

The PALIMPSEST

JUNE 1947

CONTENTS

Story of an Iowa Woman 161

CLARENCE R. TURNER

Musical Ottumwa 172

RUTH W. STEVENS

The Grand Opera House 184

EDITH HARPER EKDALE

PUBLISHED MONTHLY AT IOWA CITY BY
THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA

ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER JULY 28 1920 AT THE POST OFFICE AT IOWA CITY IOWA
UNDER THE ACT OF AUGUST 24 1912

THE PURPOSE OF THIS MAGAZINE

THE PALIMPSEST, issued monthly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is devoted to the dissemination of Iowa History. Supplementing the other publications of this Society, it aims to present the materials of Iowa History in a form that is attractive and a style that is popular in the best sense—to the end that the story of our Commonwealth may be more widely read and cherished.

BENJ. F. SHAMBAUGH

THE MEANING OF PALIMPSEST

In early times a palimpsest was a parchment or other material from which one or more writings had been erased to give room for later records. But the erasures were not always complete; and so it became the fascinating task of scholars not only to translate the later records but also to reconstruct the original writings by deciphering the dim fragments of letters partly erased and partly covered by subsequent texts.

The history of Iowa may be likened to a palimpsest which holds the records of successive generations. To decipher these records of the past, reconstruct them, and tell the stories which they contain is the task of those who write history.

PRICE — 10 cents per copy: \$1 per year: free to Members

ADDRESS — The State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY RUTH A. GALLAHER

VOL. XXVIII

ISSUED IN JUNE 1947

NO. 6

COPYRIGHT 1947 BY THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA



Story of an Iowa Woman

It was in 1892, when I went to Waverly to become principal of the high school, that I first met a charming old lady, then in her seventy-eighth year. Her name was unfamiliar to me because I was not at all versed in Iowa history and I had never heard of the name of Oran Faville whose widow she was. She was wearing her black widow's garb, as had been her custom for many years, and, perhaps because she and her husband had no children, she was known to the community as Auntie Maria or Auntie Faville. For more than a quarter of a century she had taught a class in the Sunday school of the Methodist Church. Her personality was distinguished and I have never forgotten the words she used in encouraging the beginner in his new duties. And now, a long time after this first meeting, it has occurred to me that something of her history and that of her well-known husband, Lieutenant Governor Oran Faville, may be worth while.

Maria M. Peck, born at Mexico, New York, on September 18, 1815, was a student at Cazenovia Seminary, located near Syracuse, New York, in the years 1838 to 1840, entering school there the year Iowa became a separate Territory. This Seminary had been founded in 1824 under the authority of the Oneida Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Miss Peck was so appreciated by the trustees, or whatever the members of the governing body of the Seminary were then called, that in 1841 she was appointed "governess, instructress in modern languages, drawing, painting and botany." From 1841 to 1845 she was also preceptress. Under her instruction in this coeducational institution were some men whose names are well known across this nation.

While serving in these different capacities in the Seminary, Miss Peck had time for a correspondence with a young man at the Fairfield Academy, who later taught ancient languages at the Cazenovia Seminary. A letter in her fine script dated October 11, 1841, was addressed to Mr. Oran Faville, Fairfield, Herkimir County, New York, and in the customary fashion of that day was sealed without an envelope. The letter began: "Mr. F—, the bell has rung the hour for evening study and having visited all the rooms in the Ladies Halls to see that their inmates were

busy with their tasks, I have seated myself to my lesson which I have been conning for two or three weeks, and have not yet been able to learn. I would that I knew whether I ought to ask him who gave me that lesson to explain it . . . I will not yet."

Then it seems she drew on her surroundings for illustrative material in expressing her feelings. "What a changing world is ours! I recollect that when I last wrote to you the earth was flooded with radiance and in that light we could read beauty written on everything. But this evening the spirit of the storm is out wrapped in his robe of clouds and his moaning voice tells of nothing but desolation and death. The withered leaves borne by his breath against my window seem warning spirits and their sad language calls forth an echo even from my buoyant heart. . . .

"To me a correspondence owes much of its value to the sentiments which prompt it and these I ever wish frankly to express, though in this recent instance I may be thot trampling on the rules of propriety. . . . It is only upon a long acquaintance that I can decide upon the choice of friends. As our acquaintance has been brief I feel much hesitation in complying with your request, fearing that if, after more mature deliberation, I should wish to discontinue the correspondence you might

think me guilty of pursuing that course which I never wish or intend to take. Should you consider it in this light I must now say adieu. If not, your letters will be received and returned with pleasure. Our school is flourishing and my situation is very pleasant. Maria."

