

Opera House Illusions

Jesse Cox and Theatrical Scenery

Text by Michael Kramme

Photos by Chuck Greiner

JESSE COX put Estherville, Iowa, on the theatrical map during the turn of the century. Cox had worked as an repertoire actor early in his life, but his more significant achievements were as editor of *The Opera House Reporter* and, most important, as the inventor of a system of painting theatrical scenery that revolutionized the industry.

Cox lived in the golden age of the traveling theater in America. When the pioneers founded the thousands of towns and villages that constituted the American frontier, one of the first important structures to be erected in most of these communities was the town hall, opera house, or, in some cases, "grand" opera house. The term "opera house" was misleading as few of them ever actually housed an opera. Very few opera companies could afford to be on tour. But to many rural citizens, the word "theater" had a tarnished reputation and the phrase "opera house" provided a bit of class to the community.

Many of the opera houses were simple, perhaps only a platform at one end of a large room on the second floor of a business building. Often the audience area was flat so the floor could double as a dance area. Other opera houses were elaborate structures that were the

pride of the community. A surge of opera-house construction occurred from the 1870s through the 1890s. By 1905, according to *Julius Cahn's Official Theatrical Guide*, Iowa listed 122 available opera houses (yet only 184 Iowa towns had populations over a thousand).

The opera house was the center of the community's cultural activities. It provided a place for public meetings, lodge meetings, home-talent productions, graduations, and also hosted the traveling theatrical companies that roamed the territory. Some of the traveling companies stayed in town for one performance only, especially the numerous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows. Other companies had a selection of different plays available so that they could stay in town for an entire week and present a different play nightly.

Between the 1880s and 1930s, hundreds of these traveling repertoire companies operated across the country, with a large concentration

Right: Jesse Cox's workbench, dye pigments, and special short-bristle brushes used in his revolutionary "Diamond Dye process" of painting canvas stage scenery. Apparently the process involved heating glue on the burner and mixing it with the pigment. His technique remained a trade secret. But the result, vivid color that would not peel, crack, or rub off, was shared nation-wide as owners of opera houses and managers of acting companies bought his lavish sets of scenery.





Jesse Cox (left). After working as a prop boy, actor, musician, and editor of *The Opera House Reporter*, Cox applied his experience to create portable, durable, and convincing scenery. "If you have a large production it will save you \$1.00 to \$3.00 on baggage transfers every day, or \$365 or more a year. . . . If you play a small house you can fold in the stuff to fit the stage and use the scenery every night in place of leaving it in the alley about one-half of the time," Cox wrote in his 1916 sales catalog. Satisfied customers, representing touring companies and opera houses across the nation, sent compliments and promised more orders.



One of Cox's working paintings. The next step was sketching the design in charcoal on the huge expanse of canvas. Then he and his staff artists would paint the design with the dyes, using special short-bristle brushes.

in the Midwest. Some of the more famous Iowa companies included The Schaffner Players, The Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company, The Hazel M. Cass Players, J. Doug Morgan, Augler Brothers, The Henderson Stock Company, George Sweet Players, The Hatcher Players, Angel's Comedians, and The Hila Morgan Show, for which Morgan advertised herself as "Iowa's sweetheart."

The arrival of a traveling company was quite an event, especially in the more remote villages. It was the custom for the players to make a grand entrance, emerging from the train depot and then parading in their best attire through the town to their hotel. Since many of the companies played the same community year after year, several of the performers became celebrities in the eyes of the local fans. The companies were also welcome because they brought excitement to entertainment-starved regions.

During the winter months the companies played in the opera houses. But in the summer

months before the advent of air conditioning, it was necessary to move into tents. Extra helpers were needed in the summer to erect the tents and set up the chairs and stage machinery, and many of the town's young people helped in exchange for passes to the shows.

Fascinated by the traveling theater companies, young Jesse Cox began his theatrical career as a prop boy at the Lough Opera House in Estherville. Born March 3, 1878, in Seneca, Illinois, he and his family had moved to Emmet County, Iowa, in 1891. At age sixteen he joined the Warren G. Noble Dramatic Shows of Chariton as an actor. He also worked with the Long Dramatic Company, the Ideal Tent Show, the Scoville-Caufman Repertoire Company, and King Brothers Circus. In addition to performing, he "doubled in brass" by playing the baritone or bass in the companies' bands. During these years on the road, Cox developed his talents painting scenery, talents that would later bring him great success.

