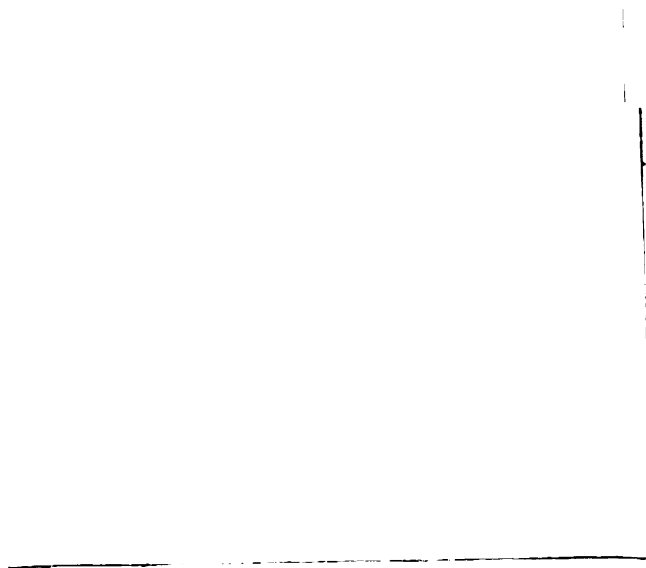


A SURVEY OF LEGITIMATE THEATRE IN
BAY CITY, MICHIGAN FROM 1884 TO 1902

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.
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ABSTRACT

A SURVEY OF LEGITIMATE THEATRE IN BAY CITY, MICHIGAN FROM 1884 TO 1902

by Raymond Joseph Lewandowski

During the nineteenth century the small mid-western community of Bay City, Michigan was the scene of a great deal of professional theatrical activity. The citizens in the latter half of the century were desirous of securing touring stage entertainments and experienced many difficulties in providing themselves the opportunity of witnessing the road companies which played throughout the nation. In particular, the problem of providing a suitable building for the incoming theatre companies proved to be a difficult one. The way in which this obstacle was overcome, and the revelation of the theatre attitudes and customs of the community, provide the chief subject matter for this study.

In order to present this history it was necessary to consult sources and compile data of the time when such theatrical activity was at its peak. The major source of material was the now non-existent newspaper, The Bay City Tribune. Additional material was obtained from the files of the Bay County Historical Society, and the limited number of local histories found in the libraries of the city.

This study views the interest of the Bay Cityans in professional legitimate theatre from the first recorded theatrical presentation in 1864 until 1902. The community was sedulous in obtaining the touring road companies and experienced many hardships in so doing.

Bay City's first opera house was constructed by William Westover, a prominent local citizen. In this building appeared some of the

Raymond J. Lewandowski

greatest plays and players of the century. Although, at the time of construction, the building was considered one of the finest in the state, it eventually became obsolete. The community was then faced with the problem of raising the necessary finances to construct a new theatre. Although a temporary house was employed, the pride of the city in its theatre building and its reluctance to be outdone by a neighboring city, Saginaw, Michigan, prompted the construction of a new and finer opera house. The formation of a governing body for the new theatre, and the problems of construction and finances, comprise a major portion of the study.

Once the building itself was provided, the problem of attracting high quality companies was solved by the formation of a theatrical circuit of numerous cities throughout the state.

Articles, reviews, and comments in The Bay City Tribune aid the reader in observing the theatre attitudes and customs of the times.

This study concludes with the event which eventually proved to initiate the decline of interest in professional legitimate theatre in the community, the destruction of the opera house by fire in 1902.

Bay City's pride in, and desire for, professional theatre were strong enough to surmount all obstacles and provide a more than adequate theatre. Thus the people were able to obtain the quality of amusements they wished to witness, amusements which were generously supported by the general population of the community.

Approved


Director

A SURVEY OF LEGITIMATE THEATRE IN BAY CITY, MICHIGAN
FROM 1884 TO 1902

By

Raymond Joseph Lewandowski

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	v
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. BAY CITY, MICHIGAN	4
III. THE FIRST EVIDENCES OF THEATRICAL ACTIVITY AND THE WESTOVER OPERA HOUSE	10
IV. THE PLANNING, BUILDING, AND OPERATION OF WOOD'S OPERA HOUSE	33
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	84
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Insurance Companies and Their Coverage On the Wood's Opera House Block and Opera House	80

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. The Westover Opera House	14
2. The Benches Located In the Gallery of Wood's Opera House	57
3. Relief Work In Bronze	57
4. Area of Original Box Seats	58
5. The Main Ceiling and Decoration	58
6. The Exterior of Wood's Opera House Upon Completion . .	81

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study deals with professional legitimate theatre in Bay City, Michigan, from the first recorded account of such activity to the destruction by fire of Wood's Opera House in 1902.¹ This event marked the beginning of the disappearance of such theatre in the community and the end of an active history of touring plays and players to appear in the city.

The study will include the plays, players, and theatre-housing problems facing the citizens of the community from the beginning up until the time they finally had an opera house, considered one of the finest in the state. Through the reviews of presentations written by the local newspaper, The Bay City Tribune, the theatre tastes and attitudes of the community may also be seen. Developments in theatre throughout the state, insofar as they affected the local situation, will be considered in this survey. It is hoped that the study will give an overall view of the professional touring theatre in a small mid-western community during the nineteenth century.

Following the destruction of Wood's Opera House in 1902, a new theatre was built on the same location. This theatre is still in existence and has a history of its own. However, because this is a different building and the decline of community interest in theatre began with it, the survey is terminated with the destruction of the earlier building.

¹The Bay City Tribune, August 29, 1902.

It will be obvious that many items of interest and importance have not been included in this writing because of a lack of materials, pictures, and sources dating from the period of 1884 to 1902. The principal source of information for this survey is the file of the local newspaper, The Bay City Tribune. This source proved to be extremely valuable and, with the exception of a few missing copies, was all intact.

Local histories such as Bay County Past and Present, by G. Butterfield, provided valuable historical background materials regarding the lumbering, ship building, salt and fishing industry.² Such sources also provided information regarding the make-up of the population of the community. The History of Bay County and Representative Citizens, by Augustus Gansser,³ furnished backgrounds on the famous men of the area, especially those who were influential in theatre activity of the community. Other histories, such as Historic Michigan and History of the Lake Huron Shore, were useful in adding other needed material.⁴

In order to study and substantiate various legal matters, it was necessary to use the facilities of the Bay County Registrar of Deeds Office. Various documents such as the Deeds Liber, Mortgage Liber, Plat Books, and Contracts and Leases were studied to obtain important material.⁵

²George Butterfield, Bay County Past and Present, Centennial Edition (Board of Education, Bay City, Michigan, 1957).

³Captain Augustus H. Gansser, History of Bay County and Representative Citizens (Chicago: Richmond & Arnold, 1905).

⁴George N. Nuller, Historic Michigan (National Historical Association, Inc., No date given).

⁵Deeds Liber 40, 46, Bay County.

Mortgage Liber 31, Bay County.

Plat Book No. 1, Bay County.

Contracts and Leases, Volume J., Bay County.

Materials regarding theatrical problems elsewhere in the state were studied in other newspapers such as The Adrian Daily Times and The Saginaw Evening News.⁶ These sources furnished further material as well as substantiating that found in the Bay City paper.

Upon completing research on this project, four general divisions began to appear: (1) the location, background, and general atmosphere of the community; (2) the first recorded evidence of theatre in the community and the first opera house; (3) the building and operation of Wood's Opera House and its subsequent destruction by fire; and (4) a summarization of the complete study. Consequently the study is organized in the four following chapters to correspond to these divisions.

⁶The Adrian Daily Times, March 5, 1886.
The Saginaw Evening News, February 26, 1886.

CHAPTER II

BAY CITY, MICHIGAN

During the period of our American history from the early 1900's, the nation was experiencing rapid growth and change. The electric light was beginning to find its way into the stores and houses of the larger cities; transportation consisted of riding horseback, buggies and carriages, and railroad trains, at that time the most rapid form of travel. The Wild West was still "wild", but civilization was rapidly changing that too.

The nation was living in peace and a new prosperity following the War of 1812. In the mid-west, the lumbering industry was bringing wealth and employment to thousands of people who lived in this region. In the Great Lakes area, the lumber and fishing industries were booming. The cities which bordered on the lakes were given great hope of becoming very prominent and prosperous because of their desirable location.

Television, radio, and motion pictures, which comprise a large part of our presentday amusements, were, of course, unknown to the population in this period. The larger, more populated cities in the country were able to secure theatre in the form of traveling road companies. It was during this era that the legitimate theatre flourished on the road, touring from town to town performing one-night stands seven days a week.

Because the people of the country wanted this form of amusement to come to their cities, many groups were formed to develop circuits

and build theatres for the acting companies. The theatres of this period were called "opera houses". They were built in various sizes and shapes, some large and very elaborate, others small and simple. In some cases the opera house was nothing more than a small room with a small stage or elevated platform at one end; others were more elaborate than those found in New York City. Whatever the description of the opera house might be, the country wanted live theatrical entertainment and was getting it. In order to obtain a more complete picture of the legitimate theatre during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is necessary to review the actors, companies, circuits, towns, and theatres that were part of the sprawling theatre of the time. Bay City was one such town.

One of the Great Lakes Cities which was destined to be the site of an important shipping port and manufacturing center was Bay City, Michigan. Bay City is located on the Saginaw Bay, a natural harbour on the western edge of Lake Huron. Flowing from the interior of the state into Saginaw Bay is the Saginaw River. From the beginnings of Bay City this river was expected to be the greatest natural resource the city had. So it has been and, with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway, this forecast is rapidly becoming even more prophetic.

The history of Bay City began with the establishment of the village of Lower Saginaw by the Saginaw Bay Company in 1837.¹ After some time Lower Saginaw became known as Bay City, and it carries that name up to

¹George N. Nuller, Historic Michigan (National Historical Association, Inc., no date), p. 131.

the present day. In April, 1865, Bay City began its corporate existence as one of Michigan's most promising cities.²

The men of the lumbering industry were the first to see the future of Bay City as a manufacturing and shipping point:

The vast forest on both sides of the river, the 12 miles of river front with the deep-water channel, and the cheap and convenient means of securing a seemingly inexhaustible supply and equally easy and cheap access to the markets of the world, brought into life the greatest lumbering community the world has ever seen.³

When Bay City began its corporate existence as a village, there were only a half a dozen sawmills in the community. Rapidly, however, mills sprang up all along the river front and on all the adjacent streams. The lumbering industry moved into full swing.

Lumbering was not the only industry to emerge at this time, as other natural resources were being put to use.

The fishing industry furnished employment to many men and furnished a good share of the exports from this frontier village. Then came the discovery of the vast salt basin, and the success of these salt-wells can be understood when we note that in 1865 the salt production of Bay City alone amounted to 259,061 barrels. That same year the sawmills cut 154,727,945 feet of lumber. The rapid development of these kindred industries brought with them a growth of wealth and population during the next 15 years, almost unprecedented in the annals of our country.⁴

The population growth of Bay City illustrates the promising community it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century. According to Gansser, Bay City had a population of 810 people in 1860; 3,359 in 1865; 7,064 in 1870; 13,676 in 1874; and 17,993 in 1876.⁵ When the

²Captain Augustus H. Gansser, History of Bay County and Representative Citizens (Chicago: Richmond & Arnold, 1905), p. 166.

³Ibid., p. 176.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., p. 179.

national census was taken in 1880, the city was heralded as having the highest percentage of increase in the decade of 1870 to 1880 of any city in the country. The 1880 population figure was 20,693; in 1890 it was 27,839. It is apparent that the city had a very healthy growth in this ten-year period, but, as every available site along the river front was taken up by sawmills and lumber yards, and as the supply of lumber was giving out under the buzz of countless saws, there was no longer room for the rapid multiplication of mills and population that had marked the preceding ten years.

The manufacture of many kinds of wood products developed along with the lumber industry. When logs were brought into the mills to be cut into boards, much of the log was left in the form of slabs and edgings:

According to a report for 1883 over 106 million pieces of lath, four feet in length, were cut that year in the mills of Bay City and West Bay City. Placed end to end there would have been enough to reach around the world three times with several thousand miles of them left over.

Fence pickets were another by-product. Most city yards in those days were fenced, in order to keep out the horses and cattle that roamed the streets....⁶

The city also produced wooden barrels. These barrels were used in the community for packing salt and fish for shipment. In the surrounding county they were used for shipping sugar, flour, crackers, molasses, vinegar and many other products.⁷ Other materials made out of wood were doors, blinds, window frames, mouldings, brackets, ballusters, and carriages and sleighs. In the year 1868 Bay City began to produce

⁶George Butterfield, Bay County Past and Present Centennial Edition (Board of Education, Bay City, Michigan, 1957), p. 79, 80.

⁷Ibid.

wooden pails and tubs, along with wooden pipe.⁸

The future of Bay City seemed quite secure until an act of Congress put an end to the growing prosperity. The United States government doubled the import duty on Canadian lumber. The lumber supply, which had gradually receded further north and, since 1890, was largely coming from the Georgian Bay region in Canada, was at once shut off by the retaliatory measures of the Canadian government. With the raising of the duty on Canadian lumber, the flourishing lumber industry of Bay City and the west shore of Lake Huron was doomed. Because of this,

We find that the Federal census of 1900 shows a loss for Bay City, as compared to the State census of 1894, being only 27,628, a loss of 0.8 per cent. These figures indicate the growth, boom and decline of the lumber industry, which laid the foundation of the city.⁹

The decline and eventual death of the lumbering industry did not mean death to the community. With the forests gone, farms began to spring up in the county, and the richness of the soil of the Saginaw Valley provided a fine livelihood for many people. Industries such as ship building, fishing, and agriculture have helped the community grow to a city of over eighty thousand people at the present time.

It is important to note that while legitimate theatre was emerging as the popular entertainment, the community was expanding in a time of prosperity and looked to a future which appeared quite secure.

The makeup of the population of Bay City might easily be called an example of the "melting pot", a phrase used to describe the population of the entire country. When Bay County was created in 1857, most of the residents were American-born. Some of these early settlers

⁸Ibid., p. 80.

⁹Gansser, Op. Cit., p. 179.

were of French descent, coming from Canada and Southern Michigan; those of English descent came from Southern Michigan or the Northeastern portion of the United States.¹⁰

In contrast to these first groups, the later settlers were immigrants, coming from European countries. German immigrants settled in Frankenlust, a small community of farm families on the southwestern edge of the city, as early as 1848, and in later years other Germans settled in that same general area. The German faction also located on the east side of the river. However, these people were not the only ones to come to the Saginaw Valley.

Beginning about 1872, many Polish and Jewish immigrants migrated from Russia and Germany to escape persecution and bad living conditions....

Through the years of heavy immigration from Europe into the United States, Bay County received its share. Famine and other hardship conditions brought in a large group of Irish immigrants who located on both sides of the river. Others came from Sweden, Holland, Belgium, Austria, Hungary, Italy, and Greece, and still more from various parts of Germany¹¹

Thus, the population of the community was one which contained many different and varied cultures and traditions.

It was in these surroundings that legitimate theatre began. The people of the city wanted amusements to come in and, when they found it necessary, were ready to provide a place in which the players and their plays could be housed.

It is this goal, to obtain the professional dramatic acting companies and to provide them with an appropriate theatre, and the ultimate success in doing so, with which this study deals.

¹⁰Butterfield, Op. Cit., p. 184, 185.

¹¹George Butterfield, Bay County Past & Present (Bay City, Michigan, C & J Gregory, 1918), p. 163.

