

The Iowa Thespians

Amusements during the thirties in the outpost settlement of Dubuque, or in any of the border towns, were none too plentiful. True, the Lafayette Circus Company of New York had performed for several nights to large audiences in Dubuque, a menagerie of wild animals had been exhibited at settlements along the Mississippi River, and a few strolling mimics, singers, and gymnasts had displayed their skill in the dining rooms of the taverns at Davenport, Bloomington (Muscatine), and Burlington, but for the most part the tragic muse was unwooded in the Iowa country.

Partly to relieve the monotony of the long winter evenings and partly to satisfy natural dramatic inclinations, a group of young men in Dubuque organized the Iowa Thespian Association early in 1838. The lure of the footlights and the desire to tread the boards in sock and buskin have always possessed fascination. The formation of this band of players — probably the first amateur dramatic company on Iowa soil — was prompted by the same charm of the stage that to-day attracts members into the Drama League and invigorates the Little Theatre movement.

The Thespian Association was fortunate in selecting a place for their theater that was already well

and favorably known in the community. The Shakespeare Coffee House and Free Admission News Room, maintained by Charles Corkery in a two-story building near the corner of Main and Second streets, had been opened a short time before. The *Iowa News* for November 15, 1837, carried his opening announcement which called the attention of the public to the attractions of the place. Patrons were to enjoy free use of legislative and congressional proceedings and newspapers from all parts of the Union, Canada, and Texas, as well as ready access to a superior and well selected assortment of wines, liquors, and cordials at the bar "cash up". The large upstairs room of this popular building was selected by the Thespians as the scene of their theatricals and was given the appropriate name of Shakespeare Hall.

The young men proceeded to rearrange the room in a comfortable style well adapted to their needs. A stage was built across one corner at an elevation of three or four feet above the floor. The body of the hall was filled with rows of seats, and the Thespian artist spread lurid colors on the scenery and the front drop.

When the sun had disappeared behind the high bluffs to the West and darkness had fallen upon the frozen Mississippi the amateur actors met in Shakespeare Hall to rehearse their plays and songs. The crackling oak logs in the huge fireplace and the semi-circle of sputtering candle footlights created an

atmosphere that incited them to noble efforts. Nor did they hesitate to attempt the heaviest rôles in the leading plays of the day — such as the thrilling historical drama, “England’s Iron Days”, and the notable success, “Pizarro”, by August F. F. von Kotzebue, which had been the most popular play in England for a decade or more.

An item in the *Iowa News* for February 3, 1838, reported that some of the parts in the early productions of the Association “were admirably played, and all the plays were well received and applauded. Several national and sentimental songs were sung, in a beautiful strain, by a young gentleman possessed of musical powers which if cultivated, bid fair to rival the best vocalists of the day.” Shakespeare Hall was recommended to the lovers of mirth as a place well calculated to drive dull care away during a long winter evening.

The most pretentious offering of the Iowa Thespians during the first season of their existence was a patriotic thriller in five acts, entitled “The Glory of Columbia her Yeomanry” by William Dunlap, the father of the American drama. It had been written for a Fourth of July production by its manager-author and had been played at the Park Theatre in New York for the first time in 1803. Under the capable leadership and direction of Thomas C. Fassett, A. J. Anderson, and George L. Nightingale the large cast became letter perfect in their lines and proficient in the stage business of the play. At the

same time other members of the Thespians practiced a number of songs for the afterpiece, without which no theatrical performance was complete in those days.

The following advertisement, one column wide and two inches long, appeared in the *Iowa News* on February 24, 1838, announcing the event of the season to the people of Dubuque.

THEATRICAL

THE IOWA THESPIAN ASSOCIATION

WILL PERFORM


On Monday night, the 26th inst., in DuBuque at the Shakspeare House, the much admired play of

THE GLORY OF COLUMBIA

(By WILLIAM DUNLAP, Esq.)

And conclude with a variety of Songs, Duets, Trios.

N. B. Children under 10 years of age not admitted.

 Tickets to be had at the bar of the Shakspeare.

The performance attracted an appreciative audience that filled the hall to overflowing, and many were denied admission for lack of room. Great was the satisfaction and loud the applause of the early patrons of the drama as the curtain fell upon the successive acts of the patriotic play. No doubt the enthusiastic and noisy appreciation mounted also with each visit between acts to the hospitable bar

below. In fact, the play proved so popular that the Iowa Thespians were obliged to repeat it on the next Saturday night, March 3, 1838. At this performance they inserted as an added attraction for the after-piece the laughable farce, "Gretna Green".

