

A Boy's Horizon Widens

From the cottage beside the shop we moved to a brick dwelling that stood near the southeast corner of Third and Ripley streets. The actual corner, which we sold later to Schricker & Rodler, was our front yard, and here my father permitted the Turner Grand Opera House to erect two narrow billboards. This was to have a stimulating influence on my education, for with the billboards went a pair of tickets to every performance advertised thereon. Obviously I did not get to see all the plays that the crowded "road" of those days offered, but I saw enough to whet my appetite for the theater. One of the actors on tour was the German tragedian, Emil von der Osten, in repertory. His *Othello* made me eager to learn more about Shakespeare. A friend thereupon procured for me a copy of the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare*, issued in pamphlet form by the Howe sewing machine concern for advertising purposes. I read and reread the stories, and after that the plays were familiar friends.

My half-brother, Anthony, who was already in business in the East when I was born, had been dramatic correspondent for the *Chicago World*, a weekly medium of theatrical news. His files and

numerous playbills from Davenport and Rock Island theaters were in the house, and fed my imagination. Represented in these playbills were Edwin Booth, Barrett, Jefferson, Januschek, McCullough, Parsloe, Warde, Clara Morris, Fay Templeton, the minstrel troupes of Haverly, Primrose, Barlow, and West, and numerous other top-rank performers, for no actor could afford to ignore one-night stands. How well the stars profited from performing in these two cities is not in the record. I recall that in one review my brother complained that the star had brought so much scenery of his own that the public did not get to see the scenery newly painted for the Burtis Opera House. I have long since regretted the loss of the files of the *Chicago World*, which went the way of all magazines.

Turner Hall, at Third and Scott streets, was owned by the Davenport *Turngemeinde*, the most influential organization west of Main Street before the First World War. The term community center was not yet in use, but that is exactly what Turner Hall was. When I was a lad running about its corridors Henry Vollmer, former mayor and later representative in Congress, was its presiding officer, Theodore Rudolf Reese had charge of its musical events, and Wilhelm Reuter was its highly competent director of physical culture, head of its *Turn Schule*. I attended its gymnasium classes for years and was thrilled to sing in chor-

uses under Theo. Rud. Reese, as he always signed himself. *Wenn die Schwalben Heimwärts Zieh'n* was a great standby.

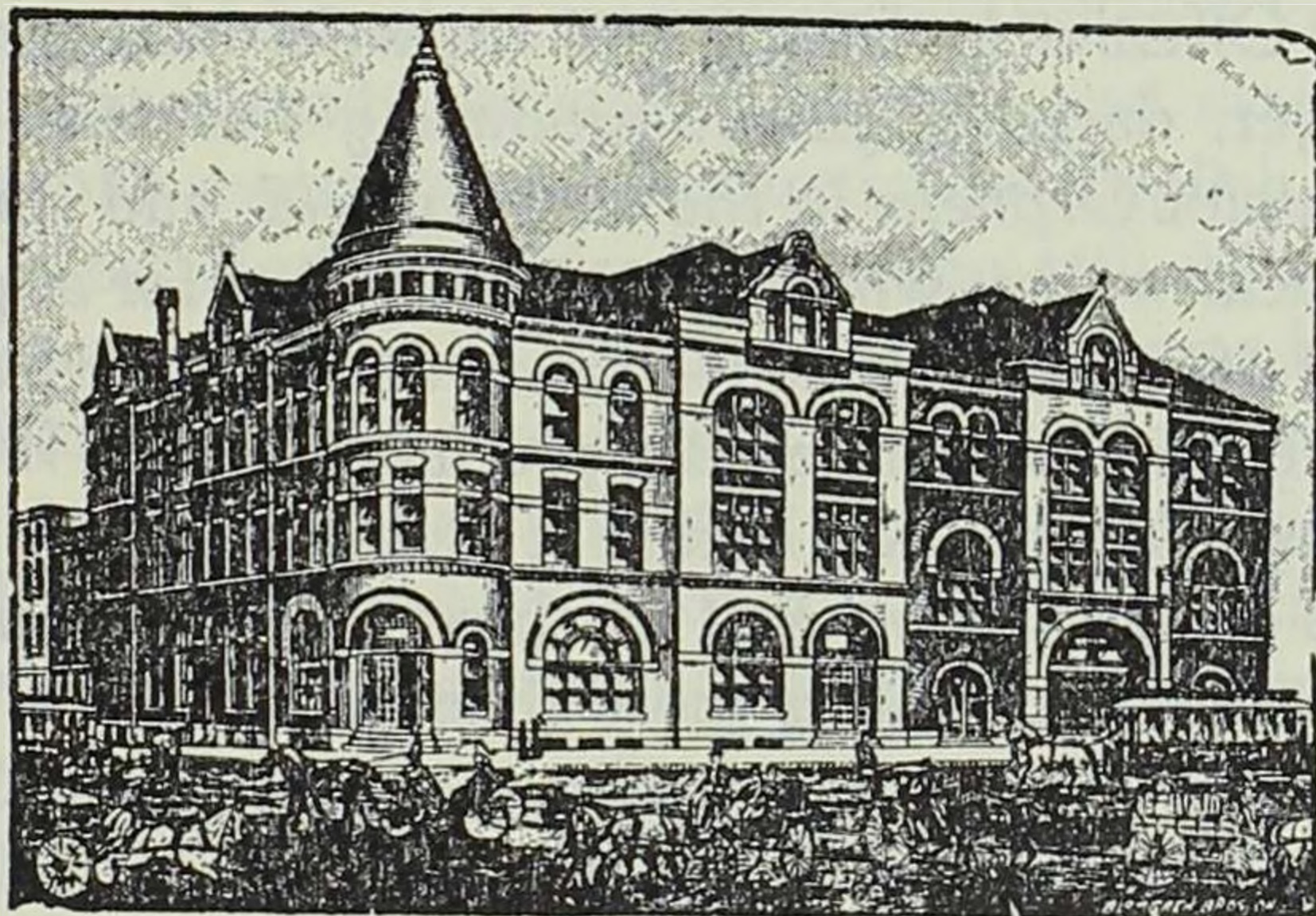
Twice a year gymnasium classes gave a program of exhibitions that were a treat to the young participants. The exercises were opened by all classes marching down the main aisle to the stage, led by Reuter escorting the littlest girl. The program proceeded from calisthenics by the youngest pupils to Indian Club swinging, drills with wands, and feats of strength by the older men. The admission fee was always 10 cents. The exhibitions, prepared long in advance, created a healthy spirit of cooperation and a desire to excel.