The outcome of this correspondence was the marriage of Maria Peck and Oran Faville on July 24, 1845, in DeWitt, N. Y. They took up their residence at West Poultney, Vermont, where he was at first a teacher of ancient languages and later principal of Troy Academy. Mrs. Faville continued in this Academy the work she had carried on at Cazenovia. From Vermont they moved westward to McKendree College at Lebanon, Illinois, where Mr. Faville filled the chair of ancient languages for one year. At the close of that year Mr. Faville became the first president of the Ohio Female College at Delaware, Ohio. Mrs. Faville was preceptress there, also, but after a very short service they resigned on account of the illness of Mr. Faville.

With the hope that life on the prairies of Iowa would restore his health the Favilles removed to Mitchell County in 1855. It has been said that he "opened a new farm" and that seems to have been true in a rather large sense for, as the record shows, his first land deal was the purchase of a

fractional half section in section five, township ninety-eight, range seventeen, and another eighty acres nearby. For the nearly four hundred acres in these two purchases, he paid \$2,550. Later that year Faville purchased an additional quarter section for two hundred dollars. In June of 1855 there was another purchase of eighty acres for \$100, the government price as shown in the land office receipt. Other fractional purchases warrant the conclusion that the Favilles purchased about 600 acres of Mitchell County land.

It had been the hope of Mr. and Mrs. Faville that the outdoor life in the new country would restore the health of Mr. Faville and they wished to live a quiet life. But people of their type were in demand and he was soon called into the service of the public. The Constitution of 1857 provided that the Lieutenant Governor should be ex officio the presiding officer of the newly created State Board of Education. With rare appreciation of fitness for the office to be filled, political leaders picked Oran Faville for the post and in 1857 he was called to enter the campaign for Lieutenant Governor on the Republican ticket. Mr. Faville took an active part in the campaign and it is recalled that when speaking in Dubuque he addressed his German listeners in their own language. Oran Faville became the first Lieutenant

Governor of Iowa, but he served only the one term.

In 1859 he was elected county judge of Mitchell County and took office in January of 1860, but the entire county judge system ended at the close of 1860. The most important business before the county judge during his brief term was the relocation of the county seat of Mitchell County. County judge Faville ordered the holding of an election to decide between Osage and Mitchell. Mitchell secured a majority, but Osage won out in the final decision.

Oran Faville was popular in Mitchell County; in 1862 he was that county's "favorite son" for the office of Representative in Congress, but he lost the nomination to William B. Allison. The following year he returned to Des Moines as Acting Secretary of the Board of Education and later was made Secretary. When the Board of Education was discontinued at the close of 1863, Oran Faville was named to the newly created office of Superintendent of Public Instruction by the General Assembly and in 1865 he was elected for the two-year term. Ill health again interfered and he was compelled to resign in March, 1867. He returned to his home in Waverly, Mitchell County, where he died in 1872.

In addition to these official positions, Oran Faville was an active participant in the educational

affairs of the State. He served as editor of the *Iowa School Journal* and as president of the Iowa State Teachers Association, and in all respects was regarded as a man of great ability. Long before there was a training school for teachers he had advocated such an institution. He was not permitted to be wholly free from the public call when he came to live in Waverly, for he served as president of the local board of education and aided in the erection of the first high school building. It was his wish to live quietly but he never refused to serve the public when his health permitted.

Mrs. Faville did not leave the log house they had built on the Mitchell County farm when her husband was elected Lieutenant Governor. Instead she took upon herself the care of the property and she was abundantly able to do so, for she had grown up on a New York farm. That was not the usual way the wives of State officials managed their households. After Mr. Faville's death, Maria Faville continued to live in Waverly in the old home.

In 1895 an enterprising reporter for the *Chicago Record*, learning something of the life of Mrs. Faville, came to Waverly to interview her. He says: "I found her living in an unpretentious cottage of half a dozen rooms, located in the midst

of the shrubbery scattered here and there over the lawn. She was engaged in housework, which she put aside when I told her the object of my visit."

"Yes," she said to the reporter, "I shall be 80 years of age, if I live until the 18th of September. But I like to keep busy, although I have a touch of rheumatism now and then when a storm is coming up. Otherwise I have good health." At this point the Chicago man asked her if she ever heard from any of her students of Cazenovia Seminary. "Well, yes; here is a scrap book full of letters, some from Africa, China and Japan and in fact from almost all parts of the world. . . . Of those who were in my classes when preceptress, Mr. Leland Stanford became the wealthiest. Here is a letter from him inviting me to spend the summer on his ranch in California. No doubt it would have been pleasant to do so but I couldn't find time."