Leaving his acting job, he returned to

Estherville, where, from 1898 to 1907, he and his older brother George, owned, edited, and published *The Opera House Reporter*, a weekly show-business newspaper. The *Reporter* contained advertising as well as box office reports from theaters. It aided the local theater owner in hiring traveling talent.

MEANWHILE, Cox developed a special process for painting scenery while working as a scenery painter in the local Lough Opera House. From his experience in traveling companies, Cox would have known that scenery was of major importance to the theater groups on tour. The larger and more prosperous companies brought their own scenery in railroad boxcars, but the smaller companies had to rely on scenery owned by the opera house. The number of locally available sets and the quality of the art work varied considerably. Some were painted by itinerant artists; others were painted by professional scene shops located in Minneapolis, Kansas City, Chicago, and — thanks to Jesse Cox — Estherville, Iowa.

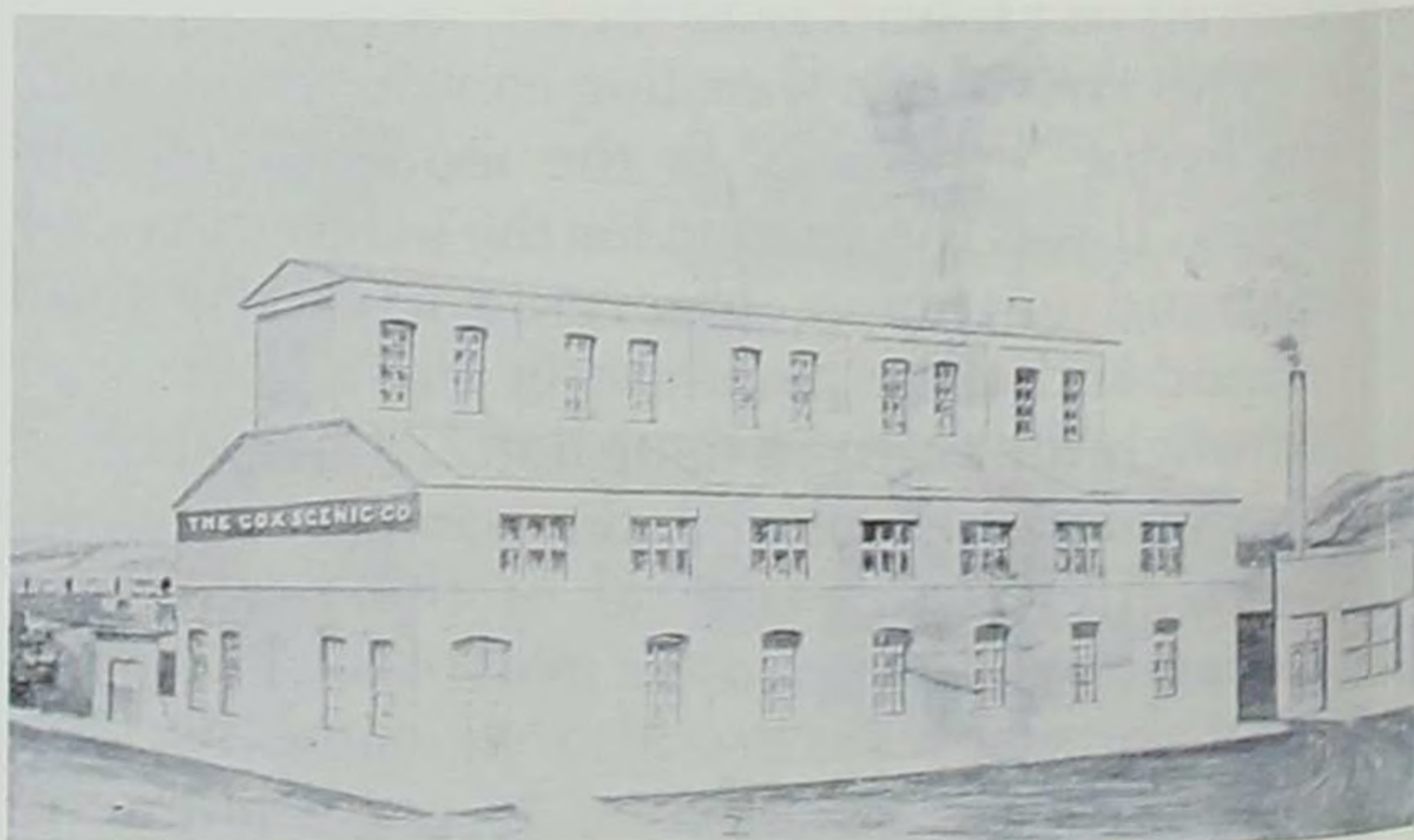
The scenery most widely used at the time was known as “wing and drop.” The sides of the stage were masked by a series of wings (or flats), wooden frames covered with canvas and then painted to represent the setting. The wings were lined up behind one another at intervals so they would mask the side of the off-stage area from the audience and provide entrance space for the performers. Actors would “wait in the wings” for their entrances. When a show had not been fully rehearsed, many actors would have their scripts in the wing area so they could consult the script between entrances. (From this practice we get the phrase “winging it.”)

