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OPERA HOUSES IN KANSAS, NEBRASKA, AND THE DAKOTAS: 1870-1920

RONALD L. DAVIS

As the last frontier approached an end, nearly every town of any distinction on the Plains boasted an opera house. The term “opera house” was preferred over “theater” since opera was considered a highly respected art form rather than mere popular amusement, even though grand opera itself was seldom actually performed in the Great Plains. What the management offered on its stage depended primarily on the town’s proximity to a railroad, which in the late nineteenth century served as the major link to the outside world. Whether or not opera troupes ever sang for local audiences, a town’s opera house—on the Plains, as throughout small-town America—was viewed as the crowning achieve-

ment in the community’s social and cultural life, symbolic of civilization in the most exalted sense. More a monument to local dreams of grandeur than a profitable business, the opera house became a rallying point for civic boosterism, tangible proof that a town had come of age. Civic pride knew few limits. When Hallo’s Opera House opened in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1873, it was proclaimed “the finest west of the Missouri River”—definitely a challenge to more illustrious theaters in San Francisco.

OPERA HOUSE ARCHITECTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

Opera houses from Kansas to North Dakota ranged in seating capacity from 200 to 1,600, and were generally built on the second floor of a two- or three-story structure, with a hotel, hardware store, restaurant, saloon, or other place of business below. Construction costs averaged \$40,000 to \$60,000. Some were built of brick, others of stone, still others of wood. A few, like the Homestake, which opened in Lead, South Dakota, in 1914, were designed in connection with a recreation center that might include a swimming pool, ballroom, and bowling alleys.¹ Several earlier examples, such as the Deadwood

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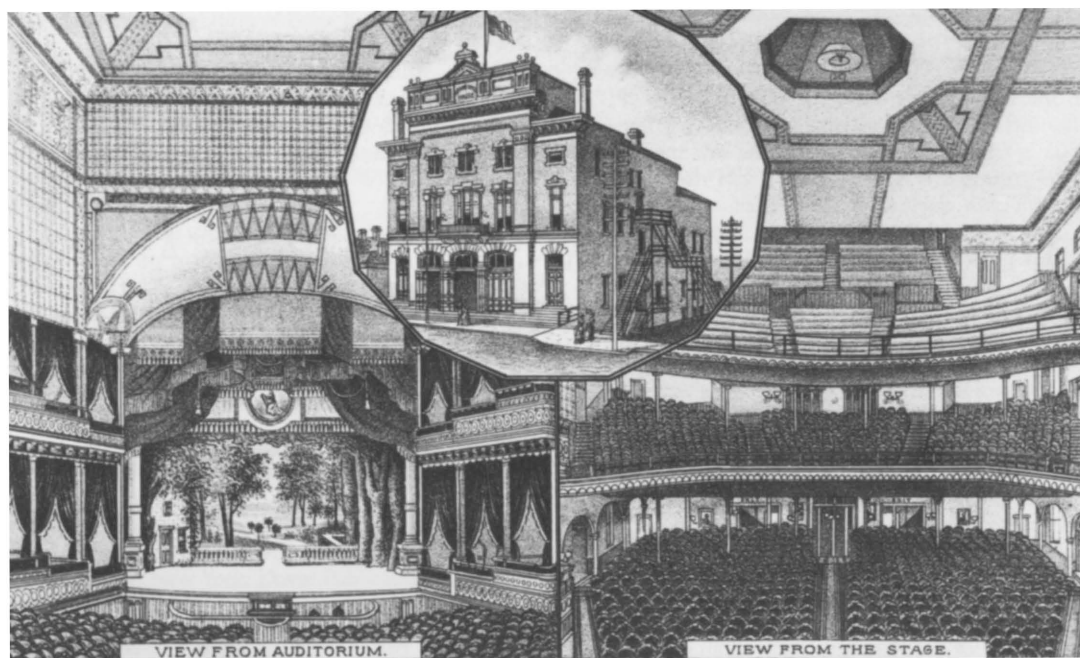


FIG. 1. *Grand Opera House as pictured in Events Atlas of Kansas.* Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.

