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## Hand In Hand: The Story of Clinton, Iowa and the Rise of the Davis Opera House

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## Hand In Hand: The Story of Clinton, Iowa and the Rise of the Davis Opera House

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA  
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES AND FINE ARTS

HAND IN HAND:  
THE STORY OF CLINTON, IOWA  
AND THE RISE OF THE DAVIS OPERA HOUSE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Hand In Hand: The story of Clinton, Iowa and the Rise of The Davis Opera House documents the parallel development of the city of Clinton, Iowa due to the lumber boom of the 1880's and the building of the first opera house of significance in the community, The Davis Opera House. Documentation from primary and secondary sources reveals a strong connection between the lumber industry and the subsequent building of The Davis. In addition to lumber, rail developments and the building of a bridge across the Mississippi River connecting Iowa and Illinois, played a secondary role in Clinton's development. The innovations of lumber baron W.J. Young of Clinton were adopted world-wide in the transportation of logs. His relationship with the railroad serves as documentation for the interdependence of lumber and rail industries. The role of the Davis Opera House in the life of Clinton and more generally, the role of the opera house in any community is explored. The opera house is found to be a gauge for the life and vitality in any community and The Davis Opera House is an accurate gauge for the city of Clinton, Iowa in the late nineteenth century.

CHAPTER ONE:  
PURPOSE, SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the parallel developments of the city of Clinton, Iowa and The Davis Opera House in the late nineteenth century. The emphasis of the study is upon recording the significant data about the role of The Davis Opera House as a community focal point as well as documenting the industrial affairs, financial status, and social climate of the city of Clinton. The study concentrates on the factors of the lumber boom of the 1880's and the development of rail transportation as primary factors in the city's prosperity.

Previous Research:

A number of histories document the development and activity of particular opera houses or the physical characteristics of the buildings. Each city has its own story often told together with the rise of the opera house, town hall or community building in the city.

Solomon Smith's Theatrical Management in the West and South for Thirty Years and Noah Ludlow's Dramatic Life As I Found It tell of the early years of theatrical activity in various parts of the country while Rueben Fanders' A History of the Boyd Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska, Joseph Schick's The Early Theater in Eastern Iowa, and Robert Hamilton's A History of Theatre in Keokuk, Iowa from 1875 to 1900 are specific documentation of a city, and its theatres and theatrical activity. George Glenn and Richard Poole's work The Opera Houses of Iowa is a work devoted to the physical descriptions of the houses.

An article appearing in a historical column in The Clinton Herald documents the physical description of The Davis Opera House and the other businesses comprising The Davis Block. A handful of newspaper clippings and memorabilia tell of the activities within its walls. A survey of newspapers reveals its prominence in the community.

### Justification

The absence of theatre in histories of Clinton, Iowa. Theatre gets but little mention in most histories of the city, while descriptions of the theatres of the city are limited and vague. Katherine Long and Melvin Erickson address theatre structures in their work Clinton Iowa: A Pictorial History but give little if any description about the people and productions attached with each theatre. Local historian Everett Streit has addressed the major theatres and their activities, however, in the form of his newspaper column, Once Upon A Time, these topics have been covered only briefly. The Clinton Historical Society documents personalities in entertainment in their bicentennial work The History of Clinton County Iowa, but does not document the history of any theatre or its activities, but does give brief mention to the theatres.

### The anecdotal nature of history

Given the many flowery reviews and sentiments about The Davis Opera House, the approach to the subject was to objectively look for substantive material behind local history. What is presented here is that material which has reoccurred in research and which,

given the author of the material, seems to be the best representation found.

Limitations of the study:

This study is limited to The Davis Opera House in Clinton, Iowa and does not discuss the impact of the lumber industry on other theatres or theatrical entertainment in Clinton or elsewhere. The Davis Opera House was chosen because of its status as the first significant opera house in the city and because its erection (1876) comes at the height of both the lumber and rail industries. This study makes no attempt to link the lumber industry as a whole with theatre, but is an important study linking Clinton's economic development with the rise of The Davis Opera House.

Importance of the Study:

This study may prove useful in the research of the opera house in the life of a community or as a product of economic development. For other cities with significant lumber interests specifically, (St. Paul, Dubuque, Muscatine,) this study might aide researchers in sorting through the usually large amount of local history materials. Additionally, the author knows of no other city besides Clinton with the economic impact specifically due to the lumber industry.

Methodology:

Historical methodology was employed in this research. The intent was to interpret historical documentation of a **primary** nature of both The Davis Opera House and the lumber industry in

Clinton. Secondary sources already purporting an interpretation and analysis were consulted only after a review of the primary materials. It was a deliberate action to consult materials which appeared to maintain objectivity such as Reynolds Allen's dissertation on nineteenth century theatre structures in addition to those sources which were written by citizens of Clinton.