The drop, a large unframed piece of canvas painted to match the wings, provided the back wall of the setting. Drops came in all sizes, but ten to twelve feet tall by twenty to twenty-five feet wide was most common. In the larger theaters the drops would be tied to a batten and then hoisted above the stage when they were not needed. Many of the smaller opera houses did not have adequate overhead space so the drop would be rolled up out of sight on a

wooden cylinder. To change the setting, the drop would be hoisted or rolled out of view and the drop for the next setting would be lowered into view; at the same time, the wings would be slid out of the audience's view. Generally, grooves cut into the floors and a grooved support from the stage ceiling held the wings in place.

A well-equipped opera house would have a minimum of four standard sets, known in the profession as “front room, back room, timber and town.” The “front room” was an elaborately painted set to represent a fancy parlor. This would be used to represent rooms in mansions or palaces. Some of the front-room drops had an opening cut out in the center to provide the main entrance into the room. A drop with such an opening was called the “center door fancy.” The “back room” set represented a rustic or poorly appointed room, and was used for rustic interiors, homes of the poorer class, kitchens, or servants' quarters in a well-to-do household. “Timber” sets usually represented a wooded scene, but would often double for any exterior setting. Many of them included a pool of water that could represent a lake, pond, or river. The “town” set was used for any street scenes. The town drop was usually hung downstage (closest to the audience). It was also often used as the background for specialty entertainments between acts of the play or while scenery was being changed behind the drop.

Many of the opera houses had beautiful velour main curtains; others had a special drop used in lieu of the main curtain. These



Cox's Estherville studio, from a 1916 scenery catalog. Over the years Cox worked in three different buildings. The first was destroyed by fire, the second by tornado.



Cox sits in the "working" window of a scenery wing.

would have a scene painted in the center of the drop. Surrounding the scene would be several blank spaces on which advertising of the area businesses could be painted in by local artists. This advertising provided additional income to the theater.

MOVING AND STORAGE of scenery were very difficult and expensive — especially for the traveling companies that transported their own. Although the wings were built so they would fit sideways into a standard boxcar and could be moved easily, the drops, however, were too large to move without folding them. If the drops were folded, the paint would crack and flake off. These problems were solved by Jesse Cox's "Diamond Dye process."

Cox developed and patented a process of painting scenery with heated dye rather than paint. The use of a dye process provided a full array of vivid colors that would not rub off or crack, as was the case with painted scenery. With this process, drops could be folded up, packed into trunks, and easily transported from theater to theater. With this innovation, the repertoire companies could carry a greater selection of scenery with them. They could

have scenery painted especially to fit the play rather than having to rely on the scenery provided by the opera house. This must have been a refreshing change for the local theater patrons who were weary of seeing the same old scenery again and again.