Opera House, completed in 1885, had their origin in the craze for roller-skating that spread across the nation in the 1880s. Practical even in their entertainment, the citizens of Deadwood agreed to erect a building suitable for roller skating until the fad died out and then transform the structure into an opera house of which the town could be proud. In 1878 Bismarck, North Dakota, opened under one roof a combination courtroom, faro bank, saloon, and theater. As one old-timer remarked, "It was thus that without undue exertion one could litigate, speculate, 'irrigate,' or be entertained, according to his own tastes or needs."²

Normally business leaders pressed for the construction of an opera house, convinced that whatever enhanced their town's image in time would enrich the local economy and attract desirable settlers as well. Frequently a stock company was formed to finance the building once citizens decided the time was ripe to augment

their churches, schools, post office, hotel, and newspaper with a temple for the arts—further evidence of civic progress and permanence. "Now, let us add another link to this splendid chain by the erection of this proposed opera house," the *Omaha Republican* wrote in 1878 regarding the decision to begin Boyd's Opera House.³

In other cases a wealthy entrepreneur stood behind the building of opera houses. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, mother of William Randolph Hearst, was the instigator of the Homestake Opera House in Lead, having grown interested in the recreational and humanistic needs of that community during the time her husband, California senator George Hearst, was developing the Homestake Mining Company. More often a resident businessman proved the incipient force. Lincoln's pioneer opera house was erected in 1869 by local clothier H. Hallo. Six years later the house was destroyed by fire, and in

1876 it was rebuilt as the Centennial Opera House, sold in 1882 to German-born liquor dealer Fred Funke. Costa's Opera House in Topeka, originally built in 1861, was purchased in 1870 and remodeled by an Italian butcher, Lorenzo Costa. Costa's butcher shop was located on the ground floor next to a stairway leading up to the auditorium on the second floor. In 1880 Costa's building was purchased for \$20,000 by Lester M. Crawford, an enterprising tycoon who had started in Kansas as a boy by peddling apples, peanuts, and cigars to state legislators, but later controlled a chain of theaters in Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and Colorado.⁴



FIG. 2. *The small town opera house building also served many purposes. Wagner's Place occupied the ground floor of the Granville, North Dakota, Opera House. Photo courtesy of North Dakota State Historical Society.*



FIG. 3. *The Grand Opera House, Topeka, Kansas, about 1888. Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.*

Fire posed the greatest hazard to opera houses, claiming scores of theaters between 1870 and 1900. The Crawford Opera House in Topeka, recently remodeled and renamed, burned early in the morning of 2 December 1880. The following year ten Topekans formed a corporation to raise funds to build the more imposing Grand Opera House on Jackson Street (fig. 3). Mindful of the fire that had destroyed Crawford's theater, the Abilene Opera House was constructed in 1880 of brick, with a thousand-barrel tank placed on its third story to supply the boilers with water and be available in case of fire.⁵ People frequently shunned a theater in which a fire had occurred and even after the house had been remodeled, many feared to enter. Ministers who opposed the whole notion of theater often took advantage of destruction by warning members of their congregation that the burning had been "an act of God."

For most townspeople the opening of a local

opera house called for much self-congratulation, and dedicatory speeches were appropriately laudatory. Construction on the Topeka Grand Opera House, the Honorable John Martin assured in his opening address, had been "pushed with the energy and zeal so peculiar to the western man, who builds a house in a day and a city in a month."⁶

Interiors of theaters were consistently described as the most lavish in the area, if not any place in the West, and by frontier standards opera houses were dazzlingly ornate, at times bordering on gaudy. Gilt boxes, frescoed ceilings, marble lobby floors, Corinthian columns, carpets from Brussels, and mirrors from France frequently adorned the houses.

At the Stevens Opera House in Garden City, Kansas, which opened in 1886, seats were red plush, with tapestry upholstered chairs in the

boxes. The Metropolitan Opera House in Grand Forks, North Dakota, was a gem of ivory, blue, and gold baroque decor, with two curving balconies, luxurious draperies, and upholstered seats. Residents claimed it was almost a replica of the famous Chicago Auditorium designed by Louis Sullivan. At the Brown Grand Opera House in Concordia, Kansas, built in 1907 by Colonel Napoleon Bonaparte Brown as a memorial to his family name, the proscenium arch was gilded, and painted on the drop curtain was a depiction of Napoleon at Austerlitz (fig. 4). The curtain of Lloyd's Opera House in Jamestown, North Dakota, displayed a view of Renaissance Rome, with Saint Peter's Cathedral in the distance. The Homestake Opera House in Lead was illuminated by crystal chandeliers and decorated with cherubs, murals, and intricate carvings.⁷



FIG. 4. *Brown Grand Opera House, Concordia, Kansas. Note the elaborately painted drop curtain.* Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.