Here the inquisitive reporter asked about her pupil who became such a wealthy man. "How was he as a boy? Did he give any evidence when reciting to you that he would ever become possessed of forty or fifty million dollars, become Governor, United States Senator, found a great University and be talked of for president of the great republic?" To this she had a ready reply: "No, indeed, he was about the greenest, awk-

wardest boy I ever saw. We had a celebration one day when every boy was expected to escort a girl, but what bothered young Stanford was that he could not find a girl who would go with him. I had hard work to find a girl to accompany him but I finally succeeded.

"Charles Dudley Warner was one of my pupils. He was modest, studious and gave great promise even then of the literary distinction which he has achieved. After I had read certain of his books I wrote him to know if he was indeed the author who recited to me in French and Spanish." And then she showed the reporter the letter that had come from her former student.

"Although General Slocum [Henry Warner Slocum] did not recite to me," continued Mrs. Faville, "I knew him very well. He was born over at Delphi at the head of Pompey Hollow. He attended the seminary a term or two, taught school and then went to West Point and later commanded an army corps under Sherman. After the war he served several terms in congress from Brooklyn, Long Island. There was Joe Hawley [Joseph Roswell Hawley], Little Fighting Joe, as the boys called him, who recited to me in natural science as well as in Italian and Spanish. I get a letter from him now and then but I find it impossible to answer all my letters. Little Fight-

ing Joe could not have been idle much of the time, since he rose rapidly after leaving school to become major general, governor, and now United States senator from Connecticut." James Callanan of Des Moines was also one of Mrs. Faville's students.

Before the reporter left the modest home of Mrs. Faville he discovered that she was not a woman suffragist and had never attended suffrage meetings. Nevertheless she worked for temperance in the days when it was not a popular thing to do. She did say that "had I father or brothers, or husband who had been unkind to me, I might believe in what are called women's rights."

The visiting reporter concluded with this comment: "I came away and as I came I could not but think that this little town has had a resident for more than a score of years who is known personally to more distinguished people of the world than almost any one in the land, and yet so quietly had she lived and so completely had her life been absorbed in that of her distinguished husband, as an educator, that those living within a stone's throw of her home had only known her for her gentle Christian life."

While Mrs. Faville may not have been an advocate of women's rights in every sense, in the late sixties she rallied to the defense of women's

right to compensation for work in the field of education where they worked in the same ranks as men. A newspaper communication, signed "M. M. F.", argued for the equal pay of women in the public schools. Mrs. Faville said that she had no ambition to be a reformer nor to be classed among the "strong minded", but it was her belief that "when woman acts in her sphere and labors faithfully and successfully, she should be adequately paid."

On Monday, September 18, 1899, eighty-four friends of Mrs. Faville surprised her on her eighty-fourth birthday. They congratulated her and brought gifts. Among the memorials presented was a volume containing the names of over three hundred persons who had been instructed by her in Bible classes in the Methodist Church. She always maintained her active church life and after she had retired from teaching, she annually entertained those she had taught.

Mrs. Faville lived to be past eighty-eight years of age and passed quietly out of this life on December 28, 1903. Her life has been called a benediction, and it was a great privilege to know her even for a very short time.

CLARENCE R. AURNER

Musical Ottumwa

By the time supper dishes were washed on the evening of May 25, 1907, the rain was pelting so hard on tin porch roofs and blooming peony bushes that Ottumwans who were not in a musical mood decided not to get out rubbers and umbrellas and huddle off to the Opera House for the May Festival of the Choral Society. Despite the weather a good crowd turned out, for Ottumwa was a musically-minded city and the performance of Handel's "Messiah" was recorded as "one of the most notable musical events ever held in the city".

This Choral Society, organized many years earlier, sang under the direction of the seasoned conductor, James Swirles, and, as was usual, visiting artists — this time from Chicago and Des Moines — added glamor to the evening's performance. The 54th Regimental Band, always willing to introduce the main attraction with a stirring overture and conclude the program with a rousing march, that evening played the familiar "William Tell", "exceptionally well", under the direction of another of Ottumwa's fine musicians, B. O. Worrell.

