

# Boosting Culture in the Gilded Age

## Sioux City Theater, 1870–1904

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AMERICANS during their so-called Gilded Age experienced rapid, complex, and sometimes violent changes, as the rise of industrialism after the Civil War transformed American society. The development of railroads as the country's first mass transportation system opened up the West to rapid economic development and encouraged geographical specialization. A few individuals who were able to take advantage of this rapid change and rapid transit succeeded in accumulating great wealth and power in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In order to maintain power and control, men such as J. P. Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, Cornelius Vanderbilt, and James J. Hill consolidated their empires into organizations called trusts, pools, monopolies, or syndicates. Their economic policies and business practices exerted enormous influence on every segment of American life. A formerly rural/agrarian nation became increasingly urban/industrial. Small-town life and influence gave way to urban power and distant control.<sup>1</sup> The theater did not escape the impact of these

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1. Historians differ widely in their descriptions and analyses of the Gilded Age. This richness fosters a greater understanding of a complex and diverse chapter in American history. The most helpful sources include Vernon L. Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America, 1869–1920*, vol. 3 of *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1930); H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *The Gilded Age*, rev. ed. (Syracuse, NY, 1970); Richard Bartlett, ed., *The Gilded Age in America, 1865–1900* (Reading, MA, 1969); Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865–1915* (New York, 1970); Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861–1901* (1934; reprint, New York, 1962); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York, 1967); Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago, 1957); and John A. Garraty, ed., *The Transformation of American Society, 1870–1890* (New York, 1968).

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developments, as the history of the theater in Sioux City, Iowa, illustrates.

By 1871 Sioux City, an upper Missouri River frontier town, inspired by economic success and self-conscious boosterism, had built the Academy of Music, the town's first bona fide opera house. In 1888 Sioux City boosters, responding to a booming economy, raised money to build a new, more elaborate opera house, the Peavey Grand. And in 1895 local businessman Alpheus B. Beall became the Peavey's manager, beginning a nine-year tenure that culminated in his emergence as a regional theatrical magnate and business entrepreneur. Nationwide theater trends, reflecting national economic conditions and business practices in Gilded Age America, directly influenced these developments in Sioux City theater between 1870 and 1904.

AMERICAN THEATER prior to the Civil War comprised three major types of producing organizations: the local stock company, the repertory company, and the traveling star. By far the most common was the local stock company, organized and run by a manager who owned or leased a theater building. The manager also picked the plays, organized the season, hired the actors, and sometimes performed. The repertory companies toured in a particular region, performing plays in their repertory on successive nights as long as they could attract an audience. These companies were notorious for their economic instability. The star system, prevalent in this country since the early 1800s, consisted of a single performer appearing with various stock companies throughout the country.<sup>2</sup>

After the Civil War American theater changed dramatically. The railroad, essential to the development of industry and to the subsequent accumulation of individual fortunes, also contributed significantly to the growth of theater and to the development of the first great theatrical monopoly, the Theatrical Syndicate. Historian Jack Poggi asserts that "railroad devel-

2. Benjamin MacArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia, 1984), 41. For an account of theater in Iowa before the Civil War, see Joseph S. Schick, *The Early Theatre in Eastern Iowa: Cultural Beginnings and the Rise of the Theatre in Davenport and Eastern Iowa, 1836-1863* (Chicago, 1939), 38-73.



opment seems to have been a technological advance as significant to the theater as the later inventions of the motion-picture camera and the electronic tube." The collapse of the local stock company, the evolution of the combination company, the emergence of the theater businessman, and the development of nationally organized and tightly controlled theatrical circuits and centralized booking practices reflected a nationwide pattern, as local control was replaced by distant impersonal forces.<sup>3</sup>

By the 1870s the star system had evolved into the combination company. These companies, many based in New York or other big cities, traveled with the same production over a period of time, performing in various cities and towns. Sometimes a star or stars traveled with the troupe. Combination companies sounded the death knell for the older permanent stock companies. Given the chance, people wanted to see the best costumes, scenery, and acting that a metropolis could offer.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of the combination coincided with the emergence of the businessman as theatrical entrepreneur. Instead of local tastes being developed and controlled by local managers and actors, the local scene came to be controlled by national combination companies and centralized booking agencies. As the theater became just another piece of real estate, it could be managed by business people who, unlike the old stock managers, needed no artistic sensibilities. Booking agents, who ensured regular schedules for both the individual theaters and the various touring productions, also needed to know little if anything about the artistic end of the theater.<sup>5</sup>

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3. Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967* (Ithaca, NY, 1968), 6. See also MacArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 9. The analysis of Gilded Age America as a time when distant impersonal forces replaced local control is favored by Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, and Hays, *The Response to Industrialism*.

4. MacArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 7; Alfred L. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre: An Economic History of the American Theatre, 1750-1932* (New York, 1964), 27-31.

5. Morgan, *Gilded Age*, 7; Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre*, 33. Weldon B. Durham, "The Revival and Decline of the Stock Company Mode of Organization, 1886-1930," *Theatre History Studies* 6 (1986), 165-88, describes the revival of popular-priced stock based on a remodeled version of the older

Because of its size and position as the major theatrical center in the country, New York City became the hub for theatrical booking. Under the old local stock system, the manager did all the booking, most often through correspondence, with occasional visits to New York. With the advent of the combination system, however, booking took on greater importance and necessitated "personal negotiations." Now it took a great deal of time and money to fill the season. Therefore managers banded together to form circuits. From each circuit, the managers sent a representative to New York who negotiated for all of them.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes theaters on the same circuit were similar in size and finances, and what was booked for one was booked for all. Often, however, a single manager in a large city would do all the booking for the surrounding smaller towns and in effect would form a one-person trust or monopoly. If managers in the smaller towns did not like a particular attraction and did not want to take it, they faced considerable trouble. Their only option, personal negotiations, guaranteed considerable expense. Even worse, they could be frozen out and receive none of the bookings the other theaters got.

Prior to the development of circuits, managers operated independently and took what they could get. However, both production quality and dependability of appearance were constant concerns. While a circuit could not guarantee quality, it could almost guarantee appearance. But theaters had to take all of the offered productions or get none. Thus, the stability achieved under the circuit system came at a price. Moreover, as the most prosperous theaters gained increasing control, and often ownership, of smaller theaters, the system evolved from cooperative associations into syndicates, and eventually into a major theatrical monopoly, the Theatrical Syndicate.<sup>7</sup>

The Theatrical Syndicate comprised three sets of two partners: Charles Frohman and Al Hayman; Marc Klaw and

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second-class stock company. He maintains that Bernheim's treatment of stock's decline is "deformed by a negative attitude toward stock, an attitude influenced by the nation wide failure of the stock company mode of organization, indeed with signs of the failure and collapse of the whole American Theatre industry."

6. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre*, 33, 36.

7. *Ibid.*, 40.



Abraham Erlanger; and S. F. Nixon and J. F. Zimmerman. As a theatrical producer, Frohman was the only "theater artist" in the group; the rest were businessmen. Hayman had been a theater manager and owner since the mid-1870s. Nixon and Zimmerman, partners since the early 1880s, operated theaters in Ohio and Pennsylvania. By 1890 Klaw and Erlanger had emerged as one of the country's leading booking agencies. On August 1, 1896, they formed an agreement which was to "monopolize the theatre business for fifteen years." In 1896 the Syndicate owned or operated sixteen theaters and controlled the booking for seventeen others; by 1904 they booked more than five hundred theaters. The Syndicate maintained its control over the business in much the same way as the other giant trusts of the Gilded Age did. For the theater business that meant setting the booking fees at whatever level they chose, demanding exorbitant fees from producers to guarantee a good route for a production, and freezing out any independents who opposed them.<sup>8</sup>

The demise of local stock companies, the growth of combination companies, the rise of theater businessmen, the flourishing of circuits, and the development of the Theatrical Syndicate reflected the American theater's response to business practices and economic conditions during the Gilded Age. These national theater trends were, in turn, reflected in the development of the theater in Sioux City, Iowa.

SIoux CITY was established in 1854 by people who were, in the main, "non-laboring investors—doctors, bankers, lawyers, merchants and land agents—who had come out by horseback and steamboat intending to 'strike it rich' in townsite land." Unlike other western frontier towns, its founding was not a direct result of either the farm or the railroad. Nor can it be said that Sioux City was one of those isolated, rural communities that later fell prey to dislocation and impersonal distant control brought about by the economics of industrialism and Gilded Age business practices. For Sioux City was, from its founding, part of a large, distant, impersonal national economic network.

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8. Poggi, *Theatre in America*, 12, 13; Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre*, chap. 12.

Local boosters publicized it as the "Gateway to the Northwest." As a gateway, it functioned as an entrepot city, providing access and goods to millions of square miles of emerging frontier. By 1870 the population had reached 3,400, there was a lively steamboat trade, the Iowa Falls and Sioux City Railroad had arrived, and the city had begun to exhibit a complex, diverse economy. Like other frontier towns, Sioux City's population was highly mobile, with wealth and power increasingly concentrated in the hands of the stable portion of the population, who used their money and power to influence the economic, social, and cultural growth of the city, undoubtedly as a reflection of their own economic, social, and cultural values.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the building of the Academy of Music in 1870, available entertainment in Sioux City consisted of home talent plays, local debates, a few traveling repertory companies, and a speaker or two. Two halls—Gertz and Doss's, and McElhaney's—had large rooms where performances took place. Two other structures—the Olympic and the Varieties—called themselves theaters, but were probably just taverns with entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

9. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive social or cultural history of Sioux City. Therefore, historians must make thoughtfully considered inferences and carefully reasoned analyses from the only major source, the newspapers. The only other work that directly considers cultural values, albeit briefly, is Scott Sorensen and B. Paul Chicoine, *Sioux City: A Pictorial History* (Norfolk, VA, 1982), especially chap. 4 (the quotation is from p. 24). According to Sorensen and Chicoine, Sioux City's cultural commitment between 1869 and 1871 was reflected in the development of a school district, the beginnings of a library system, the *Sioux City Journal's* change from a weekly newspaper to a daily, and the building of the Academy of Music. Sioux City's early economic development is treated in William Silag, "City, Town, and Countryside: Northwest Iowa and the Ecology of Urbanization, 1854-1900" (Ph.D. diss, University of Iowa, 1979). Silag asserts that "even before the railroads' arrival, Sioux City's population exhibited a distinctly urban character." "At no point in its history," he continues, "had the town functioned as the 'isolated republic' depicted in its newspapers. Local men certainly played a part in its growth over the years, but their role was defined by a commercial network whose centers of power remained beyond their control" (4). Silag also shows that "nearly 40 percent of the men with sizeable property holdings in 1870 remained in Sioux City for another ten years, while just 13.2 percent of those with assets of less than \$1,000 did so" (153). See also *ibid.*, 1, 74-75.

10. The Olympic and the Varieties probably resembled closely the variety



Then in 1870 three prominent Sioux City businessmen—Judge A. W. Hubbard, J. C. C. Hoskins, and T. J. Stone—proposed to erect a brick building containing rental spaces, a common business practice. But there were those who felt that such a structure would not reflect Sioux City's growing economic and cultural prominence. An unknown author, perhaps representing a group of prominent Sioux Cityans, wrote in the *Sioux City Times*,

We made up our mind that no stone should be left unturned in convincing the gentlemen just named that a first class theatre would be a more profitable investment than having the upper floors layed off into offices. With this object in view we fortified ourselves by figures and facts on the subject and thus armed we secured a meeting of the gentlemen, gave our plans to their consideration and were rewarded by seeing that both Judge Hubbard and Mr. Hoskins coincided with our views. We next privately visited Mr. Stone and after a long talk got him to write certain friends of his in Omaha who owned the Academy of Music. Our next move was to reach the ear of the Omaha gentlemen and induce them to write a letter to Mr. Stone favoring the occupancy of a portion of his block as a theater hall.<sup>11</sup>

Even though the *Times* did not name the author, his sentiments obviously expressed the values of a person or group who had power and influence. While never directly mentioned, the cultural aspect of theater must have been a major part of the motivations of these developers. With the abundance of other investment opportunities available, it would have made little sense for the Sioux City establishment to think of theater as just a money-making proposition. On the other hand, any frontier municipality that considered itself progressive—as Sioux City certainly did—wanted to have an opera house or Academy of Music.<sup>12</sup>

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dives and concert saloons described by John J. Jennings in *Theatrical and Circus Life; or Secrets of the Stage, Green-Room and Sawdust Arena* (Detroit, MI, 1884), chap. 28. See also Richard L. Poole, "Selden Irwin and The Academy of Music," *Sioux City Historical Journal* 1 (1983), 6.