CHAPTER III

THE FIRST EVIDENCES OF THEATRICAL ACTIVITY AND THE WESTOVER OPERA HOUSE

The Globe and Fraser Hotels

While the business of lumbering was going on around Bay City, the people were looking for some form of amusement. The first mention of any kind of theatre, along with the presentation of plays, came in the year 1864 when the owner of the Globe Hotel, a combination hotel and restaurant, decided to furnish a room in his establishment for the purpose of presenting entertainments. The Globe Hotel was owned by a Mr. Rouech.¹ It was originally the home of Sidney S. Campbell, later enlarged by Rouech, and in 1862 named the Globe Hotel.² Mr. Rouech realized that the public had, on numerous occasions, demonstrated the desire for a public hall. Therefore, he took the liberty of arranging such a place on the third floor of his building. The room he chose was 40 feet wide and 60 feet long. At the east end of this room he constructed a stage 12 feet deep which was elevated to give the audience a sufficient view of the performance.³ The Bay City Tribune described this early theatre as follows:

¹Bay City Tribune, December 6, 1885.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

It was furnished with a drop curtain and stage appliances that fully met the requirements of the case. In front were several rows of seats, and then came an inclined plane which served as gallery, family circle, boxes, loges and dress circle.⁴

It was in this room that Bay Cityans witnessed their first known theatrical performance.⁵ The company that played there came from Detroit and was so popular that the local newspaper reported they packed the hall from "pit to dome" during their three-night engagement.⁶ The hall had a seating capacity of seven hundred, and every one of the spectators had to walk up a long flight of winding stairs, four feet wide, in order to get to the hall.

This small theatre, on the third floor of the Globe Hotel, was not long to remain the only building with theatrical facilities in Bay City. In the year 1865, James Fraser built the Fraser Hotel, or the Fraser House, at Center and Water streets.⁷ In the southern portion of the building Mr. Fraser built a public hall 45 feet wide by 96 feet long, with a ceiling 21 1/2 feet high.⁸ At one end of this hall was a stage which was fitted with movable scenery and a reportedly beautiful drop curtain.⁹ The house had a seating capacity of about eight hundred persons. However, if a larger audience was present, the

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷George Butterfield, Bay County Past and Present, Centennial Edition (Board of Education, Bay City Michigan, 1957), p. 163.

⁸Bay City Tribune, Dec. 6, 1885

⁹Ibid.

space was able to seat a hundred more.¹⁰ This public hall was the pride of Bay City. It was regarded as the greatest theatre in the state north of Detroit.¹¹ With the coming of the railroad to the community, Bay City soon became even more interested in the theatrical world because the railroad was able to bring traveling companies to the town more often.

The Westover Block

Because of the numerous job opportunities in and around Bay City, people were coming into the city in large numbers. The lumbering industry was doing a thriving business, coal was being mined, and salt was being taken from the ground. The increasing population forced the city to grow and expand, and this growth brought the first brick buildings. Prominent among these was the Westover Block, built by Mr. William Westover, located on the southwest corner of Washington and Center Avenues.

Mr. Westover was a very well known person in the community. He was president of the Second National Bank.¹² A native of Massachusetts, he had moved to Bay City in 1865 and had entered the lumbering business. The History of Bay County Michigan says this of the Westover Block and Mr. Westover:

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²History of Bay County Michigan, (Chicago: H. R. Page & Co., 1883), p. 99.

In 1868-69 he built the Westover Block, in which the opera house is located. This block is a structure of imposing appearance, and, at the time it was built, was a long stride of enterprise in advance of anything before attempted...The opera house has been of great public advantage to the place...No man in Bay City is more ready to contribute to the welfare of the place than Mr. Westover.¹³

The Westover building was four stories high, with the upper two stories devoted to theatrical purposes.¹⁴ The building itself consisted of

three stories and wide entrance, as will be seen in the illustration, [Figure I] which fronted on Center Avenue. The corner was occupied by the Second National Bank, and in the basement directly underneath was the barber shop of Wm. Smith. The second store was occupied by Frank L. Westover, as the post office. This store was L shaped, having a private entrance on Washington avenue. In the Basement on Washington avenue under the post office was the plumbing shop of John Young. The next store was occupied by Sirmyer and Edwards with a stock of clothing. Directly above this store were the dental rooms of Dr. C. W. Maxon, back of which was the tailoring department of Sirmyer and Edwards. Over the post office was the lumber of E. Y. Williams, back of which was a lobby, hall, and two stairways leading to the third floor. A hall also led from the lobby to the rear of the building where there was a stairway leading to Washington avenue. Over the Second National Bank were the dental rooms of Dr. C. B. Porter and Son, and the residence of the former, which extended along Washington avenue from front to rear of building.

On the third and fourth floors was Westover's opera house. The third floor was devoted to the dress circle, parquette and stage. The fourth floor was the gallery. The dress circle and gallery were furnished with oil-finished pine seats. The floors and stage were also of pine. The opera house...had a handsome drop curtain painted...by Walthew and Sons of Detroit, besides considerable scenery.¹⁵

Very little is known about this theatre other than what was reported in this article.

When the Westover Opera House was constructed, it was considered one of the finest theatres in the state. In it played some of the most

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Bay City Tribune, January 19, 1886.

¹⁵Ibid.



Fig. 1 - The Westover Opera House

famous stars and companies of the period. The following list is a representative sampling of the dates, plays, and players that appeared at Westover's Opera House:

- Jan. 30, 1884: McSorley's Inflation, M. W. Hanley's Company
- Feb. 1, 1884: Rip Van Winkle, Robert McWade and Company
- Feb. 7, 1884: A Mountain Pink, Miss Laura E. Dainty
- Feb. 11-12, 1884: The Romany Rye, Walter Dennis, Miss Ettie Baker
- Feb. 16, 1884: Peck's Bad Boy, Joseph H. Murray
- Feb. 26, 1884: Shaun Rhue, Joseph Murphy, Miss Belle Melville
- Feb. 27, 1884: Lorle or Artist's Dream, Maggie Mitchell
- Mar. 7-8, 1884: The Silver King, The J. H. Haverly's Co.
- Mar. 11, 1884: My Partner, Chas. T. Parsloe, Louis Aldrich
- Mar. 18, 1884: The Bankrupt's Wife and The Octoroon, Henrietta ChanFrau, Frank S. Chan Frau
- Mar. 20, 1884: Davy Crockett, Frank Mayo
- Apr. 4, 1884: Only A Farmer's Daughter, Adelaide Eherie, Camille Kinzey
- Apr. 9, 1884: Richelieu or The Conspiracy, Thos. W. Keene
- Apr. 12, 1884: The World, The J. Z. Little Co.
- Apr. 14, 1884: Irish Aristocracy, Hugh Fay, Billy Barry
- Apr. 23, 1884: 3 of A Kind, Salsbury's Troubadours, Nellie Mc Henry, Nate Salsbury
- Apr. 30, 1884: Pirates of Penzance, Wilbur Comic Opera Co.
- May 2, 1884: Esmeralda, The Madison Square Theatre Co.
- Sept. 3, 1884: For Congress, John T. Raymond
- Sept. 9, 1884: Skipped By the Light of the Moon, Louis Harrison, John Gourlay
- Sept. 13, 1884: Spot Cash, M. B. Curtis
- Sept. 16, 1884: Yvonne, Rhea

- Sept. 25, 1884: Minstrels, Hyder Berman's
- Sept. 26, 1884: Shaughraun, Dion Boucicault
- Oct. 3, 1884: Early In the Morning, Smith, Walkron, Cronin and Martin's Grotesque Comedy Co.
- Oct. 8, 1884: All Crazy, Barry and Fay
- Oct. 10-12, 1884: Scraps, Rentfrow's Musical Comedy Co.
- Oct. 27, 1884: Francesca Da Rimini, Lawrence Barrett, Louis James
- Oct. 30, 1884: Humbug, Roland Reed
- Nov. 3-4, 1884: Zozo, The Magic Queen
- Nov. 8, 1884: Uncle Tom's Cabin, Uncle Tom's Cabin Co.
(The only traveling company with the sanction of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe)
- Nov. 12-13, 1884: Lights O' London, Shook and Collier's Co.
- Nov. 27-28-29, 1884: Streets of New York, Under the Gaslight, East Lynne, The Spitz-Erdman Dramatic Co.
- Dec. 5-6, 1884: The Black Flag, Edwin Thorne
- Dec. 9, 1884: The Emigrants, Baker and Farron
- Dec. 14, 1884: Georgia Wonder (Tricks with chairs, tables, etc.)
- Dec. 17, 1884: Bunch of Keys or The Hotel, Hattie Anderson
- Dec. 19-20, 1884: Planter's Wife, Harry Lacy, Miss Edna Carey
- Dec. 31, 1884: Caprice "A Dramatic DewDrop", Miss Minnie Maddern, J. J. Herdon
- Jan. 13, 1885: Queen's Lace Handkerchief, Grau's Famous Opera Company¹⁶

The local newspaper, The Bay City Tribune, carried advertisements in its columns telling the public about the coming attractions and also stories relating to the excellence of the traveling companies. Reviews of the past evenings' performances were also printed. The following

¹⁶Ibid. The above plays and players' names were found in newspaper advertisements preceding the performances.

review is of the performance of Peck's Bad Boy, which starred John J. Murray as Mr. Peck and Frankie Bishop as the Bad Boy:¹⁷

If two full houses in one day and shouts of laughter that could be heard two squares away, are to be accepted as testimony of success, "Peck's Bad Boy" on the stage is a success, but when it is subjected to cool criticism it is seen to be rubbish without pith or point. It is not a drama, for it has not plot; it is not rational amusement, for the pranks are played to no purpose. But people who have seen it declare it is the best show they ever saw, and what can be said against such testimony.¹⁸

The Bay City Tribune went on to say the following about a performance of The Octoroon, with Frank S. ChanFrau as the star:¹⁹

The evening performance, "The Octoroon" was far from satisfactory. What there was of it was well enough done, but there is nothing of it. It is a poor thing that ought to be left to rural amateurs. Mr. ChanFrau as Salem Scudder found a chance to show some of his leading characteristics as an actor, filling the role with his usual vigor and darkey Pete's eccentricities were fairly amusing, but the piece, though termed the great American drama, is weak and flabby throughout, devoid of dramatic effect.²⁰

One review in particular seemed to be very cruel, showing very little mercy toward the performance or the company. The play was The Romany Rye, presented by the John T. Dickson company:²¹

The lurid and picturesque play of The Romany Rye was presented to a moderate size audience last evening by John T. Dickson's company of select barnstormers assisted by two or three very fair actors. The piece was not well mounted and there was a noticeable lack of correct dramatic effect. Some of the ranting would make the flesh on a petrified rhinoceros creep...²²

¹⁷Bay City Tribune, Feb. 17, 1884.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Bay City Tribune, March 19, 1884.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Bay City Tribune, March 25, 1885.

²²Ibid.

Not all the reviews written in the paper were as uncomplimentary as the ones just cited. When the reviewer saw something he liked, he was just as liable to praise it highly as he was to tear another down. The appearance in Bay City of Thos. W. Keene in the title role of Richelieu was met with favorable comments:²³

The smallest audience that ever greeted Keene in this city was that at Westover's last night. The reason assigned is that this week is the worst week in the amusement season, and poor houses are noticeable in all cities. Richelieu was the play and in this it is said Keene is seen at his best. His impersonation was watched with unabated interest throughout, and loud was the applause that greeted his efforts on many occasions. Richelieu is certainly one of his finest impersonations.²⁴

Mlle. Rhea, always a favorite in Bay City, received reviews which were complimentary. She appeared at Westover's Opera House on September 16, 1884, and the following review appeared the next morning:²⁵

Rhea drew a pretty large audience last evening, the largest she has ever attracted here. Her new play was well received and gave great pleasure to admirers of society plays, which includes all the ladies. Rhea is an actress one can witness without feeling that the part assumed is being overdone.

Yvonne is a highly emotional play, and the title role was sustained by the charming grace and natural dignity, and at the same time with a tenderness of demeanor and manner that strongly appealed to the sensibilities. Mlle. Rhea's costumes were exceedingly rich, and excited the admiration of the ladies. The support was excellent and the play well placed on the stage.²⁶

The moral code of the period is reflected in many of the newspaper reviews, as seen in an article reviewing Tony Denier's Pantomime Troupe in a play called The Wild West:

²³Bay City Tribune, April 10, 1884.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., September 16, 1884.

²⁶Ibid., September 17, 1884.

Tony Denier played to a full house last night. The audience was highly entertained and some points were roundly applauded. The acting was lively and mirthful and maintained its interest throughout. The singing and dancing were good but we would suggest to the young lady in tights that she lengthen her skirts or don pants.²⁷

These reviews indicate the type of entertainment appreciated by the audiences and the attitudes they expressed toward what they saw.

Bay City Merchants

The merchants of Bay City were quick to take advantage of the interest in the theatre shown by the members of the community. Various articles associated with the drama and the theatre were sold by the local merchants. Advertisements such as this were found in The Bay City Tribune:

The dramatic season has not as yet received the attention it should from Bay Citians, but after the rush and hurry of holidays opera house entertainments will receive a better patronage. An opera glass is always a desirable article for a lady and Frank Dickinson has a handsome line for Christmas presents at very low prices. Get your mother, your cousin, your sister (or some other fellow's sister) or your aunt a pair of opera glasses at Dickinson's.²⁸

Another store owner attracted customers by giving a free theatre ticket to every fourth purchaser at his place of business. His advertisement invited his clientele to

receive a free ticket to any of the entertainments in the opera house, besides getting the best goods at lower prices than are found anywhere else in this city.²⁹

The theatre was in Bay City to stay, everyone was familiar with it, and many individuals took advantage of it.

²⁷Ibid., September 12, 1885.

²⁸Ibid., December 21, 1884.

²⁹Ibid., March 8, 1885.

Opera House Attendance

Today, attendance at the theatre is effected adversely by such things as television and motion pictures. The attendance at the theatre in 1885 was also effected by other amusements. During the first portion of the year 1885 Mr. Buckley, manager of the Westover Opera House was asked about the amusement season by a Bay City Tribune reporter:

Manager Buckley, of the Saginaw Valley circuit, was button-holed yesterday, by the Tribune interviewer in the matter of amusement season. He stated that the present, this far, has been the dulllest that he has yet experienced. He ~~attrib~~tributes the small patronage to the general depression of business, roller rinks, etc.³⁰

The presence of three or four roller rinks in Bay City apparently did indeed have an effect upon the number of persons attending the theatre.

The Opera House Manager

The manager of the Westover Opera House, John Buckley, was a native of Onondaga County, New York. At the age of twenty-one he traveled to the state of Tennessee and there assumed the foremanship of a grist mill.³¹ When the Civil War broke out, he had the choice of joining the rebel army or leaving the country; it took him very little time to decide to keep out of the war. He returned to New York state and in 1862 came to the Saginaw Valley.³² In 1877, in company with Samuel Clay, Buckley opened, as manager, the Saginaw Valley Theatrical Circuit including the cities of Bay City, East Saginaw,

³⁰Ibid., January 25, 1885.

³¹History of Bay County Michigan, (Chicago, H. R. Page & Co., 1883) p. 141.

³²Ibid.

Port Huron and Flint.³³ This was the man who became well known to every Bay Cityan as the local theatre manager.

The Rink Opera House

When Mr. Westover opened his opera house in 1869, the theatre was said to have been built far in advance of the city. However, by the year 1885, Mr. Westover began to feel that, because of its age, the building was not safe for further theatrical performances. He therefore decided to close the opera house and began plans to remodel it. With the opera house closed, a new site was needed to present the theatrical engagements which would be coming into Bay City while the old theatre was being rebuilt.

The manager of the theatre, Mr. Buckley, decided that the only logical place to hold his amusements would be in one of the larger roller skating rinks in the city. With this in mind, he proceeded to secure the use of the Bay City Rink for two nights a week.³⁴ This arrangement was completed, and the scenery was moved from the opera house to the rink.

A number of problems presented themselves when the idea of using the Washington Avenue Rink was felt to be the only thing to do. The Bay City Tribune described a few of these problems:

Bay City cannot expect first class attractions to come here until there is an opera house. Westover's opera house will not be opened to the public until it is rebuilt, and the only alternative is the rink, or to go to East Saginaw. The Tribune is informed, by Manager Buckley that Mr. Westover will not open the

³³Ibid.