Reese conducted the massed choruses of the numerous singing societies. He was also a composer, and his operetta, *Sylvester*, was produced at the Turner Grand. Reese and Reuter were also responsible for such productions as *Snow White*, which had several revivals. For my part as a courtier I had a mustache glued on my face by none other than the talented Gustav Donald, himself a fine amateur actor, who served as makeup man. The star was Martha Reis, a young woman of poise and charm, with whom we all fell in love.

The German Theater, which had flourished in Davenport in the 1870-1880 decade and then lapsed, was revived in the early 1900's by Fritz Singer, a highly gifted actor from Vienna. Performances took place on Sunday evenings, and as

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we had season tickets I attended with my mother. Thus I became familiar with a repertory of plays and operettas, some trivial, some pretentious, by authors as diverse as Birsch-Pfeiffer, Kadelburg, and Offenbach. Singer and his wife, Margarethe Singer, dared mightily, producing *Preciosa*, *Fra Diavolo*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, and similar musical works, which must have called for a great deal of rehearsing, since many of the actors were home-trained. Singer also produced *At the White Horse Tavern* long before it became a great success on Broadway, and its shower of rain pleased the young spectators more than did the plot.

In my teens I never missed the annual visit to the Turner Grand Opera House of the Van Dyke & Eaton stock company. Of its repertory I recall only the Civil War play, *Linwood*, and the serpentine dance that a hefty female gave between acts. An aura of something forbidden lingers in my recollections of the dance, which we adolescents considered too daring to be mentioned before girls. Obviously it was only a mild ballet number. Turner Grand also was the stage for amateur theatricals. In one of the best Realff Ottesen was an exceptionally able leading man, and for a time his friends expected him to adopt the stage. But the law won him; had he taken up acting he would have been a leader in today's wonderful world of entertainment. Another friend, Otto Rieck, who took part in plays with me when

we were still children, took up acting under the name of Sidney Morris and made a success that enabled him to retire over a dozen years ago.

Turner Hall had been established as a center of German-American activities, but when I knew it, it was already strongly bilingual, and most of its public events were conducted in English. In the West End the older generation still adhered to German in the *Claus Groth Gilde*, named for the Holstein folk poet, which conducted its meetings in *Plattdeutsch*. It met in the Claus Groth Hall, a huge wooden building at Third and Taylor streets, on a site now occupied by Friendly House.

For children the annual "bird-shooting" in Schuetzen Park was a tremendous experience. This originated in the German fete, *Vogelschiessen*, in which youngsters contested for prizes by shooting wooden bullets with a cross-bow at a wooden bird high on a stake. There were special prizes for bringing down wings, beak, and tail, and the lad who brought down the body was proclaimed king. Every annual fete had a parade led by a marshal and captains, all of whom wore side arms. The marshal sat on a horse and wore a cavalry sword that nearly weighed him down. For a number of years this job was captured by Hilmar Plath, by persuading a majority of the boys to vote for him a few days before the festival. One year Roy Oelkers, later a justice of the peace

in Davenport, tried to unseat Plath, but to no avail — Plath proved the better politician.

When I was a schoolboy the celluloid button craze swept the country and made collectors of everyone. The little picture buttons of candidates for office, passed around during the election campaigns today, survive from that time. There were buttons illustrating every possible subject, in series: birds, beasts, flowers, heroes, national flags, presidents, naval vessels. There were buttons with slogans, mottoes, and slang phrases, such as "If you love me grin," "I'm as happy as a clam at high tide," "Go 'way back and sit down," "Ladies' Man," and — as part of the Spanish-American War — "Remember the Maine." Buttons came as premiums with packages of chewing gum. Swapping was a major sport. It was not uncommon to see boys with rows of buttons pinned up and down their coats and around their caps. Whitehead & Hoag were the chief button makers.

