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ABSTRACT

A HISTORICAL STUDY OF THE BELDING OPERA HOUSE BELDING, MICHIGAN, FROM 1888-1915

by Jack A. Wilson

This study attempts to present the Belding Opera House by reconstructing its physical aspects before and after modernization in 1901, by recording its productions and events which directly or indirectly affected it, and by showing cause for its decline as an entertainment center in the Belding community. The study is limited chronologically to the years 1899-1915 for emphasis, although a brief summary of activities from 1915 to 1965 is included. The years 1889-1894 are incomplete as a result of insufficient records. The year 1902 has been deleted because no record is available for that year.

Chapter I summarizes the important historical events in the founding and development of the Belding community which eventually led to construction of the Belding Opera House.

The physical aspects of the original opera house structure are described in Chapter II. The

remaining portion of the chapter delineates the Belding Opera House after its renovation in 1901. Several ground plans and a longitudinal cross-section are included.

Chapter III records the actual use of the Belding Opera House as a theatre and community center. Important events within the community relating to the Opera House are also presented as an integral part of this chapter.

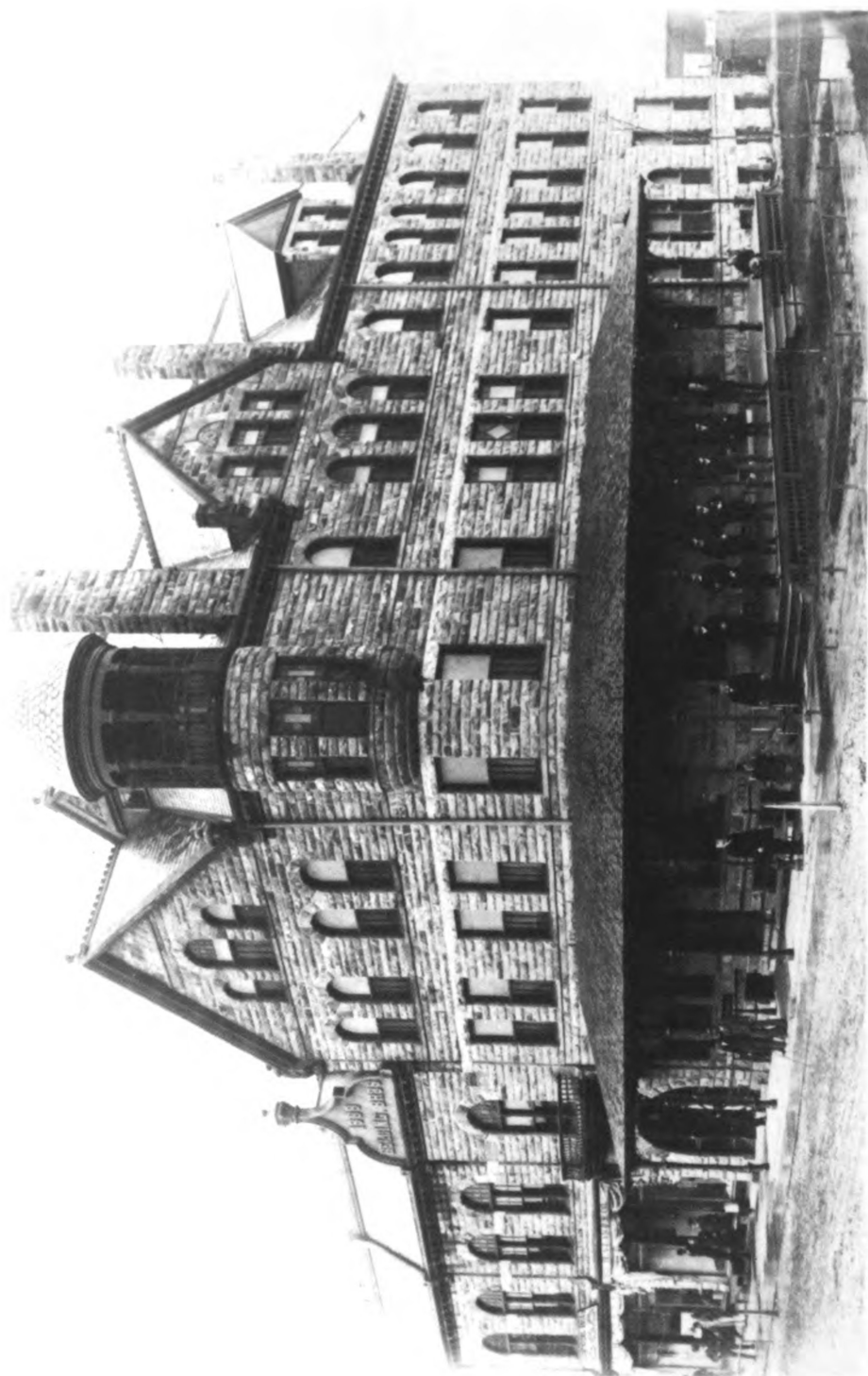
The final chapter, Chapter IV, summarizes the events at the Belding Opera House during its twenty-seven years of active theatrical life. Using the summary, in part, as a reference point, one major conclusion is reached concerning the decline of the Belding Opera House as a place of dramatic activity. The moving picture, with its better ability to duplicate real life, its small capital outlay and its low cost to the audience, is found the cause for the death of the Belding Opera House as a place of legitimate drama.