³⁴Bay City Tribune, July 21, 1885.

house again in its present condition. He has arranged matters with the other owners of the block and is ready to commence work and rebuild the house according to his proposition on the same plans made for the new house.³⁵

Following this article, the discussion of the rink as an opera house continued with one reporter comparing the facilities at the Washington Avenue rink to those at the old opera house:

Westover's opera house, which has been stripped of stage, scenery and settings will probably not be used, but the performances that are given will be presented at the Washington Avenue roller rink, if arrangements to that end can be perfected. A stage has already been used there quite successfully, but the question of heating in winter is an important one and one that will meet with a thorough discussion. The old opera house with brick walls was hard enough to warm, and the rink, with only one thickness of boards, will be still harder.³⁶

The report indicated at least some opposition to the choice made by Mr. Westover and Manager Buckley. However, the rink was to be only a temporary opera house, and with the lack of another desirable location, it was apparently the best choice possible. The Bay City Tribune published an article describing the manner in which the theatre managers prepared the new site for theatrical performances:

The Tribune reporter visited the rink yesterday and noticed the improvements in progress there. The stage at the west end is approaching completion. The trusses have been removed and the stage finished to a height sufficient to place the opera house curtains and scenery. The gas borders and footlights are yet to be placed in position. On either side dressing rooms have been arranged. The stage proper is about the same width as that in Westover's opera house while it has 10 feet more depth. The elevation on which it has been placed is calculated to allow those in the rear seats to see what is transpiring...The rink will seat about the same number as Westover's...³⁷

³⁵Ibid., August 30, 1885.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., September 6, 1885.

Thus the converted roller skating rink became the temporary home of legitimate theatre in Bay City.

Rebuilding The Westover Opera House

While Manager Buckley was preparing the roller rink for the coming season, the citizens of Bay City and Mr. Westover were busy trying to get the project of remodeling the old opera house under way. The money for this purpose was to come from the citizens of the community in the form of subscriptions. The opera house committee, Mayor Shearer, Chairman, met on Thursday, May 28, 1885, to ascertain what had been accomplished up to that date:

The committee on bonus subscriptions made their report by T. A. E. Weakock, chairman. The amount subscribed was \$9,850, with a number of parties not called upon who will subscribe towards the bonus. They were counted upon for stock. The committee who solicited stock reported that out of 25 persons or firms who were counted upon for stock there were only seven signed, or pledged themselves, to the amount of \$14,000, with little prospects of others.³⁸

The city at large may have been vastly interested in the new opera house project, but it did not appear eager to help rebuild the theatre with money out of its own pockets. This problem plagued the committee throughout the campaign.

J. M. Wood, an architect from Chicago, wrote the following letter regarding the building of a new opera house or remodeling the present Westover house. It appeared with the preceding article concerning the opera house committee:

Opera House Committee, Bay City.

Gentlemen On my visit to Bay City last Friday I learned that on account of the stringency of the times there was some difficulty

³⁸Ibid., May 29, 1885.

in getting the requisite amount of stock subscribed to build the new opera house and my attention was called to remodeling the old one, and the inquiry was made as to whether the proposed plan could be introduced there. By examination I found for size the plan fitted the old house, and by the addition of the 35 feet in the rear I could give you all the advantages which a new house would have...³⁹

Mr. Wood had built a number of opera houses throughout the country, and one aspect of construction in which he was extremely interested was the safety of the audience. This point was made very clear in the same letter to the opera house committee:

Now, regarding the important matter of exits, I will say that I will guarantee exits that will discharge the house, when filled to its maximum capacity, in 60 seconds, discharging in every direction...Regarding the character of Mr. Westover's building I would say, if I were building it now I would not add one iota in strength of construction. Regarding location, I need not add anything. I stated, while in Bay City, that I would not identify myself with the movement unless I could make it as complete as the new house would be. This would necessitate a clean sweep of everything above second floor to the roof. I also stated that unless allowed [sic] use just as much space as I wanted for exits, I would not touch it, as I could not afford to identify myself with a movement that did not commend itself to my own conscience.⁴⁰

The architect went on further to describe his ideas concerning the inside and outside structure of the theatre:

My ideas are 1st. To make a handsome front to the 35 feet in the Moorish style of architecture, with handsome approaches to the house, and make the inside as per last plan sent to you with separate entrance and exits for gallery element. I will heat the building by steam, and it will be thoroughly ventilated.

Its stage will be thoroughly equipped and in this respect will not be excelled by any. This of course will cost money, I could not carry out my ideas for less than \$30,000...I don't know that I can add anything further than to assure you that I am willing to stake my reputation on making that house all that could be desired as to safety, completeness and elegance, and to make it the finest in the state of Michigan, conditioned on being allowed to use the 35 feet as I please. The house could be completed by September 15, if settled at once and work crowded, and I would take it and give my own personal supervision to it, and

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid.

you could invite your neighbors to come and see you and show them something that would astonish them. I shall have several iron stairways on the outside.⁴¹

Meanwhile, in the Washington Avenue Rink, entertainments were being presented before Bay City audiences. This place of amusement was not looked upon by all as the perfect spot to hold the stage shows. The Tribune, in a weekly Sunday column entitled "Lillian's Letter," made this comment about the temporary opera house:

The seats however, are not selling as rapidly as they ought, It will be presented at our "new" opera house---the skating rink... Dear me, how I wish Bay City had what could be called a theatre! Even Westover's old house was a hundred per cent better than the rink, but it is a certainty that it will never be reopened in its present condition...⁴²

This was not a completely positive attitude toward the rink playhouse. Public sentiment seemed to be in favor of some type of change.

The committee formed to collect funds for the new opera house found it difficult to secure the amount needed to begin work. The local newspaper did a good deal to help the committee arouse the city's interest in the project. The city of Saginaw, up the river, was always in competition with Bay City in matters of size, opportunities, and the like. Saginaw had a new opera house, one which was among the best in the state. The Tribune used this spirit of competition between the cities to motivate the desire for a bigger and better theatre in the local community. The following is taken from an article describing the need for funds:

It only remains for the citizens of Bay City to say whether we shall have an opera house which will have no rival in the state

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., October 18, 1885.

or whether we shall be dependent upon East Saginaw for entertainment. Let all citizens who have the welfare and interest of the city at heart be prepared to respond to the call of the committee and give as they are able and Christmas we will witness the dedication of a Thespian temple that will send the green-eyed monster of envy to one of the southern suburbs of Bay City...⁴³

Again we see reference made to Saginaw. Although the community is not mentioned by name, the readers knew to what the reporter was referring.

The opera house committee again called a meeting on the evening of May 30, 1885, to check upon the progress made by its members.⁴⁴ Mr. Westover was present, and he was called upon to speak. He stated that he had not succeeded in closing any arrangements with the other owners of the opera house property. Because of a legal question in reference to minor heirs, Mr. Westover felt that more time would be needed before satisfactory arrangements could be made. The committee appointed a group of its members to confer with the opera house owners, secure a proposition from them, and report at a meeting to be held on Thursday of the same week.⁴⁵ The men who made up this committee were Seth McLean, Selwyn Eddy, Daniel Fitzhugh, John Buckley, and A. L. Stewart.⁴⁶

All through this planning stage, Mr. Westover apparently did his best to be as cooperative as he could to help assure the success of the project. This can be seen in this statement written in the newspaper:

Mr. Westover being called upon said that if he could buy the balance of the opera house property necessary for the proposed new house, at reasonable figures, he would take a bonus of \$15,000 and put up the house as desired or as per plans submitted by Mr. Wood, the architect.⁴⁷

⁴³Ibid., September 10, 1885.

⁴⁴Ibid., May 31, 1885.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., June 7, 1885.

This indicated his strong desire for Bay City to have a new opera house.

Mr. Wood was present in the city at this time, and he was able to describe in fuller detail the opera house and its basic dimensions:

Mr. Wood...stated that...the seating capacity would be 1,500, and the cost about \$30,000. The building would be 75 x 125 feet and could be finished in 2 1/2 months.

In addition to its present dimensions, the piece of ground in the rear of the building, 35 x 75 feet would be added and built upon which would afford the amplest provision for exits...⁴⁸

The Bay City Tribune kept the citizens of the community abreast on the developments of the project, and, when it was felt that some explanation should be made relative to further planning, the staff took it upon itself to bring the facts forward in its columns:

All should know that we are to have equally as good an opera house as the new one was to have been, and a trifle larger seating about 200 more than the East Saginaw house, and equally as good in design and finish. As I am informed, the old hall is all to be taken out, and also all the offices in the building, and constructing the opera house proper on the second floor, with the stage in the Center Avenue front. The Center Avenue stairway is to be taken out. The 35 feet in the rear of the block is to be built up and all entrances to the opera house will be in the new part on Washington street. There will be separate entrances and exits to every part of the house, also exits opening into the alley. Mr. Westover will be obliged to invest about \$30,000 over and above the \$15,000 to be raised among our citizens.

The whole outlay will be nearly or quite \$45,000...⁴⁹

Thus, through the newspaper, the citizens were kept informed of the latest developments. The solicitation committee was stopped for a short time when a difficulty arose concerning the procurement of title to a portion of the Westover block. However, this matter was quickly cleared up, and the project again moved ahead.⁵⁰ Mr. Wood made clear

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., June 21, 1885.

⁵⁰Ibid., June 12, 1885.

further plans for the theatre, as described in an article in The Bay City Tribune:

There will be nine distinct and separate exits from the house, the occupants of the gallery having separate entrance and exits. The stage will be separated from the auditorium by a fire wall running through the roof, and all work on the stage will be fire-proof. It will also be supplied with a system of water supply that will enable the management to deluge the stage in a moment, thus rendering it impossible to create a panic. There can be no question but that this house for safety to its patrons will be unsurpassed.⁵¹

Although Mr. Wood worked very hard to make his ideas for the new theatre sound safe, as well as attractive, the solicitation committee still ran into trouble gathering the necessary finances. Mr. Westover was approached by The Bay City Tribune concerning his opinion on this situation:

Days and weeks are rolling by, and still the opera house project hangs fire. The required bonus has not all been raised, and until it is, the chances are decidedly against a new theatre. Mr. Westover...said that he was still ready to fulfill his part of the proposition at any time. A good portion of the bonus had been subscribed, and had it not been for the strike coming on when it did, Mr. Westover thinks the entire amount could have been realized.⁵²

For the time being, all efforts to secure a proper opera house were frustrated, and the rink remained Bay City's only theatre.

Amusements At The Rink

In the Washington Avenue Rink, now called the Rink Opera House, the world of the drama was still finding an audience. Appearing at the Rink were productions such as the following:

Sept. 9, 1885: Oh! What A Night, Mr. Gus Williams

⁵¹Ibid., September 10, 1885.

⁵²Ibid., October 21, 1885.

- Sept. 11, 1885: The Wild West, Tony Denier's Pantomine Troupe.
- Sept. 14-15, 1885: Siberia
- Sept. 23, 1885: The Skating Rink, Jacques Druger & Co.
- Sept. 28, 1885: Naiad Queen
- Oct. 5-6, 1885: The Mikado, The Thompson Opera Co.
- Oct. 7-8, 1885: The World, Mr. Chappell, Miss Alberta
- Oct. 14, 1885: A Sleeping Beauty, The Adah Richmond American Burlesque Company
- Oct. 19-20-21, 1885: A Prisoner For Life, Shook & Collier's Company
- Oct. 29, 1885: Wanted A Divorce, Wm. Stafford, Miss E. Foster
- Nov. 14, 1885: Minstrels, McNish, Johnson & Slavin's
- Nov. 28, 1885: Dark Days
- Dec. 4, 1885: A Mountain Pink, Laura Dainty
- Dec. 9-10, 1885: A Dangerous Game, Mlle. Rhea
- Dec. 15-16, 1885: Storm Beaten, Edmund Collier
- Jan. 7, 1886: Banker's Daughter & Risen From the Ashes, The Egbert Dramatic Company
- Feb. 17, 1886: The Mascotte, Starr's Company
- Mar. 3, 1886: Devils Auction, Chas. H. Yale, Manager
- Mar. 18, 1886: A Rag Baby, Manager Eugene Tompkins
- Mar. 22, 1886: M'Liss, Two Orphans, Little Barefoot, A. R. Wilber's Lyceum Theatre Co.
- Apr. 13, 1886: Tom, Dick and Harry, Salsbury's Troubadours
- Apr. 29, 1886: As You Like It, Miss Adelaide Moore
- May 10, 1886: M'Liss, Annie Pixley
- May 19, 1886: A Soap Bubble, Baker & Farron⁵³

⁵³Ibid. The above plays and players' names are found in advertisements preceding the performances.

These were just a few of the shows which found an audience at the temporary playhouse.

At this point, in the effort to collect funds, the bonus committee found itself unable to move in any direction. They were not able to raise the necessary funds, and the citizens of Bay City did not seem eager to help them out of this situation. Mr. Wood, realizing what the situation was, decided to take the matter into his own hands and ease the problem by paying for a public theatre out of his own pocket. He chose to build a completely new theatre in a new location. The newspaper covered this story in an article as follows:

Mr. Wood said this morning: "You can state that work on the new Bay City opera house will commence in about two weeks, and that I expect to open it September 20 with Edwin Booth. The location is on the corner of Washington and Sixth streets. There will be a three story building in front, with stores and offices on each side of the main entrance and a large hall or assembly room on the third floor. The opera house will be the finest in the state with one large gallery, a fire wall and iron drop curtain between the stage and auditorium, and a seating capacity of 1,200. The dome will be 48 feet high; the stage the largest and best equipped in Michigan. I shall own the building myself, and lease it to some capable manager."⁵⁴

In keeping with this basic idea, Mr. Wood wrote a letter to the city which appeared in The Tribune making the following proposition:

I will erect and furnish complete ready for the opening entertainment an opera house in accordance with plans, specifications and detail drawings, to be approved by you and attached to the contract for the payment to me of bonus. Said opera house is to seat at least 1,200. Stage floor to be 8 inches above sidewalk level. The first floor and balcony to be seated with A. H. Andrews and Co.'s opera chairs, same as in academy of music, East Saginaw, Michigan. The stage will be larger than the academy stage and will be thoroughly equipped with scenery and stage machinery. It will be heated by steam and will be detached with four exits on sides of auditorium. The highest seating level will be 32 feet above sidewalk.

⁵⁴Ibid., January 6, 1886.

The building will be thoroughly constructed and in finish I guarantee more artistic effects than can be found in any opera house in the state. The house will be thoroughly practical and will be a model of completeness and elegance in every respect. In its characteristic features it will surpass anything in the state, as in design it will be Moresque and susceptible to the richest effects. The stage will be separated from the auditorium by a fire wall running through the roof.

It will be furnished in keeping with its finish and decorations. The first floor and balcony carpeted with body Brussels carpet and the openings for curtains hung with handsome portieres and boxes draped with rich materials, silk plushes or Turcomans, or Moorish Indo Velours.⁵⁵

Mr. Wood stated that he would build this opera house in Bay City under a specified arrangement: the citizens of the community were to contribute fifteen thousand dollars to the project. This money was to be in

the form of notes payable when the walls of the building are completed and roof is on; 66 2/3 per cent of said notes to be delivered to me on execution of contract, the balance to be held by your committee and collected at maturity and the money held and paid to me on completion and opening of opera house.