Although the boys I knew did not smoke, they did collect cigarette pictures, small reproductions of photographs of actresses that came with the packages. The most popular pictures were poses in tights, and older smokers gladly passed on to me pictures of actresses fully attired. A teacher, seeing my cards, asked to inspect them. She found one of a ballet dancer with a flaring skirt and remarked: "Would you care to see your mother like that?" and advised me to destroy it. I saw

nothing reprehensible in the picture and did not follow her advice, which was typical of the inhibitions of that time.

During World's Fair days we moved to a house on Seventh Street, on the hill, and a whole new world opened to the boy who had grown up in the downtown world of brick. Now there were wide lots to play on and lawns to be mowed. Actually we had transported our household goods only five blocks, but the ascent from the river level to land several hundred feet higher made the change seem tremendous. Even today, when I put in a full hour twice a day merely traveling between home and office, I think of our Davenport distances as far greater than they really were.

Among the big events on the hill was the celebration of Independence Day. We boys — and girls — set off firecrackers from early morn till late at night, and parental admonitions to desist were looked on as a lapse of patriotism. The energetic efforts of Henry Hubers, Karl Schmidt, Alfred Rieck, Carl Voss, Walter Rohwedder, and myself made a bedlam of July 4 and even set fire to wooden culverts. It was the custom of the family of Charles N. Voss to serve ice-cream to guests after the fireworks, and we were invariably lingering near the kitchen when the time for distribution came.

My new home on the hill was in a different school district, but I asked and readily obtained

permission to continue attending No. 8 at Fourth and Ripley streets. For this reason I never acquired a bicycle, for I would have had to push it up a steep hill most of the way home. Practically every other boy had one, and during my high school years boys who lived in the West End were able to ride home and back to the high school on Rock Island Street during the noon hour. Talk about "makes" was all-absorbing. Boys who enjoyed speeding favored bikes with large gears, and handle-bars so low that the torso was practically horizontal, giving power to the legs for pedal-pushing. More dignified persons, like the high school principal, W. D. Wells, rode with erect carriage and cared nothing about speed. The chainless, which had a transmission rod, came in at this time and was the subject of much argument by racers. None of us imagined the bicycle would ever lose its great popularity; it was "too useful."

Like many of the boys I knew I had rewarding Sunday School experiences, but they did not ripen into affiliation with any church. My parents were Lutherans, and my mother read me Bible stories at an early age. She had great compassion for the unfortunate, and when a Lutheran clergyman refused to officiate at the burial of a suicide, she ended her attendance. As a little fellow I was taken by other children to the Sunday School of the First Presbyterian Church, where Bible stories

were told with verbal literalness. When I asked for plausible explanations, I was told I must accept them as the word of God. This left me unsatisfied.

When we moved up the hill most of the children there attended the First Unitarian Sunday School and invited me to go with them. In this hospitable atmosphere I found no dogmas to puzzle me. The minister, Arthur M. Judy, was a scholarly New Englander, who stimulated my interest in Emerson, Whittier, Channing, and his favorite poet, Robert Browning. The teacher of my class, John Hornby, was a public school principal and an admirable leader of the young. I drew two books a week from the library. Later I joined in debates and presided at meetings of the young people's society on Sunday evenings. In this chair it was once my duty to introduce a young Harvard graduate named John Haynes Holmes, who has become one of New York's great liberal preachers.

The Sunday Evening Guild had as members young people of all faiths, including several Episcopalians, who invited me to join the choir of Grace Cathedral. This became a memorable experience. Wallace Moody was leader of the choir, and I was tremendously impressed because he was composing light operas. Unfortunately none was ever produced. He was succeeded by Miss Louise St. John Westervelt, a most capable coach. The first two rows of pews were occupied by the

girls of St. Katharine's School, and the older boys warned me that the girls watched the choir to see if we kept step. Consequently, when I marched in the processional for the first time, my heart beat against my ribs and I dared not look right or left. But I stepped bravely forward and reached the choir stalls without a stumble.

I learned the fine *Te Deums* of Dudley Buck and other composers and heard Bishop Theodore Morrison preach on special days. I would ask the rector, Dr. Nassau S. Stephens, such a question as: "What is the meaning of the quick and the dead, Doctor?" and he would explain this patiently. The Bishop's son, Nevin Morrison, became a friend in those days. I have visited many churches in the old world, but in Grace Cathedral I came as near to yielding to the religious mystery as I ever did, and today my memory of it is of beauty and a lift to the spirit.

It is likely that I would have joined a church in these impressionable years had I been asked. But no one asked me, and I was too unsure of myself to apply. In college I studied the Bible under Shailer Mathews and Richard Green Moulton, and my inability to accept a dogmatic view of the universe became fixed.

HARRY HANSEN