Such musical evenings were not rare in Ottumwa; ever since the itinerant singing teacher and his tuning fork had begun to appear annually with the first snowfall many decades earlier, Ottumwa had been singing. In addition to these elaborate May festivals, pageants and operettas were presented; choruses were sent to the Eistedfods in Albia, Williamsburg, and on one memorable occasion in 1903 in Des Moines, where the "sum of \$385 was carried [away] . . . by the Ottumwa singers", the chorus choir capturing the main prize of \$250. The mixed chorus and some soloists were also awarded prizes. One of the earliest of these soloists, a lovely soprano, was Regina Neville Evans. Somewhat later came Maude Edmunds, soprano, Nellie Brown Hughes, contralto, Cyrus Blake, baritone, and Edward Mather, a powerful bass.

Around 1900 there was a men's quartette called "The Ottumwans", which sang in neighboring towns as "The Quartette that made Ottumwa famous". Their first tenor, Edward Weeks, is still — 1947 — living in Oklahoma. The others were James Swirles, William F. Muse, and Eugene Peterson. Ten years later another male quartette was exceedingly popular locally. Its members were Frank Daggett, Frank Burton, Burchard Peck, and Grant Keyhoe. Down

through the years there were many outstanding small choruses, quartettes, and groups like the Romany Singers and the Basque Carolers.

For awhile with the coming of the radio, recorded music, and the movies, interest in group singing lagged, but recent years have brought a decided swing back. Some of the more active ensembles in recent years have been the Rotary Chorus, which made a concert trip to California in June, 1938, the PTA Mother-singers, the American Legion Chorus, and the Morrell Male Chorus, which is still functioning with Margaret White Stoltz, a concert soloist, as director.

The dean of Ottumwa's early musical residents was J. H. Rheem, who came to Ottumwa in 1873 with his wife and three small daughters. He was one of the pioneer singing school teachers. People in the community were full of enthusiasm but short of cash, so the "Professor" told interested singers to join his classes anyway and pay in produce, or as best they could. His daughter says the family had never lived as well as it did that first winter in Ottumwa.

"Professor" Rheem taught music in the public schools and founded the first conservatory in Ottumwa in the old Y.M.C.A. building, hiring quite a notable faculty. He was also the director of some of the early choral groups. One of his

leading sopranos, Bertha Roemer, used to go to Oskaloosa, while the Oskaloosa prima donna, Virginia Knight Logan, came to Ottumwa, adding prestige to each other's productions as "visiting artists". An elaborate pageant, "Belshazzar", was staged and taken, with difficulty, to other cities. Rheem was instrumental in founding, with Carl Schawbkey, the 54th Regimental Band, which received national acclaim in 1909 under B. O. Worrell.

Rose Elizabeth McGrew, who became an outstanding soprano, was born in Ottumwa about 1875. This somewhat frail looking child, with her long red curls, became a familiar figure in the usual home talent performances at Ottumwa until her family moved to Denver when she was eleven years old. Wealthy people there became interested in her and financed her study abroad. After eight years of intensive work she had a repertoire of seventy operas and sang in the Royal Opera at Hanover and Breslau three times weekly during the season for thirteen years. She also sang in the Royal Opera at Vienna where she created the rôle of Octavian in Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier* in 1911 and was given a great ovation.

While in America during the first World War, she returned to Ottumwa to visit relatives. Of course she gave concerts — the largest at the

Grand Opera House, which was packed to the rafters with admirers. Mrs. Isabelle M. Hofmann, her accompanist, tells this story.

They were rehearsing one day when suddenly Madame McGrew said, "Let's go up to the house and practice where Aunt Linnie can hear us." Aunt Linnie was a little old Quaker lady. They picked up their music and went to the house where Madame McGrew boomed forth in her best operatic manner, while Aunt Linnie, in her tiny white cap, sat over in the corner. When Rose was through Aunt Linnie looked up and said mildly, "Thee hollers right well, Lizzie." After her return to Denver she was given a contract at the Metropolitan, but a throat infection prevented her from carrying on her operatic career and she accepted the chair of music at the University of Oregon at Eugene.

Contemporary with Rose McGrew was the pianist, Nellie McNett, born in Ottumwa in 1874. After several years' study with Joseph Gahm (the accompanist for Hans Albert), she graduated from the Chicago Musical College, before going on to Paris and Vienna for further instruction. An early death cut short a promising career.