All in all, the first season of the Iowa Thespian Association proved more successful than the sanguine hopes of its founders had anticipated and plans were made for a longer and more elaborate dramatic season the following winter.

The second year of the organization was made noteworthy by the visit of the McKenzie-Jefferson company, the first troupe of professional actors with a metropolitan reputation to visit the newly created Territory of Iowa. The group included Alexander McKenzie and his wife, Joseph Jefferson, his wife, daughter, and son, Joseph (Rip), then a boy of ten, Germon, Leicester, Burke, Warren, Sankey, Wright, Stafford, and Mesdames Germon and Ingersoll.

They had come on a barnstorming trip by the lake route to open a new theater in the town of Chicago, then a place of some two thousand people. It was the first lap of a roving trip through the West and South. The Jeffersons and their troupe "passed Indians, and glided by small villages, destined some day to become great cities." On the way to Dubuque "the company's scenery dropped into the Mississippi River, while forest and castle ran away in streaks of color across the canvas. Jefferson III nothing daunted, went courageously to work, re-

painting the smeared landscapes." On another occasion "these travellers got into trouble, where a lawyer had to be called in. They employed a gaunt and awkward looking man — none other than Abraham Lincoln — to aid them in their difficulties." For a time "the father of 'Rip' turned sign-painter for the nonce." Again the Jefferson family went "down-stream on a raft, with scenery serving as sails, whole fields and balustrades flung to the breeze." Sometimes barns "were fitted up as theatres; candles spilled wax around, and shed a dim, flickering light on a squalid room. Not frills and fancies, but rough, healthy democracy greeted them every where."

That part of the trip which took the company overland from Chicago to Galena, thence up the frozen Mississippi to Dubuque, is best described by Joseph Jefferson in his delightful autobiography.

"After a short season in Chicago, with the varying success which in those days always attended the drama, the company went to Galena for a short season, traveling in open wagons over the prairie. Our seats were the trunks that contained the ward-robe — those old-fashioned hair trunks of a mottled and spotted character made from the skins of defunct circus horses: 'To what base uses we may return!' These smooth hair trunks, with geometrical problems in brass tacks ornamenting their surface, would have made slippery seats even on a macadamized road, so one may imagine the difficulty we had in

holding on while jolting over a rough prairie. Nothing short of a severe pressure on the brass tacks and a convulsive grip of the handles could have kept us in position; and whenever a treacherous handle gave way our company was for the time being just one member short. As we were not an express mail-train, of course we were allowed more than twenty minutes for refreshments. The only difficulty was the refreshments. We stopped at farm-houses on the way for this uncertain necessity, and they were far apart. If the roads were heavy and the horses jaded, those actors who had tender hearts and tough limbs jumped out and walked to ease the poor brutes. Often I have seen my father trudging along ahead of the wagon, smoking his pipe, and I have no doubt thinking of the large fortune he was going to make in the next town, now and then looking back with his light blue eyes, giving my mother a cheerful nod which plainly said: 'I'm all right. This is splendid; nothing could be finer.' If it rained he was glad it was not snowing; if it snowed he was thankful it was not raining. This contented nature was his only inheritance; but it was better than a fortune made in Galena or anywhere else, for nothing could rob him of it.

"We travelled from Galena to Dubuque on the frozen river in sleighs — smoother work than the roughly rutted roads of the prairie; but it was a perilous journey, for a warm spell had set in and made the ice sloppy and unsafe. We would some-

times hear it crack and see it bend under our horses' feet: now a long-drawn breath of relief as we passed some dangerous spot, then a convulsive grasping of our nearest companion as the ice groaned and shook beneath us. Well, the passengers arrived safe, but, horror to relate! the sleigh containing the baggage, private and public, with the scenery and properties, green curtain and drop, broke through the ice and tumbled into the Mississippi. My poor mother was in tears, but my father was in high spirits at his good luck, as he called it—because there was a sand-bar where the sleigh went in! So the things were saved at last, though in a forlorn condition. The opening had to be delayed in order to dry the wardrobe and smooth the scenery.

