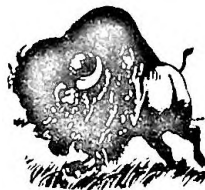


26-28 Circus



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

July-August 1986

THE OPERA HOUSE - Part I

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

The people of Buffalo County from their earliest beginnings had an interest in the arts. Along with the building of churches and schools, almost every town had an opera house for home-town and touring theatricals, school events and social gatherings. Sometimes in a single building, but often the second floor of a downtown business building, the opera house played an important role in the cultural and social life of the community.

The interior plan of the opera house distinguished it from the community hall. A stage with wings, dressing rooms and storage areas for costumes, flats and properties were essential to the opera house. A curtain on the stage was also a requisite. Pastoral scenes might adorn the curtain, but more often it would carry advertisements of local business firms. Seats were movable. These were common type chairs which could be rearranged to line the walls of the room when a dance or an athletic exhibition was held. Later folding chairs were used. More's Hall in Kearney and Abels' Hall in Miller were more commonly known as halls but had the features of an opera house and were at times referred to as such.

The opera houses of the towns in Buffalo County offered programs and events of similar nature—high school commencement, school plays and musical concerts, declamatory contests, home-talent plays, lyceum courses and traveling road shows. The hot upstairs rooms were not often used in the summer. Instead, local entertainment was found in open air band concerts, Chautauqua, and traveling road shows under tents.

The Meisner Opera House in Shelton was built in 1884. George H. Meisner, an early Buffalo County farmer and stock-raiser, established a private bank in Shelton. He built a 2-story brick building with the bank on the first floor and an opera house upstairs. It was designed with a balcony section, a deep stage with wings and dressing rooms. The usual social, school and public events were held during the opera house's long history. On New Year's Eve, 1889, a Hard Times Sociable and Watch Meeting was given by the Young Ladies Art Society. The *Shelton Clipper* of February 14, 1890, reported:

Mr. E. Oliver, manager of the opera house, has made arrangements whereby the amusement-loving people of Shelton will be given a chance to see a first-class minstrel show by a first-class company. J. H. Hallidy & Co. minstrels will appear February 22.

The February 28 *Clipper* stated that the company had played to a crowded house.

Leora Lane and a company of artists appeared for a week commencing January 16, 1893, presenting some of the popular plays of the day. Advertising a "Change of

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Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people.

Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$ 7.50
- Institutional Membership \$10.00
- Supporting Membership \$25.00

Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Chandler Lynch III; Vice-President, Margaret Hohnholt; Secretary, Alice Howell; Treasurer, Leo Henriksen; Directors: Glen E. Wisch, Frances Link, Barb Avery, Merlin Berglund, Philip S. Holmgren, Minnette Steinbrink, Henrietta Rhamy, Edna Hehner, Robert Stubblefield and Marian Johnson. Publications Chairman, Alice Howell.

Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director.

Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

On July 12 at the old Baptist Church in Kearney, the Buffalo County Historical Society commemorated the visit to Kearney of President and Mrs. Harry S. Truman and daughter Margaret when they attended Baptist church services there on June 7, 1948. A memorial plaque was presented to Mrs. Rowena Bissell, present owner of the church. A short program highlighted the events of that day, with accounts from those who attended the service. Leonard Silver was chairman of the program, and made the presentation on behalf of the Society.

AT THE MUSEUM — More people are finding Trails and Rails Museum this year than ever before. With the summer season half over, we can look at our attendance figures and make some comparisons. From Memorial Day through July 15 this year we had 1,468 visitors sign our Guest Log. They have come from 35 different states besides Nebraska and from 7 foreign countries.

We have seen a 133% increase in attendance over the past five years. Not only are tourists who pass through Buffalo County finding the museum, but also many local people who had been intending to visit, have stopped by this summer.

FAIR TIME — County fair time is coming up soon. Once again we will be setting up a booth and taking the opportunity to visit with you. We will be at the fairgrounds August 21-25. Stop by and see us. Catch up on the latest activities at the museum and with the society.

If you would like to visit with BCHS members and others fair-goers, you can help run our booth. Just call the museum (234-3041) and reserve the time you will be there.

DONATIONS — Pamela Long has donated a lovely settee for the Freighters Hotel. Mr. and Mrs. Duane Day have donated a picture of the Odessa depot when it was in use. Does anyone know where we can find pictures of the Elm Creek, Riverdale, and Poole depots?

