




The GLADBROOK OPERA HOUSE

by

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One Saturday night in 1930 a projectionist panicked when the old-fashioned celluloid film he was showing caught fire. He kicked the projector out of the fireproof projection booth and into the audience. Somehow, no one was hurt—but Gladbrook's old wooden movie theater burned like dry tinder.

It had been a movie theater since the First World War. But my grandfather T.E. Mann had opened it before the turn of the century as the Gladbrook Opera House.

Maybe "opera house" is a rather grand name

for the one-story frame building that occupied a corner lot just a block off Main Street. But it was typical of the modest buildings similarly named in the small towns of pre-war America. Its stage, raised high above the flat wooden floor to give everyone a good view, was separated from the audience by—yes—a fireproof asbestos curtain—quite a functional article that was nonetheless tastefully adorned with pale blue and gold cupids who floated among puffy clouds. The border of the curtain was decorated too, with the advertising of local merchants. For scenery there were several pieces of canvas painted to suggest a woodland scene.

The audience was accommodated with a similar elegance in Bentwood kitchen chairs. These were dignified for performances by white cotton slipcovers, which could be removed when the House was hired out for dances and the chairs pushed to one side.

All of this—grand name, cupid safety curtain, woodland scenery, slipcovered chairs—helped to give the Gladbrook Opera House, and similar establishments all over the country, the air of genteel respectability demanded in those days by the starched-stiff morality of small town America.

My grandfather was no less fastidious about the plays and players he booked into his Opera House. They had to be moral—as well as entertaining, of course. But it really wasn't very difficult to sell tickets in Gladbrook at the turn of the century, especially when the crops were good and the town's single money-making industry, a German mustard factory, was doing well. In fact, like most small towns, Gladbrook was enjoying a modest prosperity and, with the rest of middle-America, was just beginning to ease itself from the hold of an all-work-and-no-play ethic.

Now the town was small, with a population of only 1,200—too small, you would think, to attract many touring companies. But Gladbrook's location along the Great Western and the Rock Island rail lines made it a more than convenient stopover for rail-bound theatrical companies. Over 350 repertory shows played back and forth across the continent in those days, bringing entertainment to 1,300 opera houses like the one at Gladbrook.

"Good Attractions or None," was my grandfather's motto. That meant bringing respectable companies whose players were also entertaining enough to draw the crowds. In fact, many of these companies came back to Gladbrook year after year. The actors became our personal friends and were eagerly awaited as guests of the family. The arrival of one such



T.E. Mann (courtesy of the author)

group was first announced in Gladbrook on November 1, 1899 in *The Tama Northern*, my grandfather's paper. (Owning your own newspaper was a pretty convenient thing for the proprietor of an opera house.)

The King-Perkins Company was larger than most. It boasted 13 members instead of the complement of five—the Hero, Heroine, Comedian, Soubrette, and "Heavy" or "Character Actor"—that was standard with most companies. It was not enough for members of the company to be good actors. Most were also

required to perform "specialties," taking vaudeville turns between the acts. These intervals diverted the audience while costumes and scenery—in the days before zippers and revolving stages—were changed.

As carefully as the actors' morals were scrutinized, so were their clothes. A company's wardrobe was almost as important as a company's plays since it brought to the small towns glimpses of the larger world of high fashion. On as well as off the stage, most actors took great care to appear modishly attired. A photograph of the King-Perkins Company shows the actors colorfully but respectably dressed, the men sporting derbies with neckties wrapped around celluloid collars. The women wear fashionably modest high-necked dresses or blouses, their wide-brimmed hats fixed securely with long hat pins. When my grandfather announced the Company's October, 1903 engagement he paid almost as much attention to what the actors were to wear as to what they were to play:

This year they bring a new play called "The Leading Lady." This play is rather "classy" and tells the story of a brilliant actress who gave up the stage to wed a society man whose wealthy father objects to their marriage, but yields when he learns more of her good qualities. This play gives Chic Perkins an opportunity for her best acting, in gorgeous gowns imported from Paris, the same being the highest achievement of the modiste's art.