“The halls of the hotel were strung with clothes-lines, and the costumes of all nations festooned the doors of the bedrooms, so that when an unsuspecting boarder came out suddenly into the entry he was likely to run his head into a damp ‘Roman’ shirt, or perhaps have the legs of a soaking pair of red tights dangling around his neck. Mildew filled the air. The gilded pasteboard helmets fared the worst. They had succumbed to the softening influences of the Mississippi, and were as battered and out of shape as if they had gone through the pass of Thermopylae. Limp leggins of scale armor hung wet and dejected from the lines; low-spirited cocked hats were piled up in a corner; rough-dried court coats stretched their arms out as if in the agony of drown-

ing, as though they would say, 'Help me, Cassius, or I sink.' Theatrical scenery at its best looks pale and shabby in the daytime, but a well-worn set after a six-hours' bath in a river presents the most woe-begone appearance that can well be imagined; the sky and water of the marine had so mingled with each other that the horizon line had quite disappeared. My father had painted the scenery, and he was not a little crestfallen as he looked upon the ruins: a wood scene had amalgamated with a Roman street painted on the back of it, and had so run into stains and winding streaks that he said it looked like a large map of South America; and, pointing out the Andes with his cane, he humorously traced the Amazon to its source. Of course this mishap on the river delayed the opening for a week. In the mean time the scenery had to be repainted and the wardrobe put in order: many of the things were ruined, and the helmets defied repair."

When the damage resulting from the river mishap had been repaired as far as was possible the company began an eleven day run at Shakespeare Hall. They presented the popular plays of the season — the comedies, "Honeymoon", "How to Rule a Wife", and "The Waterman"; and the classics, "Othello", "Charles II", "Rob Roy", "McGregor", and "Richard III". Germon's singing of the "Lass o' Gowrie" and Burke's dancing the "Sailor's Hornpipe" were favorite parts of the afterpiece performances while the acting of juvenile parts by

young Joseph Jefferson and his sister was a revelation to the frontier audience. Leicester as a tragedian and Germon as a villain became favorites of the theatergoers, while Joseph Jefferson, Sr., the comedian, could always bring roars of laughter. Crowded halls greeted the actors when the curtain rose every evening at 6:30 o'clock, and for three hours and a half the townspeople and visitors at the taverns reveled in tragedy and comedy. Even the property man who replaced the burned down candle footlights between the big show and the afterpiece received his share of applause. Adults paid one dollar to see a performance, children fifty cents.

The engagement at Dubuque was one of the most successful experienced by the company on its western tour, both from the financial aspect and from the standpoint of appreciation. Well pleased with their first visit to Iowa, the troupe left the lead-mine town to visit other places down the Mississippi.

The Iowa Thespian Association and Shakespeare Hall had paved the way for the professionals. Without the general interest in the drama which had been fostered and developed, the famous Joseph Jefferson might have been received no more enthusiastically in Dubuque than he had been in Chicago.

Although the first two seasons of the Iowa Thespians had indicated that an amateur stock company in the rapidly growing town of Dubuque filled a community demand, interest waned in a few years and the organization disbanded. No longer could a guest

best talent at the schoolhouse "Literary" and who had sat enthralled when they attended an occasional performance by some travelling troupe in the Bedford opera house, thought that they would stage some plays. They were confident of success. Couldn't they recite the poems and dialogues in McGuffey's *Sixth Reader* as well as the actor folk they had seen in town? Couldn't they build a stage in the front part of the schoolhouse?

The idea fired the imagination and a meeting was held one night in December at the home of Frances Titus to perfect the plans. The would-be actors assembled in the parlor, a square room equipped with severely plain furniture and a rag carpet. On the oval-topped walnut center table a large oil lamp threw its rays into the eager faces of these devotees of the drama.

There was handsome Frank Crossen who had a fondness for the rôle of a villain. James Dougherty and Huston Cox leaned toward character parts, and Sen Campbell was willing to try any rôle. Jolly Roe Rubart delighted in comedy, while Ellis Titus preferred to attempt juvenile characters. Then there was pretty May Hiatt, the teacher at Pleasant Hill, stately Ida Rubart, and vivacious Vira Titus for the feminine parts of the contemplated productions.

Each agreed to accept a part, to learn the lines, and to assist in the details of production. Enthusiasm waxed jubilant as they discussed the merits of the farce, "Turn Him Out", which one of the group