## INTRODUCTION

The city of Clinton, Iowa was once a bustling economic center of the midwest. Today it is surviving a depressive economy and is but a shadow of what it formerly was. The drastic changes in the life of this city over the last century make the glitter and fortunes of its past seem almost fictitious. The impressive architecture, the local historians and the writings that remain, however, tell the story of a city that struck it rich and offered a way of life like none other in the midwest.

A 1904 edition of American Home Journal called Clinton "one of the gems in the crown of commerce" (Vol 2, No.1, 1).

A commercial history of Iowa refers to Clinton as "the coming metropolis of Iowa" (Harvey, 129). And a history of the city says that it had "more millionaires per capita than any other city in the nation..." (Streit, "Mansions"...., 5). Yet this small community in Iowa is relatively unnoticed outside of its neighboring cities, and its history has faded in importance to the generations now occupying the once grand buildings and offices on Clinton's streets. So what contributed to Clinton's prosperity and decline? And for the theatre scholar, what is of value in this study?

Research indicates that both the rail and lumber industries were chief factors in Clinton's development and

it is necessary to trace their influence. The natural location of Clinton on the Mississippi River and in respect to larger cities such as Chicago, Minneapolis and Kansas City must also be considered as a factor because both rail and river made the transportation of people and goods, efficient and affordable. In addition, the work of lumber baron W. J. Young, in his pioneering efforts in the transportation of logs, made Clinton a natural place to be for others who wanted to attain the success that Young had. The result of these factors was a bustling economy, growth, disposable income, and a demand for a quality social life to match the other quality offerings of the city. The Opera House would rise to the occasion to meet this demand.

The positive economic influence of the lumber industry between its beginning in 1857 and its end in 1909 contributed significantly to the economic welfare of the city and gave rise to the housing industry and, mercantile and entertainment businesses. Each of these was proliferated by the rising number of persons moving to Clinton because of the lumber industry which is said to have employed two-thirds of the city (Allen, 58). Where there are people there is need for goods, services and entertainment.

The Opera House was successful in meeting the needs of its community and was certainly looked upon as a reflection of the city in which it was located. Bruce Mahan, in his article, At The Opera House, says, "Each [opera house] was invariably pointed to with pride as the most modern and pretentious building of its kind west of the Mississippi" (408). Certainly the lumber barons were concerned with the image of the town as they drew business from all over the midwest. An article in the Clinton Herald entitled "City Founded on Sawdust," suggests that "[W.J.] Young adopted every improvement which gave promise to more expeditions and economical manufacture" (July 4, 1976, 8). G. W. Sieber, in his dissertation on the lumber industry in Clinton indicates that the lumber barons were not indifferent to the affairs of the city" (61). Known for their philanthropy, both lumber barons Chancy Lamb and W. J. Young were known to give great sums each year various organizations which would improve the city. Whether this included the opera house is not known. Suffice it to say that the lumber barons supported the opera house if only by their presence at productions for certainly the opera house was both a place to see and be seen.

Clinton's glorious past as seen through the community-centered structure of the opera house is an important subject

of study that seeks to further the connection between social and theatre history. The Opera House, being a gauge for a city's caliber, is not merely a place for entertainment, but a status symbol and an indication of the other offerings a city might possess. In addition, this study documents the particular features of Clinton's first impressive structure, The Davis Opera House, built to meet citizen demand for luxury, and quality entertainment.

## Chapter I

### The early development of Clinton: 1836-1860

The natural resource of the Mississippi River made the area of Clinton desirable to those seeking settlements after the Black Hawk treaty was signed in 1832, opening to settlement a vast stretch of land across the midwest. Elijah Buell first staked a claim on what is now the north part of Clinton. He settled with the intention of opening a ferry service to Illinois. With John Baker, Buell settled on the Iowa side and Baker on the Illinois side and plans for the ferry service quickly materialized. Buell named this settlement Lyons after the city in France. Allen's History of Clinton County, Iowa states that Buel [sic] said, "We thought that this would be a favorable point for a ferry, and our only object was to secure to ourselves this expected privilege. We agreed to locate, Mr. Baker to take the Illinois side and I the Iowa side" (338).

A bit south of Buell's claim, Joseph Bartlett laid claim to what is now central Clinton and called it New York. Bartlett was convinced that Clinton possessed gold deposits and Captain C.G. Pearce said, "He always insisted that he was digging for gold, and that he found it in large quantities. In the spring of 1838, I think it was myself and Col. B.

Randall and Col. Jennings purchased the town from Mr. Bartlett, but I have no recollection that we gave any more for it on account of its mineral wealth" (L.P. Allen, 343). Bartlett had opened a mercantile while waiting for gold (and wealth) to be found. After a few years he grew tired of waiting and left the city.