11. *Sioux City Daily Times*, 15 January 1871.

12. Lewis Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border* (Bloomington, IN, 1954), 135–42.

No evidence indicates that the Academy's promoters knew about any aspect of theater, business or otherwise; that is probably why they made the trip to Omaha. Undoubtedly, they were advised to hire a competent and trustworthy manager. Selden Irwin fit the bill. Irwin, well known in Omaha, had been the stage manager of the theater there in 1869. In 1870 he became the first actor/manager of the Sioux City Academy of Music.<sup>13</sup>

Irwin and his group provide an example of an interesting "combination." Between 1863 and 1870 they usually traveled as a troupe, the Selden Irwin Combination, and played in Ohio, Missouri, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, and eastern California. On June 2, 1870, the Irwin Combination made its Sioux City debut at the Gertz and Doss Hall and was well received by the press. The group played until June 14, "most of the time to good houses."<sup>14</sup> During the summer and fall of 1870, the Irwin Combination played Sioux City, Des Moines, and other towns in the region, a practice it continued during its intermittent two-year stay in Sioux City.<sup>15</sup> At the same time Irwin established connections with the owners of Sioux City's new entertainment facility, for by December 10 he had rented the Academy for fifteen hundred dollars per year.<sup>16</sup>

Originally named Hubbard Hall after A. W. Hubbard, a prosperous and influential Sioux City businessman and one of the original investors, it was renamed the Academy of Music upon its completion in December 1870. This name change indi-

13. "The Hernandez Trail," *Omaha Weekly Herald*, 27 January 1869.

14. *Sioux City Journal*, 5, 14 June 1870. Irwin and his wife played as a couple in New York City at the Bowery Theatre and in Brooklyn at the Park Theatre in 1867. George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 15 vols. (New York, 1927-1949), 8: 174, 243; T. Allston Brown, *A History of the New York Stage* (New York, 1964), 141. While in Utah, they allegedly were the first non-Mormons to play Salt Lake City, where, according to Margaret G. Watson, *Silver Theatre: Amusements of the Mining Frontier in Early Nevada, 1850-1864* (Glendale, CA, 1964), 306, they were "Brigham's [Young] pets." See also Walter M. Leman, *Memories of an Old Actor* (San Francisco, 1886), 306, and "Death of an Old Time Actor," *New York Times*, 3 February 1891, 4.

15. For the Irwins' activities in Des Moines, see Agnes O. Lewison, "A Theatrical History of Des Moines, Iowa, from 1846-1890" (M.A. thesis, University of Iowa, 1931), 22, 25-30, 35.

16. *Sioux City Journal*, 1 January 1871.





*The Academy of Music, 1888. Photo from "Views of Sioux City and Vicinity," published by J. M. Pinckney Book and Stationery Co. Courtesy of State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City (SHSI).*

cated that more than money influenced the Academy's development; civic responsibility and pride took precedence over profit and individual gain.

Designed by St. Louis architect William Angelo Powell, the Academy of Music opened on January 14, 1871, with *The Serious Family* and *A Day in Paris*. One day later the *Journal* described in glowing terms the new temple dedicated to the Muses. Located in the south half of the second and third stories of a brick block built between May 1 and December 15, 1870, it occupied the south side of Fourth Street between Douglas and Pierce streets. The hall was 50 feet by 88 feet and 27 feet high. The ground floor and a small balcony combined to seat eight hundred people; with standing room, it could hold one thousand. The stage, 4 feet high, 22 feet by 50 feet in area, had a proscenium opening 26 feet wide flanked by fancy columns. A full complement of stage scenery could be changed by special machinery located offstage. Stage lamps could be darkened without extinguishing them. The drop curtain, an essential part

of nineteenth-century scenery, showed a scene of Venice, Italy. By comparison, the Omaha Academy of Music, undoubtedly Sioux City's model, was not much larger and accommodated only eight hundred persons.<sup>17</sup> So, for a small town with a population of only about 3,400, Sioux City had an extremely large and well-appointed opera house. About one of every four Sioux City residents could occupy the Academy at any given time. Actually, it served the needs of not just an expanding town, but the surrounding region as well.

The Irwins were "in residence" at the Academy from January 14 to June 10, 1871, and they returned three more times—in September and November 1871 and September 1872—for runs of about ten days each. During that time they gave at least 176 performances in Sioux City. Said to be proficient in both tragedy and comedy, they—especially Mrs. Irwin—were repeatedly praised in the papers. The *Times* reported on February 10, 1871, that "Mrs. Irwin is not only an actress of no ordinary ability, but in addition, is a lady of rare social qualities, who has made hosts of friends during her residence here."<sup>18</sup>

Typical newspaper criticism primarily described rather than evaluated. Sometimes a review sharply criticized the performers. More often than not, however, the main purpose of the "review" was to boost attendance for the next performance. The review, perhaps unintentionally, also communicated another and perhaps more important message: since Sioux City depended on print as the primary means of advertising itself, a glowing review, or at least a neutral description, would provide ample evidence to potential residents that progressive Sioux City was the place to be, culturally as well as economically.

17. *Sioux City Journal*, 15 January 1871; *Sioux City Daily Times*, 15 January 1871; Charles Allen Tichy, "The First Seventy Years of Legitimate Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988).

18. *Sioux City Daily Times*, 10 February 1871. After their residence in Sioux City in 1871, they left in November, and did not return until October 1872 to play a brief nine-day stand. Then they left for good. One can only guess that they continued to tour. Irwin died in New York City in 1891. See Irwin's obituary, "Death of an Old Time Actor," *New York Times*, 3 February 1891, 4. Mrs. Irwin subsequently played in New York at the Academy of Music in October 1892, but that is all that is known about her.



Irwin's core company was very small; it consisted of him and his wife, her stepson and sister, a daughter, and a few others. As a result much script-cutting probably occurred, and actors were often forced to play two or three roles in a single play. In addition, they often used local talent to flesh out their productions. Irwin tried to bring in "stars" whenever he could, but the primary company Sioux City saw was the Selden Irwin Combination, supplemented by local talent when necessary. Irwin and his company did everything: act, paint, build, light, clean, publicize, and promote. They also rented out costumes, provided space, and offered advice to other organizations that produced theater, particularly the Episcopal and Congregational churches. The company's prior experience as a self-sufficient repertory company served them well in this instance; during their residence in Sioux City, the limited size of the company and the quantity and type of shows they produced still demanded that they do everything related to producing their shows.<sup>19</sup>

Irwin's company mirrored, at various times, all three major theater-producing structures of the Gilded Age: the strolling repertory company, the local stock company, and the combination company. Herein lies the secret to Irwin's continued success. He survived and thrived by adapting to existing conditions. When his organization was on the road prior to its Sioux City stay, it behaved like a repertory company, although it was called the Selden Irwin Combination. When based at the Academy of Music, it functioned as a local stock company. When it brought in "stars" or featured "stars" of its own, it operated as a sort of combination company minus the extended run. At home and on the road it was still called the Selden Irwin Combination, no small conceit!