NEW MEMBERS

- | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| Rowena Bissell | Kearney | Robert and Lois Lawhead | Kearney |
| Mr. and Mrs. R. J. Ehly | Kearney | Mrs. Donald B. Lewis | Denver, CO |
| Richard Oldfather | San Antonio, TX | Helen Kotsiopoulos Collins | San Jose, CA |

NEW LIFE MEMBERSHIPS

- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|---------|
| Letha and George Raffety | Kearney | Jean and Chandler Lynch | Kearney |
|------------------------------------|---------|-----------------------------------|---------|

Bills Nightly," and admissions of 25¢ and 35¢, the company presented *Lightning Rod Agent*, *Rose Garland*, *Fun in a Boarding School*, *East Lynne*, *Joshua Whitcomb*, and *Gyp the Mountain Girl*. The *Clipper* commented afterwards that "while the company has been playing to fair audiences, it is deserving of much better patronage."

A big affair on June 6, 1890 was the commencement exercises of the first graduating class of Shelton High School held in the opera house. From that time until the late 1920's high school commencement was held in the opera house. A 25¢ admission was charged to help defray expenses.



First graduating class of Shelton High School, 1890. Class members: Jessie Cassidy, Edith Childs, Della Wyman, Lulu McCreary, Ida Stockell, Nora Scott, May Beugier, Ursula Waters, Cary Moore, Maud Lamberson, Stewart Sammons, Albert Fisher, Clyde Stebbins. H. A. Hull, principal.

Photo courtesy of Irene Garrett.

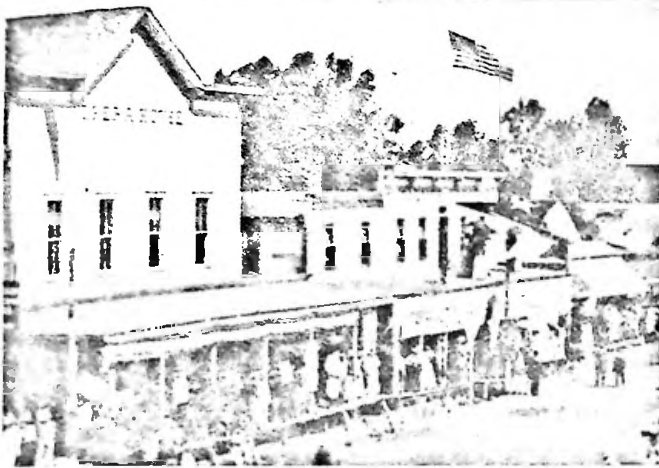
After Mr. Meisner's death, the building was sold to M. A. Hostetler and the second floor became the Hostetler Opera House and continued with the same offerings and activities. Although not now in general use, once a year for the past few years the opera house has been the location of the Shelton Jaycees Halloween Spook House.

The Ravenna Opera House was located on the second floor of a building constructed by Frank Havlicek in 1886. It originally had a seating capacity of 300 but while the building was under the ownership of the Krug Brewing Co. of Omaha, a 24 x 40 foot addition was built in 1905. In addition to the usual functions identified with opera houses, such as masquerade balls, golden wedding anniversaries, and benefit performances, plays in Czech and Bohemian language and Czech concerts were given almost annually from 1889 to 1940. Among the many offerings of the opera house noted in the *Ravenna News* was the following from the December 17, 1891 issue:

The Opera House was packed by a large crowd of Bohemians last night, the attraction being an entertainment by Bartos, a Bohemian ventriloquist. After the program the floor was cleared and dancing commenced. The music for the occasion was laboriously ground out of an asthmatic hand organ.

And in the May 29, 1896 *News*:

Maid from the Rockies will give a shooting exhibition at the Opera House on June 10. There will also be 50 Indians and Squaws. If Lone Bear comes to the Pow-Wow he will bring his medicine and flaming arrows.



Ravenna Opera House.
Photo courtesy of Bob Roy.

The story of the Ravenna Opera House would not be complete without reference to the Big Onion Cafe/Tavern, which operated from 1917 into the 1950's below the opera house. It was famous for its roast beef sandwich and people traveled great distances just to have a Big Onion sandwich, seasoned with its special combination of spices that was a trade secret passed on from owner to owner.

Over its 80+ years there were many changes of ownership of the opera house. The upstairs was condemned many years ago, the entire building condemned in the 1960's, and it was torn down in the early 1970's.