Said building is to be located on a prominent street and is to be not less than 65 feet wide and 120 feet deep.⁵⁶

The Opera House Fire

The people of Bay City did not have a great deal of time to think over and decide upon this proposition. The letter appeared in the January 7, 1886, edition of The Bay City Tribune. But, on January 19, another article appeared describing the loss of the Westover Opera House by fire the previous evening.⁵⁷ The building was in ruins, nothing had been saved. The fire destroyed any idea of remodeling the old playhouse. The cause of the fire was not known, but there was

⁵⁵Ibid., January 7, 1886.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid., January 19, 1886.

speculation that it did not come about by natural causes. This opinion can be seen in a portion of the article describing the occurrence:

As near as The Tribune can locate the place where the fire originated, we find it between the first and second floors, at about where the ticket office was located, or inside the entrance of the back stairway. It seemed to be in the heart of the building and worked rapidly to the opera house, where it had more freedom to spread. The belief that it was started by an incendiary prevails, but the motive cannot be understood...⁵⁸

The offer made by Mr. Wood was now the only plan which could be put into operation. With Westover's burned beyond repair, the city fathers had no other choice. The destruction of Westover's Opera House proved to be the force which set the wheels of progress moving swiftly forward to the building and completion of a new theatre.

⁵⁸Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THE PLANNING, BUILDING, AND OPERATION OF WOOD'S OPERA HOUSE

Plans For A New Theatre

The Bay City Tribune again began to publish articles intended to arouse the interest of the people in the construction of a new opera house. For example, the writer of this piece attempted to use the pride of the city as a motivating factor:

Our managers state that they tried to give us good amusements in the present place, the rink, and our people will not patronize them. For instance, Mlle. Rhea played two nights in the academy and quite as many of our people went to the latter place as witnessed the performance here. This proves that Bay City must have an opera house or we cannot expect that first class attractions will visit our city...If business men and capitalists follow the example of other cities in Michigan in enterprise, and give us an addition to our great lumber, salt and shipping, rail roads, opera house, manufactories, etc., then will Bay City take new life and become the first city in Michigan.¹

This type of argument seemed to have its effect, because a few days later another article announced that the opera house project was progressing nicely. Nine thousand of the fifteen thousand dollars bonus required by the city had been raised, and the soliciting committee was confident of securing the balance.² Seven days later it was announced that

¹Bay City Tribune, January 22, 1886.

²Ibid., January 24, 1886.

the opera house question in Bay City is settled at last, and there will be built here the handsomest theatre in the state. The money is all raised, and as soon as the ground is secured, work will be commenced upon it.³

On February 20, 1886, architect J. M. Wood came to Bay City from his home in Chicago with the completed plans for the new place of amusement. The new theatre was to be called the Bijou Opera House.⁴ The site selected by Mr. Wood for the building was the southeast corner of Washington Avenue and Sixth Street.⁵ The property had a frontage of 75 feet on Washington Street, running along the block to Adams Street, and a depth of 220 feet.⁶

The plans Mr. Wood brought with him called for a building which would be

69 feet wide and 195 feet deep, and front on Washington avenue thus leaving a passage 6 feet wide on the south side of the building to ensure exits on all sides.

The front 63 feet of the building is devoted to a main entrance in the center, 25 feet wide with a store 20 feet wide on each side of the same on the first floor. On the second floor is a nicely arranged suite of social club rooms with private entrance from Sixth Street.⁷

The description of the theatre portion of the opera house stated that it would be located on

the ground floor immediately back of stores, and is 69 feet wide by 132 feet deep and has an actual seating capacity of 1,300, with comfortable extra seating capacity, in case of necessity, for 300 additional.⁸

³Ibid., January 31, 1886.

⁴Ibid., February 21, 1886.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

The seating arrangement was planned and explained in complete detail. The seats were to be divided into the following groups: 600 opera chairs on the first floor, 350 in the balcony, and 350 in the gallery.⁹ there were to be two Moorish pagoda boxes, or loges.¹⁰

The spacious entrance to the opera house was to be 25 feet wide, gradually inclined to the floor level, which was to be three feet above the sidewalk;¹¹

There is but one step from the first floor of the auditorium or stage to the sidewalk, and the highest seating level in the house is but 32 feet above the sidewalk, and to reach the gallery you only have an ascent of 43 steps.¹²

Being very anxious to have adequate space for his exits, Mr. Wood prepared his plan in such a way that his goal would be achieved. In the new opera house there were to be

5 distinct exits from the first floor aggregating 36 feet in width; 4 distinct exits from the balcony, aggregating 20 feet in width, making a total aggregate width of exits of 66 feet insuring the discharge of the audience in 60 seconds, if necessary.¹³

Further to insure the safety of the audience, Mr. Wood took precautions to see that the auditorium was separated from the stage by a brick fire wall was to be built between the auditorium and the front portion of the building. To add to this, iron doors were to be placed in all openings, thus separating the various sections of the building in an attempt to prevent the spread of any fire to other parts of the house.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

The stage of the opera house was to be 42 1/2 feet deep by 69 feet wide. The height to the gridiron was 60 feet. The stage was to be equipped "with the most complete outfit of scenery and stage machinery."¹⁴

The interior and exterior architectural motif was to be Moorish with the decorations and furnishings in harmony with the style of the house.

The preceding information was given the citizens of Bay City concerning their proposed new theatre. The plans were laid, the money raised, the property selected, and now all that was left to do was to proceed with construction of the building.

The Wood's Opera House Company, Limited

Mention will be made at several points in the contracts and deeds to an organization known as the Wood's Opera House Company, Limited. At this time an examination of this organization is in order. The articles of association of the company were filed with the Bay County Register of Deeds on October 27, 1886, as follows:

We the undersigned being desirous of forming an association for the purpose of conducting the business here in after described at Bay City, Bay County, Michigan, under the provisions of act number 191 of the Session Laws of the State of Michigan of the year 1877 and the acts amendatory thereof and supplementary there to do make, sign and file this agreement and statement for that purpose as follows Viz.

First: The name of the association shall be, "Wood's Opera House Company, Limited" and the place of business and the principal offices of said association shall be at Bay City, Bay County, Michigan.

¹⁴Ibid.

Second: The business of said association shall be the purchasing of real estate in said Bay City, the erection, construction, and maintainance of a building or buildings...in all respects, to be used and rented for a Theatre or Opera House, and for stores, shops, offices, club rooms, assembly rooms, banqueting hall and for other business purposes, and the renting of the same to be used for lawful business and occupations to be carried on therein.

Third: The capital stock of said association shall be Twenty Thousand Dollars, divided into Two Hundred Shares of One Hundred Dollars each, and shall be paid as follows Viz:

Ten per cent on signing these articles.

fifteen per cent	December 1st.	1886
"	" " January "	1887
"	" " February "	1887
"	" " March "	1887
"	" " April "	1887
"	" " May "	1887

The Capital Stock may be increased to Forty Thousand Dollars, by a two thirds vote of the Stock Holders, and each Stock Holder shall be allowed to subscribe for such increase in proportion to the amount of stock held by him at the time of making such increases and if any Stock Holder shall fail to subscribe for his perportion [sic] of such increase within thirty days...such increase shall be sold under the direction of the association...

Fourth: This Association shall commence business and its Organization take effect from this date to wit, October 26th 1886, and the duration of said Association shall be Twenty Years from this day.

Fifth: The annual meeting of said Association, shall be held on the third Tuesday of January in each year at the office of the company in Bay City aforesaid, and the first meeting for the election of officers of the Association shall be held on this day to wit, the 26th day of October, at the office of Hatch & Gooley in Bay City, Michigan, at which time...a Chairman, Secretary and Treasurer shall be designated there from.

Sixth: The following are the names of Officers and Managers of the Association, who are to hold office until the first annual meeting of said Association here after to be held, and until their successors are duly appointed and qualified. Viz:

Managers - John R. Eddy, Wilson H. Tousey, George H. Young, H. H. Hatch, Byron E. Warren

Chairman - Wilson H. Tousey
 Secretary - George H. Young
 Treasurer - Byron E. Warren

Seventh: We the Subscribers hereby assert to and adopt the proceeding Articles of Association, for the purpose there in stated and we hereby promise and agree to take the number of shares in Capital Stock in said Association set opposite our names respectively of the value above stated and to pay for the same at the time and in the manner herein before stated.

	Shares
Wilson H. Tousey Bay City, Mich. . .	30
Daniel H. Fitzhugh Bay City, Mich. . .	20
Geo. H. Young. " " " . . .	10
Harrey P. Merrill. " " " . . .	40
William Miller " " " . . .	20
Herschel H. Hatch " " " . . .	10
Edgar Gooley " " " . . .	10
John R. Eddy " " " . . .	30
Byron E. Warren. " " " . . .	30 ¹⁵

A short time later these articles were amended to add article eight, as follows:

Eight: The Capital Stock of this association is here by increased Six Thousand Dollars, which shall be divided into sixty shares of one hundred dollars each, so that the total amount of Capital Stock of said Association shall be Twenty Six Thousand dollars, and the total number of shares shall be two hundred and sixty...¹⁶

Thus was formed the Opera House Company which was to operate the theatre throughout its history.

Necessary Legal Procedures Prior To Construction

In order to build, the necessary property had to be purchased from the legal owner. Mr. Wood was to take care of this arrangement, and he was able to fulfill his portion of the agreement with very little difficulty.

¹⁵Contracts & Leases, Vol. J., pp. 52-53; Bay County, Michigan Register of Deeds.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 368.

Mr. Wood entered into a contract with the Opera House Company for the sale of the land. The contract specified that

the parties of the first part (James Lawson and Susan McMaster, trustees of E. Blackstock) therein agree to sell said lands to said Wood at and for the price of \$10,750. And where as by the terms of said contract said parties of the first part (The Wood's Opera House Co.) therein agree to loan to the said Wood the sum of \$10,000, in two instalments of \$5,000 each one of which said instalments of \$5,000 has already been advanced to the said Wood.

Now it is further agreed that the said Wood hereby sells transfers and assigns all his right title and interest in and to the said contract and the said land, buildings, furniture and appurtenances as a security for the full performance of this contract on his part...¹⁷

The original owner of the property sought for the opera house site was mentioned in the above contract, E. Blackstock of Toronto, Ontario. This individual, formerly Emeline M. Fraser of Bay City, conferred upon her trustees, J. Lawson and S. McMaster, the full power and authority to sell the property.¹⁸ Thus the transaction took place, and the following deed was drawn quitting Wood from the opera house property:

James M. Wood and Isabella S, his wife of Racine, Wisconsin Quit Claim to Woods Opera House Company Limited, of Bay City, Bay County, Michigan, the following described parcels of land, dituate in Bay City, Bay County, Michigan to wit Lots one and Twelve, and the North half of Lots two and eleven in Block Seventy Four, according to the plat of Lower Saginaw...with all the scenery, chairs, desks, furniture, carpets, curtains, hangings, goods and chattles of every name and nature in or about the said building to which the said James M. Wood has any right or claim what so ever. For the sum of Forty Thousand Dollars (\$40,000.00).

This deed is made in compliance with the terms of an Executory Contract entered into between the said James M. Wood and the said Opera House Company, Limited, bearing date the 26th of October, 1886, and recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds for Bay

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 50-51.

¹⁸Deeds, Liber 40, p. 10 & 178; Bay County Register of Deeds Office.

County, Michigan on the 27th day October 1886 in Liber "J" of contracts at page 50.¹⁹

The deed from James Lawson to the Opera House Company appears in the records of the office of the Bay County Register of Deeds.²⁰

Selecting A Name For The New Theatre

With the plans for the new opera house now ready, the problem of selecting a name for the new building became a major problem. The name Mr. Wood proposed for his new theatre was the Bijou, but it was this one point upon which the city did not agree with Mr. Wood. The architect stated that he chose the name upon the recommendation of a prominent actress who, when seeing his drawings for the theatre, remarked that it was to be a "regular bijou and I'd call it the Bijou."²¹ In 1886, there were two other theatres in the country called the Bijou, one in New York and the other in Washington.²² Both of these were considered "perfect jewels" and were financially very successful. It was under these circumstances that Mr. Wood selected Bijou as the name for his new opera house. The Bay Cityans felt that the new opera house should have a name "more easily grasped by the English speaking tongue, and as strong in its meaning."²³ The name which came to the front at this time was "The Grand."²⁴ The Bay City Tribune took a stand in

¹⁹Deeds, Liber 46, p. 452; Bay County Register of Deeds Office.

²⁰Ibid., p. 566.

²¹Bay City Tribune, March 7, 1886.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

favor of the Grand opera house and submitted the name to Mr. Wood for his consideration.²⁵ Nothing more appears thereafter regarding the name of the new opera house. When the building was constructed, it bore the name "Wood's Opera House."

Problems of Actual Construction

The wheels of progress began to turn, and the contracts for erecting the building were let to the various men who were seeking the work. The contract for the excavation of the property was let to Andrew Hannah of West Bay City on March 10, 1886, and by April 18 he had the first one hundred feet completed, with a portion of it ready for the masons.²⁶

The contract for the mason work was let on April 3, 1886, to a contractor named Haines, from Missouri, for the sum of \$9,000.00, a much lower sum than that for which the local masons of Bay City could do the work.²⁷ The contract called for the completion of the walls ready to receive the roof by June 1 of that year.²⁸

The building of any large structure requires the services of some very capable person to oversee the operation and make certain all aspects of the operation run smoothly. The man chosen for this position was S. McIntyre of Hannibal, Missouri.²⁹ Mr. McIntyre had previously

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Bay City Tribune, April 18, 1886.

²⁷Ibid., April 4, 1886.

²⁸Bay City Tribune, April 18, 1886.

²⁹Ibid.

superintended the building of the Academy of Music in East Saginaw, Michigan.³⁰

With all the contracts let and the plans ready, the builders of the opera house began to run into a few difficulties which brought the wheels of progress to a grinding halt. The Tribune discussed one of the problems:

Work upon the walls of Wood's opera house has been delayed by the nonarrival of stone for the ground tier. The material has been expected to reach the city every day, but the steam barge M. Sicken on which it has been loaded, has been detained. There is plenty of stone now in the excavation to go ahead with the building but Mr. Wood does not think the blocks are large enough for the base tier and hence the purchase of larger blocks.³¹

Lack of proper building materials was not the only problem to arise at this time. When the necessary stone did arrive, the contractor could not find men to work for him on his terms. When Mr. Haines came to Bay City

he wished the stone and brick masons to work ten hours and wished the masons to work the same length of time. The masons however refused to work for ten hours, agreeing to work nine hours for \$3.00 per day...³²

Evidently this particular problem brought a protest from the general public because the local newspaper referred to the delay in these terms:

There is no need of the people or press worrying over the opera house for it is to be built and it is to be the best one in this section of the state. Tis true, work has been delayed over a week, and it may be that it will be delayed a week longer, but there is no necessity for fretting about it. Great bodies move slowly and great undertakings are sometimes characterized with obstacles that loom up as work advances. We have a hole in the ground and the material is all at hand. With ready hands the

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., May 19, 1886.

³²Ibid., May 15, 1886.

walls can be put together in a hurry and the building can be completed within the specified time.³³

The plans for the house meantime had been changed a little, by Mr. Wood, to meet new requirements. The building would be 17 feet shorter, to provide for an additional gallery, and four more dressing rooms would be built on the south side of the stage, making a total of ten including those in the basement.³⁴ Constructing the building 17 feet shorter to provide an additional gallery does not seem logical but these are the changes reported. The foundation walls were to be made wider than before, and the brick walls thicker and higher.³⁵

Additional time was needed before the building could rise because Mr. Wood found that he had to take care of some pressing financial matters that needed his attention. These problems were evidently worked out because a local news reporter wrote:

The house is to be built and work is to be resumed today. Architect Wood has completed his financial arrangements and there is sufficient means at hand and in sight to pay all obligations and carry the house along to completion. All debts incurred to date have been liquidated with the exception of one or two and the money is ready for them.

Contractor Haines advertises elsewhere for masons. He will engage all Bay City masons who are willing to work ten hours, and it is his desire to confine his help to Bay City men. But if his contract calls for the completion of his part at a certain time and sufficient men can not be obtained in Bay City to do it, then it will be necessary for him to go outside of the city...³⁶

Although the financial matters had been cleared up, the problem of obtaining men to do the necessary work still plagued the project.