Thus, while combinations were replacing local stock companies in the rest of the country, the Irwins, nominally a combination themselves, were acting as a local stock company in Sioux City. It is significant that Irwin, like many other local stock managers, was a "theater person." After the Irwins left, management of the Academy followed national theater busi-

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19. *Sioux City Journal*, 8 November, 13, 23 December 1870, 19, 21 January 1871.

ness and managerial trends; theater passed into the hands of businessmen, with the traveling combination as the most prevalent theatrical format. Indeed, from the Irwins' departure in 1872 until the Academy's demise in the 1890s, a businessman always managed the Academy of Music, and combination companies from big cities were the main attraction.

THE ACADEMY OF MUSIC did not remain the only legitimate theater in town. The thriving local economy, audience dissatisfaction, and civic pride prompted potential competitors to propose several rival facilities beginning as early as 1874. But Sioux City boosters did not succeed in gaining sufficient support for a new opera house until 1888.

By the end of the 1870s grain and livestock production had developed considerably, and processing industries followed quickly. James E. Booge, a local butcher turned meatpacker, became extremely successful. From a modest beginning, his business expanded rapidly. His success prompted others to get involved in the meatpacking business. In 1879 Sioux City meatpackers did business valued at \$1.5 million. The following year Booge built a processing plant costing \$250,000. In a few years his business, helped by such technological advances as refrigerated railroad cars, could hardly keep up with demand. By the 1880s, then, Sioux City's meatpacking industry held a secure place in the national economy.<sup>20</sup>

While the local economy boomed, the fortunes of the Academy sank. Productions still occurred, but patrons were increasingly discontented. For the first time, competition from a new Sioux City opera house appeared possible. The newspapers were increasingly vocal during the years between 1874 and 1884 about the Academy's irritating inadequacies. Complaints centered on claims that it had dilapidated scenery, poor ventilation, was too cold, too small, and some seats did not allow a clear view of the stage. In general, the facility no longer satisfied.<sup>21</sup>

20. Silag, "City, Town, and Countryside," 131-32, 138-39.

21. See, for example, *Sioux City Journal*, 12 February 1874, 10 January, 3 November 1882; *Sioux City Daily Times*, 30 August 1881.



A close reading of these complaints reveals more than just irritation at the Academy's physical shortcomings. They seem to indicate that the facility failed to appropriately reflect Sioux City's growing prosperity. The Academy had arisen partly as a promotional device. Now, it no longer served that purpose adequately. Continued growth depended on a positive image. A prosperous town should have that prosperity reflected in its civic works. Sioux City certainly had reason to boast about its prosperity. The meatpacking industry thrived. National economic connections strengthened. Sioux City, no longer just a rough frontier outpost with national connections, became a developing metropolis with many of the cultural and civic niceties of any civilized eastern city. Sioux City entrepreneurs deemed a new opera house essential.

The first three proposals to build another opera house all failed. The first attempt occurred in 1874, but newspaper reports about it are vague and confusing. The next proposal did not surface until 1883, when a Mr. White suggested that the city finance a new opera house. Obviously, White's proposition did not impress the city council, because nothing happened. The next year businessman and Sioux City booster A. S. Garretson decided to try a different approach; he proposed that a new opera house be financed through the sale of stock. Although this was a new idea for Sioux City, Garretson's idea had ample precedent; the Minneapolis opera house had been built largely by a syndicate of six men, and, closer to home, an Omaha opera house had been financed largely with citizens' money.<sup>22</sup>

Garretson contended that there were enough businessmen in town who could raise the money if they wanted to. And it was generally accepted that a modern opera house would help the town's business climate. It would have to be a "first class building built and equipped on modern principles," with a seating capacity of 1,200 and including "rooms to rent to ensure a steady income." Garretson also claimed that it would "bring people here who now go to Omaha or St. Paul to buy goods because they can take in some first class entertainment at these towns."<sup>23</sup>

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22. *Sioux City Journal*, 14, 17, 21 May 1874, 13 May 1884.

23. *Ibid.*, 13 May 1884.

Garretson, along with Sioux City businessmen George Weare, Frank Peavey, W. I. Buchanan, James E. Booge, and Craig Wright, would put up a percentage of the total cost of the building. Over a four-month period, from May to August 1884, these men, along with D. T. Hedges, James Junk, and probably others, sought the necessary funds. The hard work came to naught, however. Ironically, Garretson himself helped to jettison the scheme when he withdrew a fifty-thousand-dollar loan he had raised from an unnamed Rhode Island capitalist. Garretson claimed there were insufficient assurances that the structure could be a first-rate one for the money raised. He went ahead instead with plans to build a post office on the proposed opera house location.<sup>24</sup>

All three of the failed proposals would have incorporated businesses within the opera house structure, a commonly accepted practice. The benefits seemed obvious. It was also apparent, even though no "theater person" was involved in any of the planning, that there would be no problem securing enough quality attractions. By the 1880s American theater activities centered around local profits and distant products. New York City had become the nation's theatrical hub and principal supplier of traveling combinations. The businessman as theatrical manager and booking agent, likewise, had become firmly entrenched.<sup>25</sup> Sioux City boosters knew little about the theater, but they knew a lot about business. So in 1886 they tried again.

It was a propitious time. Sioux City had just entered a period of great prosperity known as her boom years, and more money was available.<sup>26</sup> Since previous attempts to persuade enough others to back their scheme had proved futile, Sioux City's primary boosters resolved to back it themselves. Four successful businessmen and longtime vocal Sioux City boosters—A. S. Garretson, James E. Booge, W. I. Buchanan, and Frank Peavey—were largely responsible for the project's eventual success. All four had been involved in previous attempts to build an opera house. Garretson, a prominent

24. *Ibid.*, 5 August 1884.

25. MacArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, especially chap. 1.

26. Sorensen and Chicoine, *Sioux City*, chap. 4.



banker, obviously felt that this good business opportunity coincided with civic duty; his 1884 attempt to build an opera house had already demonstrated that. He took advantage of this second opportunity even more forcefully. Newspaper interviews with Garretson and articles about him revealed the man as a dogged persuader who cautiously but continually was determined to have his way.

Similar attributes and interests shared by the other three primary supporters of the project may explain the reasons for, and the intensity of, their involvement. Three of them had been directly involved in theatrical productions. Buchanan, Booge, and Peavey had been involved in theatricals for some time—and not just as financial supporters or audience members. As early as 1871, the young Booge, who came to be regarded as “the father of Sioux City’s meatpacking industry,” had participated in a benefit performance at the Academy in honor of Selden Irwin. Booge portrayed a “genteel but seedy Irishman to the life and his quaint appearance excited much mirth.”<sup>27</sup> Peavey, like Booge, was a member of the Young Men’s Association in 1869. He had his amateur theatrical debut in 1876 playing Peter Probidy, age 60, in the Histrionic Association’s production of *The Chimney Sweep*. A successful farm implement dealer since the 1870s, he was, by 1886, well on his way to becoming a Minneapolis grain mogul.<sup>28</sup> Both of these men, therefore, had “trod the boards” and seen something of theatrical life. Buchanan, a crockery merchant, also had been involved with amateur theatricals as early as 1883. He even managed the Academy of Music prior to becoming the Peavey Grand’s first manager.<sup>29</sup> So all three of these men, by 1886, had a history of civic involvement, successful business practices, and a love of theater.

Originally, the opera house was to cost only fifty thousand dollars, the same price as the 1884 proposal. Stock sold, and by late July 1887 construction began. But still more money was

27. *Sioux City Journal*, 15 February 1871; Sorensen and Chicoine, *Sioux City*, 40, 54.

28. *Sioux City Daily Times*, 4 November 1869; *Sioux City Journal*, 10 January 1876.

29. *Sioux City Daily Times*, 23 May 1883; *Sioux City Journal*, 23 May 1886.

needed. Garretson proposed, in a *Journal* article, that if the company financing the opera house would complete the fifty-thousand-dollar stock subscription and guarantee its payment, he would provide the money to finish the building and put it in shape for opening night. Allegedly, only a few thousand dollars remained to be subscribed, and then the contract could be closed. Garretson acknowledged that "a few parties interested have done the bulk of the work so far, and are still at work to make a grand success of them. Sioux City cannot afford to let such an enterprise lag. Fill the subscriptions and complete the building."<sup>30</sup> Again, success depended on money.

By October 6, 1887, the day the building cornerstone was laid, an additional \$95,000 had been raised. During the winter, however, project supervisors discovered that even more was needed, so an additional sum of nearly \$30,000 was raised to complete the building. This brought the reported total to at least \$175,000, more than three times the original estimate. Building costs had inflated wildly. Still, several Sioux City boosters, who already had been very generous with their money and energies, desperately wanted to see the opera house completed. Most of the last \$30,000 came from William Joy, James E. Booge, A. S. Garretson, and Frank Peavey. Joy and his partner, A. S. Garretson, had founded the Sioux National Bank. Garretson and Booge, promoter and meatpacker, had a history of involvement in Sioux City theater on various levels. Peavey, the grain merchant and former Sioux City amateur thespian, had the theater named after him, according to the *Journal*, because "he has not only been a heavy contributor financially, but he also lent his counsel and encouragement to help make it the splendid success which it already is."<sup>31</sup>

On September 24, 1888, the Peavey Grand Opera House opened with a production of *The Gypsy Baron*, played by the Conried English Opera Company. The elegant four-story structure, designed by Chicago architect Oscar Cobb, had a seating capacity of more than thirteen hundred, not counting standing room. The interior was lavishly decorated with blue, red, and

30. *Sioux City Journal*, 29 July 1887.

31. *Ibid.*, 27 November 1887, 25 September 1888.





*Peavey Grand Opera House interior. Photo taken on opening night, September 24, 1888. Courtesy of Sioux City Public Museum (SCPM).*

gold silk curtains, velvet English carpets, white French tapestry and lace curtains, Venetian silk velour in orange and blue, and other evidently opulent furnishings, selected by Booge. The theater itself was 120 by 70 feet. The stage was 70 feet wide, 42 feet deep, and 60 feet high. The auditorium was divided into ground floor, balcony, and gallery, with special boxes available. The entire structure, located on Fourth and Jones streets, was 200 feet long, 70 feet wide, and 146 feet from the top of the building to the street.<sup>32</sup> By any standard, it represented a sumptuous "Temple of the Muses." As a production facility it presented all the greats and near greats of American and western theater. Edwin Booth, James O'Neill, the Divine Sarah Bernhardt, Joseph Jefferson III, Eleanora Duse, Helena Modjeska, Julia Marlowe, and Otis Skinner were but a few of the many that graced her boards in the early days. Charity

32. *Ibid.*, 25 September 1888.

balls, high school graduations, and all manner of public meetings also took place there.<sup>33</sup>

Most important, the Peavey Grand was more than just a performance and public meeting facility: it was the quintessential symbol of progress. Sioux City had emerged from the frontier, not just economically but culturally as well. A growing metropolis with an unlimited destiny, it could now confer upon its citizens, present and future, the best the civilized cities of the East offered. Sioux City had arrived. Of course, if the city had arrived, then the men who had spearheaded the theater's creation also had arrived. The building of the Peavey Grand embodied this truth and displayed it for all the world to see.

Now that a facility had been created, it needed a continuous and reliable supply of quality productions to attract and keep audiences. Since 1872 the local managers of the Academy had depended on traveling combinations to supply attractions. Between that year and the opening of the Peavey in 1888, regional and national theatrical organizations mirrored the economic practices and organizational shape of the giant industrial trusts. They gradually increased their dominion over the supply of theater bookings. That meant the centralization of power and the loss of whatever control local managers had. Most productions came from New York City. From the beginning Peavey Grand managers went there to secure bookings to fill the upcoming season. By 1890 Klaw and Erlanger, two of the six partners who eventually made up the Theatrical Syndicate, had established one of the country's leading booking agencies. Peavey managers booked through them, and when the Syndicate formed in 1896, they booked through the Syndicate. Even though momentous events in American theater transpired in 1896, the previous year was an even more important one for Sioux City theater. For in 1895 Alpheus B. Beall became manager of the Peavey Grand Opera House.