While New York had but a few dozen residents by 1839, Lyons to the north, and Camanche to the south, were growing rapidly. It seems that by 1852 a stagecoach line connected Lyons to both Davenport and Dubuque (Schmitt, 8). This was most likely due to the organization of the Lyons and Iowa Central Railroad which began construction in the same year. The population of Lyons was approximately 200 in 1852, but by 1858 expanded to roughly 5,000 (8). The Lyons and Iowa Central Railroad "came to an inglorious end and the several hundred employees, having had no pay for months...immortalized the scheme as the "Calico Railroad" (LePrevost, 92).

In 1855 plans for a railroad did materialize, but not in Lyons. The Iowa Land Company purchased Bartlett's territory of New York and replatted the town under the name of Clinton, honoring the Governor of the state of New York, DeWitt Clinton. Of Governor Clinton it was said that he was "a most worthy namesake, a prominent literary and public man...and one of the prime movers and most efficient advocates of the scheme

for building the Erie Canal" (Allen, 324).

The year 1856 brought a flurry of activity with the building of the railroad in Clinton, and subsequently the population of the tiny settlement of Clinton grew to 1,000 by the year's end. The Clinton Herald reflected the city's growth when it ran a noticeable advertisement the same year for The Clinton Academy offering "a thorough course in English education, also Latin, French, Music, drawing and embroidery" (LePrevost, 88). Growth during this year is also marked by Clinton's first post office established inside of the Iowa Central House, a hotel (71).

It is certain that lumbering, even more than rail transportation was responsible for Clinton's economic prosperity though the railroad started Clinton's growth. While the railroad made Clinton accessible, other interests would have to arise in order for persons to want and need to come to Clinton. The year 1856, the same year that the railroad tracks were laid, was additionally the year in which Clinton opened it's first sawmill. The relationship between, and the combination of the rail and lumber industries produced an economy capable of supporting a great many persons. While the rail industry provided access to Clinton, the lumber industry provided an economy which could offer a fine shopping district, entertainment, and a plethora of sights and

attractions--reasons to enter the city at all. The rail industry was also a valuable means of transportation for those items and people related to the lumber industry.

Chancy Lamb supervised the building of his first mill in Clinton in 1857. He was described as "an experienced millwright and lumberman from New York" (LePrevost, 88). The mill contained one 50 h.p. engine, one circular saw which was an invention of Lamb's, one muley saw, one butting saw, one circular cross cut, one gang lath mill and a dry kiln which seasoned lumber in twenty-four hours (88). Estelle LePrevost says of Clinton's growth: "To see a town which fifteen months since was nothing more than farms with a large freight depot, two locomotives, one first-class passenger car, seven freight cars and numerous platform cars drawn up in front, is something" (88).

Clinton was internally organized by 1858 though it seems they had some problems with consistency. It was said that year, "What has become of the city council? It has not met for three weeks!" (89). The city was obviously not hindered however and its days of splendor still lay ahead with the operation of the railroad.



### Growth 1860-1900

When the first train crossed the bridge at Clinton in 1860, it was just the first in a series of railroad developments, community changes, and growth. Earlier, in 1857, Clinton had become incorporated and four influential men, W. F. Coan, Chancey Lamb, W. J. Young, and David Joyce had moved to town. Young and Lamb were concerned with building great lumber mills while Coan engaged in banking. Joyce started a lumber firm under his name. The Clinton Four are important figures in Clinton's history and served as visionaries in its growth and development.

W. J. Young built the first of the impressive mills which would later in the nineteenth century make Clinton known as the capital of the sawmill industry (Schmitt, 6). The lumber industry expanded at a remarkable rate and the agriculture industry was also a support in Clinton's economy. The Curtis Brothers Company and the Disbrow Company saw hope in Clinton's future and started separate manufacturing firms which created window sash, doors, blinds and moldings. The Disbrow Company of Lyons and The Curtis Brothers Company of Clinton were stiff competitors for many years until eventually the Curtis Brothers Company dominated the industry.

G. W. Sieber asks, "How important were the sawmill men to the city of Clinton?" (58). Sieber found the answer in an 1877 edition of The Clinton Age which says, "...the sawmills were the mainstay of the city and actually supported two-thirds of the population" (Allen, 58). Just a few years earlier Clinton's production of lumber is worth noting:

In 1869 Iowa ranked ninth in the nation in lumber production. That year Clinton produced more than 60 million feet of lumber, 24 million shingles, and 14 million lath. This was more lumber than any other city in Iowa produced. Indeed no city on the Mississippi south of St. Paul produced more (Sieber, 46).

Additionally, "Clinton...was reported in some years to have cut more lumber than any other city in America" (Mills, 55). The vast supply of new building materials added to the building boom which was easily met with abundance. W. J. Young was the first major sawmill operator to use steamboat power, and this ceased the dependence on the natural flow of the river. As a result, more logs could be shipped than ever before, only perpetuating the lumber and building boom.