³³Ibid., May 21, 1886.

³⁴Ibid., May 21, 1886.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., May 22, 1886.

Mr. Haines was not long in finding a temporary solution to the problem. He and his foreman, Mr. Nordell, began the work themselves.³⁷ When interviewed by a reporter from The Tribune, Mr. Haines again stated that he was willing to hire men from Bay City, but he wanted them to work the ten-hour day.³⁸ This problem proved to be one of the most irritating the project was to face during the erection of the building.

As was mentioned earlier, Mr. Wood was very anxious that this opera house be one of the safest buildings in the city. In order to have his opera house approved and declared safe, Mr. Wood met with the Bay City Board of Building Inspectors for them to examine the plans for the theatre and suggest any changes that they deemed necessary to make the building perfectly safe and bring it within the requirements of the city ordinance relative to buildings.³⁹ The Board of Building Inspectors consisted of Harry Holmes, J. W. Shearer, Chief Engineer Harding, Alderman Kaichen, and Rose of the fire department committee.⁴⁰ Alderman Kaichen expressed his views of the proposed opera house in saying, "The building is to be a better one than the ordinance requires."⁴¹ The Bay City Tribune carried the story in its columns with this statement:

Chief Harding said he had no hesitation in saying that the means for egress in case of an alarm were the very best on any building

³⁷Ibid., May 23, 1886.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., May 26, 1886.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

in the city and he was fully satisfied with the walls and the general construction of the edifice...⁴²

This type of testimony certainly attested to the ideas and capabilities of the architect, Mr. Wood.

With the building still to be built the differences existing between the members of the mason's union and the opera house contractor, Mr. Haines, were adjusted, and the men went to work complying with the demand for a ten-hour work day.⁴³ Mr. Haines spoke of the situation in these words:

We held a meeting on Monday night and decided what we would do. Of course there was no strike, as we had not been to work before. We knew that our course in the 9-hour matter was injuring the chances for building the syndicate block and we decided it best to go to work. There are more masons than there is work, and times outside are as dull as they are here...⁴⁴

It would seem that, with this problem solved, the project could proceed without any other complication. However, the following day three union masons quit work on the opera house because they still wished to have the nine-hour work day.⁴⁵ One rather humorous aspect of the situation is that the president of the mason's union, Wm. Carney, decided that it was much better to work ten hours a day and receive a salary than to hold out for nine hours and have no work or wages.⁴⁶ Mr. Carney, happened to be the brother of a local dignitary,

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., May 27, 1886.

⁴⁶Ibid., May 28, 1886.

Justice Carney.⁴⁷ The Tribune printed this article in the May 29th edition of the paper:

Some person has been silly enough to write the justice an outrageously obscene letter regarding his brother, and making the threat that if he (the justice) does not use his influence in getting "Billy" to come out of the hole, he will be boycotted at the next election-two years hence. It is needless to say that Justice Carney does not propose to interfere with his brother's affairs, believing that "Billy" is capable of acting and thinking for himself without any of his assistance.⁴⁸

The building of the new opera house certainly did create new and different problems for the city and all concerned.

With the masons of Bay City refusing to work ten hours a day, advertisements were placed in other areas for men in order to get the project completed.⁴⁹ According to The Tribune these advertisements bore fruit and were so well answered that they had to be discontinued, with the result that there were now plenty of masons in Bay City ready to work ten hours.⁵⁰ Many of these local men belonged to the union. Thus, the long-sought solution was found, and the work commenced at a rapid rate. The Tribune, keeping the public up to date on every-day developments, stated on August 22, 1886, "The new opera house roof was completed on Thursday evening, and the ceiling has two coats of plaster which will be ready for the fresco artists on Wednesday this week."⁵¹ From this point only the normal problems of construction common to every project of this type presented themselves.

⁴⁷Ibid., May 29, 1886.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., June 2, 1886.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., August 22, 1886.

The following list comprises the entire group of persons supplying the necessary materials for construction and completion of the building:

The stone and brick work has been under the charge of W. B. Haines of Hannibal, Mo.; the carpenter work in charge of James McDonald of Chicago, assisted by Hubert Turgeon of this city, and the other work was distributed as follows: Frescoing, Spairling & Linden, 333 Wabash avenue, Chicago; scenic painting, Sossman & Landis, 236 Clinton street, Chicago under the immediate supervision of Thos. Moses; general painting and glazing, C. C. Stewart; plumbing, gas fitting and gas fixtures, Bradley & Finn; carpeting, Hawley & Fitzgerald; furniture, H. E. Cobb; stair-work and canopies, Harry Derwin; mantels and tile work, Henry Dible & Co., Chicago; Carton piece and ornamental plaster, John Poli, of Chicago, brass work, L. S. Baldwin Manufacturing Company, Chicago; plastering, Ryan Bros.; turned columns and proscenium work, J. K. Russel & Co., Chicago; sash, doors and interior finish, Matthew Lamont; carved work, T. B. Earl; chairs by Thos. Kane & Co., of Chicago; cast iron work, Smalley Bros. & Co., galvanized iron, tin work and glass, Gedney Bros.; terra cotta work, Northwestern Terra Cotta Company, Chicago; brick by Thomas Parker and Bay City brick and tile company; ornamental brick, Bay City brick and tile company; cut stone, Bay City stone company; truss rods, nails and portion of hardware, W. H. Miller; hardware trimmings, Holcomb Bros. The construction lumber was furnished by S. G. M. Gates and Ross, Bradley & Co. The principal portion of the bill stuff was furnished by Pitts & Cranage, the lath by Seth McLean, Son & Co., and the finishing lumber by the Bay City manufacturing company. The sunlight was furnished by C. C. Charles of Chicago.⁵²

The Playhouse Is Leased

The playhouse was leased for a term of four years to Messrs. Clay, Powers, and Buckley by Mr. Wood.⁵³ Earlier in the season, efforts were made by other leading managers in the state to secure the lease of the building. But Mr. Wood,

familiar with the high standing of these gentlemen with the theatrical profession, and having confidence in their ability to successfully and satisfactorily manage the house and maintain its reputation as a strictly first class theatre, gave them preference.⁵⁴

⁵²Ibid., September 17, 1886.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

With the building now almost completely finished, the city was able to quiet down to its normal routine and live day-by-day as usual. The community now had a structure of which it could be proud, a theatre which equaled or, in the eyes of many, surpassed the Academy of Music in Saginaw.

A State Theatrical Circuit

With work progressing on a grand new theatre in Bay City, the management began work to insure the patrons the finest class of entertainment. In the past it had been found that "first class" entertainments were reluctant to come into the interior of the state because of the poor treatment they received in Michigan's largest city, Detroit.⁵⁵ In order to alleviate this problem, the theatre managers of various Michigan cities banded together and formed a theatrical circuit. The Bay City Tribune mentioned an article regarding this circuit which appeared in The Muskegon News:

The Muskegon News says that preliminary steps have been taken by the managers of the theatres in Muskegon, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Bay City, East Saginaw, Adrian and Ann Arbor to form a combination for the production of shows in this state...This confederation will be of great benefit to the theatre goers of this state, especially to the people in the cities mentioned. Heretofore, it is claimed by several managers, the best attractions have been disinclined to pass through Michigan on account of unsatisfactory treatment in Detroit and the result has been that each manager has had to make bookings irrespective of any "circuit", or of Detroit, consequently some of the better companies, having but one or two stands in Michigan, avoided the state entirely.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Ibid., February 27, 1886.

⁵⁶Ibid.

It was felt that this type of arrangement would present a number of advantages. First, a company would be sure of having a series of cities to play in, with each stop only a short jump from the next. Secondly, with the managers combining and using a general agent who could act for all, they would be able to book a better class of companies.⁵⁷ Thus a confederation was to be formed "for the securing of the best class of entertainments such as have heretofore only visited Detroit."⁵⁸

On March 5, 1886, in Lansing, Michigan, the theatre managers met.⁵⁹ At this time there were five additional cities represented; Port Huron, Flint, Battle Creek, Jackson, and Coldwater.⁶⁰ The Adrian Daily Times reported:

This meeting is the result of a feeling of quite long standing, that attractions have been manipulated from Detroit to detriment of both traveling managers and managers of the theatres in the interior cities, and it is by organization that they hope to overcome the evil. Another thing is the weeding out of poor attractions and "snap" companies, ever ready to jump in and take an open date, thus overdoing the amusement business in the smaller towns...⁶¹

The person who was chosen to represent the Michigan cities in New York was C. O. White, a theatre manager from Detroit.⁶² It was felt that this individual would be the best suited for the position

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸The Saginaw Evening News, February 26, 1886.

⁵⁹The Adrian Daily Times, Vol. XXI, No. 148, March 5, 1886.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

because of his "accurate knowledge of the amusement business and his side acquaintance among actors and managers."⁶³

This action, by the combined efforts of the various theatre managers throughout Michigan, made it possible for the Bay City public to receive the best theatrical presentations available.

Opening Night Tickets and Prices

When the month of September arrived, The Tribune carried an article regarding tickets for the first production:

The sale of seats for opening new opera house, for bonus subscribers only, at council chamber Saturday evening at 8. For the benefit of those who do not understand the prices and arrangements, the citizens committee undertook to raise \$15,000 bonus and succeeded in raising less than \$14,000. If the \$15,000 were raised the citizens committee were entitled to the opening. Not raising this amount they decided to turn over the notes to Mr. Wood; also waived the opening in his favor. The opening attraction costs \$1,000, the souvenir programs \$400, other expenses \$300, making with the \$1,000, less the required bonus, nearly \$3,000. Under the circumstances the seats are as reasonable as can be expected. Reserved seats, parquette and parquette circle, \$5.00; balcony, \$3.00.⁶⁴

The opening of the new opera house was looked upon as one of the most important events in the history of the city. The attraction booked for opening night was Emma Abbott in the opera Mignon.⁶⁵ The official date for opening was Friday evening, September 17, 1886.⁶⁶

Because the prices of tickets for the opening night were set at such high rates, the managers of the opera house and Mr. Wood began

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴The Bay City Tribune, September 3, 1886.

⁶⁵Ibid., September 5, 1886.

⁶⁶Ibid.

negotiations with the Emma Abbott company to cancel an engagement elsewhere for Saturday night and provide entertainment for the public of Bay City for two nights rather than one.⁶⁷ This action was successfully completed, and the managers happily announced that the Emma Abbott company would appear Friday and Saturday nights.⁶⁸

The next action to be taken was lowering the price of the tickets. It was decided that those persons who had purchased tickets for five dollars would be able to use that ticket for both performances.⁶⁹ The Bay City Tribune explained that the ticket prices would now be as follows:

For the first night the parquette and parquette circle, \$3.00; balcony, \$2.00.

Prices for Saturday night, parquette and parquette circle \$2.00; balcony \$1.50.

Loges seating four, first night, \$15.00,

Private boxes seating six, first night, \$25.00

Loges for second night, \$12.00.

Boxes for second night, \$20.00

Matinee prices: Reserved seats, \$1.00;

Admission, 75 and 50 cents.⁷⁰

The pieces to be performed by Emma Abbott and her company were Mignon at the Friday evening opening, The Bohemian Girl at the Saturday matinee, and Faust at the Saturday evening performance.⁷¹ A gift was presented to each lady attending the theatre on Friday evening, an "elegant souvenir program costing the management \$1.00 each."⁷²

⁶⁷Ibid., September 10, 1886.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.



A letter to the citizens of Bay City from Mr. Wood indicated that, although the opening of the opera house was to go on as scheduled, there were still a few minor details of completion to be taken care of:

As important and urgent business demands my presence in Chicago on Saturday, and I shall be deprived of the privilege of expressing to you in person my regret that the entrance to the opera house and some few minor points in the interior are not thoroughly finished, I take this means of asking your indulgence and of returning thanks for the many kind expressions of interest during the progress of the work and trust that my efforts to please you have fulfilled your expectations.⁷³

The general public was made aware of these minor problems, and some apprehension arose concerning the possibility of opening the theatre on schedule. It was found impossible to get the parquette chairs in position in time for the opening. However others were substituted hurriedly and answered the purpose satisfactorily.⁷⁴

Opening Night

The Tribune painted a very colorful picture of the first night opening:

Early in the evening a crowd congregated on Washington avenue and Sixth street to glance in the windows and obtain a view of the beautiful ceiling, walls and proscenium, or watch the people who passed into the theatre.

The entrance was brightly illuminated and a matting laid from street to foyer made it sufficiently acceptable as a walk.

In the foyer and at the head of the balcony stairway was a coterie of ushers in full dress who noiselessly and speedily escorted the guests to their respective seats as though they had filled the same appointment in Wood's play house a score of times. The chief usher was Henry A. Lewis. He was assisted by A. R. Baker, John Crawford, D. Jackson, Harry Harland, Lew Waters, Chas. Rose, Will Keith and Adolph Osier, all of whom are prominent young men of the city.

⁷³Ibid., September 17, 1886.

⁷⁴Ibid., September 18, 1886.

The ladies and gentlemen's retiring rooms were each in charge of an attendant, and everything that could be done to make it pleasant and agreeable for those present was done.

The audience was a very fashionable one, many of the gentlemen and ladies being in full dress.

Expressions of astonishment were heard on every hand at the state of completeness of the house and, judging from the words of admiration and commendation heard, the audience was agreeably surprised at the general beauty, practicability and metropolitan features of the theatre.⁷⁵

Expressions of Praise and Further Description

Praise of the new opera house came from many sources, each one complimenting the house and its facilities. Emma Abbott, who opened the new theatre, called it "a perfect daisy. It is the prettiest I have played in this season."⁷⁶ Judge Birney, a prominent citizen and ex-minister to the Hague, pronounced Wood's opera house superior to many theatres in London.⁷⁷ The Bay City Tribune published an article relating to the general public all the wonderful aspects of the structure:

Bay City has now an opera house which in capacity, elegance of finish, convenience of access, size of stage and completeness of appointments, is entirely worthy of its name and ambition. Wood's Opera House is an institution such as this city has long coveted. Amusements hereafter will be a pleasure and the facilities for presenting them a pride to our citizens. The ventilation of the house is most excellent, the acoustic effects are perfect, and the mode of ingress and egress of such a character as to remove the fear which haunted the audiences and detracted from their enjoyment in the old opera house. The new opera house is clean, elegant and convenient, safe and attractive, an evidence of the city's progress toward metropolitanism. The citizens have encouraged and helped its construction...⁷⁸

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., September 22, 1886.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid., September 21, 1886.

To describe further the grand opening, the newspaper added in a later article:

The opera house has a frontage of sixty-nine feet on Washington avenue and a depth of 180 feet on Sixth, occupying the south-east corner. On either side of the vestibule and entrance is a store 20 x 61 feet. Opening from the vestibule are two double doors twelve feet in width, which lead to the entrance and into a handsome foyer, beautifully decorated overhead, and illuminated by an elegant brass chandelier. On the north side of the foyer is a gentlemen's retiring room, with a front of Moorish fretwork, turned columns and carved capitals, and on the south, a similar room for ladies. These rooms have cosy fire places, mahogany mantles, with tile hearths and facings. A toilet room is located west of each room.⁷⁹

Wood's Opera House was pictured as being a very beautiful and wonderful theatre, filled with color and grandeur. The auditorium, according to the same article, was 66 x 85 feet in size and contained a parquet and parquette circle on the first floor, balcony and balcony circle, on the second, and gallery on the third.

Other seating arrangements were as follows:

In the rear of the parquette and in front of the parquette circle railing, are nine loges, or Parisian boxes, the seating capacity of each being four persons.

On either side of the parquette, in full view of the stage, is a Moorish pagoda box, the seating capacity being six persons each.⁸⁰

Although the size of the stage had been discussed in reporting the plans for the theatre, The Bay City Tribune again stated the dimensions, which appear to have been altered somewhat from the original designs:

The stage is 66 feet wide and 40 feet deep, with a height to the loft of 60 feet.

