

THE PALIMPSEST

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VOL. XXXI

ISSUED IN JANUARY 1950

No. 1

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Drama on the Iowa Frontier

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The beginning of the drama on the Upper Mississippi frontier is but a chapter in the larger history of the development of the American theater in the Mississippi Valley. Only a few theatrical histories of western towns have appeared and the relationships of the early traveling companies and of their circuits have been only sketchily outlined by historians.

The first plays west of the Alleghanies were performed in New Orleans by a company of French actors in 1791. The French dominated the Crescent City theater until 1817, when Noah Ludlow and his company of American actors arrived down river from the north. The theater in New Orleans was largely an isolated phenomenon; it did not nourish the country to the north, but was to be nourished itself by players who came down the Mississippi.

For the source of the drama in the Upper Mis-

Mississippi Valley, we must turn to Kentucky, where amateur theatricals were known before the close of the eighteenth century, with performances by Transylvania University students in Lexington early in 1799. The first professional company apparently did not appear in Lexington until 1810. During the next decade, professional players began to appear at almost every settlement of consequence along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers as well as on many of their tributaries. Clearly the easiest route was to follow the flow of the rivers to the south, and this was the path taken by the earliest companies in the Middle West.

In 1818 the William Turner Company came down the Ohio to Cairo where, instead of continuing south, they turned north to St. Louis. They were the first traveling actors to appear in that city, arriving just three years after the earliest amateur performances there. Only a few straggling settlements were established between the mouth of the Missouri and what is now Keokuk prior to 1833, hence play companies did not ascend the river above St. Louis. Although permanent settlement of the Black Hawk Purchase began on June 1, 1833, the professional circuit between St. Louis and Iowa seems not to have been inaugurated until the fifties. Actually, the first professional company in Iowa came overland from Chicago by way of Galena in 1838, and did not come upstream from St. Louis.

Amateur players preceded the professional players in the Upper Mississippi Valley. In 1834 the soldiers of the First Regiment at Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien presented several play productions. Two of these, *Who Wants a Guinea?* and *Don Quixote in England*, were seen by Charles Fenno Hoffman, a New York editor and poet who was traveling in the West. Hoffman wrote that such plays by the soldiers were not unusual. The men had fixed up a barrack room as a theater. There was painted scenery, "cleverly done," and the seats were arranged on a graduated elevation, with the audience divided into three sections: the officers and their families, soldiers, and civilians (with a few Indians and a Negro servant or two). Hoffman was agreeably surprised "at the degree of skill and judgment with which the soldiers played, considering they were but amateurs."

About two weeks later, when Hoffman was in Galena, Illinois, some sixty miles to the south, he enjoyed another play, the melodrama of *The Woodman's Hut* which was given in an improvised theater in the upper part of an unfinished house. The audience was enthusiastic and threw half dollars "like peas upon the stage . . . at the little girl's dancing between the acts." The conditions under which the piece was given must have been primitive indeed. Even the stage was unfinished.

Farther north, the Thespian Players at Fort Snelling during the 1830's presented plays "every fortnight or so during the winter months." The soldiers at Fort Armstrong, established on Rock Island in 1816 opposite present-day Davenport, may conceivably have put on theatrical performances to while away the tedium of army life, but no record of them is extant.

The first amateur play in Iowa was given by the Iowa Thespian Association at Dubuque on February 26, 1838. The group presented William Dunlap's *The Glory of Columbia* in the Shakespeare House, located on the second floor of the Shakespeare Coffee House and Free Admission News Room. It was repeated the following Saturday night with an added attraction for the afterpiece — the farce, *Gretna Green*.

The second season of the Dubuque Thespians was made noteworthy by the visit of the Joseph Jefferson-Alexander McKenzie Company, "the first troupe of professional actors with a metropolitan reputation to visit the newly created Territory of Iowa." This group had come on a barnstorming trip by the lake route to open a new theater in Chicago — a town of some two thousand people. The troupe consisted of fifteen persons, including Joseph Jefferson III, then a boy of ten, who was later to become famous in his role of Rip van Winkle.

The company had had a short run in Galena

before traveling to Dubuque in sleighs on the frozen Mississippi. On the way, the ice suddenly broke beneath them. The passengers fortunately escaped without injury, but the baggage, scenery, stage properties, costumes, green curtain, and drop — all “broke through the ice and tumbled into the Mississippi.” The accident occurred above a low-lying sandbar so that the baggage and properties were retrieved, but only “after a six hours’ bath in the river.” As a result of this mishap the opening in Dubuque was delayed for a week while the scenery was repainted and the wardrobe put in order.

During their eleven-day run at the Shakespeare House they presented the popular comedies, *Honeymoon*, *How to Rule a Wife*, and *The Waterman*; and the classics, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Rob Roy*, *McGregor*, and John Howard Payne’s *Charles II*, on which Washington Irving had collaborated. Years later Joseph Jefferson III recounted in his *Autobiography* that after the Dubuque run, the company traveled down river “to the different towns just springing up in the West — Burlington, Quincy, Peoria, Pekin, and Springfield.”

Unhappily Davenport is not mentioned, but as the largest settlement (population about three hundred) on the river between Dubuque and Burlington, it (or Rock Island) would have served as a possible stopping place. South of Davenport,

theatrical activity was more prominent than in the north. Burlington had a theater going "full blast" in 1840, while St. Louis, as we have noted, had amateur theatricals in 1815, the first professional players in 1818, and a regular theater by 1837.

To the east of Davenport, Chicago saw its first professional production in 1837, when the Harry Isherwood and Alexander McKenzie Company opened in October of that year "at the old Sauganash Hotel" converted into a theater. This is the same McKenzie who later joined with Joseph Jefferson II, his brother-in-law, to form the troupe that played in Dubuque and in "nearly all the principal towns of Illinois" before 1840.

What of the theatrical activity in Davenport during the forties? Although no announcement of a dramatic performance, amateur or professional, has been found, there is some reason to believe that Davenport may have seen its first plays before 1850. The records of the town council which have been preserved suggest the early presence of theatrical troupes. Thus, on November 5, 1840, a town trustee moved that theatrical performances should no longer be exempt from taxation as before. Again, the presence of players may have incited the *Davenport Gazette* in January, 1842, to denounce theater and grog shop alike, the first for its "demoralizing pageantry" and the second for its "corrupting influence." In June of this same year the council again passed an ordinance "rela-

tive to licensing shows, exhibitions etc." On July 20, 1844, the mayor was granted full license authority in permitting "persons to exhibit sleight-of-hand, shows, and Theatrical exhibitions." He was free to tax or not to tax as he saw fit. Three years later, in 1847, such matters were again discussed and another ordinance "relative to exhibitions etc., was presented, read, and adopted."

One must realize, of course, that such ordinances are not clear proof of the presence of professional players; Detroit approved regulations on theatrical performances in 1825, but apparently the first professional players did not appear until 1827. However, the specific reference to the taxation of "Theatrical performances" in 1840 is encouraging to the historian, even though he must wait until the following decade for the formal opening of his history of the theater.