Until the mid-1880s when electricity started to be used, opera houses were lighted by gas or even kerosene lamps, and heated by steam. Managers repeatedly claimed that the scenery was fireproof, but time and again fire proved them wrong. Most frontier opera houses were not built with lofts for flying scenery, so set changes were accomplished by roll drops and sliding wings. The larger houses were equipped with three or four dressing rooms, although makeshift accommodations were often found necessary.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT

Opening night invariably proved a social event of the first magnitude, and the community's elite turned out in formal evening dress. "Clothes, of course, do not make an opera," the *Grand Forks Herald* announced when the town's Metropolitan opened in 1890, "but they certainly help." That night carriages streamed to the entrance on Third Street, unloading Grand Forksians dressed in their most stylish attire. In Chadron, Nebraska, opening night tickets could be secured at the local post office, whereas the Chicago Clothing Company in Caldwell, Kansas, offered free tickets for opening night at the opera house there with each purchase of \$5.00 or more. "Caldwell is not going to be on the black list of the better class of traveling shows after this season," the town newspaper had assured readers earlier, "if the lack of a good home is all that causes it." Caldwell citizens were soon gratified when itinerant performers pronounced their theater the best and coziest south of Topeka. Fifth Avenue in Jamestown, North Dakota, was still unpaved when Lloyd's Opera House opened there in 1893, but the new hall, with its four hundred fifty electric lights and massive chandelier, represented a beacon of civilization.⁸

Most of the year plains opera houses were dark, which only made their infrequent events all the more exciting. Local dignitaries turned out with regularity, and area politicians were much in evidence in the larger cities. The local



FIG. 5. Although the Newark, South Dakota, Opera House did not open until 1912, it was built in anticipation of urban glory. Photo courtesy of South Dakota State Historical Society.

press consistently described the audiences as the best-dressed anywhere. Garden City, Kansas, claimed more full-dress suits than in any other town west of the Missouri River. The Stevens Opera House in Garden City was built adjacent to the Windsor Hotel so that J. A. Stevens and his bride could enter their private box at the opera through a door connecting with their hotel suite. Mrs. Stevens made her entrance on opening night wearing a long-trained, crimson velvet evening gown. Grand opera performances especially brought forth pronouncements of self-esteem. "We are confident," the *Topeka Capital* declared in 1885, "that in no place, large or small, can there be found a more refined and discriminating audience than was assembled at the Grand opera house last evening." On occasion patrons were said to be truly regal. Grand Duke Alexis of Russia may have attended a performance at Costa's Opera House in Topeka on his return from his famous buffalo hunt in western Kansas in 1872, although the facts of the incident remain clouded.⁹

More certainly, frontier audiences were noisier and less well behaved than those of today, forcing the management to struggle at times to maintain a semblance of dignity. Reviewing an evening at Hallo's Opera House in Lincoln, the



FIG. 6. This 1894 dance in the old opera house in Concordia, Kansas, represents the class of local events held in opera houses. Photo courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society.

Daily State Journal reported on 12 September 1876: "A couple of individuals were noticed circulating the bottle very freely in the gallery, without seeming to care who saw them partake of the flowing bowl. One of the parties also thought his feet needed a little airing and pulled off his shoes and stockings and held them out to the breeze." The account went on to emphasize that such behavior was no way for the "political, business, and social center of Nebraska" to receive a visiting opera troupe. Occasionally opera houses were subject to damage suits, as when an inebriated patron fell out of the balcony at the Grand Opera House in Topeka, suffering a fractured collarbone. A jury of farmers awarded the injured party \$300. In Bismarck a near riot broke out when Dotty Do-

lores, billed as "The Belle Canto of Chicago," sang a number derogatory to the family of one of the town's rougher citizens.¹⁰ At their best, audiences were not given to punctuality, and performances rarely started on time.

GRAND OPERA ON TOUR

Itinerant opera companies were not only rare, but they had their problems and limitations, too. Yet in spite of limitations and the fact that opera houses were the venue for almost every other type of entertainment, grand opera did sometimes come to the Plains. Until the 1880s the few prairie performances staged were sung with piano accompaniment only, and even later in the century all but the largest companies used

orchestras numbering ten or fewer. Scores were severely cut, with choral passages usually omitted, since the expense of traveling with large numbers of singers cut into profits. Prompters were not used and sets were minimal. The custom persisted of calling a favored prima donna before the curtain between acts to sing a popular ballad like "The Last Rose of Summer," no matter what the opera might be. When Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* was staged in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1869, just six years after Quantrill's raid, the "Tower Scene" from Verdi's *Il Trovatore* was included to compensate for the choral selections of the Donizetti opera's having been eliminated. A decade later, scenes or entire acts might be presented with sets and costumes, rather than a complete opera.¹¹