Because of such enormous production, Clinton was known as having made seventeen millionaires from the lumber industry. W. J. Young, as a result of his methods and business savvy, was probably the wealthiest. At least one person, however, saw more than a self-made man in Young and pointed to the hand of God. This riverboat captain said, "One cannot contemplate

this vast amount of building material...without recognizing the wisdom of the Creator in providing extensive headwaters of the Mississippi and its northern tributaries on whose waters the logs could be floated down at so little expense" (Mills, 55). That Clinton has one of the longest riverfronts of any city on the Mississippi--over six miles--and a natural, gently sloping shore, it made for the easy docking and loading of pleasure boats and barges alike. Additionally, Clinton is the eastern-most point of Iowa and a natural stop for river travelers (Glass, 49).

As the city grew, churches, newspapers, shops, rail and river-related industry grew and it seemed that the growth might make Clinton a major city in the midwest. The tornado that leveled the growing city of Camanche to Clinton's south in 1860, and the failure of Lyon's railroad venture left Clinton without competition. These factors helped Clinton to emerge stronger than ever and helped to create anxious speculation of Clinton's future.

In 1868 the first plant opened for the manufacture of illuminating gas and the first gas mains for its distribution were constructed (Schmitt, 6). Gas was produced from Bituminous coal which has a great amount of volatile elements. "A ton of coal produced 10,000 cubic feet of gas, much of which was stored in large steel holding tanks. By 1878 seven

miles of gas mains had been laid" (Streit, "Gas...", 108). Streit's article quotes an unnamed history regarding the availability of gas:

It has been neatly said that the self-styled cities become such in reality when they are lighted with gas. Assuming the truth of that definition of what really constitutes a nineteenth century city, Clinton actually arrived at urban dignity in the spring of 1869 (108).

The cities of Clinton and Lyons were a distance apart, and because of this, a horse and mule railway began operation to connect the two towns. "On December 6, 1869, the first car ran over this line for some two and three-quarters miles between the Lyons ferry and the corner of 8th Avenue South and 2nd Street at the railroad tracks in Clinton" (Schmitt, 7).

In 1873 Clinton formed its first water company under the name Clinton Water Works and it later absorbed Lyon's water works system when the city was annexed.

The Clinton Four and other families were creating a very elite feel to Clinton and it is written of them:

These lumber barons and their families contributed much of the social glitter to Clinton as well as providing much of the leadership and financial resources for virtually every civic enterprise during the formative years of Clinton's history (Schmitt, 7).

While it is not known if the lumber kings provided financial assistance in the building of opera houses, the

lumber barons seemed to support everything else. These families created an environment in Clinton unknown before. While money cannot buy everything, the barons and their families tried. Schmitt writes in his work, The Architecture of Clinton, Iowa:

The homes the lumber barons built were showplaces of elegance. Rare woods and marble were imported from Europe for interior trim. The furnishings included works of art brought to Clinton from eastern merchandise centers. Social affairs vied with those of Chicago and other metropolitan cities for lavishness (7).

Julie Jensen-McDonald in her book, Pathways to the Present in 50 Iowa & Illinois Communities, says, "The river and the lumber industry were Siamese twins" (64), and says of Clinton's social life:

Clinton always had its definite culture. Even in the earliest days, when the river-boats were at the wharf night and day, when open saloons stood in rows in certain blocks, there were lectures, lyceums, concerts and great plays (65).

While Clinton was very successful, its rival to the north, Lyons, was not to be outdone. On July 4, 1891, a bridge was dedicated that connected Lyons, Iowa to Fulton, Illinois. On the first day it was open, receipts indicated that 23,000 people crossed the new bridge. The bridge was built at a cost of \$94,000 (Long & Erickson, 91). Just four years later, however, in 1895 Lyons was annexed to Clinton

making Lyons' hard-fought battle to keep in step with Clinton  
a great irony as Clinton now benefitted from its work.

### Railroad Activity

While it is the author's position that the lumber industry was responsible for the economic explosion in Clinton during the nineteenth century, to overlook the importance of the railroad to the lumber industry and to the city would be foolish. The railroad indeed provided access to the city from every point imaginable and allowed the transportation of goods to nearly any place in the nation.

The January, 1904 edition of American Home Journal said that Clinton "possesses unequalled shipping facilities, for in addition to the great river it boasts all four of the great trunk lines, viz: the main line of the Chicago and Northwestern; the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul; the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy; the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific, besides the Davenport, Rock Island and Northwestern, altogether representing 28,000 miles and extending to every state and territory in the middle west" (2).