Scenery painters throughout the country followed Cox's lead in changing from paint to dye. Part of his secret included the use of special paint brushes, with softer, shorter hair. This allowed greater control of the dye during application. He also would leave areas of the drop unpainted, letting the light color of the canvas show through as highlighting rather than painting the highlights on the canvas. Although other artists tried, unsuccessfully, to duplicate his techniques, Cox's special process has remained a trade secret to this day.

Working in his studio, Cox would stand on a platform in front of a paint frame. Using a bamboo pole with a charcoal tip, he sketched the outline of the scene to be painted. Then he and his staff of artists would paint the scenery using his special process. A 1903 advertisement boasted that the Jesse Cox Scenic Studio had "space for several large paint frames, carpenter shop, mounting room, designing room, office, sewing room, storage room, rooms for the manufacture of electrical and mechanical effects etc."

Cox's studio was soon providing scenery to theaters across the nation as well as Canada, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. At the height of production, in the 1920s, he had a standing order for two thousand yards of cloth weekly.

As the theatrical business died out, Cox went into business with his son, Robert. Jesse did sign painting and Robert worked with neon signs. Jesse died May 25, 1961.

Through his work as editor of *The Opera House Reporter* and his scenery studio, Jesse Cox became an important figure in American theater history, and Estherville became an important theatrical center.

Turn the page for more opera house scenery by Jesse Cox and others, from the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant.



The main curtain was often an ad curtain, in which a picturesque scene was surrounded by local advertisements — a source of income for the theater, of pride for local merchants, and today, a rich source of local history for the community historian, particularly if the curtain is dated. The large curtain above hung in a Blakesburg opera house, in southeastern Iowa and displays a number of Ottumwa businesses. It is signed “HUGH LANNING, STAGE & SIDE SHOW PAINTER, OTTUMWA, IA.” and bears the date 1905. The theater museum loaned the curtain to the Kennedy Center in 1976 for the center’s year-long celebration of “Two Hundred Years of America on Stage.”



Below: The design of this ad curtain, from Eldon, Iowa, matches that of others found in Minnesota and South Dakota. Ad curtains could be purchased with blank ad spaces, which then would be lettered in by local artists for businesses that bought ad space.



The two bottom curtains represent a scenic main curtain, without advertisements. Left: From a music hall in Quogue, New York. Right: from a Grange hall in Mendon, Illinois.





"Front room, back room, timber and town" were the four basic scenery sets, standard provisions by opera houses for traveling companies.

Upper left: A front room drop from Blakesburg, Iowa. Often as lavish as this, front rooms seldom represented a middle-class setting. If the doorway can be parted for exits and entrances, the drop is called a "center door fancy."

Lower left: Few back room drops are still in existence, probably because they were deliberately not very attractive. A back room drop could serve as a kitchen, a cabin, servants' quarters, or the home of a poor family. This one, from a Blakesburg opera house, has a "working" window (note the flap).