Ella Dow Cloutman, the daughter of a prominent Civil War officer, was another of Ottumwa's singers of the early 1900's. A Major Hamilton,

enthralled with Ella's rich soprano voice, financed her debut at the Opera House. With the funds from the concert she went to Boston, graduated from the Conservatory, was soloist for two years in Old South Church, and travelled through the East with a ladies quartette. People said she had the voice for grand opera but not enough of the grand manner. Unable to overcome her self-consciousness, she returned to Ottumwa where she taught for many years, was soloist in scores of productions, and sang at the Congregational Church and later at St. Mary's.

Three charming Ottumwa girls of bygone days went a long way in the musical world: Mabel Dewey, a dramatic soprano; Myrtle Jersey, a beautiful, talented girl whose success in musical comedy and light operas on Broadway warranted a concert tour of Australia and New Zealand; and Nellie Mae Brewster, who went to New York and had several successful seasons as soloist with top flight orchestras of that era. When you hear Gus Edwards' song, "By the Light of the Silvery Moon", think of Nellie, because she helped popularize it in 1909.

Vernon Mason Stiles, popular tenor of pre-World War I days, was born in Ottumwa in 1876. During his early boyhood the family moved to Kansas City. Before he was twenty he went to

New York to study, later touring the country as the tenor lead in "Madame Butterfly", "Robin Hood", and other light operas. Then came bigger things — study in Paris and Vienna, opera in Riga, St. Petersburg, and Cologne. At the close of this period at the repeated requests of his friend, Siegfried Wagner (son of the great composer, Richard Wagner), Vernon Stiles went to Bayreuth to sing the role of Parzifal. But the first World War broke out, and he returned to America, where his repertoire of German operatic roles was in little demand. He never again regained the reputation he had enjoyed.

So many Midwest towns have had in their musical history a German violinist who has appeared mysteriously from nowhere, taught piano, fiddled in community programs, and then disappeared after a few years, leaving no trail. Ottumwa had one, better than the average, perhaps, for they called him the "Little Wizard of the Violin". Hans Albert, a small, red-headed, homely man, was born in Bavaria, Germany, of very poor parents. So early did he reveal his genius that he was educated by the Emperor and Empress of Germany, and at the age of sixteen he was concert master for the Emperor's orchestra at Berlin and for the Imperial Orchestra at Vienna.

At the age of nineteen, already a musician of

some renown, Hans Albert came to America to be concert master for Theodore Thomas's famous orchestra. He was considered one of three great violin masters of the world and first in tone quality and expression. But his career was brief. He was a rare artist but a weak man. While still very young, he began to wander over the country, and it was during this period that he drifted into Ottumwa to teach and play, until restlessness again overtook him. One of his last concerts there is still remembered and talked about. He was playing for a large audience of Welsh music lovers, and as he played his farewell encore — the haunting melody "Liebestraum" — tears ran down his cheeks and down the faces of his listeners who left their seats and stormed upon the platform. Loved and admired, Hans Albert left exquisite music for Ottumwa to remember.

This story does not include the concerts and programs given by artists from outside Iowa, but, these were no doubt as frequent in Ottumwa as in other cities of its size. It would be interesting to know how well these musical programs were patronized. When Ole Theobaldi, the "Wizard of the Violin", gave a concert at Ottumwa on April 22, 1903, prices ranged from twenty-five cents to one dollar and the program was heard by a "small but enthusiastic audience".

Jean Duffield was one of the finest pianists Ottumwa produced. Born at Keosauqua and a resident of Omaha in later life, Mr. Duffield contributed to Ottumwa's musical life many years of exceptional teaching and accompanying. At one time he was accompanist for Paul Althouse, as well as for other artists of ability, touring extensively with them. Three church organists should also be mentioned in a discussion of Ottumwa musicians — Charles Koett, Emma Holt, and Albertina Scheiwe, daughter of Johannes Scheiwe, an artist.

A familiar figure on the conductor's stand of the first two decades of the 1900's was B. O. Worrell, who achieved perhaps a bit more than local renown as a teacher, bandsman, and composer. External symbols of success may have been lacking in his life, but Frederic Stock, the late conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, once wrote to Worrell, "You have the faculty of instilling in your pupils a greater love of music than any man I have ever known." What higher praise could there be for a small town musician?

Ottumwa also had its share of musical meetings. In June, 1903, for example, it was host to the Society of Music Teachers of Iowa and the opening program was a concert by Ottumwa musicians. It included the chorus from "Elijah", sung by the

Ottumwa Musical Club Chorus under the direction of Mrs. Frances E. Clark, an aria sung by Edward Weeks, piano numbers by Jean Duffield, vocal solos by Nellie Mae Brewster and James Swirles, and numbers by the Colonial Ladies Quartet.