The Emma Abbott Grand English Opera Company was the most frequent troupe to play the Plains during the nineteenth century, opening the Topeka Grand Opera House in 1882, the Stevens Opera House in Garden City in 1886, and the Metropolitan Opera House in Grand Forks in 1890. For an Abbott engagement in Topeka in 1880 special trains were formed to bring listeners from Atchison, Lawrence, and Emporia, returning them to their points of departure immediately after the performance. At the Grand Forks opening a decade later people came from Manitoba, Minnesota, South Dakota, and all parts of North Dakota to hear Abbott sing. Her company gave its performances in English and consisted of a dozen principals, ten instrumentalists, and toward the middle of the 1880s, thirty choristers. Abbott, a coloratura soprano, sang most of the leading roles. During an 1887 season in Wichita she performed the soprano leads in *Martha*, *Faust*, and *Linda di Chamounix* on three consecutive nights. When it was discovered by Topekans a few years before that Abbott would appear in *Faust* but not *Carmen*, residents voiced such strong disappointment that the soprano agreed to sing the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor* prior to another singer's *Carmen* performance. During an 1884 season Abbott performed Gilda in *Rigoletto* for Topekans and



FIG. 7. Kearney, Nebraska, Opera House. Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society.

upon request stepped before the curtain at the conclusion of the opera to sing the beloved "Home, Sweet Home."¹²

The most illustrious opera troupe to play the last frontier was Her Majesty's Opera Company, managed by British impresario James Henry Mapleson, which offered seasons in 1884, 1885, and 1886 in the West. Unlike Abbott's, Mapleson's performances were sung in Italian, and his company was considerably larger, consisting of one hundred sixty people. His roster of singers included the famed Adelina Patti, Emma Nevada, Minnie Hauk, and Louise Dotti, and his plains repertory was highlighted by *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Il Trovatore*. Ticket prices for Mapleson's engagements were higher than for any previous operatic experiences, with reserved seats priced at \$2.50 each.¹³

Audiences appear to have gained critical standards quickly. The local press seemed enchanted during Mapleson's first season at the Topeka Grand Opera House in 1885. A typical report read "The visit of such a large and talented company as Col. Mapleson's to a city of Topeka's limited age and population is at once a compliment and an honor." A year later newspapers were unanimous in their disgust. "The

chorus, male and female," *The Lance* recorded in 1886, "is the characteristic Maplesonian conglomeration of misshapes, cross-eyes, kaleidoscopic costumes and miserable acting, making a comic valentine appearance that no matter how fine the singing is, detracts very much from the opera."¹⁴

Other touring companies before 1900 were plagued with even greater deficiencies and staged more light opera than grand. Until the late 1880s people remained enthusiastic, eager to demonstrate their cultural awareness. During two performances by a troupe headed by Italian tenor Pasquale Brignoli in Leavenworth in 1869, the audience demanded frequent encores and tossed several bouquets upon the stage. "Leavenworth appreciates a good opera troupe," the town's *Times and Conservative* declared proudly. "The taste for opera is as strong here as in New York."¹⁵

LIGHT OPERA TOURING COMPANIES

Most of the works presented in prairie opera houses were in the less weighty vein: *Martha*, *The Bohemian Girl*, *The Chimes of Normandy*, the operettas of Offenbach and Gilbert and Sullivan. Throughout the 1870s enthusiasm ran high, and houses were generally full. When Anna Bishop sang *Martha* at Costa's Opera House in 1873, a local critic claimed her trill "caught of skylarks and love-notes learnt of robins." The next year the Flotow opera was performed at Hallo's in Lincoln by the Redpath English Opera Company from Boston, consisting of only five members but promising in advertisements that the production "will be brought with full and correct costumes, stage effects, etc., and in all respects save chorus and orchestra, the work will be presented as upon the Italian or English stage." The local reviewer praised all four singers and assured readers that the pianist "was an orchestra in himself."¹⁶

Usually the touring opera companies had a good voice or two among them, and the melodies alone were worth the price of admission.

"What good luck for a country child to hear those tuneful old operas sung by people who were doing their best," Willa Cather recalled from her girlhood in Red Cloud, Nebraska (fig. 8). On three occasions Cather heard the Andrews Opera Company from Mankato, Minnesota, but the noted Maurice Grau's company opened the Kerr Opera House in Hastings, and the Carleton Grand Opera Company gave three performances that same year (1884) in Lincoln.¹⁷

After 1890 the diminishing frontier saw less opera since railroad rates had increased and the Great Plains suffered a general economic recession. Grand opera, the most expensive of all entertainment forms, was an early casualty of the hard times, particularly since public interest in opera had begun to wane during the late 1880s.¹⁸ Having established themselves as civilized men and women, townspeople on the Plains grew weary of the expense of operatic performances and failed to comprehend why opera house management could not show a substantial profit, especially when box office receipts were good. As the public turned to other forms of amusement opera passed out of fashion.