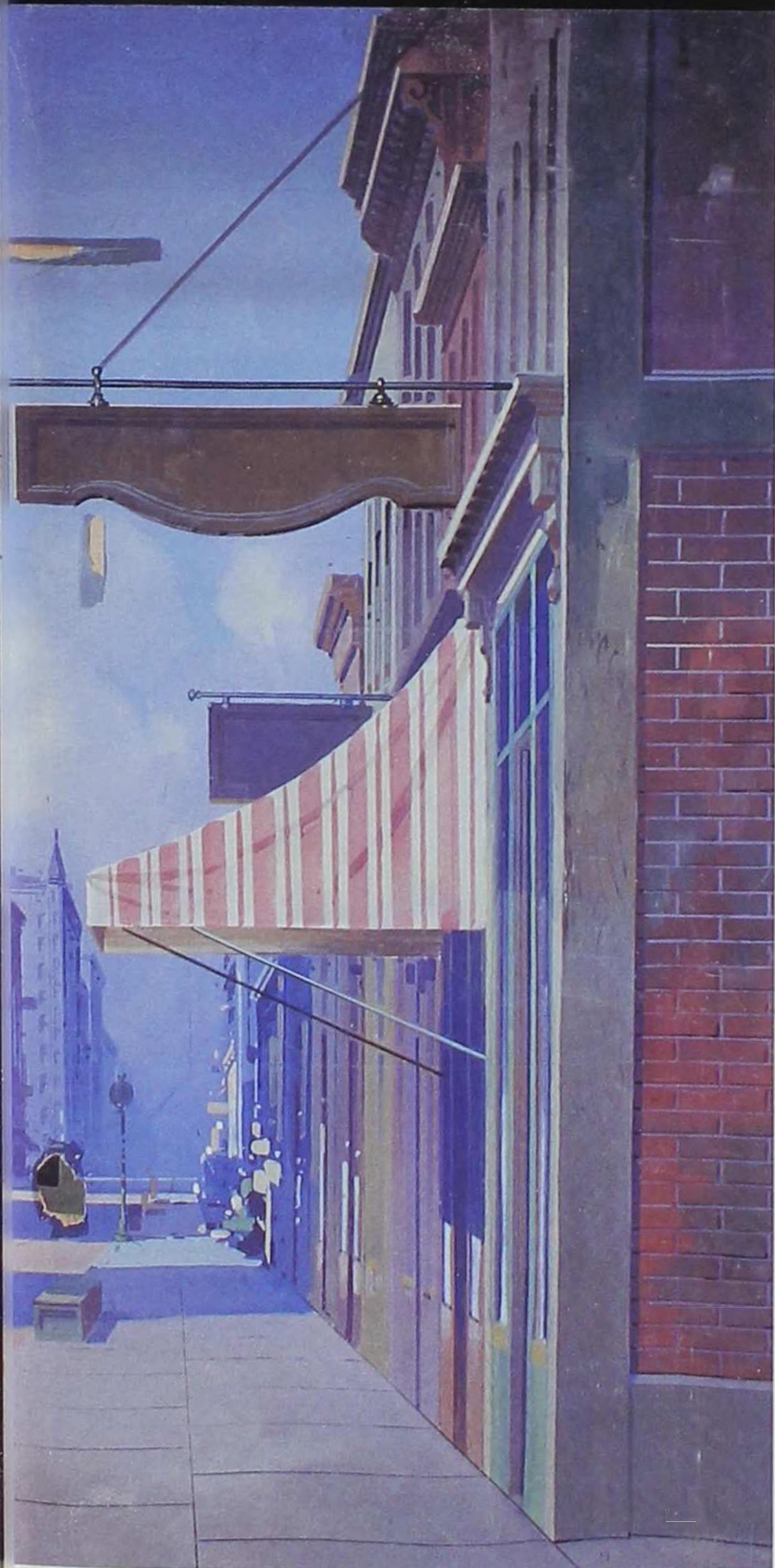
The "timber" set suggested a wooded setting, but could be used for any exterior scene. Timber drops often included more water than this one from Beaman, Iowa. The water might represent a river, lake, or ocean.



Town drop from Westgate, Iowa. Painted in a Kansas City studio, the curtain sports a misspelling, "Hotel Minniapolis," on the right wall (directly above the three windows).