Brief mention may be made also of the Department of Music Education of the National Educational Association, which concerns two former Ottumwans — Mrs. Frances E. Clark, public school music supervisor at Ottumwa about 1895 to 1905, and Miss Alice C. Inskeep of Cedar Rapids, a graduate of the Ottumwa high school in 1893, who had been a teacher in the intermediate grades at that place. In 1907 Philip C. Hayden of Keokuk, editor of the national music magazine, *School Music Monthly*, called together at Keokuk supervisors of music from many of the larger cities in the United States. Mrs. Clark and Miss Inskeep attended the meeting. Mrs. Clark was elected president of the Department in 1908 and was later director of the R. C. A. Victor Talking Machine Educational Department. In 1918 a committee of ten members, the Educational Council, was formed, and Miss Inskeep was the only woman elected to this group.

Around 1920, Ottumwa had a creditable symphony orchestra which gave concerts both here

and in surrounding towns, often with the assistance of nationally known soloists. Later came the Presbyterian Little Symphony, and through the years there were many small orchestral combinations such as the Ottumwa Harp Orchestra, mandolin clubs, and string trios.

Each decade has seemed to bring forth a new group of leaders in Ottumwa's musical life. During the 1930's the musical ability of Sister Mary Colette, head of the department of music at Ottumwa Heights College, was prominently recognized. Performances of her choral works with orchestral accompaniments were heard and greeted with high praise.

Then there is Isabelle M. Hofmann, who has appeared countless times as a concert pianist, and who has labored unceasingly to create and foster interest in better music. Another familiar figure in the twenties was Catherine McFarland Dwight, soprano, who later returned to her native city, Burlington. Among her several published songs two favorites have been "Hush Thee, My Own" and "Only and Forever".

All of Ottumwa is proud of Alberta Powell Graham, whose life from early childhood until recent years was spent in Ottumwa. Mrs. Graham directed many fine choruses, has written innumerable songs, stories, and plays for children, and has

supervised public school music in the Ottumwa schools. Although she has become in the last few years of living in the nation's capital a successful author of books on Washington, D. C., and the presidents, she is still true to her first love, children's rote songs.

A recent gift of Ottumwa to the musical world is Harold Ayres, who has been hailed by critics everywhere as one of the most gifted of the younger violinists. Born in 1901, Harold was taken to Chicago at the age of ten years to study with the finest teachers there. Leopold Auer pronounced him at sixteen, the "most promising pupil I have found in America". Besides his extensive teaching and recording, Ayres was for fifteen years concert master of the Minneapolis Symphony. Resigning in 1945, he went to California, where he is currently concert master of the Werner-Jannsen Symphony. Another Ottumwa-born musician of the present is Edmund Haines, well-known composer of orchestral music.

These and many others laid the foundations of musical Ottumwa. Space does not permit mention of many present-day Ottumwa musicians who are ably carrying on the tradition.

RUTH W. STEVENS

The Grand Opera House

Living next door to Burlington's Grand Opera House for over fifty years meant for me close association with one of the finest playhouses in the world. The Grand was a beautiful theater, with an imposing facade and an ornate interior. Acoustically it was perfect. And what, do you ask, was the Grand Opera House?

During the 1870's and 1880's many of the larger cities in Iowa were sponsoring the building of opera houses. Burlington was among these. On March 25, 1881, the Burlington Opera House Company bought the lots on North Third Street where the famous Old Zion Methodist Church had once stood, and began the erection of the Grand Opera House. "The Grand", regarded by many as one of the finest theater buildings in the Middle West, was completed in 1881, and the formal opening was held on January 6, 1882. The performers on this occasion were members of the Emma Abbott Grand English Opera Company. My parents, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas G. Harper, served meals for Emma Abbott.

For many years following its gala opening, the Grand attracted some of the foremost entertainers

of the day in dramas, lectures, concerts, and operas. Patrons from all parts of Iowa came to Burlington by excursion boat or train to see and hear such famous entertainers as Adelina Patti, Joseph Jefferson, Mark Twain, Iowa's Lillian Russell, Della Fox, and Jeff de Angelis.

In 1929 the Grand's name was changed to The Rialto, and by this time movies were being shown in the old theater. But time took toll of the old building, and a court order authorizing the razing of the building was issued in September, 1940. A parking lot for the Elks Lodge now occupies the site.