⁷⁹Ibid., September 17, 1886.

⁸⁰Ibid.

On the stage floor are a green room, three dressing and property rooms. Above these are five other dressing rooms. There will also be two dressing rooms in the basement, designed especially for minstrel artists. When the scenic work is completed the stage will be as thoroughly equipped with scenery and stage machinery as any theatre in the west. The limited amount of time for doing the work prevented the painting of the principal drop curtain here, making it necessary to open the house with only the drapery or act drop. The work will not be crowded so as to injure its character, but will be completed as rapidly as possible consistent with good work.⁸¹

The theatre was so designed that every seat in the house was a good one. The lines of vision throughout the house provided "the entire auditorium a clear and unobstructed view of the stage."⁸²

From the description of the chairs provided for the audience, it appears that attending a play was a very pleasant and comfortable event:

The chairs in the parquette are the celebrated Thos. Kane & Co.'s No 6; mahogany back with tortion joint, the back being upholstered in Hosvell's Best embossed leather; the seat upholstered in plain leather.

The parquette circle and first three rows in the balcony are seated with the same chair with the exception of the upholstered seat.

The remainder of balcony and balcony circle is seated with a similar chair, not upholstered.

The gallery has comfortable benches. [Figure 2]

The seating capacity will be as follows:

Parquette, 211; parquette circle, 200; balcony circle, 225; gallery, 500; boxes and loges, 48; other seating room, 200; total, 1,536.⁸³

The individuals who were fortunate enough to be part of the opening night audience were treated to quite a sight. The decoration of Wood's Opera House was described as follows:

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

The decorations are all in fresco in shades of old gold, terra cotta and old blue; a large amount of relief work being used which is finished in shades of bronze. [Figure 3]

A succession of Moorish arches gradually increasing in size from the proscenium opening and supported by large turned columns with carved capitals give a very artistic, original and pleasing effect. The proscenium boxes are quite novel and the canopies are very handsome. On the top of each canopy is an elegant standard light with five clusters of candles of four lights each.

The rails of the boxes are surmounted with handsome brass posts and rails. [Figure 4] The same are used on the loges. The balcony rail has brass posts and rail, and a Moorish fret-work of polished brass between the posts. The gas fixtures are Moorish in character and were designed expressly for this house by Michell, Vance & Co., of New York.

The main ceiling is divided into six deep recessed panels and the chords dividing the panels are filled with heavy relief work in carton piere. [Figure 5]

The carpets are in Moorish design of body brussels. The draperies are in the same design in silk turcoman, harmonizing with the decorations.⁸⁴

This concluded the description furnished by contemporary sources, of the playhouse decorations. Additional information was provided regarding the exits, entrances, box office, heating, and fire walls:

From the first floor there are five exits, two on either side of the building each six feet in width, and one leading to the entrance, twelve feet wide, making an opening space of thirty-two feet.

From the foyer two stairways, each five feet in width, ascend to the balcony and balcony circle.

The entrance to the gallery is from the right side of the main entrance by a stairway which leads to a hall back to the gallery. On the left side is a stairway leading to the club room and this, in connection with the other, are to be used for exits from the gallery.

The ticket office for parquette and balcony will be located on the right side of the main entrance under the gallery staircase as will also be the main office. On the left side in a similar location will be the check room.

The gallery ticket office will be at the head of the gallery stairs.

There will be a door leading from the main entrance to each store.

The house will be heated by the under floor steam heating system.

⁸⁴Ibid.



Fig. 2 - Gallery Benches

(These are located in the Washington Theatre, the rebuilt Wood's Opera House, and from the original description on page 55, these seem to be the same as in the original house.)



Fig. 3 - Bronze Relief Work



JUL

Fig. 4 - Area of Original Box Seats



JUL



JUL

Fig. 5 - The main Ceiling and Decoration

The stage is shut in by a fire wall from the auditorium and a similar wall separates the auditorium from the club, assembly rooms and stores. In case of fire an iron curtain will be lowered from the stage loft.⁸⁵

Plays and Players

The next attraction to come to Wood's Opera House, following Emma Abbott, was an event that caused almost as much excitement as the actual opening. The managers had been fortunate enough to engage the talents of none other than the famous actor Mr. Edwin Booth.⁸⁶ Mr. Booth played in the opera house on Monday, September 20, 1886, in the role of Hamlet.⁸⁷ Booth referred to the Opera House as "one of the finest in the country," and Arthur B. Chase, his agent, said, "Well I would like to have it in New York City."⁸⁸

The Bay City audience was aware of the wonderful reviews Booth had received for his performance as Hamlet, and it was anxious to witness this excellent actor and his brilliant production. What the audience saw when it attended the production was not exactly what it had expected. A representative of The Tribune reviewed the play and had this to say about the actor and his effect upon the audience:

One of the best audiences that this city can produce was present in the new opera house last night, and warmly greeted the great actor when the curtain ascended upon the scene in which the Melancholy Dane first appears. The first sight was something of disappointment to the younger people, who had never seen him, and to some of the older ones he did not seem like the actor of ten

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., September 19, 1886.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid., September 22, 1886.

or fifteen years ago. He is aging as well as the rest of the world, the classic outline of features is gone, and in his make up the art of disguising wrinkles and gray hairs was not applied to a great extent.⁸⁹

The audience was not long in forgetting that first impression because, although Edwin Booth showed the marks of age, his portrayal of the leading character quickly took hold of the audience and held it up to the final curtain.⁹⁰ His performance that evening was

regarded as a dramatic effort of the highest order, and as now presented is clothed in a repose and dignity which enobles rather than detracts from its effect upon the mind of the auditor.⁹¹

The audience was reported to be

highly appreciative and liberal in the bestowal of applause, and three times insisted upon an appearance before the curtain...

The audience was not only representative but large in point of numbers, showing that Bay City appreciates real dramatic merit.⁹²

The prices of admission charged for Hamlet were: loges seating four, \$12.00; boxes seating six, \$18.00; first floor seats, \$2.50; balcony, three rows front, \$2.50; balance of the balcony, \$2.00; admission to the balcony, \$1.50; and gallery, 75¢.⁹³

As the season continued, the next well-known star to visit Bay City was James O'Neil in Monte Cristo.⁹⁴ His performance was well received by the audience and the reviewer from The Bay City Tribune.

⁸⁹Ibid., September 21, 1886.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Ibid., September 18, 1886.

⁹⁴Ibid., October 22, 1886.

James O'Neil made his first appearance before an Bay City audience last evening as Edmund Dantes in Monte Cristo. The play has been given before in Bay City, but no such representation as that given by Mr. O'Neil and Company. There was an enthusiastic audience, large in point of number, and each scene was greeted with great favor....

Monte-Cristo, the leading role, is ably taken by Mr. O'Neil. He is vigorous and impressive, and has that magnetism that draws one to him as a hero, although there is no genuine heroism in the character.⁹⁵

Examples of other attractions playing on the boards of Wood's Opera House during its initial season were: The Tavenier Dramatic Co., with Ida Van Cortland, in The Mighty Dollar; W. H. Power's Co. in The Ivy Leaf; Wilson Barret and Henry A. Jones in Hoodman Blind; John A. Stevens in A Great Wrong Righted; and the McNish, Johnson and Slavin's Refined Minstrels.⁹⁶ Manager Buckley discovered that the people of Bay City were particularly fond of minstrels. In a conversation with Tribune reporters, he made this statement:

I never saw the people take such of a hold of a minstrel show as they did last night. I tell you it was a deadly grip. Why, do you know that we sold \$412.00 worth of tickets before the doors opened?

I tell you if I had a few more shows like that I believe I'd start another daily paper in Bay City.⁹⁷

These were the words of a happy theatrical manager, not to mention a fine tribute to the minstrels of McNish, Johnson and Slavin.⁹⁸

Fanny Davenport appeared in Bay City in productions of Fedora and London Assurance. The newspaper review stated that

⁹⁵Ibid., October 26, 1886.

⁹⁶Ibid., January 4, 7, 15, 28; February 6, 1887.

⁹⁷Ibid., February 11, 1887.

⁹⁸Ibid.

Fanny Davenport is known and admired as an actress by a large number of people in this city and since her appearance here three years ago they have heard with satisfaction of her great success in Fedora, and last night they filled the opera house with one of the largest audiences of representative society people it has ever held. They were not disappointed, for they saw a play of the strongest dramatic effect and the character embodying its interest and intensity, portrayed with a power and fidelity which thrilled and excited them. Stolid must be the nature which is not moved by the acting of Fanny Davenport in Fedora...⁹⁹

Another production which brought forth praise from the local reviews was the performance of Fantasma. Advertisements in The Tribune billed it as "The Original and World-Famous Hanlons in the Grand Fairy Spectacular Fantasma 2 Special Cars of Magnificent Scenery 4 Gorgeous Transformation scenes."¹⁰⁰

The performance of Fantasma brought forth this description of the production in The Tribune:

The scenic tableaux in the historical representation of the Arctic explorations are most elaborate and possess a high degree of interest. The groups in tableaux upon the revolving stage in the second act, shown under colored lights are very beautiful and so artistic that one would never tire of seeing them repeated...One of the greatest features of the illusion is the vanishing lady. It is a mystery no one can guess how and where she goes.¹⁰¹

The type of entertainment that was presented to the public seemed to be of a finer quality each season. The Tribune reported the following:

Realism on the stage is getting to be one of the important features in successful dramatic productions of the day, and it would seem the limit had been reached for novelty in that line.

⁹⁹Ibid., November 30, 1886.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., December 12, 1886.

¹⁰¹Ibid., December 18, 1886.

The latest bit of realistic production, and one which is even more sensational and striking than any yet seen, is the introduction of the Carlton Iron Works, the largest iron mine in the world, in full blast. A realistic representation is given of the vast furnace, the stage being darkened, and the effect is weirdly picturesque. From the tall chimneys volumes of dense smoke pour forth with a roar, and when the big doors of the furnace are opened the fiery flames shoot out with dazzling brilliancy [sic]- huge sheets of blueish, gaseous fire, which lights up the faces of the workmen and forms a realistic scene...¹⁰²

To illustrate further the various scenic representations presented at Wood's Opera House, the newspaper speaks of the performance of the play, The Pay Train:

"The Pay Train",...Will be produced... on Saturday March 19 ...The most phenomenal of all is the railroad effect, a full train of cars dashes across the stage at full speed, and is uncoupled in full view of the audience; the pay car is immediately light up, showing the action in the car. The company carried a full electric dynamo for the purpose.¹⁰³

This is one type of production the people of Bay City were able to witness in their new opera house. The following is a representative sampling of the dates, plays and players appearing at Wood's Opera House in the first few years:

Sept. 20, 1886: Hamlet, Edwin Booth
 Sept. 25, 1886: The Magistrate, John T. Raymond
 Sept. 28, 1886: The Long Strike, J. C. Padget & Miss Emily Fairchild
 Sept. 29, 1886: May Blossom, Benjamin Maginley
 Oct. 6, 1886: Pa, Sol. Smith Russel
 Oct. 7, 1886: The Silver King
 Oct. 11, 1886: La Mascotte, Starr's Comic Opera Co.
 Oct. 18, 1886: The Private Secretary, Madison Square Theatre Co.

¹⁰²Ibid., November 25, 1891.

¹⁰³Ibid., March 13, 1892.

- Oct. 25-26, 1886: Monte Cristo, Jas. O'Neil
- Oct. 27-28, 1886: Muggs' Landing, Miss Frances Bishop, Mr. Alfred McDowell
- Oct. 30, 1886: Faust and Margurite, Celia Alsberb & Lewis Morrison
- Nov. 4, 1886: Ox-Y-Gin, Lillie Hall's Burlesque Co., & Fannie Bloodgood's Comedy Co.
- Nov. 11, 1886: Clio, Mile. Adele Cornalba & John L. Burleigh
- Nov. 13, 1886: Falka & Black Hussar, The McCaull Opera Comique Co.
- Nov. 20, 1886: Meg Merrilies, Janauschek
- Nov. 25, 1886: The Shadow Detective or Leonie the Waif, Daniel A. Kelly
- Nov. 29, 1886: Fedora & London Assurance, Fanny Davenport
- Dec. 3-4, 1886: The Wages of Sin, Charles C. Maubury's Co.
- Dec. 10, 1886: Vim, Neil Burgess
- Dec. 15-16, 1886: A Brave Woman, J. M. Hardie
- Dec. 17-18, 1886: Fantasma
- Dec. 27, 1886: Nancy & Co., Arthur Rehan's Company
- Dec. 31, 1886: Caprice, Minnie Maddern
- Jan. 1, 1887: Queena & Nobody's Daughter, Ida Van Cortland
- Jan. 4, 1887: The Mighty Dollar, The Private Secretary, Forget-Me-Not, Engaged, Romance of a Poor Young Man, The Tavenier Dramatic Co., Ida Van Cortland
- Jan. 13-14, 1887: The Ivy Leaf, W. H. Power's Co.
- Jan. 19, 1887: Hoodman Blind, Wilson Barrett & Henry A. Jones
- Jan. 27, 1887: Damon & Pythias, Geo. C. Miln & Wm. R. Clifton
- Feb. 7, 1887: Forgiven, Frederic Bryton
- Feb. 16-17, 1887: Fogg's Ferry & Sea Sands, Lizzie Evans
- Feb. 22, 1887: Kerry Gow, Joseph Murphy
- Feb. 26, 1887: The New Magdalen & Led Astray, Pauline Markhan & Randolph Murray

- Mar. 10, 1887: Rienzie, Lawrence Barrett
- Mar. 15, 1887: Pat's Wardrobe, Pat Rooney & Miss Katie Rooney
- Mar. 18, 1887: Maggie the Midget, Maggie Mitchell
- Mar. 29, 1887: The Planter's Wife, Harry Lacy, Edna Carey
- Apr. 4, 1887: Mixed Pickles, J. B. Polk
- Apr. 5, 1887: Two Johns, J. C. Stewart's Comedy Co.
- Apr. 7, 1887: Gilmore The Great and his Wonderful Band
- Apr. 11, 1887: Our Irish Visitors, Murray and Murphy
- May 6, 1887: Farewell Tour of the Champion of All Champions, John L. Sullivan
- May 16, 1887: The New Mascotte, Olivette, Mikado, Chimes of Normandy, Golden Goose, Golden's Grand Laughing Night, The Golden Opera Co., with Richard Golden
- May 30, 1887: The Hidden Hand, Fifth Avenue Theatre Co.
- Sept. 24, 1887: Monte Cristo, Mr. Aiden Benedict
- Oct. 4, 1887: Alone In London or A Woman Against the World, Cora Tanner
- Oct. 17, 1887: Only A Farmer's Daughter, Marion Abbott
- Oct. 22, 1887: Human Nature, Richard O'Gorman
- Oct. 25, 1887: Black Hussar, The Dunlap Opera Co.
- Oct. 26, 1887: Love in Harness, Arthur Rehan's Co.
- Dec. 7, 1887: Shamus Obrien, Chas. Erin Verner
- Dec. 20, 1887: A Great Wrong, J. B. Studley
- Dec. 31, 1887: The Highest Bidder, E. H. Sothern
- Jan. 2-3, 1887: The Still Alarm, Harry Lacy
- Jan. 4, 1888: Mary Stuart, Modjeska
- Jan. 7, 1888: Married, Not Mated, Agnes Herdon
- Jan. 17, 1888: Renee De Moray, Clara Morris
- Jan. 27-28, 1888: Only A Woman's Heart, Helen Blythe

Feb. 24, 1888: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Richard Mansfield
 Mar. 8, 1888: In Spite of All, Miss Maddern
 Apr. 4, 1888: Our Angle, Lizzie Evans
 Apr. 11, 1888: Over the Garden Wall, George S. Knight
 Apr. 14, 1888: Si Perkins, Frank Jones
 May 4, 1888: Julius Caesar, Edwin Booth & Lawrence Barrett
 Oct. 30, 1888: La Tosca, Fanny Davenport
 Jan. 7-8, 1888: Spartacus, the Gladiator, Robert Downing
 Jan. 23, 1889: Caprice, Minnie Maddern
 Jan. 28, 1889: Monte Cristo, O'Neill
 May 16, 1889: Jane Eyre, Charlotte Thompson
 Apr. 4, 1893: Fontenelle, James O'Neill
 Nov. 3, 1894: Sousa's Peerless Band, John Philip Sousa¹⁰⁴

It is apparent from this list that Bay City audiences were able to witness many of the greatest stars and attractions of the late 19th Century American theatre.