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33. Richard L. Poole, "Entertainments on a Bend in the River—A History of Theatre and Other Entertainments in Sioux City, Iowa, 1854–1919," unpublished manuscript.





*Peavey Grand Opera House, c. 1890. Courtesy of SCPM.*

WHEN ALPHEUS BEALL ARRIVED in Sioux City in 1888 at the age of 22, he encountered a city embarked on a period of sustained prosperity. By 1889 three Sioux City meatpackers were doing a combined business of \$7.6 million. By 1890 the population had reached thirty-seven thousand, a remarkable increase of thirty thousand in ten years. And "its economy constituted the heaviest industrial concentration in the state of Iowa." This commercial boom created many new jobs, including clerical positions. Also, during this time period, Sioux City men in their twenties were particularly successful in improving their economic situation. This group, as well as men in their thirties, experienced frequent and rapid advancement.<sup>34</sup> In keeping with this pattern, Beall began as a bank clerk and worked in the banking business for seven years. He advanced rapidly, and at the relatively young age of 29, in 1895, he became secretary of the Iowa Investment and Trust Company.

34. Silag, "City, Town and Countryside," 1, 141, 145, 202, 205, 210.

That year he also would take over as manager of the Peavey Grand.

In seven years Beall had become a Sioux City success story. Rising from a position of relative obscurity, he became secretary of a significant investment company, as well as manager of the region's newest and finest opera house. Hard work undoubtedly had much to do with his success, but Beall must have had a keen awareness of his own opportunities. For example, C. L. Joy, president of the Iowa Investment and Trust Company, of which Beall was the secretary, was the son of William Joy, president of the Sioux National Bank. William Joy's partner in founding the bank was A. S. Garretson, civic booster and key supporter of the Peavey Grand Opera House. From the outset Beall was involved with people who believed in his abilities, had power, and felt that the Peavey was a significant civic asset. They probably also felt that the Peavey, like any other important business in town, had to be run on the soundest of business principles. Beall must have impressed them, or he never would have been entrusted with such an important job at such a young age.

As the fourth Peavey manager, Beall eventually became the leading theatrical magnate of Sioux City and the surrounding area. His theater business practices reflected the practices and methods of the Theatrical Syndicate, especially regarding the development of circuits and booking practices. Ultimately, Beall created and controlled an extensive regional theater syndicate of his own and became heavily involved in numerous other business enterprises. But he started with the Peavey Grand.

The *Sioux City Daily Tribune* interviewed Beall on March 29, 1895. Thomas Boyd, the Peavey's former manager, had left, and Beall was spokesman as well as secretary for the Iowa Investment and Trust Company, trustee for the bond holders of the Peavey Grand building. Beall's style was smooth, confident, and aggressive but somewhat guarded. In the interview Beall revealed those qualities by the way he responded to questions about the Peavey Grand's next manager. Beall stated that changing managers in no way reflected negatively on former manager Boyd. Then, after offering a few stock reasons for Boyd's departure, he said, "we have talked with a number of



people but as of yet have made no bargains for a new manager. We do not propose to let the house to any irresponsible party and of course whoever gets it will have to have some capital in back of him. . . . In the meantime, I shall manage the house for the trustees."<sup>35</sup> The meantime was to last for nine years, from 1895 to 1904.

After replacing Thomas Boyd as the Peavey's manager, Beall moved quickly and efficiently. He had obviously demonstrated the ambition and talent to manage such a large operation. He seized his opportunity and took advantage of it. On March 31, 1895, the *Journal* reported, in a very straightforward way, that "the bookings and management will be attended by A. B. Beall, secretary of the company which owns the building."<sup>36</sup>

Slightly less than six weeks later, on May 14, Beall met with managers from Des Moines, Davenport, Ottumwa, Cedar Rapids, Dubuque, Oskaloosa, Marshalltown, and Omaha to form the Western Managers' Association. They also planned to extend the group to include theaters in western Illinois and Minnesota, and additional theaters in Nebraska and Iowa. This regional circuit, like others scattered across the country, evolved in order to force road companies to keep their engagements. Up to this point, if they did not show up, a theater's only recourse was through the courts. Now, they would be blacklisted. The benefit for each theater in the circuit was increased bargaining power and cost effectiveness. The more theaters there were on the circuit, the less it would cost to book any particular show.<sup>37</sup> Sound business practice made for better profits. And for Beall, the ambitious newcomer, that was the bottom line.

Beall's business acumen and subsequent relationship with the Western Managers' Association allowed him to solidify his position at home while making the connections that would prove so valuable in the development of his future theatrical syndicate. Almost one year after becoming manager, in 1896 (the same year the Theatrical Syndicate officially began), his position seemed secure. The May 24, 1896, edition of the *Jour-*

35. *Sioux City Daily Tribune*, 29 March 1895.

36. *Sioux City Journal*, 31 March 1895.

37. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre*, 36.

nal stated, "It is a noteworthy fact that since the Grand Opera House passed into the hands of Manager Beall it has under his careful management kept fully abreast of the times. In fact the Grand has never had a better season not only in point of high class attractions but also in attendance all of which is gratifying to the management."<sup>38</sup> Whether the paper's report reflected circumstances totally accurately or not really does not matter. Beall was a success.

During his nine-year tenure at the Grand, Beall provided Sioux City theater-goers with a number of innovations, and proved himself an astute theater businessman and promoter. For example, during the opening of the 1895 season, fifteen large balloons, each filled with a ticket entitling the bearer to two of the best seats in the house, were released the Saturday prior to the Tuesday opening. During the 1897 season he brought in the Vitascope, a film projector devised by Thomas Armat. The views included "Shooting the Chutes" and William Jennings Bryan speaking from a train. He also brought in the Trioscope, an electric motion picture machine, and the Cinematographe.<sup>39</sup>

The best promotional gimmick of his early years emerged in 1899, when he placed a huge spotlight atop the Peavey Grand. Beall claimed that this light surpassed any other electrically illuminated device in the country, although that statement probably contained more Beall advertising hyperbole than electrical fact. When placed on the central tower of the opera house 146 feet from the street, the light could be seen for a radius of forty miles. All of the Peavey's subsequent advertising appeared with Beall's couplet, "When you see the searchlight there's a show that night."<sup>40</sup>

