Mr. Frank Gregory and the

elocutionary skills of Maude Hare. Nebraska Wesleyan University, located in University Place just outside Lincoln, often sent its musical groups out to perform.

By the turn of the century the third option, *Lyceum Bureaus*, were a regular entertainment staple in the fall and winter throughout the Plains. Late in the nineteenth century, small towns with limited income bases chose this attractive entertainment option, which allowed them to offer professional performers even though they could not afford the major touring companies. For a set price, usually three to five hundred dollars, a season of four, five, or six edifying evenings could be contracted through an entertainment agent in Lincoln, Omaha, or farther afield. Administered by high schools or the various commercial booster clubs as fundraisers, these events consisted of musical performances, lecturers, and specialty acts.

The 1912-13 Lodge Pole Commercial Club season offered "a strong five-course entertainment, each attraction warmly recommended and absolutely guaranteed to please" for the reasonable price of two dollars for adults, one dollar for children.¹⁷ Since Lodgepole had a population of 245 in 1910, boosters may have hoped to gross more than four hundred dollars, a tidy profit even after the three-hundred-dollar Lyceum Bureau charge and other expenses were deducted. Sometimes, though, receipts did not meet expectations. When the Hallowell Concert Company played Central City in 1916, featuring Mr. Weitzel, baritone soloist, and Mrs. Hallowell, lady trap-drummer, the audience fell far short, for the newspaper reported:

The young men of the city who were guaranteeing the attraction in order to raise some money for the band are very much disappointed in the results, as instead of making some money for the proposed fund, they were obliged to donate a little for expenses, [even though] the company was of exceptionally high standard and their program was fine.¹⁸

If expenses were not met, additional entertainment might also be contracted through the Lyceum Bureau to offset the loss. Poluhni and Company, a troupe of Hawaiian musical performers, were booked into Geneva in 1915 to make up the deficit from the 1914 course. To assure attendance, the newspaper reminded its readers that

This is an opportunity for those who are interested in seeing the lecture course get on its feet once more to get a dollar's worth of entertainment for 35 cents and also boost a good cause. Are you interested in the continuation of the lecture course in Geneva? If so, show your interest by being present and treating yourself to a good entertainment as well.¹⁹

The Lyceum Bureaus took pains to put together affordable, attractive packages that relieved owners of opera houses in small towns—often retailers who had little working knowledge of what would or would not bring in a full house—of the necessity of selecting respectable entertainment from among the myriad touring groups traipsing across the country. Managers no longer had to worry about the quality of a show or whether it would appear as scheduled. Lyceum Bureau numbers were guaranteed; if performers could not meet a date, another act would take their place.

Most Lyceum Bureau packages included one or two musical groups each season, primarily billed as "edifying" entertainment. Advance publicity extolled the credits of the performers: Rounds' Ladies Orchestra "played in every state and every city of 200,000 or more, [of which] people speak in the highest terms of their entertainment and of their ability as musicians."²⁰ The Ramos' Spanish Orchestra "stands on a plane of excellence so far above other musical organizations that no mere word picture can give more than a faint idea of its true merits."²¹ The Hallowell Concert Company bragged of its members: "each individual [is] a schooled musician, graduates of some of the best schools in the east, who have played

in some of the finest bands and orchestras in the United States."²² Miss Fisher Shipp, soprano, billed herself as having "accomplishments of such merit that it is difficult to secure assisting artists whose work will not seem commonplace by comparison and be unappreciated."²³

When the David City Opera House presented the Schubert Symphony and Ladies Quartette in 1901, the editor explained that their popularity sprang from their "study to please the people. All their encores are either amusing, or artistic arrangements of those sweet old melodies so dear to all American hearts."²⁴ Editors acknowledged exceptional talent such as the performance of Bertha Sonntag, contralto, and Spencer Robinson, tenor, at the opera house in Friend, where they were declared "[sweet] Voices that are rarely heard in these entertainments, more truly appreciated by those farthest advanced in music."²⁵ The performance of Josephine Curtis, violinist with the Sue Burgess Concert Company, received considerable praise: "The sweetest of music fell upon the ears of the audience as the soul of her violin was made to speak."²⁶

Like all press releases, the puffery provided by performers was written to attract audiences by any means. The performance of the four women of the Oriole Concert Company—contralto, reader, violinist, pianist—in Tecumseh in 1907 was touted with effusive praise to assure potential audiences in the heartland of the wholesomeness of the performers:

Bright, vivacious, refined and talented young women carry with them the spirit of the best American womanhood. They are independent, free, unaffected, and right. The Orioles know how to bring light and laughter and happiness into an even hour. Miss Anderson [the pianist] makes listening easy; she is sensitive, deeply emotional, but plays with a clearness of interpretation that is rare. The listener can make clear visions while his mind floats on the rhythm of the controlled yet spirited renditions.²⁷

Although occasionally programs did not fully meet critical expectations, overall the Lyceum Bureau courses were looked at in a positive light. The *Tecumseh Chieftain* promised that the Dewey Heywood Grand Concert Company of Chicago would provide "great variety and brilliancy," and warned that "No lover of high grade music should absent himself."²⁸ The writer noted after the performance that there was "some criticism on account of the brevity of the program" but declared that the "Epworth League is deserving of praise for its enterprise in affording the music-loving people an opportunity to attend so meritorious a performance."²⁹

Some musical offerings had a broad—and occasionally undesirable—popular appeal, attracting rowdy crowds. Blind Boone, whose piano renditions were "worth double the price of admission,"³⁰ created an audience ruckus in Friend to the point that

The noise in the gallery was so loud that people immediately under and near to it could hear very indistinctly a fine rendition. It finally got so dense that Boone in justice to himself stopped in the very midst of the selection and said that the persons in the gallery were making all the noise they could and asked them to confer a favor upon him by being quiet or the last movement would be a failure.³¹

Audiences also anticipated the opportunity to hear exotic musical performers and instruments. A number of Hawaiian groups toured the Plains in the years preceding World War I, always drawing good crowds. Poluhni and Company, the Royal Hawaiian Concert Company, Kulolo's Hawaiians in "The Paradise of the Pacific," and Vierra's Royal Hawaiians all gave audiences the opportunity to experience the unique music of ukuleles, the steel guitar, and the hula. Losseff's Russian quartet featured "native Russian instruments having much of the character of the mandolin and guitar."³² Winters' Entertainers featured the whistling of Mrs. Winters, whose publicity