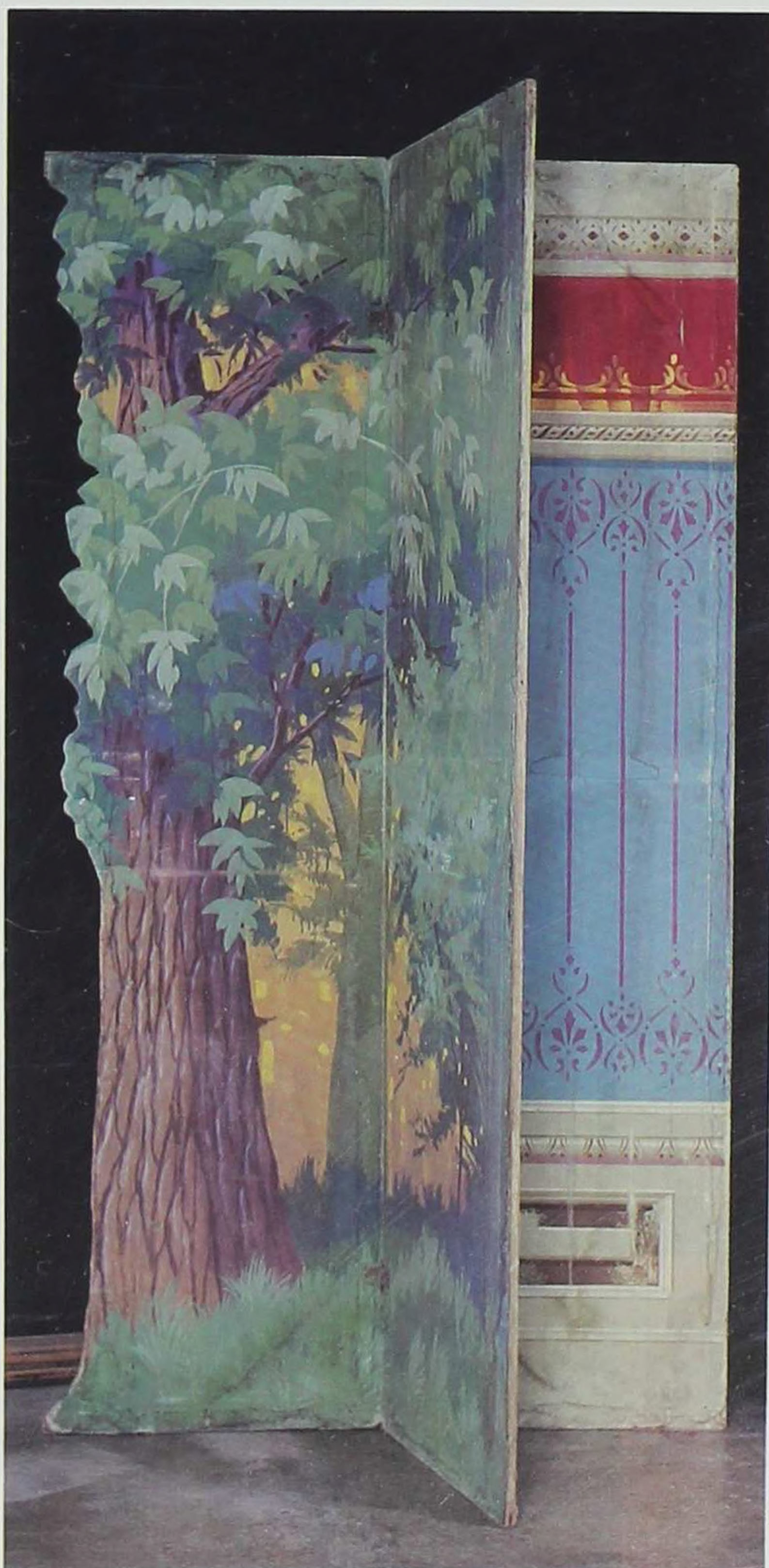
Quality of the scenic artists' talent varied greatly. Left: A town drop from a basement opera house in Leonard, Missouri. Painted by an itinerant artist, the drop was never finished. Apparently the artist moved on before finishing the brick work (building on left) or filling in the shop windows.



Above: A superb town drop from an Oxford Junction, Iowa, opera house, painted by Sosman and Landis, Co., Chicago. Note the blank sign and the clock without hands. This allowed each company to chalk in the time and place to suit the play. According to assistant curator Joseph Mauck, a good town drop could transport the audience to "any city that your imagination wants to take you to."

On some occasions, the street scene also served as the "oleo" curtain between acts. During costume and scenery changes, the touring company would stage an "oleo." The oleo was a specialty act, perhaps singing, dancing, juggling, tumbling, drawing pictures or performing magic. Larger companies or more well-equipped opera houses might have a separate oleo curtain, which hung three feet behind the main curtain and in front of the town scene.

Below: Tormentors were wings used on the side of the stage to mask activity from the audience. Painted by the Cox studio, this tormentor was probably used by a traveling company because of its portability and size (lower than what most opera houses would normally use). Free-standing and depending on the angle at which it's set, this tormentor could be used with a front room, timber, or (not visible here) back room.





