

Steele's Opera House

The two-story structure built of brick on the corner of Main and Dodge streets was known as Steele's Opera House. The lower floor was divided into two stores, one the owner's harness shop, and the playhouse occupied the entire space above. There was a wide inside stairway at the back leading up to a ticket office and the entrance to the hall.

In the theatre, kitchen chairs were used for seats, and these could be piled on the stage when dances were held. If one sat at the rear of the hall, it took a considerable craning of necks to see everything that transpired on the stage. But this handicap was offset by a series of platforms as the rear one-third of the hall rose tier by tier until it reached a paneled railing near the rear ceiling. These seats were "reserved" and were occupied by the merchants and professional men of Bedford, their wives, and children. The final platform had two rows of chairs back of the paneled railing and bore the uncomplimentary name "Nigger Heaven."

The stage and wings extended across the front of the hall with short stairways leading up to doors on either side. The front drop, which was

worked by ropes and pulleys, rolled upward in itself and required little space among the rafters. It was a wonderful curtain with a scenic panorama in the center and rectangular ads of local merchants across the top and bottom and down each side.

To a boy seated on one of the kitchen chairs in the front row, as close to the tin reflector footlights as possible, the wait for the curtain to rise seemed endless. What a thrill when the piano player came down the steps from backstage, gave the stool a whirl, and swung into the overture! With breathlessness and jumpy heartbeats, we of the younger generation awaited the weaving of a magic spell by the visiting players.

The stage had three sets — a street scene, a woodland, and a "fancy door center" with backdrops that rolled up and down like the front curtain. On either side of the stage were wings that could be shifted to match the backdrops. Sometimes companies brought their own scenery for special effects, such as a train, a shipwreck, floating ice for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and sawmills. A partition reaching halfway to the ceiling in each wing provided a dressing room on one side for men and on the other side for women.

There were not many shows during a season, but at county fair time the Myrtle Vinton Stock Company would come for a week with a change of bill each night. Beach and Bowers Minstrels

were perennial favorites, and an *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company made annual visits.

Minstrel shows were always popular in my boyhood, and folks would flock to Bedford when the minstrels came to town! They had been alerted in advance by the gaudy, grotesque posters put up in every strategic place by the advance agent of the minstrels. And how Bedford resounded to the blare of the minstrel band as it swung round the Court House Square to the tune of old favorites like *Dixie*, *A Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*, *Stars and Stripes Forever*, *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*, all played with true minstrel verve while the crowd assembled before the Opera House to greet their favorites of the burnt cork opry circle.

I was a lucky boy in those days for Harry Meek, who ran a corner drugstore, hired me to sell chocolates and bon bons between acts at each show. I never missed a performance.

BRUCE E. MAHAN