Spread throughout the text where they seem most useful are a quick reference chart showing the number and classification of actual events at the Belding Opera House for each year, drawings of the physical plant, programs of former events, and pictures of the Opera House as it is today. Included in the appendix are a reporter's view of a production from back stage and a copy of a concert program.

Fig. 1

Belding Hotel and Opera House

1890



A HISTORY OF THE BELDING OPERA HOUSE
BELDING, MICHIGAN, FROM 1889-1915

By

Jack A. Wilson

A THESIS

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PREFACE

The study of the Belding Opera House is the outgrowth of interest in the small town opera house which was aroused by Frank C. Rutledge in a course in theatre history. The preliminary research for the study was done under Mr. Rutledge's guidance in 1962. The intensification of the study was begun in the fall of 1964 to meet the thesis requirement of Michigan State University.

The purpose of this study as first conceived was to not only record the events which took place at the Belding Opera House but also to reconstruct its physical features, show cause for its decline and hopefully to uncover evidence of a small town opera house which once housed road companies which ordinarily played only the bigger cities.

The latter purpose was not achieved. The preliminary investigation showed that as a result of a major fire at the Powers Opera House in Grand Rapids one company scheduled to play the big city opera house in Grand Rapids was detoured to the Belding Opera House. Newspaper accounts seemed to indicate that other companies destined for Grand Rapids might also have been rerouted through Belding. Detailed research did not show this to

be true, although research efforts were restricted by the lack of records for the following year.

The other purposes of the study were realized only with the help of many people. I would like to thank all those who aided in the research and preparation of this thesis.

A very special thanks must go to Loren Prine and the staff of the Belding Banner-News for their patience, their invaluable clues to sources of further information, and their kindness in allowing me complete freedom in their morgue.

I am also indebted to:

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CHAPTER I

BELDING UNTIL THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE BELDING OPERA HOUSE

In 1838 Charles Broas, formerly of Broome County, New York, his wife and seventeen-year old son Levi picked and hacked their way along section lines, waded streams and slept in the wilderness until they encountered a big bend in the Flat River. It was here that Charles Broas had obtained three hundred and twenty acres of land, and it was here that a small settlement was to grow to become the silk capital of the world.¹

With the help of other settlers who moved in, Broas built a wing-dam and race and erected a saw mill through which many of the pine logs being cleared from surrounding land might be processed. The year 1842 brought Lucius Patterson to the area and he bought half interest in the Broas saw mill, but it soon failed and was abandoned.