Before the date of 1904, however, much hard labor and disappointment met those striving to make the Clinton area accessible by rail. Many failed ventures, including the Calico Line in Lyons and the dissolution of a railroad bridge between Camanche and Albany, Illinois, brought discouragement

in cities trying tirelessly to expand. Many success stories are to be told, however, and local historian, Everett Streit calls the railroad "a major prop for the economy of Clinton" ("Economy...", 65).

In 1856 Clinton was met with success when the Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska railroad was organized. "The line was originally designed to make runs from Clinton to Cedar Rapids as an extension of the Dixon Air Line which had reached Fulton the year previously" (65). The same year a bridge was completed across the Mississippi. Long and Erickson say of this monumental occasion, "Completion of the railroad bridge...gave Clinton much of the business impetus it need to progress and grow as a city" (Long & Erickson,90).

Both the repair of trains and the changing of crews were established in Clinton and "as early as 1861 several shop buildings had been erected at 8th Ave. S. and 2nd St." (Streit, "Economy...", 65). The C, I and N, at that time known as the Iowa Division of the Chicago and North Western Railway, expanded rapidly and by 1871 had established even more shops for repair and even included a round house (65). In addition to the largest railway systems already at home in Clinton, the Iowa & Illinois Electric Railway, hereafter called the I & I, had operations in Clinton. "These transportation systems, along with the shipping facilities on



the Mississippi, meant that every city in the United States had easy access to the factories and buyers of Clinton" (Long and Erickson, 90).

The lumber industry's connection to the railroad is a relationship to note. The foremost lumber baron of Clinton, W.J. Young, was dependant upon the Chicago & North Western Railway and its connection at the Missouri River (Sieber, 414). Young also made use of the new railroads that headed out of Clinton. Young's interest in railroad activity was not merely a reflection of his interest in the city. He often argued with railroad companies because of their prices and was known to pay his bills by how much he thought it should cost. Marking out the balance due, he would blatantly write in his own price (Sieber, 413). So finding Young on the Board of Directors of the Iowa Midland Railway Company as early as 1870 was no surprise (414). The Iowa Midland Railway was bought out soon after its inception by Chicago & Northwestern Railway.

When the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy line came to town but failed to cross the river at Clinton, mill owners were angry. When the completion finally did come about Young was said to have distributed this announcement to all of his customers:

The Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railway is now

established at this point for business. We are prepared to ship to all points in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska and Colorado, on its entire Railway system (417).

The growth of the Railway system in Clinton was not only a factor in the city's growth, but a prime factor in the success of the lumber industry. The transportation of lumber into the city was done naturally on the Mississippi, but the transportation of lumber products to the rest of the world was largely dependant upon the railroad.

### The Opera House

As was mentioned previously, the opera house was a central focus for the community. Caroline Shaffner of the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa has said that "No respectable city, village, hamlet or town was without an opera house" (Shaffner). This is confirmed by Reynolds Allen's dissertation in which he says that every town of 2,000 or more persons had an opera house (6). Additionally, George Glenn and Richard Poole support this by commenting in their book, The Opera Houses of Iowa, "...virtually every city and town throughout the length and breadth of Iowa had a place called 'the Opera House'" (3). As a status symbol and evidence of a city's seriousness about entertainment, the opera house was the gauge used. "Often the opera house was seen as a gauge of the quality of the community: its business health, its progressive thinking, its ambition and will to move ahead" (Reynolds Allen, 8). In the city of Clinton, The Davis Opera House mirrors those very qualities.

Researching the history of the Davis Opera House can be a confusing project when one considers that there were two structures of that name written about in Clinton newspapers in 1876. Edward M. Davis, proprietor of limestone quarries and kilns "had constructed the general utility hall, the Davis

Opera House some time before 1871" (Clinton Daily Herald, Jan 27, 1877, 4). That structure was destroyed by fire in 1876 (4). Mr. Davis rebuilt the Opera House that same year within an impressive structure appropriately named The Davis Block. Regarding the naming of theatres within block structures, Glenn and Poole write, "Significantly, some of these opera houses were named after an individual rather than the community in which they were built" (13).

The Davis Block consisted of a lower level of retail shops and a restaurant and pub, a second story of offices and the third and fourth floors comprised the Davis Opera House (Long & Ericson, 112). The citizens of Clinton were justifiably excited at the new addition to their town and it was heralded as "the most impressive [block] in Clinton" (Streit, "Davis...", 16).

That one of the Davis Opera Houses was destroyed by fire and the other erected in the same year makes for numerous mentions of the Davis name in local publications. When the original Davis Opera House burned in 1876, it left Clinton with an inadequate structure, the Union Hall. It was a multi-purpose general utility hall and not suitable for the level of entertainment Clinton audiences were demanding. The proprietor of the Union Hall, Col. Smith, was encouraged to do remodeling of the Hall after The Davis had burned to the

ground. The editor of The Clinton Age said of the anxiousness of the public in regard to fire: "In order to quiet the nervousness which prevails in this community about fires in public halls...Col. mith [sic] will at once construct other outdoor exits in his hall" (Reynolds Allen, 101).