The King-Perkins players were great favorites at Gladbrook, returning year after year with plays like "Cheek," "Down East," and "A Wife Worth Winning." As Mr. H. Soleman, the manager of the Tama Opera House, wrote to my grandfather, the Company's plays were "clean, bright and up to date. Every member of the company is capable and the specialties between the acts are alone worth the price of admission." Although he was always careful to secure from managers testimonials and assurances of the wholesome quality of the acts he booked, my grandfather was not always fortu-

nate. Once he was even prompted to publish this warning in a trade paper called *The Opera House Reporter*:

Gladbrook, Iowa Gossip

Well, yes, Gossip is the word for some things I say below. But "d—m" would more explicitly introduce a "write-up" of a self-styled scenic artist named Charles H. Dobson. In one of those numerous early March snow storms this artistic fraud and a female companion drifted into Gladbrook. Despite his scenic face, whiskey breath and shaky nerve he secured a contract from the writer hereof to paint something over 100 yards of scenery, I to furnish the cloth and lumber necessary, his compensation to be the proceeds of an advertising drop curtain and some cash to boot. Did he do it? Yes, he "dude" it. He wrought fearfully and wonderfully on the drop between drinks, then dropped around and collected for the ads on the drop. He then dropped his contract and drooped about town, finally drooping out of sight leaving a kitchen scene only just commenced, and a prison scene and several wings untouched. Managers look out for him. He is rather tall, dark-complexioned, dark hair. You can smell him if he comes near you.

On another occasion a Mrs. Dalroy played in the "Wizard of Wall Street" at Gladbrook, carrying "a heavy part in the play when she should have been at ease owing to a delicate condition of health." That is, she was very, very pregnant. And as if such problems as these were not enough, the opera house owner was often fleeced by touring companies who failed to provide their own music and musicians.

Note on Sources

The major sources for this article were old issues of *The Tama Reporter*, the newspaper owned by T.E. Mann, and the *Opera House Reporter*, then considered the bible for theater owners. A large body of letters also proved useful. This article is a chapter from the author's book, *Trouping America*, which recounts her parents' experiences on the stage.

The King-Perkins Company (courtesy of the author)

Often my grandfather fired off stern letters to managers of traveling companies. He wrote the following to an A. L. Edwards, who handled the "Old Arkansaw" company:

Dear Sirs:

A piano player is quite an uncertain proposition here. Will not the show be greatly marred without piano or orchestra playing? Why do you not, like most companies of your class, provide the *entire* entertainment for the evening? Where part of the entertainment is to be provided by the local manager should not his percent be greater than 25%?

Yours truly,
T. E. Mann

Of course the acting companies had their share of problems, too. Not every one of the 1,300 opera houses was as grand as Gladbrook's. It was not uncommon for actors to play to a dirty auditorium with accommodations in poorly-lit and cold dressing rooms. Nor did my grandfather always book acts of the King-Perkins' caliber. During the '90s he brought the famous—or infamous—Cherry Sisters from Cedar Rapids to Gladbrook. Effie, Jessie, and Addie Cherry were soon to become a national joke with an act so bad (it included the declamation of essays on the evils of drinking and smoking) that it packed the Old Olympia Theatre in New York four weeks running. In some places



the Sisters performed behind a scrim set up to block the tribute of eggs and vegetables they customarily received from their audiences.

Yes, it must be admitted that acting can be a hard life. When my mother Floy Mann many years later, after having given up the stage, became bored with being a housewife, she returned to acting for a single season. She took me with her. I sang "Barney Google" and "Let the Rest of the World Go By." My mother billed me as "Baby Bonnie" and I am told that I never failed to applaud myself. During one performance another kid in the company—one who must have had but little regard for the kind of tasteful moral standards my grandfather ad-

hered to—upstaged me. He had what used to be called an "accident" right on stage. My father always told me: never play a scene with a dog or another kid.

But no matter what happened in them on a given night, the old opera houses were a valuable part of small town life. Whether they offered the decent, competent entertainment of companies like King-Perkins, with their wardrobe representing the height of the Paris "modiste's art," or the naive antics of the Cherry Sisters, or later on, movies, America's opera houses brought to communities like Gladbrook a glimpse of culture beyond the village limits. □