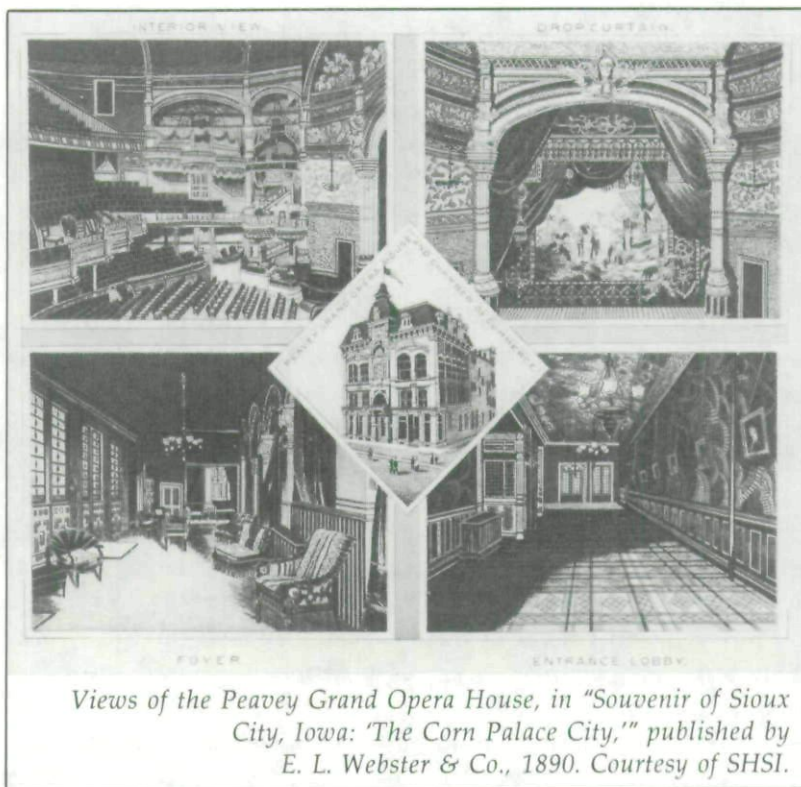
Beall was not only an astute promoter, however; he was also a skillful manager and booking agent. In 1897 an article in the *Journal* extolled his virtues as a manager and stated that he had been on a month's booking trip to New York City, adding

38. *Sioux City Journal*, 24 May 1896.

39. *Sioux City Tribune*, 24 August 1895; *Sioux City Journal*, 5 January 1897; Arthur Edwin Krows, *The Talkies* (New York, 1930), 77.

40. *Sioux City Journal Industrial Edition*, 1899; *Sioux City Tribune*, 13 October 1899.





that "if Sioux City gets a better or even as good a line of attractions this coming season as Manager Beall provided last fall and winter, no complaint will be offered. . . it will be seen to get a good line of amusements requires the untiring efforts of a local manager."<sup>41</sup>

Two years later the *Journal* reported,

things theatrically have been brisk in Sioux City so far this season. One reason for this is there are a great many more traveling companies on the road this season and a number of them have been working west. Sioux City comes in for its share of the business as it is almost on a direct line from East to West. Attractions which play Omaha invariably are glad to fill a day by coming up to Sioux City and thence a number go on to St. Paul and Minneapolis. Sioux Falls is becoming quite a place for companies to

41. *Sioux City Tribune*, 31 July 1897.

stop now and Manager Beall sends quite a number from here to that place.<sup>42</sup>

In this article the *Journal* recognized, perhaps inadvertently, that securing the town's share of traveling companies was a "business." Beall, by training and instinct, knew this, too. He also knew that it made good business sense to emulate the most successful models. As a result, he moved quickly to develop a substantial booking business. By 1898 he had become the booking agent for theaters in the Western Circuit, which included Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Marshalltown, Clinton, Lincoln (Nebraska), and Rockford (Illinois). He also booked shows for Fort Dodge, Le Mars, Cherokee, Waterloo, and Oskaloosa.<sup>43</sup>

Beall's skills as a manager soon enabled him to extend his financial empire to encompass other entertainment enterprises. By 1900 he was, besides being manager of the Peavey, president of the Riverside Park Amusement Company, lessee of Riverside Park, a popular amusement facility and home to a summer theater facility elegantly named the Riverside Aerial Casino. He also controlled Woodland Park, a recreation and baseball facility, was president of the Sioux City Bill Posting Company (purchased from previous Peavey Manager E. L. Webster), treasurer of the Associated Bill Posters of the United States and Canada, manager of a baseball team and park in Minneapolis, and owner of a baseball team in Sioux City and a baseball park in Denver, Colorado. And in 1901 he was president of the Northwestern Telephone Company.<sup>44</sup>

By 1902 Beall ambitiously began to extend his theatrical empire as well. From those first contacts with the Western Managers' Association in 1895, he eventually controlled the New Theatre in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and one in Mankato, Minnesota. He took on a partner, S. M. Bear of Sioux Falls. By 1903 they controlled theaters in Fort Dodge and Council Bluffs,

42. *Sioux City Journal*, 12 November 1899.

43. *Sioux City Tribune*, 9 August 1898.

44. *Sioux City Tribune*, 8 July 1899, 12 February 1900; *Sioux City Journal Industrial Edition*, 1899; *Sioux City Journal*, 11 May, 8 November 1901, 8 March 1902.



Iowa; Faribault, Minnesota; Vermillion, Yankton, and Elk Point, South Dakota; and Norfolk, Nebraska. Characterized by the *Journal* as "somewhat of a Charles Frohman in the theatrical line," Beall now headed "the only real simon pure theatrical trust in the west." Pure or not, he extended his empire in 1904 to include theaters in Mason City and Le Mars. Back home he gained control of the Gem Theatre, a vaudeville house.<sup>45</sup>

Like the Theatrical Syndicate and other giant trusts of the day, Beall insisted on absolute control over all aspects of the business. When the stagehands struck in 1897, for example, Beall countered their claims that they were being underpaid and not being treated fairly by labeling them lying "drunkards." Even more revealing was his statement that "I propose to run my own affairs according to what I consider is the proper method and to use every employee right and to be used right by every employee."<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, then, he continued to have labor troubles until the spring of 1899, when he settled with the National Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. No specific terms were announced, although the *Journal* wrote that the conflicting parties had agreed on W. H. Bastian as arbitrator and that his decisions would be accepted as final.<sup>47</sup>

Labor conflicts were not the only illustrations of Beall's desire for control and for having things done exclusively his way. He was in court a number of times, either suing or being sued. Newspaper quotations and other descriptions of his behavior reveal an arrogant and combative nature. Eventually this fatal flaw in his character contributed to his loss of the Peavey Grand, and his exit as a regional power from the theatrical scene.