This drop is part of a set that includes the duplicate scene in the spring time. The set was used by the Warren Noble Company of Chariton. The winter and spring drops would convey the passage of time on stage.

“Friend Jess, Received the scenery all o.k. and on time. And it was certainly the swellest bunch of scenery we have had in many a day. The set house matches the cut wood, and looks fine especially under the lights.”

*Fred Byers
Gladbrook Opera House
Gladbrook, Iowa*

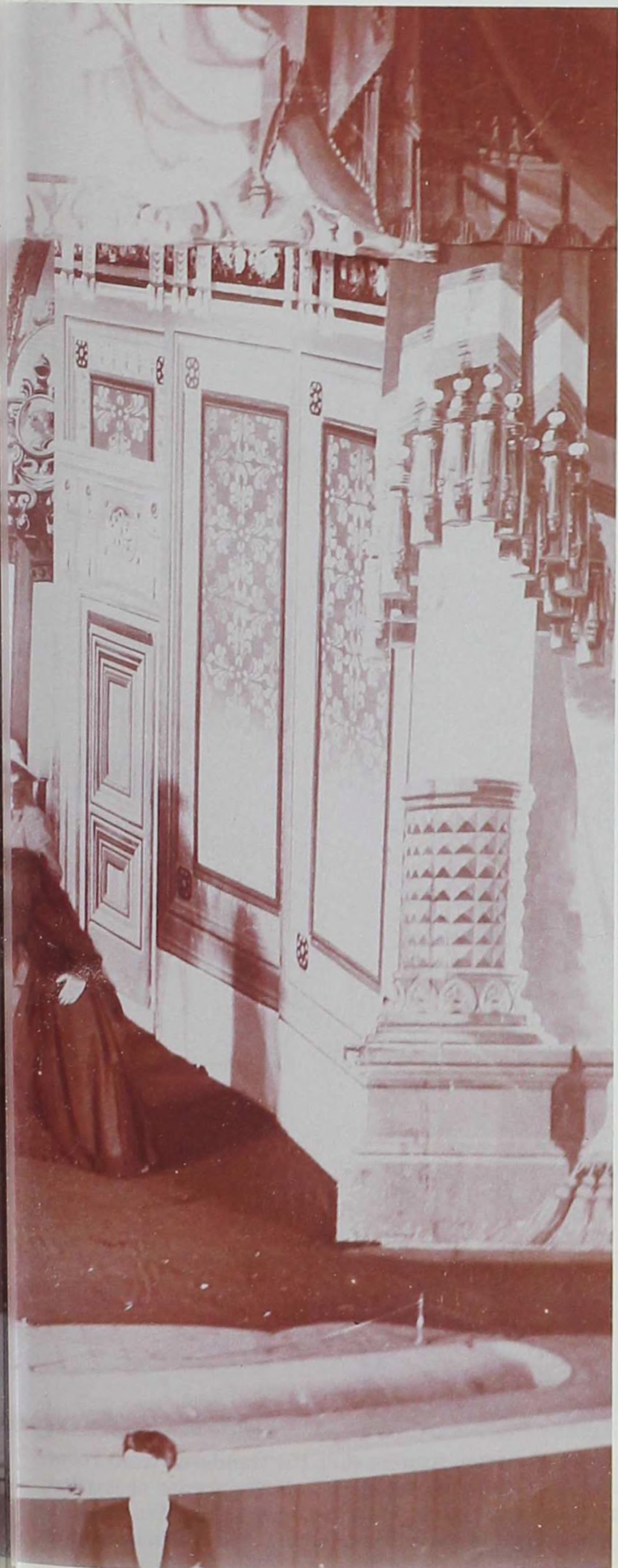


The working painting for a palace arch set, created by Jesse Cox's studio and advertised in his sales catalog. Note his signature in the left corner.



An early Jesse Cox scene, perhaps used by the Warren Noble Company of Chariton. The seascape may have been specially created for performances of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, one of the classic plays of the opera-house era. A drop of a castle interior also exists.