Tickets and Services

In order to make the obtaining of tickets an easy task, Manager Buckley contrived the idea of making up miniature diagrams of the seats in the opera house.¹⁰⁵ These were furnished to the patrons of the theatre and made it much more convenient for these people to secure seats by telephone. All that needed be done was to call the theatre

¹⁰⁴Ibid., The above plays and players' names are found in newspaper advertisements preceding the performance.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., December 7, 1886.

and designate the seats desired, and they would be reserved for the party.¹⁰⁶ These miniature diagrams were to be presented to the patrons about January 1, 1887. On the back of the diagram were rules and procedures for the purchasing of tickets:

All reserved seats sold at opera house box office, and unless otherwise advertised, will be three days in advance. Hours from 9 a.m. to 12 a.m., and 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Seats may be secured by responsible parties by telephone to the opera house, No. 1010, and if not called for, the party will be held for the amount.¹⁰⁷

To learn the price of the seats, the patrons were to consult the advertisements in the daily papers. If the advertisements stated that the price of seats was to be as usual, then reserved seats were seventy-five cents.¹⁰⁸ Tickets for seats in the loges also had specific prices:

Loges seating four persons, sold in advance. Parties wishing single seats in loges can secure them at the box office, night of the entertainment, at 25 cents in advance of reserved seat price, unless otherwise advertised.

By special arrangements parties can have five seats in a loge. The name of the parties purchasing loges will be placed on the loge ticket and coupon.¹⁰⁹

The hours at which the theatre doors would open were also posted on the back of the miniature diagrams. The doors opened at 7:15 p.m., and the curtain was scheduled to go up at 8 p.m., standard time.¹¹⁰

One stipulation was made regarding the securing of seats. There

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., December 30, 1886.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

would be "Positively no seats exchanged or money refunded."¹¹¹

The managers of Wood's Opera House attempted to do all that was possible to make attending the theatre a pleasant experience for the opera house patron. If anyone needed to order a carriage, or attend to any urgent business during a performance, he was permitted the use of the house telephone.¹¹²

In addition to the above services, if, upon entering the theatre, the city physicians would register their names and seats with the treasurer of the house, they would be notified of any telephone or other calls during the play.

To add to his convenience, the theatre-goer was able to have his coat, umbrella, or wraps and other goods checked at the check room in the main entrance.

All these services were provided for the well being and convenience of the customer. Bay City had now one of the best theatres in the state, and in order to be successful it needed an audience. A Tribune reporter, in writing about the new opera house, expressed the importance of financial success in these words:

Now it would seem that the proper thing for all classes to do, within their means, is to unite in helping to sustain it in a manner that will prove that it was good business judgment and not local pride and jealousy which led to extending the encouragement and aid which were instrumental in securing it....¹¹³

Dissatisfaction with Ticket Prices

The city, its newspaper, and its people were justly proud of their

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Ibid., September 21, 1886.

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new building. They were interested in the attractions presented within it and also the prices charged for admission. The public's dissatisfaction toward ticket prices was brought to attention in the following article:

The subject of prices charged for admission to Robson & Crane, has caused a great deal of comment in Bay City during the past two days and the above question has been asked The Tribune very often, the charge being made that seats at the Bay City Grand were 25 cents higher than the prices charged in East Saginaw.¹¹⁴

The Tribune did some research on the subject and was able to arrive at some very interesting conclusions. Facts soon made it quite clear that the citizens of Bay City had very little or nothing to complain about. It was discovered that theatres in other Michigan cities were charging more money for admission than locally.

In Kalamazoo the prices of admission, reserved seats in the parquette, were \$1.25 and seats in other parts of the house on the same bases, according to location.

In Flint the prices advertised in the evening Journal, were as follows: "Prices of admission \$1.00, 75¢ and 50¢. Reserved seats, parquette and 2 row parquette circle \$1.25. Reserved seats any other part of the house, \$1.00."

In East Saginaw, in the Courier Herald, the prices were advertised as follows: "Parquette, \$1.00, seats in boxes and loges, \$1.25; balcony circle, \$1.00; balcony back of posts, 75¢; gallery, 50¢.

In Bay City the prices were advertised as follows: "Prices - Parquette, \$1.25; parquette circle and front in balcony, \$1.00; admission 50 75 cents; loges, seating four persons, \$5.00; boxes, seating six persons, \$7.50."¹¹⁵

From this investigation, it was found that the only difference in prices was twenty-five cents. When this was brought to the attention of Manager Buckley, he replied that

¹¹⁴Ibid., May 13, 1887.

¹¹⁵Ibid.

in the East Saginaw house the parquette was not divided. There was no circle, but the entire space was counted as a parquette.

The lower part of the Bay City house is divided into parquette and parquette circle.

The price for the gallery in both places was 50 cents the first night and second, only 25 cents, a reduction having been made.¹¹⁶

This information did not quiet the persons who were complaining about the price of admission. The newspaper took up the battle and attempted to persuade the theatre companies to think about their rates:

While the Tribune does not want to dictate to anyone the manner in which to conduct his business on the prices charged for his wares, it believes that Robson & Crane ask too high a price of the public to see their performance.¹¹⁷

It was the opinion of the paper that although the players must carry all their own scenery, at great expense, their performance did not warrant the high rates of admission. The Tribune felt that if the company reduced its rates while playing in the city, it would draw larger houses and give greater satisfaction all around. Whatever the solution to this problem was is not known, as further mention in relation to it was not reported.

The Hated Advertising Curtain

With the problem of ticket prices barely out of the picture, the next item which aroused the anger of the public was an advertising curtain which made its appearance during the run of one company at Wood's Opera House. It seems that the various individuals who helped Wood's Opera House grow to completion felt it quite unnecessary for this type of thing to occur in their theatre. The event was reported in these words:

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

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Contrary to the wishes of the Bay City public and especially those who contributed to the opera house fund, the management of the theatre deemed it proper to ring down an advertising dodge in the shape of a curtain during performance the past week. It is a noticeable fact that this curtain, which, it was understood would not be thrust upon the public, has not been rung down until the cheap show arrived. This has a tendency to show that the feelings of cheap show audiences and those that attend performances when larger rates are charged, are different, and that the former must submit to gazing upon an advertising scheme when others are not. The advertising opera house curtain is an emblem of backwoods houses, and dance halls, and Bay City's theatre does not deserve to be classed with them.¹¹⁸

Three days later, The Tribune published two articles taken from Detroit papers regarding this advertising curtain:

Detroit News: A drop curtain plastered with advertisements is among the things Bay City theatre goers kick at, but none of them have yet been able to reach it. They evidently do not realize what an interesting pioneer the curtain will become in a few years when most of the firms upon it will have gone out of business.

Detroit Free Press: Bay City has a very pretty theatre, but when the advertising drop curtain falls after every act it drives the male portion of the audience to drink. Of course the ladies have to be content with the odor of cloves. Bay City should pattern after that model play house at East Saginaw, the academy of music, and discard the advertising curtain, which is the emblem of backwoods houses, dance halls, and the like.¹¹⁹

Nothing more regarding the advertising curtain can be found in the daily paper. Possibly this "ribbing" by the "big city" papers caused the disappearance of the curtain. The reference to Bay City following the example set by East Saginaw may have brought an end to the curtain because East Saginaw was looked upon with distaste by the people of Bay City. What actually happened to the curtain is not known, but it was never mentioned again.

¹¹⁸Ibid., June 5, 1887.

¹¹⁹Ibid., June 8, 1887.

Audience Behavior

The audiences of Wood's Opera House were not without the small grievences which seem to be found in every theatre in the country. Small numbers in the audience were conducting themselves in a manner which was not acceptable by the general audience. These trouble spots were brought forth for all to see:

The high hat still clouds the view at the theatres. Bay City is no exception to this rule and everyone who will stand at the entrance of the Grand and look over the audience will be astonished to see how high hats adorn the heads of the ladies. It is a misery indeed to be seated behind one of these monstrosities.¹²⁰

The hat was not the only nuisance found at the Opera House. The theatre was attended by the young as well as the old, and the former tended to create some little disturbance:

Another theatre nuisance is the young man "with his best girl," who insists on talking to her throughout the performance, to the great annoyance of all in their vicinity. But the greatest nuisance of all is the mother who takes a child of anywhere from six months to five years of age to the theatre. It is delightful for the audience, during some thrilling or pathetic scene, when everyone's attention is fixed on the stage, to hear the youngster exercise its lungs in a manner that proves beyond doubt that they are not weak in the slightest degree.¹²¹

To add to the list of high hats, young men and their ladies, and crying children, reference was also made to tobacco. An article appeared in The Tribune stating that Bay City had very fine audiences, and one would not be able to find one more orderly, appreciative, or better behaved in the theatre circuit. However, it added that

we are called upon at nearly every performance to call the attention of some one to the rule forbidding the use of tobacco in the

¹²⁰Ibid., September 15, 1887.

¹²¹Ibid.

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Theatre...If any gentleman is so addicted to the use of tobacco that he must use it during the performance, he will be supplied with a cuspidor on application to the usher...¹²²

It is interesting to note that some of the theatre-goers were becoming annoyed with certain groups of individuals in the audience.

Said a gentleman yesterday: I wish you would say in the paper that the patrons of the opera house consider the behavior of some persons in the gallery as very offensive. Whistling and loud talking should be prohibited. There is a proper way to applaud, but it is not by whistling. If the management would yank some of the rowdies out into the street, we would appreciate his efforts to abate the nuisance.¹²³

Further discussion of these matters does not appear in the local newspaper of the time. It is assumed that these matters were taken care of in due time, and those who felt it necessary to bring such matters to the attention of the public were apparently no longer vexed by the situation.

Promotional Ideas

Although we associate "give-away" promotional ideas with the modern motion picture house, this type of activity was employed in the legitimate theatre of the late 1800's. On June 11, 1887, an advertisement appeared in the local paper stating that the Lyceum Theatre Company, with Marie Brainard and S. S. Simpson starring in Pearl of Savoy, Two Orphans, and many other plays, was coming to Bay City and would be in town one week beginning Monday, June 13.¹²⁴ At the bottom of the advertisement appeared this notice:

¹²²Ibid., November 27, 1887.

¹²³Ibid., November 13, 1886.

¹²⁴Ibid., June 11, 1887.

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Saturday night a solid silver tea set will be presented to the party holding the lucky number. The set will be on exhibition in the show window of Wood's jewelry store, from whom it was purchased, and the name of the party drawing same will be engraved on each piece without charge.¹²⁵

The Star Theatre Company, arriving in town on Monday, August 8, had attached at the bottom of their advertisement this short notice; "A fine gold watch will be presented to the purchasers of tickets during the week."¹²⁶ Reference was again made to the free gift to the audience in a later advertisement which stated that

On Wednesday evening...will give away a beautiful set of dishes and on Saturday evening at the closing performance a bed room suite to the holder of the lucky ticket, who must be in the house when the prize is drawn...¹²⁷

As an additional advertising feature, for the performance of Fantasma, Manager Buckley offered a prize of a five dollar gold piece, to be presented at the matinee performance, to the person who was able to compose the greatest number of English words out of the letters spelling the name of the play.¹²⁸ The answers were to be turned in to Mr. Buckley before Friday, December 17. Further research was unable to disclose who the winner of this prize was.

This type of inducement was not prominently in evidence but these few examples illustrate the existence of the practice.

¹²⁵Ibid., June 12, 1887.

¹²⁶Ibid., August 7, 1887.

¹²⁷Ibid., May 14, 1893.

¹²⁸Ibid., December 12, 1886.

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Theatre On Sunday

Although manager Buckley was well liked by the people of Bay City, he was not always able to do as he wished as manager of the theatre. This fact was brought home in an article discussing the possibility of a Sunday performance at Wood's Opera House:

Manager Buckley said yesterday that the announcement made in the Opera house Wed. that the Wilbue Opera Co. would render Ermince Sunday night was all right and that the entertainment would be given. It is possible that in this instance Mr. Buckley is mistaken. There is an ordinance in this city against Sunday theatrical entertainments and the officers will see that it is enforced. Just as soon as the performance is advertised steps will be taken to punish those taking part in it...The penalty for a violation of the statute referred to as a fine and imprisonment not to exceed sixty days.¹²⁹

These were words and a stern warning to anyone who would dare present a play on Sunday. The warning was apparently taken, for this presentation did not make its appearance as stated.

Amateur Theatricals

With stage shows and well-know players appearing in Bay City, the local citizens began to show some evidence of wanting to produce and act in productions of their own. Very little is found regarding the existence of amateur theatricals in the community at this time, but this one article did appear:

A number of the amateur actors in the city with a number of semi-professionals from Bay City have engaged Harmonia hall and are practicing for a new drama, half tragedy, half comedy, which they will soon have ready to put on the boards for the benefit of the local public...This will be quite an addition to the reputation of this city and it is hoped that the enterprise will prove a success...¹³⁰

¹²⁹Ibid., January 31, 1890.

¹³⁰Ibid., May 8, 1889.

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Additional interest in theatre was displayed by individuals who were considering the possibility of a theatre in Bay City with attractions at popular prices:

A number of Bay Cityans are discussing the advisability of providing the city with a popular priced theatre. The promoters have been interested spectators at the casino at Wenona beach during the summer and have come to the conclusion that if the attractions there suffice to draw large crowds similar attractions in a city theatre would bring as liberal patronage. It is not the intention to have a theatre in operation during the summer, but to start it soon after the beach season closes and run throughout the winter, securing first-class attractions and offering them to the public at popular prices...There is no doubt such a theatre would yield good profits, and the gentlemen interested are well aware of this. There is plenty of capital in sight for the enterprise should it be decided to embark in it.¹³¹

Just what progress was made in this direction was not mentioned. Nothing more regarding the venture was printed in the columns of the newspaper.

Opera House Managers

From the time that Wood's Opera House was built, Mr. Buckley was manager. He apparently did a very fine job and was well liked by the general public for his services and excellent performance of his duties.

Upon his death, he was replaced by A. E. Davidson.¹³² Mr. Davidson had under him a person named Walter who served as stage carpenter and later as stage manager.¹³³ Frederick P. Walter became manager of the theatre, and he was followed by a person named Daunt.¹³⁴ Exactly

¹³¹Ibid., August 29, 1901.

¹³²Ibid., May 28, 1893.

¹³³Bay City and Essexville Directory, (R. L. Polk & Co., Publishers, Detroit, Mich., 1890), p. 392.

¹³⁴The Bay City Tribune, August 29, 1902.

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when these changes took place the writer was unable to determine. These were the people who were responsible for the successful running of the only theatre in Bay City in the late 19th Century.

The End Of An Era

"Opera House In Ruins!"¹³⁵ This was the headline of the article covering the fire which brought to an end the most beautiful theatre Bay City was to know. On August 28, 1902, fire destroyed the structure which had become so much a part of the life of the city. The Tribune, along with a sketch of the disaster, described the catastrophe:

Bay City's handsome opera house is this morning a mass of smouldering ruins. Fire swept through the big building shortly after midnight and completely gutted the structure. Large sections of the bare walls are standing, marking the site.¹³⁶

The fire was so fierce and spread so rapidly that it was impossible to save any scenery or fixtures in the theatre. The store which was located on the side of the theatre was not able to salvage any property either. Because of the condition of the walls, firemen found it very dangerous to attempt to get near the building. The men

were kept at a safe distance, occasionally risking their lives by creeping up close to the building to send a stream into some opening from which fire spouted.¹³⁷

The dangerous condition of the walls resulted in the death of one twenty-two year old man, Eugene Zarembo, who was crushed to death by a falling wall.¹³⁸

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Ibid.