When the Davis Block opened in 1876, Clintonians were extremely supportive of the structure which, notably, placed its opera house on an upper floor, a trend in nineteenth century theatre structures. Incidentally, Reynolds Allen notes that "three of the first four opera houses in the [trans-Mississippi] region were constructed in upper stories of business buildings" (31).

It seems that within the Davis Block a customer could buy a suit at The Hub Clothing Store, get a drink at the pub, see a show, and eat dinner afterward, all in the same building. Though Davis was probably not dreaming of the modern mall, he did bring the latest architectural trend to Clinton. The Hub Clothing Store was known as Clinton's quality store and it sold the exclusive Hart, Shaffner & Marx suit (Long and Ericson, 112). The Clinton Daily Herald ran an advertisement for The Hub in its October 20, 1908 edition which was boasting "Fine suits in all the new fancy fabrics brought out for fall in blue serges, black Thibet, suits for all occasions...\$15 to \$40" (112).

Rated as one of the finest in the midwest, The Davis Opera House has many notable features. The seating at The Davis was impressive and is said to be somewhere between 1200 and 2000 patrons. Sources are consistently conflicting on the number of seats and it is perhaps due to whether or not the balcony seats were counted and/or used. An 1883 Clinton City Directory characterizes the Davis as "the principal block in the city... seating from 1600 to 2000 persons" (L.P. Allen, 49). Perhaps the discrepancy in the number of seats in The Davis was due to it being a multi-purpose facility with movable seating. An event considered to be well-attended estimated attendance at 1500 persons (Reynolds Allen, 157) and this without the distraction of pillars to block a patron's view!

In The History of Clinton County, Iowa it is said of a performance at the Davis that "not a pillar or post obstructed the view of the stage" (675) which was a very attractive part of this House. Mahan's article characterized the typical Iowa opera house as having "iron posts cast in ornate Corinthian style" used to hold up the balcony but which "interfered seriously with the view of half of the dress circle audience" (408). The Davis, however, had strong iron rods at the top of the building which attached to the trusses. This was used in holding up the gallery (L.P. Allen, 675).

The stage itself was embellished on either side of the drop curtain by pictures of Edwin Forest and William Shakespeare. The drop curtain "represents a fine scene on Lake Como, Italy" (675). The stage dimensions were thirty-six feet wide by thirty-two feet deep and it was considered spacious (Streit, "Davis...", 16). The Davis boasted a "Hallett and Davis orchestra grand piano made expressly for the Opera Hall" and, at a cost of \$1,500 was one of the most costly available (675).

The acoustics of the Davis were often commented on as being unusually good. The editor of a Clinton newspaper joyfully commented that "the words uttered on the stage were easily heard in all parts of the large hall, showing that its acoustical facilities are admirable" (Clinton Herald, Dec 4, 1876, 4). The Clinton Age had something similar to say in that, "...he was heard with the greatest of ease all through the hall, galleries included" (Dec 8, 1876, 8).

The center dome on the ceiling of the house was decorated with frescos of the finest nature and paintings representing the four seasons. Even portraits of the world's great authors surrounded the dome (Streit, "Davis...", 16). These elaborate details were, according to Reynolds Allen, not unusual to the most prolific houses of which the Davis was certainly one. Allen's history of the city says that "the building is

complete throughout, in every respect, and is a credit to any city in the West." He adds that "Judge Brannan pronounced it the best building of the kind in the State" reflecting "great credit on the energy and enterprises of its owner, Mr. Davis" (676).

Mr. E. M. Davis was a native of Pottsville, Pennsylvania and was an orphan by age four. He apprenticed to the machinist's trade, studying in the evenings to learn what he could. At age 19, Davis was said to have the responsibility of running an engine (675). He apparently traveled to Indiana and then a year later to Chicago where he worked as an engineer on the old Galena and Salem Railroad for a number of years. He resigned that position on August 21, 1858. The watch he received upon his resignation contained the inscription, "Presented to E. M. Davis, master mechanic of the New Albany & Salem Railroad, By the employes [sic], as a token of their regard; Michigan City, Ind., Aug. 21, 1858" (675).

Davis was in the army during the Civil War, and worked with the railroad transportation department. He married Margaret Waters, from his home county in Pennsylvania. They moved to Clinton in November of 1865 and Davis was successful in a number of business ventures, his most successful being the erection of The Davis Block in 1876 (675).