But I remember how we used to sit in the parquet, leaning far back in our comfortable red plush seats and gazing up at the brilliantly lighted chandeliers and the society folk, beautifully dressed, gracing their boxes which were paid for by the season. No one thought of attending the theater and sitting in the parquet without white gloves and best gown.

During intermission, the gentlemen would hie themselves to the opera house exchange, a block south of the theater, where Mr. Wohlwend quenched their thirst, while Mr. Rhys and Mr. Nash played the piano and violin, until a buzzer sounded, warning that the entr'acte was over. Meanwhile the ladies of the audience might fre-

quent the lovely powder room which was in charge of a uniformed colored girl or partake of ices, iced water, and candy served by a corps of ushers. And gum-selling boys walked up and down the aisles displaying their wares. I remember one in particular who used to sing a little song about Black Joe Cream Gum.

Manager Frank Chamberlain himself walked up and down the aisles, smiling, and greeting every person as his guest, making each feel welcome. Such was the personality of the manager — warm-hearted and gracious at all times — a far cry from today's theater managers who seldom are seen, much less heard, to extend a welcome either warm or cold. Frank Semple, Melvin Scovill, George Peck, Ralph Holmes, Martin Bruhl, and Oscar Jacobs followed Mr. Chamberlain, each carrying on his tradition of welcoming theater-goers. Martin Bruhl was himself a pianist of note, having played with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for some fifteen years, under the direction of Walter Damrosch. Gone, indeed, are these warm-hearted men who extolled the theater by making themselves friends in the community.

I remember, too, Mr. and Mrs. Koepff, the caretakers of the theater, who kept it clean and shining. Saturday mornings, when they had the doors open cleaning, I liked to slip in to watch a

rehearsal in progress for the gala Saturday matinee. (Saturday night was never a show night, but the matinee was an event of social and financial importance.) Frank Foote, Bert Fowler, and Frank Foehlinger were the friendly doormen who took tickets, and I always tried to be the first one in. The supervisor of the stage hands and of house personnel was Fred Croft, Mr. Chamberlain's right-hand man.

But the man who worked longest and hardest and loved the Grand more deeply than anyone else was Johnny Agnew — never was there a finer fellow than Johnny, God rest his soul! He was of Irish descent — red-cheeked, blue-eyed, ever whistling merrily as he cleaned the paste barrels and made paste for the city's bill posting. Then there was gruff, cross Glory Dunham, who was really tender underneath. He was always willing to "make up" our faces when we were in amateur shows and, upon request, he would take us through the dressing rooms in the crypt or the fascinating prop room. Well do I remember when Glory would call a group of us youngsters backstage to hold hands with him while he grasped one of Johnny Agnew's. Then Johnny would pull the electric switch, and the shock which went through each of us nearly knocked us off our feet, but oh! it was exciting!

The theater orchestra was under the direction of J. Henri Fischer, whose two, four, or ten piece group played regularly for theater productions. I remember how Mr. Fischer's orchestra often practiced in the theater on summer evenings, after the show season was over, and many times their beautiful music lulled me to sleep.

I remember the old stock companies — Spooners, Holdens, Flints, Jack Bessey, and Hickman-Bessey. Some productions were more popular than others. Hoyt's shows nearly always drew crowds, but Shakespearian plays rarely played to packed houses. Father took me to see every one of the latter, however, so I grew to enjoy them.

There were the gay musical comedies — "Piff, Paff, Pouf", with Eddie Foy; Joe Howard singing his own songs; and Eva Tanguay who had so many curtain calls singing and dancing "He's a Dandy, Is My Sambo". She fell into the stage hand's arms after each curtain call, but she was never too tired to give encores. Louis Granat, the whistler, was a favorite, too. Some of the old time plays that we saw are not often mentioned today: "Honey Moon", "Dolly Varden", "Prince of Pilsen", and "Black Crook". Better known melodramas were "Way Down East", "East Lynne", "Uncle Tom's Cabin", and "Uncle Josh Spruceby".

Many of these troupes, with gay minstrel bands, gave pre-performance parades on the streets, finishing in front of the theater, and playing a few more pieces to draw the people in. Not all the "characters" were on the stage, however, for Burlington in those days had many "panhandlers" who hung around the gallery doors, hoping some kind person would give them the necessary dime or quarter for admission. Many times my father and I offered the wherewithal.