In 1855 Hiram Belding purchased a tract of land from Levi Broas and settled on a small hill overlooking the river. With the help of Volney Belding as builder, Lucius Patterson reopened the saw mill in 1857, the same year a post office was established and given the name Patterson Mills. By 1862 the Patterson Mills' post

¹Information not otherwise footnoted in this chapter comes from: History of Ionia County, Michigan, ed. Rev. E. E. Branch, (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen and Co., 1916), I, xx, 277-341.

office was bolstered by a stage mail connection and the appointment of an official postmaster, S. S. Brown. Two years later, Hiram Belding opened a small store on what is now Main Street. He sold it, but another store and a grist mill were established. The village numbered thirteen families with seventeen children drawing public money for schools and also had a doctor.

In 1871 the first major industry came to the settlement. A firm of Wilson, Luther & Wilson purchased land and constructed a saw mill with a capacity of from fifty to sixty thousand feet of lumber a day. This brought capital and employment to the little village. The following year a branch railway connecting the village with Kiddville was completed. The passenger service on this railway consisted of a rail car pulled by a horse which walked on plank laid between the tracks.

Village citizens, about this time, began to feel a need for a permanent name for their community. Although originally called Patterson Mills, the village had picked up many other names associated with the river conditions from the log runners and rafters of the early days. Broas Rapids and Hog Hole were the most common. Sometime in late 1871 a meeting was held to give the village a permanent name.

The meeting was quite largely attended and many of those present were in favor of calling

it Broas Rapids.

David E. Wilson, however, suggested that there being so many towns in Michigan already ending with "Rapids" it would be better to choose some other name and proposed Belding, arguing that this being the old home of the Belding Brothers who were then engaged in the manufacture of silk thread in the east, the name Belding already appearing on spools the world over would at once bring the place into special notice. The meeting at once became favorable to the change and a majority vote was registered for the name Belding.²

Thus Belding got its name, but who were these brothers after whom it was named and how did they rise to fame? In 1857 Hiram and Alvah N. Belding, then working on their father's farm, decided to write their brother Milo who was still in the East to send them a stock of silk merchandise. They formed a partnership, and with liabilities of \$145.60 owed for their merchandise and cash capital of \$3.15 to make change, they began their silk business. They were successful and continued to send east for merchandise while peddling their goods not only house to house but to local merchants as well.

In 1863 brothers Milo and David joined the partnership and the Belding Brothers and Company were soon using one-twentieth of all the silk imported into the United States. In 1864 they joined in a partnership with E. K. Rose who had a small silk mill in Rockville, Connecticut. Two years later they dissolved the partnership

²Belding Banner, 1912 Industrial Edition.

and the Belding Brothers and Company began to manufacture silk on their own. The business increased rapidly and in 1876 they established a factory at Northampton, Massachusetts.

While the Belding Brothers were prospering, so was the small village of their name in Michigan.

Those enterprising men, the Belding Brothers, who started out from Ashfield a few years ago to peddle silk, and worked themselves, as the older concerns have reason to know, into an extensive business of manufacturing and wholesaling silk, have founded a village on the Flat River, in Ionia county, Mich., which has now grown to a population of 1000, and which bears the name of Belding. Some of the land has recently been sold at the rate of \$2000 per acre for building lots. An extensive lumbering mill is busy, as is a large flouring mill. The place now has a railroad and it did have a paper but green-backism led the editor astray last year, and that political venture proving unsuccessful, he is now "busted".

The silk factories of the Beldings at Northampton and in Rockville, Conn. are six weeks behind their orders and some of the machinery at Northampton is kept running 15 hours per day.³

The Belding Home News, in reprinting this article, noted only one error and that was that the Home News was still publishing and planned to continue.

Seven years later in 1886 the Belding Brothers and Company built a 150-foot high four-story silk mill in the village of Belding. How and why this happened are told in the words of Alvah Belding himself in an

³Springfield, Mass., Union quoted in Belding Home News, Vol. I, Aug. 21, 1879.

interview with a reporter of the Detroit Journal in 1901.