The Davis's Romanesque design lent itself to good



construction and the Opera House was perhaps better constructed than any other building in Clinton (Reynolds Allen, 156). This quality construction was evidence of two things: 1) the steadfast place of the opera house in the life of the community and 2) its importance in relation to establishments of prominence. That the Davis was also taller than any other building erected in Clinton at that time should not be dismissed as coincidence. The Romanesque design was part of a trend in Romanesque Revival and was prevalent between 1873 and 1893. Typical of Romanesque design were the following characteristics: 1) Rounded arches 2) Facades on the upper stories were round and square-headed windows in deep jams 3) Cornices were smaller 4) Roof lines were high with dormers and corner towers and 5) French details of rough textures in stone, checkerboard patterns of brick, carvings and mixtures of rough and smooth textures (11). Note the picture of the Davis on page 37.

The contract for scenic design was held by the firm of Noxon and Toomey of the Olympic Theater in St. Louis. Mr. P. J. Toomey and his assistant, [Mr.] Green painted the scenery for use in The Davis. Nine "sets" were painted on flats by Toomey, with thirty-two wings to match and three sets of borders (Reynolds Allen, 159). Apparently the flats and wings slid in grooves, and gave the stage an attractive appearance

(159). Eight of the nine sets are described for us as 1) a parlor, 2) a jail, 3) an ordinary room, 4) a house, 5) a cottage, 6) a pair of rocks 7) a row of balustrades, and 8) a log cabin (Clinton Herald, Jan 16, 1877, pg 4). For these and other smaller pieces, Toomey was paid between \$1,200 and \$1,500.

The Clinton Herald and The Clinton Age were equally excited over Toomey's work and gave favorable mention of it. The Clinton Age called Toomey's work, "A grand and magnificent embellishment of the splendid Opera House" (Reynolds Allen, 160) while The Clinton Herald said, "A full view is obtained of the castle in the lake. An Italian beauty deftly fingers the melodious lute on the steps of the balcony, while a female companion looks on admiringly. Other figures are seen farther down the steps, bright wreaths of flowers adorn the foreground, while the whole painting, produced in "warm colors" toned to a rich blending, fall gently on the vision, delights the senses and disarms the criticism of the ordinary observer" (Jan 16, 1877, p 4).

The stage of The Davis was surrounded by footlights. It boasted four dressing rooms and a hydrant for use in fighting fire. The Davis opened for business on January 22, 1877 with Wallack's New York Combination with John Dillion playing Our Boys (Clinton Age, Jan 19, 1877, p 1).

This study is intended to do more than merely point to a fine opera house in a prospering lumber town; the study points to a fine opera house because of a prospering lumber town. With two-thirds of the city being employed by mill operations, Clinton was indebted to the lumber industry for its progress. Katherine Long and Melvin Erickson note in their work, Clinton: A Pictorial History that "the historian Lucius P. Allen compared Clinton during the 1860's era to a tropical plant growing and blossoming, 'almost visibly, day by day' (14). Between 1860 and 1897 Clinton knew progressive growth and development because "the lumber industry expanded rapidly" (46). They add, "Indeed, new brick homes and buildings were replacing the crude, wooden structures and the commercial area continued to expand. As did the artistic and social proclivities of its citizens" (14). The authors added that the lumber barons were not the only ones enjoying the city's offerings: "For entertainment, Clintonites watched some of the biggest stars make personal appearances as they entertained before large, sometimes 'standing room only' audiences in handsome theatres...In fact Clinton became known far and wide for its theatre enthusiasts..." (91).

Lillian Russell, Clinton native and the vivacious star of legitimate theatre in the late nineteenth century, topped the list of big names appearing at The Davis. The Clinton Herald

said of Russell in An American Beauty presented on October 24, 1896, "The cruel and searching light that brings out every imperfection of feature, on account of the nearness of the stage here to the audience, did not harm Miss Russell" (111). The light referred to here is electric light and it further proves that the Davis was the first opera house in Clinton to have electric light. The review continued, " Her makeup was perfect, and to back it, she has natural beauty" (111).

Though Russell was certainly a star in her own right, The Clinton Herald was surely not unbiased in the review of this 'hometown girl.' "Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor and the Barrymores were just a few of the many outstanding stars who made personal appearances during the golden era of theatre in Clinton" (91).

Though the Davis played such an important part in Clinton's entertainment, little remains to tell of its activities. A few playbills and newspaper advertisements hint to its entertainment. An unidentified scrapbook of playbills in The Clinton Public Library contains a newspaper clipping advertising a juvenile cantata entitled The Merry Party; or The Cadet's Picnic scheduled for Friday, March 2nd 1888 at Davis Opera House. The nine person ensemble was accompanied by "a chorus of 50 voices" and contained three scenes: A wood near Picnic Grounds, The Picnic Ground, and again, A wood near

Picnic Grounds. At the end of Part II a special feature of a "GRAND DRESS PARADE AND FANCY DRILL BY THE CADETS" was offered under the direction of Mr. Chas. Root. The cantata was done for "the benefit of the M.E. Church Pipe Organ Fund."