Left: A palace arch set in use at the first Graham Opera House in Washington, Iowa, shortly before the building burned down in 1892. The convincing illusion of depth in the backdrop is aided by the wings. Here, the set is used by the Spooner Family of Centerville.

Note the musicians in the foreground. For opening night of the opera house, the local newspaper effused that "the scenery is ample. . . . There are 12 set pieces; the interior scenes represent a palace, a palace arch, center door parlor, prison, kitchen, plain chamber; the exterior scenes are a forest, garden, landscape, street, horizon, mountain pass. . . . No danger from fire amid the sceneries; but there is a water supply on the stage." (From a Washington County history.)

Below: This patriotic drop was used by the Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company of Sabula, Iowa. The company toured Wisconsin for over fifty years. The drop, with depth created by a recessed second curtain, was probably used behind an orchestra playing a patriotic overture on stage. Note the fallen soldier saluting in the foreground, and the troops following.





A working painting for Cox's scenery catalog. Cox created far more elaborate scenery than the standard "front room, back room, timber, and town" owned by every opera house. In his catalog he listed his exterior scenes as garden, landscape, light wood, dark wood, and so on. T. C. Perry, from a theater in Havre, Montana, wrote Cox: "We hung the garden drop you painted for us, yesterday. It is a neat and tasty job, a credit to you and your studio. You will hear from us again soon."



A somewhat frantic but satisfied customer writes Jesse Cox:

"We are enclosing you a check for \$270.00 for 'THE WOLF' and 'THE VIRGINIAN' scenery as per your statement and trust you will pardon the delay in making this remittance, and I know you would if you could realize the strenuous situation I have been up against the past two weeks — rehearsing three shows, getting their props, scenery and effects together, the inevitable disappointments and unreliable actors to contend with etc. ad-lib and ditto until now I have three of them out and our next show don't open until the tenth of Sept. so at last I have a breathing spell — and first of all I want to say we are delighted with the new scenery — that rocky pass set is great and you spoke of 'no attempt at detail' on that interior set — well I think the detail work you accomplished is wonderful in fact the entire outfit is beyond our expectations and we will always be glad to extend [any] recommendation or assistance we can to the 'JESS' Studio."

*From Jones and
Crane Attractions
August 21, 1913
Suite 30
Grand Opera House Building
Chicago, Illinois*



The auditoriums or halls of local ethnic groups and Granges, as well as opera houses, were used for performances by touring companies. This elegant main curtain hung in the Czechoslovakia Hall in Oxford Junction, Iowa. The words translate to "A beautiful view of Prague." The curtain was painted by Sosman and Landis, a Chicago studio.

The Museum of Repertoire Americana, a part of Midwest Old Threshers Association located in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, houses one of the nation's largest collections of theatrical scenery, including works by Jesse Cox. The collection includes several examples of drops from Oxford Junction, Blakesburg, Solon, Beaman, Westgate, Eldon, and Wyman, Iowa, as well as towns in Illinois, Missouri, and New York. Jesse Cox's workbench, equipment, and several of his working paintings are also housed in the theater museum. The museum's collection also includes thousands of posters, programs, scripts, and other memorabilia of the repertoire theater companies, tent shows, minstrel shows, Chautauqua, and showboats. The museum is open by appointment and during the annual Midwest Old Threshers reunion.

— Michael Kramme

The Palimpsest thanks Caroline Schaffner, Joseph Mauck, Lennis Moore, and Michael Kramme for helping photographer Chuck Greiner and the editor create this photo essay. Long before the theater museum was built in 1973, the core of the current collection was being amassed by Neil and Caroline Schaffner, whose company, "The Schaffner Players," toured the Midwest for decades. Neil had often emphasized to Caroline the importance of including a Jesse Cox display when the theater museum was finished. Schaffner considered Cox to be extremely important to the era of early show business. We agree.

— The Editor

NOTE ON SOURCES

Primary-source material is from the Jesse Cox Collection, located in the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Additional information is from interviews with Ivadell (Mrs. Robert) Cox of Estherville and Caroline Schaffner of Mount Pleasant.