One day my brother and I came back here to Belding, just to see the town. That was about 16 years ago - oh, yes, we're old men now, but there was something that drew us back, remembrances of our boyhood, I suppose. Anyway, we looked over what had once been the homestead farm. It had grown into quite a village of market gardeners and small farmers. Said I to my brother: "What say you to building a mill here, just to help the old town along?" He thought it a good idea. There's where the sentiment came in. Of course a business can't be conducted along sentimental lines alone. A little hard-headed commercial sense must come in somewhere so we began to figure. We learned that we could take care of our help more cheaply here than in the east. We didn't need to think much more about it. Within three months ground was broken for the mill. We told the people here we had come back to the old boyhood home to help the town along; told them we'd employ about 400 hands and build a hotel and do a few more things, to show the Belding folks we'd not deserted them for good. We've done it sir.

We opened the mill about 15 years ago. It was a success. And the Richardson Silk Co., acting upon our idea that our product could be produced more cheaply here than in the East, came along and expressed a desire to build another plant here. We sold them ours on the spot. You see, we'd built it as a model mill and wanted nothing but the best here in the old town. After that sale we set to work to build a second mill. By and by it was ready. That's the story of the Belding and Richards silk business in this quiet county town that you have to back into on the railroad and can't see from the main line. We have here now, with the Richardson company's plant, two of the finest silk thread mills in the world. We are proud of them. And the greatest pleasure my brother and I experience is when we come into Belding after tours of inspection of the other mills and settle down for a few days of rest and whist playing. You ought to play whist with my brother. I tell him he knows a lot more about whist than he

does about making silk thread. And Mr. Belding laughed behind his white mustache.⁴

So a combination of nostalgia and good business caused the Belding Brothers to return to their old homestead and help the old town along. Among the "few more things" which the Beldings did for the town was the construction of a hotel with two commercial stores and an opera house attached.

Many references are made in Belding newspapers and elsewhere to the quality of the Belding Hotel. It was finished in August of 1888 and was the finest hotel between Detroit and Chicago and much better than many in both of those cities. The Trade Review, a special edition newspaper published in 1897 "devoted to the Interest of the Progressive Business Men and the Advancement of the City"⁵ gives a very thorough description of the Belding Hotel and its facilities.

Opened to the public August 11, 1888, this hotel since its establishment has left nothing to be desired in point of elegance, comfort and perfect service. All of the modern improvements and innovations are in use, and, owing to the excellence of its management and the effort put forth to cater to a critical patronage, it has secured a firm and lasting hold on the public favor. Hotel Belding is lighted throughout by

⁴Belding Banner, April 18, 1901.

⁵Belding Banner, The Trade Review, 1897.

electricity. The exquisite furnishings are in oak, the two connection parlors on the second floor being specially arranged and adapted for receptions. The dining room on the first floor has a seating capacity of 100, and is both well-lighted and attractively furnished. The three sample rooms are favorites with commercial travelers, Hotel Belding having a practical monopoly of their patronage. Fine bath rooms are located on all three floors, and the ventilation is perfect, each of the fifty guest apartments being an outside room. They are arranged single or en suite, and every room is provided with hot and cold stationary stands, and return call annunciators. In the basement is the finely appointed billiard room. Fourteen employees are required to equip the hotel, including a chef of marked ability and skill in the culinary art, whose efforts are liberally reinforced by the liberal catering which characterizes the management. Rates are \$2 a day with special rates by the week or month.⁶

From the time it was built this elegant hotel was a center of activity for Belding. All visiting business men stayed there, so-called traveling doctors saw their patients and dispensed their wares in the hotel rooms, and all advance tickets for opera house performances were sold at the hotel.

W. P. Hetherington, a man with hotel experience in the east came to Belding to manage the hotel. Hetherington became a man of considerable stature in the community. He was once clerk of the town council and secretary of the Belding Land and Improvement Company.

⁶Ibid.