On Tuesday and Wednesday, May 4th and 5th of the year 1886 The Mikado or The Town of Titipu! was offered "under the auspices of the Wapsipinicon Club of Clinton, Iowa" at Davis' Opera House. The newspaper clipping from the same unidentified scrapbook indicates that the production included "a Grand Orchestra of 10 pieces from Prof. C. Rehwoldt's Famous Union Orchestra." The two-act production advertised General Admission seats at \$.50 and Reserved Seats at \$.50 and \$.75. An unidentified and greatly deteriorated clipping reviewing the production used the headline, "...Actors and Costumes are Just Yum Yum." The flowery review had a variety of things to say about the actors such as, "Mr. W.E. Kraft's "Pooh Bah" was just too killing" and "Mr. S. O. Merrill, as "Pish Tush," with his always pleasing voice, drew forth marked applause, and was well fitted to assume the part of a noble lord." The review went on to say that "The chorus, composed of twenty-four of the leading male and female voices of this and neighboring cities, was admirable and blended in the richest harmony with the voices of the leading dramatis personae." Ending the review the writer noted that the number

of tickets sold for the following evening indicated the city's enthusiasm for the musical.

Only one other souvenir indicating the activity within the Davis was found. A ticket, found in a folder marked "Davis Opera House" in the Clinton County Historical Society Museum, admitted a gentleman or lady to the "Second Annual Ball, Monday Evening, February 22, 1897." That this event took place is a further indication of the Davis's general purpose structure. The Ball was given by the "Hand in Hand Lodge No. 183, B. of R. T." This ticket was priced at \$1.

The Decline:  
Clinton and The Davis Opera House

The depression of 1893, along with the depletion of the forests of the northern United States slowed the lumber industry significantly and by 1897, most of Clinton's mills had closed. "Practically overnight, 5,000 of the 22,000 population left the city" (Schmitt, 8). An even more startling fact is that "between 1896 and 1906, fewer than twenty homes were built in Clinton" (9). "An era had ended in Clinton and Lyons" (Long & Erickson, 47).

At the turn of the century Clinton was in the middle of an economic depression. Thousands left the city after the mills closed, seeking other employment. Manufacturing was Clinton's answer to the declining lumber industry. Industrial work was also found to play a part in Clinton's economy, and Clinton enjoyed many years of success, but it was never again to return to the lavish lifestyle and disposable income level it had once known during the height of the lumber industry. It was evident that "...the raucous days of the lumberjacks and raftsmen were over" (47).

Subsequently, the decline of The Davis Opera House is

parallel to the decline of the city. Lumber was replaced with manufacturing interests and The Davis Opera House was replaced with The Clinton Theatre because "The Davis was felt to be antiquated by 1897, however popular it had been earlier" (Reynolds Allen, 377). And like the Davis, the lumber industry, a central focus of Clinton, was quickly forgotten and the remains razed for the latest manufacturing development.

Clinton was built on sawdust and its social history is evident through the eyes of The Davis Opera House. Noted for its central focus in any community, the opera house was often heralded as the chief attraction, unparalleled by any other city's opera house. The Davis did its share of boasting, but rightly so for it was known to be Clinton's first and finest home for legitimate theatre. Proprietor E. M. Davis spared no expense in the lavish building whose interior was handsomely decorated and frescoed. Its generous seating capacity, between 1200 and 2000, was the largest auditorium in Clinton at the time. In comparison to the Union Hall, a general utility structure, The Davis was heaven! Used as a gauge for a city's business climate and other social offerings, the opera house was looked at as a symbol of the city's success. It was also a trendy structure in the sense that it was responsible for continually meeting the expectations of its



audience. This factor could have led to The Davis being described as "antiquated" at just twenty years old.

Without the wealth incurred by the lumber industry, Clinton Iowa would have been but a shadow of what it was. Even with railroad and other manufacturing interests, the lumber industry still employed two-thirds of the city. The population increase due to laborers moving into the city for work in the mills, as well as the seventeen millionaires who called Clinton home, primed Clinton for a social life to match the demand. As it's central focus, The Davis Opera House served undauntingly, Clinton's entertainment, civic and social needs for twenty years of its prosperity. Through the eyes of the luxurious Davis, the story of the golden era of Clinton can be told.

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POPULATION STATISTICS  
1840- 1970

CLINTON:

<u>1840</u>	<u>1850</u>	<u>1860</u>	<u>1870</u>	<u>1880</u>	<u>1890</u>
--	--	1,816	7,970	10,054	14,658
<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1940</u>	<u>1950</u>
22,698	25,577	24,151	25,726	26,270	30,379
<u>1960</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1990</u>		
33,589	34,719	32,828	29,201		

AYETTE