Sporadic concerts by opera singers continued on the Plains throughout the rest of the century. By the 1880s it had become customary for a prima donna who had achieved stardom to affiliate with a manager and form her own opera or concert company, which would tour not only the large cities but small towns as well. The Clara Louise Kellogg Concert Company, the Emma Juch Grand Concert Company, and those headed by Emma Nevada and Minnie Hauk all fell into this category. Although born in New York City, Hauk had grown up on a farm near Leavenworth, Kansas, and was therefore greeted as a returning daughter when she sang in Topeka in 1883 and 1886. She had been engaged by Mapleson for the London premiere of *Car-men* in 1878 and was widely credited with establishing the popularity of the Bizet opera after its initial failure at the Opera-Comique in Paris. Governor Glick and other political dignitaries

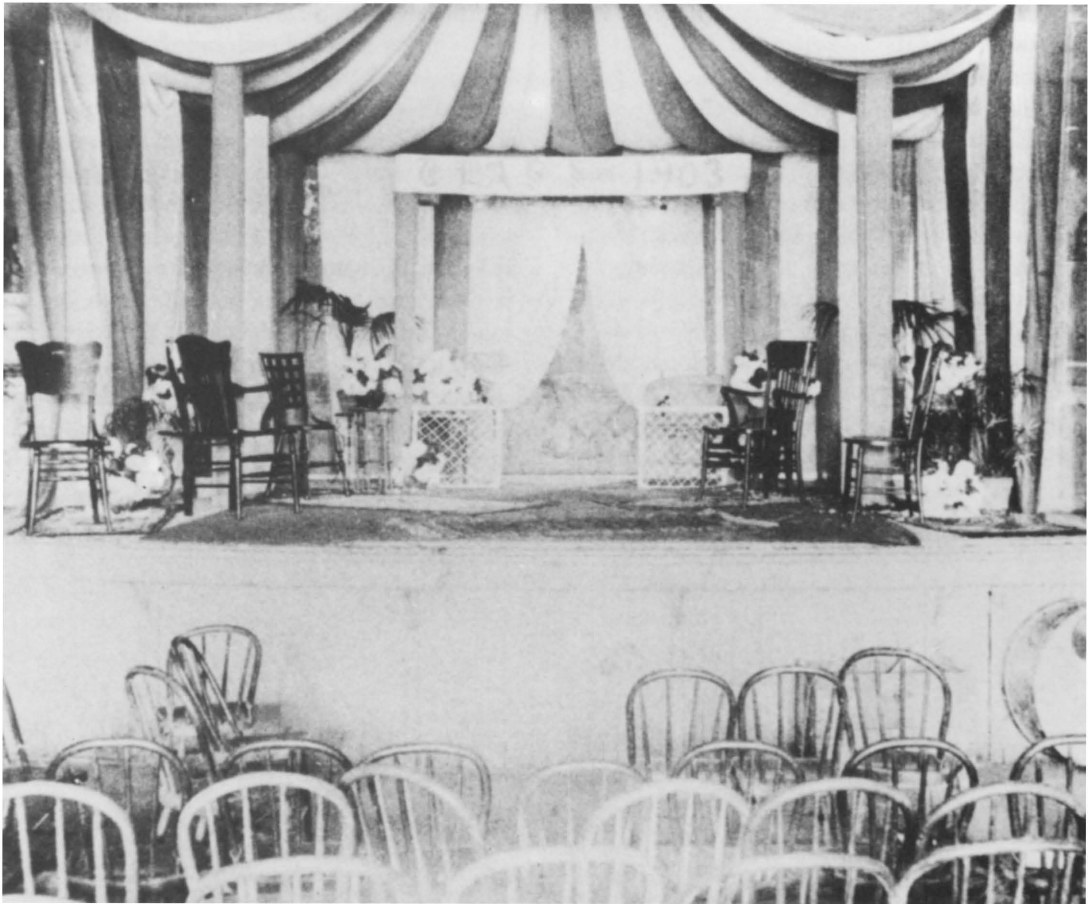


FIG. 8. *Red Cloud, Nebraska, Opera House.* Photo courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society.

attended her second Topeka concert, and Mme. Hauk was asked to encore each of her numbers.¹⁹

As long as artists conformed to local concepts of propriety and decency, they were normally received with hospitality and enthusiasm. Should artists violate those conventions, however, citizens and the press could attack hostilely. When Carlotta Patti, sister of the more famous Adelina Patti, sang a concert at the Leavenworth Opera House in November 1879, she was alleged to be drunk, and a legal battle ensued. Carlotta was lame, and some later

thought that contributed to the charge against her. Also, her facial contortions during a "Laughing Song" could have given the impression that Patti was inebriated. At any rate, she did not sing well, possibly because she was exhausted from travel, and apparently she did order a hot brandy backstage and was seen partaking of wine with her meal at the hotel. That was enough to incite the strong prohibitionist sentiment prevalent in Kansas at the time. Thomas Roscoe, manager of the Leavenworth house, claimed in an interview that Patti was drunk before, during, and after the

concert. Equally damning, Mrs. Anthony, wife of the editor of the *Leavenworth Daily Times* and a prominent arbiter of local taste, voiced her displeasure with the concert. "When people pay a dollar and a half a ticket to hear good singing," fumed an editorial in the *Daily Times*, "they have a right to expect and to demand something better than a drunken woman's maudlin mediocrity."²⁰