He acted as opera house manager and did all its booking until he retired in 1915. His local fishing excursions and the size of his catch were often recorded in the local newspaper. He and his wife were described as "fancy dressers. Hetherington and his wife, who was as broad as she was tall, always wore dressy clothes. She would never come to town without being all dolled up and when there was a show at the Opera House she wore formal gowns and he always wore a top hat and striped trousers and a formal coat."⁷

An opera house to provide entertainment for traveling guests as well as the local patrons and to serve as a center for all civic and social activities was built in conjunction with the hotel in 1888 and 1889. It comprised the second floor above the commercial stores which was a common location for such structures in this period.⁸ The characteristic features of the Belding Opera House will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁷Interview with Wes Porter, former stage manager at the Belding Opera House, Feb. 12, 1965.

⁸Harlowe R. Hoyt, Town Hall Tonight, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1955), p. 13.

CHAPTER II
PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF THE BELDING OPERA HOUSE

The physical aspects of the Opera House as it was first built are most difficult to reconstruct. Most of the evidence comes from references to the old building when remodeling was being discussed or from certain features which are still detectable in the Opera House itself.

Indications are that the original Opera House as constructed in 1888 was a rectangle 77' long and 45' wide. These dimensions were calculated in the Opera House itself and then checked against measurements taken in the commercial stores below the Opera House. The width was calculated by measuring in the auditorium from side wall to side wall above the chair rail, a distance of 43'3", and adding to this distance 1'0" for the structural west wall and 9" for the inside wall adjoining the hotel. The stores below substantiate this calculation: there are two rooms of 20'4" each in width with an 18" brick and wood paneled wall dividing them. This allows 2'10" for the two side walls and their paneling.

The length was calculated by adding the 67'6" distance between the existing apron and the back wall of the auditorium plus the 2'0" apron depth, plus the 1'0" proscenium, plus 3'6" from proscenium wall to a joint on the side wall of the building which indicates where the addition was added in 1901, plus allowing 2'8" for the

front and back structural walls (Fig. 8). This adds up to 76'8". A check in the store below reveals a total length from the outside of the front wall to the outside of the old back wall to be 77'. The 4" margin of error may be the result of the sandstone facing on the front of the building.

Directly below the present stage in the men's restroom, what was after 1901 a dressing room, and in line with the wall joint previously referred to in calculating the length, there appears a heavy brick wall (Fig. 8). Near the floor, the top of a large arch shows. Below in the store this arch broadens into a large doorway in the wall. This wall is 17'8" from what is now the back wall of the building. When the thickness of the latter wall is considered the distance is very close to the 20' addition mentioned in the Belding Banner as having been added in 1901. Little doubt is left then that the wall in the dressing room with the top of the arch showing and the door opening below the arch indicates the original back wall of the Opera House.

On the present auditorium floor several breaks in the pattern of the flooring suggest where new flooring was added, it is assumed, when the building was remodeled. After trying to fit these flooring breaks with other pertinent facts known about the auditorium and later adjustments made to it, a relatively logical theory has been

arrived at for the size of the stage and the method of seating.

The break which is closest to the present stage goes completely across the auditorium floor and is 15'1" from the present apron. This 15'1" added to the previously given dimensions for the present apron, proscenium, and distance to the original back wall make a total of 21'7" which is not unlikely for a stage using a groove system of scenery.

The second break on the auditorium floor is 21'7" from the present apron or 6'6" from the first line. It does not run the complete width but is centered. It is not unlogical that this line represents the front of the original apron. This would give a total depth of 28'1" from the back wall to the front of the apron (See Ground Plan, Fig. 3).

The old ticket board, discovered backstage, indicates that there were seventeen rows of reserved seats (Fig. 2). Each row, according to the ticket board, had ten seats on either side of a center aisle. The newspaper states that eight rows were added to the front in 1901 when the stage house was modernized. These eight rows must have been added in approximately 21'0", allowing 2'8" per row. Assuming the remaining or original nine rows of reserved seats to be the same, they would occupy 24'0".