The Gibbon Opera House, with a seating capacity of 600, was built in 1892 by L. J. Babcock at Front and Gilmore Streets. Described in the *Buffalo County Beacon* of October 26, 1892: "The new opera house building is 48 x 80 feet, the first floor being the large dry goods store of Fine Bros. & Co., the banking room of the First National, and other office rooms. The second floor is designed entirely for theatrical and other social entertainments, and is very handsomely finished." Wide stairs on the outside led to the second floor.

The Alonzo Hatch entertainers opened the new opera house on November 30, 1892. The troupe "comes well recommended from Mr. Reynard, manager of the opera house at Grand Island, and the people of Gibbon will have the pleasure of hearing one of the finest entertainments of the kind that travel."

A review in the *Beacon* of December 2 stated that "while their show is a fairly good one, it is scarcely up to the expectations of our people or to the management of the opera house."

A review of the *Gibbon Reporters* of 1916-17 finds the opera house the scene of many events—social dances, free picture shows, school plays, declamatory contest, basketball games, commencement exercises, a concert by the Hastings College Glee Club, plays by the Hugo Players and the Ambler Players, a lyceum course, convention headquarters, address by a "Dry" Amendment advocate, and a corset fitting film for ladies only.

The Gibbon Opera House played a key role in public and social events for 70 years. The building burned on October 10, 1962.



Corset Fittings

Moving Pictures

Special Show for Ladies Only

At the Opera House

Thursday Evening, May 25

At Eight O'clock

Ad. Gibbon Reporter May 18, 1916.

The Elm Creek Opera House on Front Street was built in 1906 by Ed Ray, Bill Clark and Sid Clark. The first floor of the two-story brick building was divided into areas of business and the opera house was on the second floor. One of the first public events held there was graduation exercises of the Class of 1908.

Local theatricals, school and church activities, social and political gatherings were held there, among them speeches by George Norris and William Jennings Bryan and plays by the traveling Red Path Entertainers. Silent movies were shown in the 1920's with a local girl at the piano playing during and between the film showings. During the depression years the opera house became a public market for local aid to area residents.

In 1969 the Elm Creek Opera House came to an end and the area was made into apartments.



Elm Creek Opera House.
Photo courtesy of Roena Mitchell.

The recently published Miller Heritage Book says: "The heart of the area is the Miller Community Hall, which is a very busy place. Many organizations use it for holding their meetings. Families hold reunions, and Saturday night dances are regular events."

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This hall was built by the Abel Brothers in 1908 and was known as the Abel Opera House. Some of the earliest events were the piano recitals of Mrs. Kidd and Mrs. Ruth Scott. Plays, movies, roller skating, club socials and family gatherings have taken place during its 78-year history, and so it continues today, a vital part of the Miller community.

Amherst has had two opera houses. From the *Miller Forum* of September 29, 1910 is the following news item:

The magnificent new opera house of Veal & Wagner at Amherst has provided a suitable place of entertainments, and to help supply the demand for amusement during the coming winter months, a dramatic club has been organized and the first of a series of plays was presented to a large and appreciative audience one night recently. . . . We know of no reason why the towns on this line having opera houses should not emulate the enterprise of Amherst by organizing amusement clubs which would prove great factors for the development of home talent, the supplying of clean entertainments and the keeping at home of much money that would otherwise go out of the community in the pockets of traveling companies.

A masquerade skating party was held there, according to the *Forum* of November 24, 1910. Later movies were shown. Graduation exercises were held at the opera house every year until around 1918 when Wm. (Bill) Buettner built a new building, part of which was a community hall, sometimes called the opera house. The Veal & Wagner building later became the Pentecostal Church. It has since been razed.

The opera house section of the Buettner building was extensively used for many years for school, public and social events. Part of the building has been torn down. A tavern is now located in the remaining part of the structure.

SOURCES

Mabel Vohland, *Trail Dust to Star Dust*, 1971; Miller Heritage Book, 1986; *Ravenna Centennial*, 1986; Shelton Clipper, Feb. 14, 28, 1890; Jan. 16, 1893; *Ravenna News*, Dec. 17, 1891, May 29, 1896; *Buffalo Co. Beacon*, Oct. 26, Dec. 2, 1892; *Gibbon Reporters*, 1916-17; *Miller Forum*, Sept. 29, Nov. 24, 1910. Letters from Edith Abraham, Irene Garrett; Personal interviews with Leroy Walker, Maxine Schroeder, Grace Widdowsen, Nora Ehresman, Irene Mollard, Lawrence Curd and Roena Mitchell.

(Part II will cover Opera Houses in Kearney)