OPERA HOUSE DRAMA

There was far more drama staged in prairie opera houses than grand opera. Half a dozen

times each year a traveling stock company settled into the local hotel and thrilled residents with a week's run on the opera house stage. Larger towns were entertained more often and later booked road shows on their way to or from Denver or the West Coast. Many internationally renowned stars that took to the road played the major cities of the Plains and were appropriately received by large and responsive audiences. Joseph Jefferson was seen in his perennially acclaimed *Rip Van Winkle*, Fanny Davenport in Sardou's melodramatic *Fedora*, James O'Neill in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Lillie Langtry in *Pygmalion and Galatea*; Minnie



FIG. 9. De Smet, South Dakota, citizens posed for a cast picture on the stage of the Couse Opera House. Photo courtesy of South Dakota State Historical Society.

Maddern Fiske, Adelaide Ristori, and Helena Modjeska appeared also.²¹ Shakespeare's plays, especially his tragedies, remained exceptionally popular, but audiences also enjoyed melodramas and farces. Dependable favorites included *Under the Gaslight*, *East Lynne*, *The Two Orphans*, and David Belasco's *The Heart of Maryland*. Scripts generally were secondary to scenery, since nineteenth-century audiences adored visual excitement and spectacle of the sort called for by *Ben-Hur* and *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

The poorest of the road companies were the so-called "Tom shows," troupes that presented endless versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The live bloodhounds more than compensated for the third-rate actors. "How the barking of these dogs behind the scenes used to make us catch our breath!" Willa Cather remembered. Temperance dramas continued in popularity, often staged by home talent. When *Out in the Streets* was given at the Caldwell Grand Opera House in 1885, the press announced, "The audience was in perfect sympathy with the players." Four years later *Social Glass! or Victims of the Bottle* was staged at the Grand Opera House in Topeka. The playbill guaranteed: "No Lecture half so good. No other play half so entertaining."²²

Minstrel shows and, later, vaudeville proved irresistible to plains audiences, just as they did throughout the rest of the country. A rousing street parade usually preceded blackface entertainment; vaudeville performances emphasized such star attractions as Eva Tanguay, Julian Eltinge, and Sir Harry Lauder. John L. Sullivan, the bareknuckled heavyweight champion of the world, made an appearance at the Bowersock Opera House in Lawrence; William F. Cody, the indomitable "Buffalo Bill" who had grown up in Kansas and Nebraska, appeared at the Funke Opera House in Lincoln with a company that included Buck Taylor, famed in the world of show business as "The King of the Cowboys."²³

Not all the offerings on the opera house stages were so kindly received. When May Vernon's Burlesque Company played an engagement at the Funke in February 1887, the press was quick

to point out that the show did not live up to its advertising that hinted at naughty shenanigans. "The advertisements succeeded in victimizing a houseful of very respectable male citizens of the state of Nebraska last night," the *Lincoln Evening News* reported. "The young men of the city were present, and likewise the old men. The members of the legislature were not conspicuous for their absence, and the lobbyists occupied front seats. . . . The performance was almost without a redeeming feature. There was tiresome singing by plain women without voices; fair dancing by two young men and a woman of doubtful age. . . . When the curtain fell a thousand men kicked themselves down the stairs and went home to pray for sense."²⁴

As well as providing a variety of entertainment for an eager public, opera houses served as community centers for dances, recitals, lectures, political and religious meetings, graduation exercises, trials, wrestling matches, and traveling Chautauqua shows. Serious music remained a periodic treat, particularly in the larger towns. Railroad centers might expect to hear an occasional orchestra concert, perhaps conducted by Theodore Thomas or Leopold Damrosch, John Philip Sousa and his band, or such artists as Lillian Nordica, Ernestine Schumann-Heink, and Nellie Melba. Grand opera performances continued after the turn of the century, including rare productions of the musical dramas of Richard Wagner. *Parsifal* was staged in 1908 both at the Brown Grand Opera House in Concordia and at Lloyd's Opera House in Jamestown, following the sensational introduction of the Wagner opera in pirated form at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York by only five years.²⁵ Much of the opera given on the Plains during the early twentieth century was presented by the San Carlo Opera Company, which offered the standard Italian and French works all across the country in budget productions. Local patrons welcomed such visits, putting up the required guarantees and proving gracious hosts. Lead businessman John Finola later recalled that when the Homestake Opera House opened in 1914, his mother cooked an