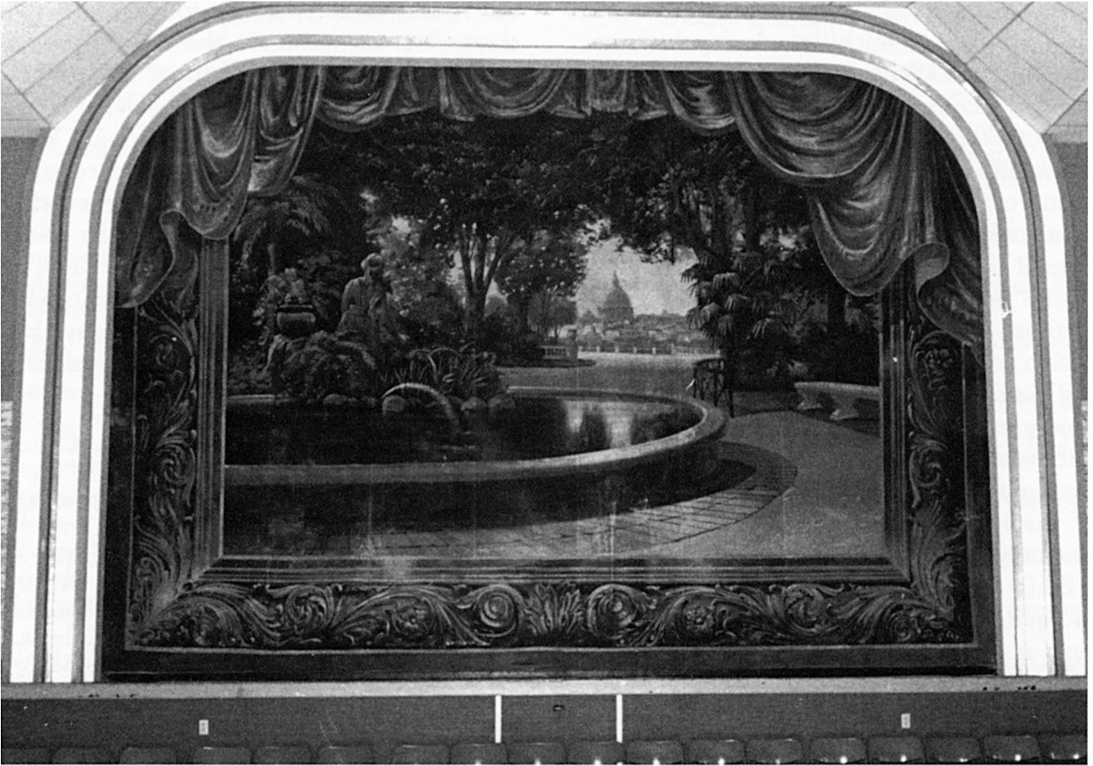


FIG. 4. *The Auditorium* (1911), West Point, Nebraska. Front drop curtain by the Kansas City Scenic Company. Photograph by Christian H. Ehlers.

guaranteed audiences would hear “the twitter of sparrows, the drawn out notes of the meadow lark, the melodious air of the canary, and the jerky call of the bob white” as well as several whistling solos.³³ Swiss Bell Ringers came to Hampton in 1900. The Chicago Boys’ Choir included the marmabophone, bagpipes, tambourine, castanets, and renditions by Mrs. Sarah Wathena Brown’s fifteen-hundred-dollar harp.³⁴

There were those that preferred more traditional plays to musical ensembles, but reporters and editors dutifully pushed audiences to consider musical performances as just as much “fun” as dramatic performances and vaudeville. Following the performance by the Community Quartet, a Lyceum course offer-

ing in Rushville in 1917, the *Recorder* article described the evening as “more genuine fun and enjoyment than we have seen at many dramatic performances.”³⁵

Lyceum Bureaus seemed like an optimum solution to the problem of providing entertainment in small towns. Unfortunately, they were ultimately doomed by Mr. Edison’s moving picture machines, which by the time of America’s entry into World War I had grown in sophistication and attracted audiences at a dime or twenty cents a head, rather than the more pricey costs of live-action entertainment, generally 25 or 50 cents an evening. The Whitney Bioscope Company brought moving pictures of the San Francisco earthquake and fire, billed as “the most thrilling spectacle ever

witnessed" and promising a view of the city in flames, seen from the hilltop during the "great conflagration."³⁶ Jesse James and his outlaw band, the coronation of the King of England, and other exciting depictions packed audiences into small storefront theatres. At a set rental of fifteen dollars a week, motion picture entrepreneurs could show the same film several times and turn a tidy profit, for expenses were small, especially when compared to those for opera houses. After all, what live action could hope to compete with one moving picture show bill at the Tecumseh Opera House in November 1907? For a dime, audience members could enjoy the antics and spectacle of an American fireman, the Casey wreck of the Rock Island, a magician, a miller, a chimney sweep, Admiral Dewey's fleet, the CB&Q wreck, an old bank robbery, a jersey mosquito, a kidnapped child, the Rock of Ages, love at the pump trough, a passion play, love behind moonlight, the bombardment of Port Arthur, a view of St. Louis, a gardener and his hose, the Hale Sisters' Dance, and Carrie Nation in the saloon!³⁷

Motion picture establishments advertised not only the latest entertainments, but up-to-date technological innovations as well, such as "an absolutely fireproof steel booth equipped with automatic fire shutters; the use of two machines entirely eliminates intermissions between reels."³⁸ *Birth of a Nation*, D. W. Griffith's influential saga of the Civil War, traveled with a symphony orchestra across the country in the years before World War I, breaking all records and selling seat for 50 cents, \$1.00, and \$1.50, proving that audiences would pay top dollar for top entertainment, live or not.

The end of World War I also spelled the end of the opera house era in entertainment. Affordability of automobiles, coupled with excessive increases on train tickets for performers, closed down a number of small town opera houses as these theatres could no longer afford even the inexpensive Lyceum Bureau offerings. Society moved on: movie houses attracted the crowds that once patronized op-

era houses. Audiences no longer restricted themselves to whatever the local manager could afford to bring into town; cities up to thirty miles away could be considered when deciding what to do for an evening. Opera houses staggered under the unprecedented competition and, coupled with aging architectural problems, many closed their doors forever, remaining a memory of good times in the hearts and minds of Plains residents who looked to the opera house as a visible symbol of the prosperity of their communities during the years 1887-1917.

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