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Ibid.

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The blaze was discovered by some people passing by approximately ten minutes after midnight.¹³⁹ According to the newspaper article, the fire was, at that time, confined to the stage and feeding on the inflammable scenery. For some unknown reason, there was a delay in reporting the fire to the authorities, and it was 12:15 before the alarm was turned in. The fire department was notified

by a call from box 39. Hose company No. 1 was first on the scene, with the chemical, and No. 2 and 3 followed in swift succession. Chief Harding came as fast as horse flesh could carry him, and at 12:23 sent in a general alarm, bringing out every piece of apparatus. Lines of hose were speedily laid and the firemen went to work with a will. They at first fought the blaze through the stage door and points of vantage on the ground floor, but were driven back when the falling roof over the stage caused the bulging of the wall on the north side of the building.¹⁴⁰

Firemen surrounded the building, keeping streams of water pouring into it. The water seemed to have very little, if any, effect upon the flames. At one point in the battle, the fire on the stage appeared to die down, and clouds of smoke issued forth from the windows of the balcony and gallery. At this point, firemen shifted their efforts and attention to the front of the house. Despite their work, the flames raged out of control, and soon tongues of fire were beginning to leap out of the openings at the west of the theatre proper. The firefighters took hose into the lobby and poured water in through that side. Hose Company No. 1 from West Bay City came and gave assistance to the local fire fighting units but to no avail.

When one of the fire chiefs reached the scene, he was convinced

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

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that the building was doomed. There was every facility to aid the fire in its spread and then there was the condition confronting the department of not being able to get close enough to do effective work...¹⁴¹

The manner in which the fire was started was not known. The blaze began following the close of a performance of The Tide of Life, which had played in the building until eleven o'clock. The company had removed its scenery, and all seemed to be secure when the theatre was closed for the night. One of the first persons on the scene, after the fire was reported, was the theatre manager, Daunt. He recounted the events of the evening:

"I was the last one in the theatre," he said, as he viewed the work of destruction. "After the audience had been dismissed I turned out the lights and shut up the front of the house and then went back on the stage. I remained there until all the scenery had been taken out and carefully inspected every portion of the stage to see that everything was all right. Then I locked up and went home. I had not gotten into bed before a telephone message announced that the opera house was on fire."¹⁴²

President Tyler, the president of Wood's Opera House Company, was called on the telephone by a reporter regarding the next move of the company regarding the rebuilding of the theatre. In answer to this question, he merely stated that he was unable to determine what action would be taken until there was a meeting of the board of directors. Upon further questioning, it was learned that the building was insured, and that the opera house with scenery and fixtures was valued at about \$100,000.¹⁴³ The fire caused a total loss. Mr. Tyler did state in a

¹⁴¹Ibid.

¹⁴²Ibid.

¹⁴³Ibid.

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later publication that the city would not be without the use of an opera house for any great length of time.

In order to obtain a clearer look at the insurance situation following the fire, The Tribune printed a list of the insurance companies and their coverage on the opera house for all the readers to study.

The following table lists the companies and the coverage on Wood's Opera House Company block and Opera House:

TABLE 1

INSURANCE COMPANIES AND THEIR COVERAGE ON THE
WOOD'S OPERA HOUSE BLOCK AND OPERA HOUSE

Insurance Company	Coverage
North British & Mercantile, England	\$1,000
Farmers' York, Pa	500
Milwaukee Mechanics	1,000
Buffalo German	1,000
State of Pennsylvania	1,000
Boston	1,500
Manchester, England	1,000
Ins. Co. of North America	2,000
Westchester, New York	1,500
Northern, England	1,000
Phoenix, Brooklyn	2,500
National, Ireland	1,250
Thuringia	1,250
Pennsylvania Fire	2,000
Liverpool & London & Globe	2,500
Commercial Union	2,500
Hartford	2,500
TOTAL	\$25,000 ¹⁴⁴

The picture on page 81 (Figure 6) is Wood's Opera House as it appeared before the fire.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., August, 1902.

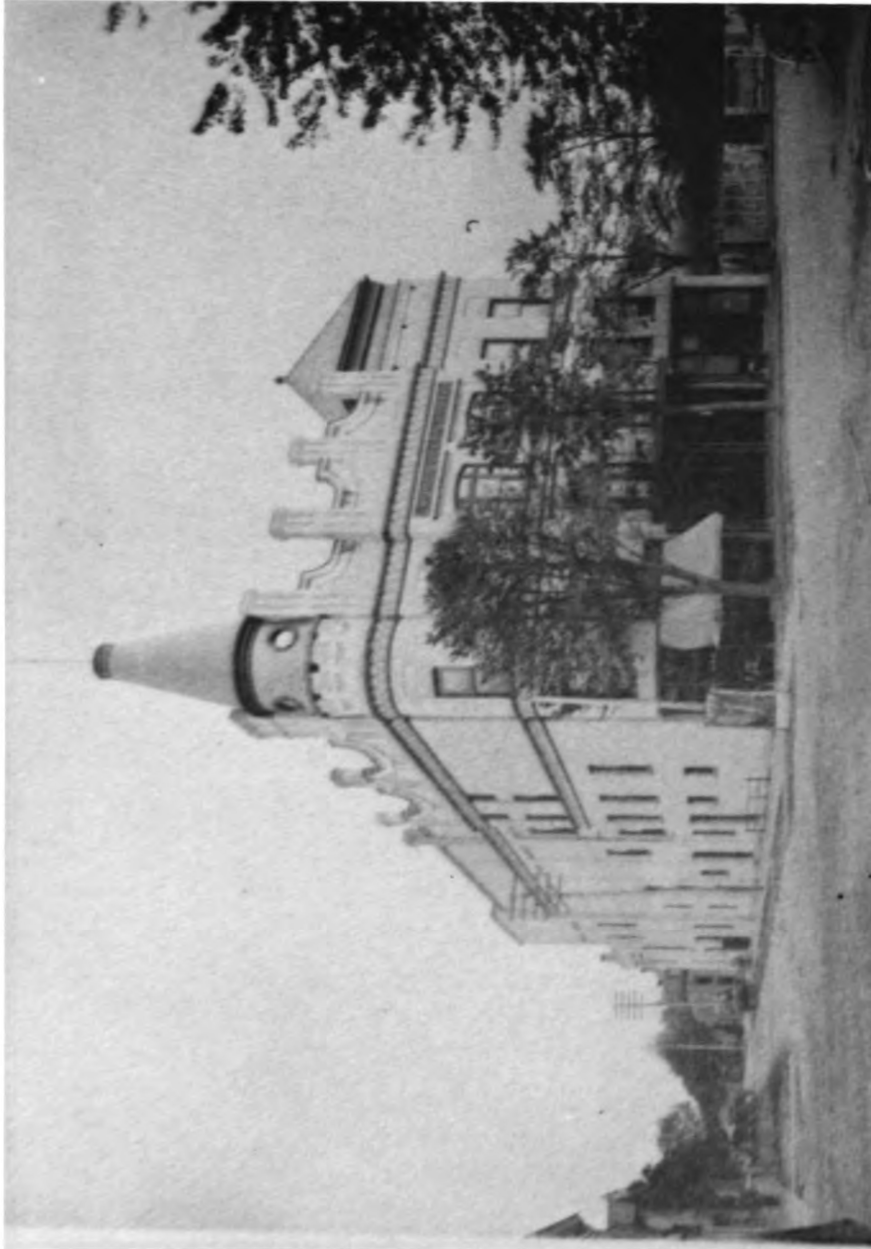


Fig. 6 - The Exterior of Wood's Opera House Upon Completion.

The many months of planning and work it took to build the opera house went up in smoke in just a few hours. President Tyler's statement that the city would not be long without a theatre was to come true.

While the ruins were being cleared away, the amusements were being continued in various suitable locations. The Davidson Stock Company played at the Casion Theatre at Wenona Beach, and later Merry Katie Emmett appeared in The Waifs of New York at the Armory Theatre.¹⁴⁵

There was some difficulty regarding the insurance. This problem was presented to the public by the Tribune:

Mr. Tyler says the company will pull the walls down as soon as possible. There is still some question over the adjustment of the insurance and the company will have to have the matter settled before the walls are down, as otherwise the insurance companies will claim inability to properly determine losses.¹⁴⁶

Evidently this was taken care of and all items worked out to the satisfaction of all.

The destruction of Wood's Opera House did not bring to an end the presentation of live theatre in Bay City. Today, at the corner of Washington and Sixth Streets, stands a building built a short time after the fire which resembles that depicted on page 81. Its name is the Washington Theatre, and in it played such stars as Ethel, John, and Lionel Barrymore, David Warfield, and George Arliss.

Upon entering the basement one can see the charred timbers of Wood's Opera House supporting the main floor of the Washington Theatre.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., September 9 and November 30, 1902.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

The destruction of Wood's Opera House marked the end of a theatrical era in Bay City. Although plays and other entertainments were to appear in the city for some time to come. The city no longer enjoyed the financial boom of the past, and, as the growth and prosperity of the community slowed, so did the interest and exercise of legitimate professional theatre.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Bay City, Michigan, from its conception as a corporate community in 1865, was a city that grew because of her many prosperous industries. These industries provided employment for many individuals. The availability of employment attracted people from many parts of the state, the country, and the world bringing a great deal of money into the community. This influx of people created a city rich in tradition and customs from many backgrounds.

The Saginaw River, Bay City's greatest natural resource, was responsible for a great deal of this prosperity. It furnished cheap transportation and a basis for much of the industry utilized by the citizens. It was in these conditions that interest in legitimate professional theatre grew.

Bay City was a community which had the privilege of witnessing professional theatrical entertainments from as early as 1864. This small but growing lumbering community, far removed from the major theatre centers, was a regular stopping place for some of the finest plays and players of the American theatre in the latter half of the 19th Century. The city attempted to provide the finest facilities in the state and, according to some, the finest in the mid-western section of the country.

When the Westover Opera House was first built it was considered the finest in the state. However, as the building grew older, it was

found unsafe for theatrical performances, and plans were made for a new house. The citizens of the community formed a committee to raise the necessary funds. This group ran into trouble securing the necessary finances and, at that point, J. M. Wood, the Chicago architect, offered to build the structure himself. Because the temporary opera house, The Rink, was unsatisfactory, Wood's proposal seemed to be a fine idea. While the community was contemplating Mr. Wood's offer, the Westover Opera House was completely destroyed by fire, leaving the community no other choice but to accept the theatre Mr. Wood had offered.

Before the new theatre was built, the Opera House Company, Limited was formed. This group of local citizens was the governing body of Wood's Opera House during its existence.

The construction of the new theatre brought with it various problems; securing proper materials, striking workers, and minor financial difficulties. However, all these problems were met and dealt with, and the building was completed on schedule.

Mr. Wood's theatre was considered of excellent design, being spacious and equipped with the latest machinery. Audience safety was of utmost importance to Mr. Wood, and he provided ample exit space.

The list of plays and players appearing at the new opera house was representative of the finest professional entertainments in the country. The citizens were receiving this excellent bill of fare because they demanded quality in theatre. The formation of a state theatrical circuit by the theatre managers of various Michigan cities, including Bay City, made it possible for cities in the interior of the state to receive the best theatre available.

The management of Wood's Opera House was confronted with problems regarding ticket prices, advertising curtains, and members of the audience who did not conform to expected audience behavior. These problems were attacked, and the opera house continued its operation.

Wood's Opera House operated successfully until the evening it was destroyed by fire. This nearly complete destruction marked the beginning of the decline of interest in professional legitimate theatre in this small mid-western community.

This study has shown a community which was determined to have professional companies brought in and, to do so, had to face and solve successive problems of providing the finest possible theatre; merely adequate accommodations were not good enough. An exceptionally fine theatre was built; a varied offering of some of the greatest players and plays of the 19th Century American theatre was provided, a direct result of the formation of the state theatrical circuit; and, finally, the community took a genuine interest in and supported the program brought into it.

Among the citizens of the community actively promoting the theatre was William Westover, an individual who gave much to the community in the way of financial support, buildings, and services. Men of this caliber made it possible for Bay City to reach the heights it did. Without such civic-minded people as Mr. Westover and his colleagues, the city would have lacked the many fine facilities it eventually obtained.

Bay City was also fortunate in having the deep interest and services of J. M. Wood, the theatre architect from Chicago. His concern

for the community was a major force in securing the opera house bearing his name. Without his taking over the almost lost project, Bay City may never have had the theatre of which it was so proud. His knowledge and understanding of theatre architecture made it possible for the community to have a practical and beautiful building.

Mr. Buckley, the man who was the theatre manager of both of the Bay City opera houses, was a valuable person to the community. His devotion and untiring work in providing the finest possible amusements for the public, made it possible for Bay Cityans to see the best.

Mr. Buckley's concern for Bay City audiences, as well as throughout the state, is exemplified in his assistance in forming a state theatrical circuit. Although this circuit was made up of many Michigan cities, Bay City was among the number when this venture was in its first stage of development. The efforts of Mr. Buckley and the other managers from the various cities accomplished a feat that was to prove to be one of the most important theatrical happenings in the state. The excellent bill of fare presented in Bay City, and subsequently in the other cities in the circuit, attests to the value of this organization.

This history suggests the pride Bay City took in the theatre as a civic institution in that a small group of people working alone, without the general interest, support, and popular appreciation, could not have achieved the success they did with an undertaking of this scope. Without the many people who gave their time and talents to the theatre, Bay City might not have had such a rich background.

However, these people did exist, and they applied themselves to a task of which the present-day Bay City resident is largely unaware.

If this study informs and enlightens only a portion of the community, bringing to light knowledge and appreciation of what has been, then it has produced something which will prove to be of use to others who share the love of the theatre.

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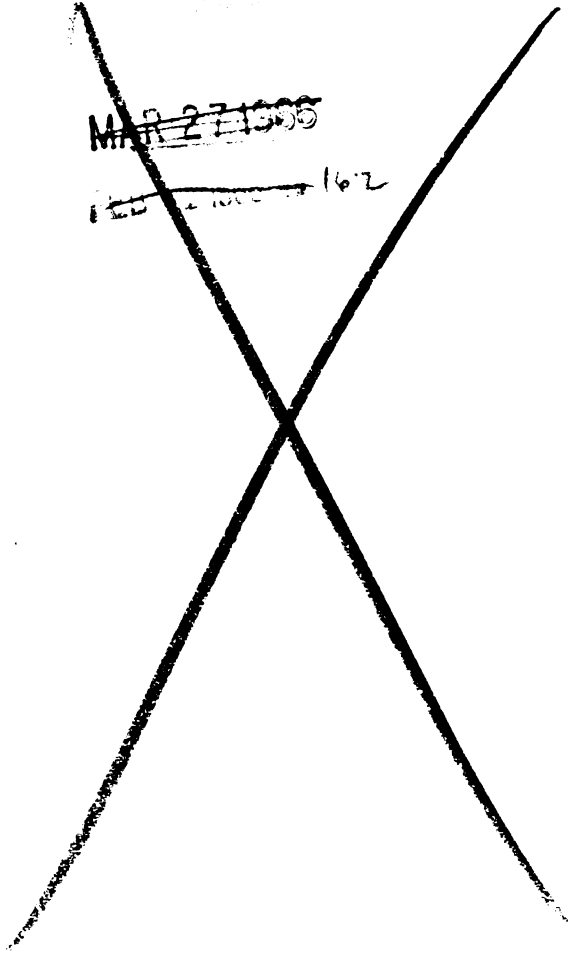


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