Italian dinner for the eleven members of the cast.²⁶

ARRIVAL OF THE MOTION PICTURE

By the eve of World War I, however, as Victorian propriety gave way to an age of increased mechanization and affordable mass culture, moving pictures were the major attraction at most small-town opera houses. Although magic lantern shows had often been seen earlier, a touring opera company probably brought Topeka its first movies. On the evening of 28 January 1897, Rosabel Morrison sang a performance of *Carmen* at the Topeka Grand Opera House. In the final act, when Carmen has her confrontation with Don José outside the bullring, footage of an "authentic Spanish bull fight" was projected on a canvas stretched across the stage, giving the Kansas capital not only its first movie, but its first mixed media presentation as well.²⁷

After the turn of the century practically every vaudeville show that played the Plains contained moving pictures and illustrated songs, and by 1905 exclusively motion picture entertainment was becoming common. Films at first consisted of one reel, run by hand, with an admission charge of five cents. Often these movies were shown in the old opera houses; many were converted into movie theaters, as the "flickers" came to attract larger numbers of men, women, and children from all classes. In town after town marquee ablaze with neon soon announced that the old opera house had been renamed the Regent, the Orpheum, the Bijou, or the name simply abbreviated to the Grand. In the larger theaters a Wurlitzer organ was frequently added to augment the screen dramas, whereas a local pianist would accompany the action on an upright on the Wednesday and Saturday nights when movies were customarily shown in the smaller theaters.

By 1915 moving pictures had grown longer and admission had soared to a dime. Sometimes shown on the same bill with Roscoe Arbuckle in *Fickle Fatty's Fall*, *Old Heidelberg* with Dor-



FIG. 10. The opera house in Iroquois, Dakota Territory (South Dakota), was built in 1882. At the time this picture was taken in 1955, the lower floor was a church with the stage hidden behind the pulpit by a wallboard partition. Photo courtesy of South Dakota State Historical Society.

othy Gish ran five reels.²⁸ The American cinema's first masterwork was D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, shown throughout the Plains during 1916, usually at the local opera house, the only suitable place. On 18 and 19 December 1916, for example, the twelve-reel film, hailed alternately as "The Great American Sensation" and the "World's Greatest Spectacle," found its way to Bloomfield, Nebraska, where it was shown twice daily on a reserved seat basis and with symphony orchestra. The *Bloomfield Monitor* announced: "Never in the history of Bloomfield has such a production been produced in its entirety." The town anticipated Griffith's epic for weeks, especially the parts showing Sherman's march to the sea and the burning of Atlanta, which the local press claimed were "quite the most wonderful of many wonderful scenes."²⁹

CONCLUSION

The excitement had just begun. A decade later, when Lon Chaney's *Phantom of the Opera* played the converted Bowersock opera house in Lawrence, the management turned all the lights out in the scary sequences except for some blue ones that added to the eerie atmosphere. In 1927 came the first talking picture, and one by one the old theaters—with much fanfare—were wired for sound. In Kansas the Fox Midwest theater chain acquired and remodeled many of the former opera houses, including the Topeka Grand, to meet the amusement tastes of a new generation.³⁰

Sound motion pictures spelled death to the traveling stock companies, and economic conditions all but put an end to itinerant opera troupes. Plains opera houses that did not become movie theaters were turned into department stores, bowling alleys, warehouses, or funeral parlors. In the late nineteenth century, however, they stood as a mark of civic distinction for every prairie town that dreamed of becoming a city and as a clear indication of a community's aspirations. If Clay Center and Beloit had opera houses, then Concordia must build one or fall behind since its image demanded it. Virtually every county of the central Plains boasted at least one opera house, and some counties had two or three, many of which still stand today. Opera houses represented traditional culture, wisdom, refinement, and permanence, as well as an aggressive community spirit and a dedication to progress. They were both a monument to past accomplishments and a symbol of the dazzling future civic boosters envisioned for their town as the vanishing frontier yielded to civilization.

NOTES

1. *Lead Daily Call*, 1 September 1914.
2. Lawrence Carl Stine, *A History of Theater and Theatrical Activities in Deadwood, South Dakota 1876-90* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1962), pp. 222-23. See also *The First Fifty Years: American Roller Skates, 1860-1910* (Lincoln, Neb.: Museum of Roller Skating, 1983), pp. 2-3; William A. Rogers,

quoted in Forrest W. Daniel, "The Artist Who Played 'Hooky,'" *North Dakota History* 43 (Summer 1976): 7.