For me the highlight of the show season was being asked to supply youngsters for a schoolyard scene in "Lover's Lane" season after season. I gathered together my closest friends, Helen and Fay Reynolds, Albert and Carl Kleppisch, and with the two boys in the troupe we had a grand time. When we met the actor in charge on the stage after school for the first time, he told us to sing "Old Dog Tray" and was bowled over when none of us knew it. Needless to say, we learned it during rehearsal, and I have not forgotten it to this day. We also sang and played "All Around the Mulberry Bush". We did have fun, being on the stage one whole act, and the troupe youngsters were polite and friendly. Later, my daughter and three other Burlington girls were bridesmaids in "Abie's Irish Rose" at its first showing in Burlington.

Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore", one of the foremost light operas of the day, was presented by Madame Theresa Stenger when voices such as those of Milton Blaul, Louis Dwight, Hazel Heimbeck, Myrtle Funck Voigt, Frank Gould, Marguerite von Behren, and Catherine Hassell were young and gay. The same opera, equally well presented by youngsters, was directed by Maude Leipsiger Jacobs. Chorus work in both cases was outstanding, even as the chorus of "Oklahoma" is notable today, for quality of voice, singing technique, and timing in direction.

Oh, to hear once more the noise of the gallery gods as they clambered down the fire escape when the show was over, whistling and singing the popular tunes at the top of their voices, if the play were a musical. And the "gallery gods" were real judges! Just about the best in the world for they never missed a performance at the top price of 25 cents.

We Harpers received "comps" as often as we paid for seats, because the stage hands were always borrowing our household articles or one of my numerous cats for props. Sometimes the cats gave an impromptu performance. On one occasion when a woman was in the midst of her program, one of my big tomcats walked nonchalantly onto the stage, sat down, washed his face, and

then walked off. Sometimes Mr. Chamberlain made a point of calling us in, saying: "Come on in and help fill my empty seats."

Show people looked forward to playing Burlington. It was a good town socially and financially, and it could be highbrow or a bit lowbrow as the occasion demanded. At midnight on New Year's Eve, Mr. Chamberlain always gave the troupe playing that day a party on the stage. There was turkey with all the trimmings to eat and beer and champagne to drink. All were guests of the genial manager — actors, orchestra members, ushers, and stage hands. The esteem which show people held for Mr. Chamberlain and the other old-time managers and caretakers of the Grand Opera House made it popular beyond its size.

Traveling companies were not the only performers at the Grand, however. Home talent, too, frequently appeared on the boards of the beautiful stage. High school Shakespearian plays, William Sheetz gay musicals, and Modern Drama League productions played to enthusiastic Burlington audiences.

But now the Grand Opera House has been torn down and an ugly parking lot stands in its place. The friendly neighbor of my childhood is gone, as is the glamor of living close to the troupe-

ers of the theater — troupers of one night stands who gave of their best the hard way. But they, too, have builded well, for today's movie leads are stars only because their background was laid in the legitimate theater.

As I stand at my window and, in retrospect, smell the dank odor of the theater and breathe the pungent air of the stage, the grease paint, and the scenery, I wonder what kind chance kept the playhouse standing, strong and solid, despite the danger of careless smokers and a bomb which exploded in 1910. That was excitement for a small town. Early in the morning, about 1:30 A. M., on September 3, 1910, just after the fall play season had opened at the theater, someone placed a bomb on the stage of the Grand Opera House, and it exploded, causing \$5,000 worth of damages. The culprit was never found, although the theater manager offered a \$500 reward for his apprehension.

We have in our yard the two stone steps from the stage-door entrance — mute evidence of the many noted feet, good and bad, that trod over them throughout the span of sixty years. We also have two of the red velvet chairs from the beautiful old boxes, and twin mirrors from the mysterious and intriguing mirror room. All the rest of the old theater is gone — except the cherished memories of the Grand Opera House.

EDITH HARPER EKDALE

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF IOWA

Established by the Pioneers in 1857
Located at Iowa City Iowa

PUBLICATIONS OF THE SOCIETY

The Iowa Journal of History and Politics
The Palimpsest—A monthly magazine
The Public Archives Series
The Iowa Biographical Series
The Iowa Economic History Series
The Iowa Social History Series
The Iowa Applied History Series
The Iowa Chronicles of the World War
The Iowa Centennial History
The Miscellaneous Publications
The Bulletins of Information

MEMBERSHIP

Membership in the State Historical Society may be secured through election by the Board of Curators. The annual dues are \$3.00. Members may be enrolled as Life Members upon the payment of \$50.00.

Address all Communications to

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Iowa City Iowa