On February 16, 1904, the *Journal* headline stated that Beall would either buy the Peavey or build a new opera house. The lease on the Peavey Grand would not be renewed. The article went on to say that Beall would erect his own house if the owners refused to sell for a reasonable figure. Fred Chamberlain of Boston, representing the Chamber of Commerce Associ-

45. *Sioux City Journal*, 5, 28 November 1902, 15 November, 10 December 1903, 4 March, 6 November 1904.

46. *Ibid.*, 10 September 1897.

47. *Ibid.*, 25 April 1899.

ation, which owned the opera house, claimed that the building could not be leased and had to be sold. Beall retorted that if he could not get the Grand for a reasonable price, he would build a new theater. "I'm not worrying a bit," he claimed. In the same article Beall asserted that he was the only man who could conduct theater business successfully in Sioux City because the Theatrical Syndicate would do business only with him. The owners countered this final bit of Beall bluster by leasing the theater to Woodward and Burgess, Syndicate men and owners of theaters in Omaha and Kansas City. So there may have been some validity after all to Beall's claim that Chamberlain had leased the theater to other parties purely out of spite, especially after Chamberlain had publicly declared his intent to sell, not lease. Whatever the reasons, on October 1 Beall's lease ended, and the Peavey Grand was renamed the Grand Opera House. Sadly, the Beall era ended with an anticlimactic and seemingly petty confrontation over a lease for the theater.<sup>48</sup>

On April 1 an article in the *Journal* touted the excellence of the new management and promised that because of this association Sioux City would get a "superior line of attractions." Interviewed about building a rival house, Beall declared, "I have never yet slipped up and I don't propose to slip up on this proposition. I am not worrying at all."<sup>49</sup> That day in Omaha the owners of the Grand signed a five-year lease with Woodward and Burgess to take effect August 1, 1904. Thus Woodward and Burgess added Sioux City to their river city theatrical trust and gained control of entertainment up and down the Missouri River for four hundred miles.

Beall never stopped trying to get back into Sioux City theater. He owned considerable property in Sioux City, still had the bill posting business, was president of the A. B. Beall Theatre Company until its demise in 1907, and also owned the Dumbarton Realty Company. He had roots. Now and again his name would appear in a lawsuit over his various entertainment or realty enterprises. He was a member of the golf, yacht, and country clubs. He was a Mason, Elk, Shriner, and Modern Woodman, and played a significant role in the Missouri River

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48. *Ibid.*, 16 February 1904.

49. *Ibid.*, 1 April 1904.



Navigation Congress in 1908. In December of that year, the *Journal* reported that Beall was again negotiating to lease the Grand. His spokesman, J. H. Carmody, denied the assertion, claiming that "Mr. Beall has been doing his best to get rid of his theatrical interests. . . . he now has important interests in the west, mining and otherwise."<sup>50</sup>

In 1909 Sioux City built the Auditorium, a 3,500-seat convention and performing facility. In October of the next year Beall got a lease on the Auditorium for seven months. Since he competed for the lease with Maurice Jencks, the new manager of the Peavey, winning must have given him great satisfaction. After 1910, however, Beall's name seldom appeared in the newspapers. When it did, it was connected with the sale of California homes and other property. In 1918 he again became manager of the Auditorium. After a lingering illness, he died in Hot Springs, Arkansas, on December 27, 1921, and was buried in Sioux City, his home for thirty-three years.<sup>51</sup>

The Beall era coincided with the pinnacle of Sioux City theater. No other Sioux City theater manager did so much so well for so long. An astute businessman and theatrical entrepreneur, Beall's theater business procedures resembled those of the Theatrical Syndicate. He also brought panache and an exciting style to the whole business. Throughout his entire theatrical career, however, he never seemed to be just interested in the money or the power. Although he started out as a businessman, he became a showman. Ironically, in 1904, Beall's last year as Peavey manager, more combination productions traveled than ever before. After that the decline began.<sup>52</sup> With Beall gone, the Peavey passed into the hands of an out-of-town theatrical syndicate, and it would be many years before the old theater would again be locally controlled.

THE ACADEMY OF MUSIC AND THE PEAVEY GRAND were just two of at least six hundred opera houses of varying sizes that dotted Iowa's landscape around the turn of the cen-

50. *Ibid.*, 18 December 1908.

51. *Ibid.*, 21 February, 28 December 1910, 9 July 1911, 3 February 1918, 28 December 1921; *Sioux City Daily Tribune*, 28 December 1921.

52. Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre*, 75.

tury, and thousands were located in the Midwest.<sup>53</sup> Most, like those in Sioux City, were established by a few local individuals who had successfully taken advantage of the economic opportunities available on the frontier to accumulate considerable wealth. Sioux City entrepreneurs, like other frontier boosters, wanted to advertise Sioux City and prove, both to themselves and to the rest of the country, particularly the "civilized" East, that emerging upper Missouri River communities could develop the marks of gentility and culture.

National and local economic trends and business practices often made those marks a reality. Those same trends, however, undermined the local boosters' desire for control over their creations, and ensured that success would be measured by the principles of good business management rather than in theatrical or cultural terms. Only during the brief tenure of the Selden Irwin Combination was Sioux City theater controlled locally by a "theater person." Alpheus Beall's nine-year tenure smoothed the transition to distant control by the Theatrical Syndicate. He provided colorful business management pursued in a constantly broadening regional context, even as he consolidated his own wealth and influence in the community. Ultimately, however, he was forced to succumb to the wealth and power of the Theatrical Syndicate.

On the other hand, the Peavey probably never would have been built without a strong national theater connection, and attractions of such quantity, diversity, and dependability would not have been available otherwise. In that regard, the Syndicate, theatrical circuits, and centralized booking agencies had a positive effect. Finally, these developments, as they were reflected in the history of Sioux City theater, reveal how the culture of Gilded Age America was never just a matter of esthetics. It always seemed to deal with some combination of power, money, and civic duty.

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53. Judith K. Zivanovic, ed., *Opera Houses of the Midwest* (Chicago, 1988); John W. Frick and Carlton Ward, eds., *Directory of Historic American Theatres* (Westport, CT, 1988).



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