3. *Omaha Republican*, 23 February 1878.
4. Donald D. Toms and William J. Stone, *The Homestake Opera House and Recreation Building* (Lead, S. Dak.: Lead City Fine Arts Association, 1985), n.p.; Forest Donald Gossage, "A History of the Funke Opera House in Lincoln, Nebraska (1884-1902)" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1961), p. 6; Pat M. Ryan, "Hallo's Opera House: Pioneer Theater of Lincoln, Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 45 (December 1964): 330; Harlan Francis Jennings, *Grand Opera in Kansas in the 1880s* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1978), pp. 51, 74, 131-32; Ted G. Wear, "Mr. Theater—L.M. Crawford," *Bulletin of Shawnee County Historical Society* 43 (December 1966): 1.
5. William Frank Zornow, "The Theatre in Topeka, Kansas, 1858-1883," *Journal of the West* 17 (April 1978): 67; George Meltzer, "Social Life and Entertainment on the Frontiers of Kansas, 1854-1890" (Master's thesis, University of Wichita, 1941), p. 143.
6. *The Commonwealth*, 12 September 1882.
7. *History of Finney County, Kansas* (Finney County: Kansas Historical Society, 1954), vol. 2, p. 133; *They Came to Stay* (Grand Forks, N. Dak.: Centennial Committee, 1974), p. 17; Adam W. Rome, *Hidden Places* (Manhattan, Kansas: University for Man, 1984), p. 19; James Smorada and Lois Forrest, *Century of Stories: Jamestown and Stutsman County* (Jamestown, N. Dak.: Fort Seward Historical Society, 1983), p. 179; *Rapid City Journal*, 20 November 1882.
8. Quotation from *They Came to Stay*, p. 17; *Chadron Democrat*, 10 October 1889; *Caldwell Journal*, 1 January 1885, 31 January 1884; *Sumner County Clippings*, 1:48; Kansas State Historical Society, (KSHS) Topeka, Kansas; Smorada and Forrest, *Century of Stories*, p. 179.
9. *History of Finney County*, Vol. 2, p. 133; *The Capital* (Topeka, Kansas), 19 February 1885; "Grand Duke Alexis Witnessed Play at Costa's in 1872," *Shawnee County Clippings*, 28 (1929): 302, KSHS.
10. *Daily State Journal* (Lincoln, Nebraska), 12 September 1876; Jennings, *Grand Opera in Kansas*, pp. 31-32; Rogers' quotation in Daniel, "Artist Who Played 'Hooky,'" p. 7.
11. Jennings, *Grand Opera in Kansas*, pp. 27, 49, 54, 58, 69.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 22, 42, 45, 47, 110; *They Came to Stay*, p. 17.
13. Jennings, *Grand Opera in Kansas*, pp. 32, 42-43, 69, 115-16.
14. J.W. Wood, comp., "Programs and Scrapbook of Topeka Theaters in the 1880s," KSHS; *The Lance*, 13 March 1886.

15. *Leavenworth Times and Conservative*, 10 November 1869.
16. Zornow, "Theatre in Topeka," p. 65; Ryan, "Hallo's Opera House," pp. 327-28; *Daily State Journal*, 12 September 1874.
17. Willa Cather, "The Incomparable Opera House," Mildred R. Bennett, ed., *Nebraska History* 49 (Winter 1968): 375; *Hastings Daily Gazette-Journal*, 23 December 1884; Gossage, "History of the Funke Opera House," p. 22.
18. Jennings, *Grand Opera in Kansas*, pp. 143-47.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61, 67; *Leavenworth Daily Times*, 29 November 1879.
21. Gossage, "History of the Funke Opera House," pp. 23, 26, 32; Wood, "Programs and Scrapbook of Topeka Theaters," KSHS.
22. Cather, "Incomparable Opera House," 378; *Caldwell Journal*, 11 June 1885; "Theater Clippings," 1 (1889): 41, KSHS.
23. Emory Frank Scott, *One Hundred Years of Lawrence Theatres* (Lawrence, Kan.: House of Usher, 1979), p. 13; Gossage, "History of the Funke Opera House," p. 26.
24. *Lincoln Evening News*, 26 February 1887.
25. Peggy Doyen, "History of Theater in Concordia 1878-1925" (1969), pp. 39-40, KSHS; Smorada and Forrest, *Century of Stories*, p. 179.
26. *Black Hills Weekly*, 31 August 1972.
27. John W. Ripley, "Two Dozen Nickelodeons," *Bulletin of Shawnee County Historical Society* 43 (December 1966): 38.
28. Smorada and Forrest, *Century of Stories*, p. 177.
29. *Bloomfield Monitor*, 7, 14 December 1916.
30. Scott, *One Hundred Years of Lawrence Theatres*, p. 23; Wear, "Mr. Theater," 7.