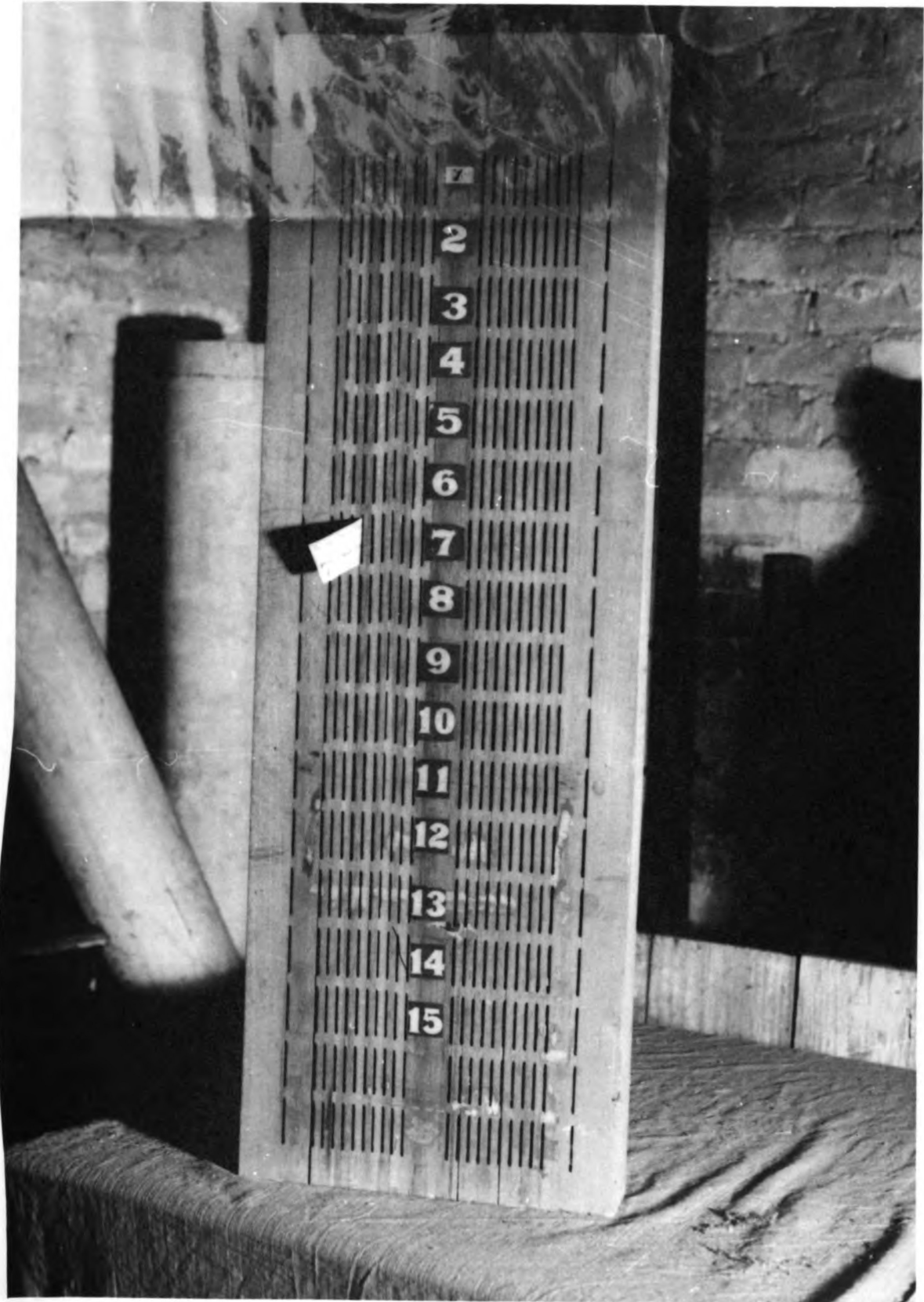


Fig. 2. Ticket Board for Reserved Seats.

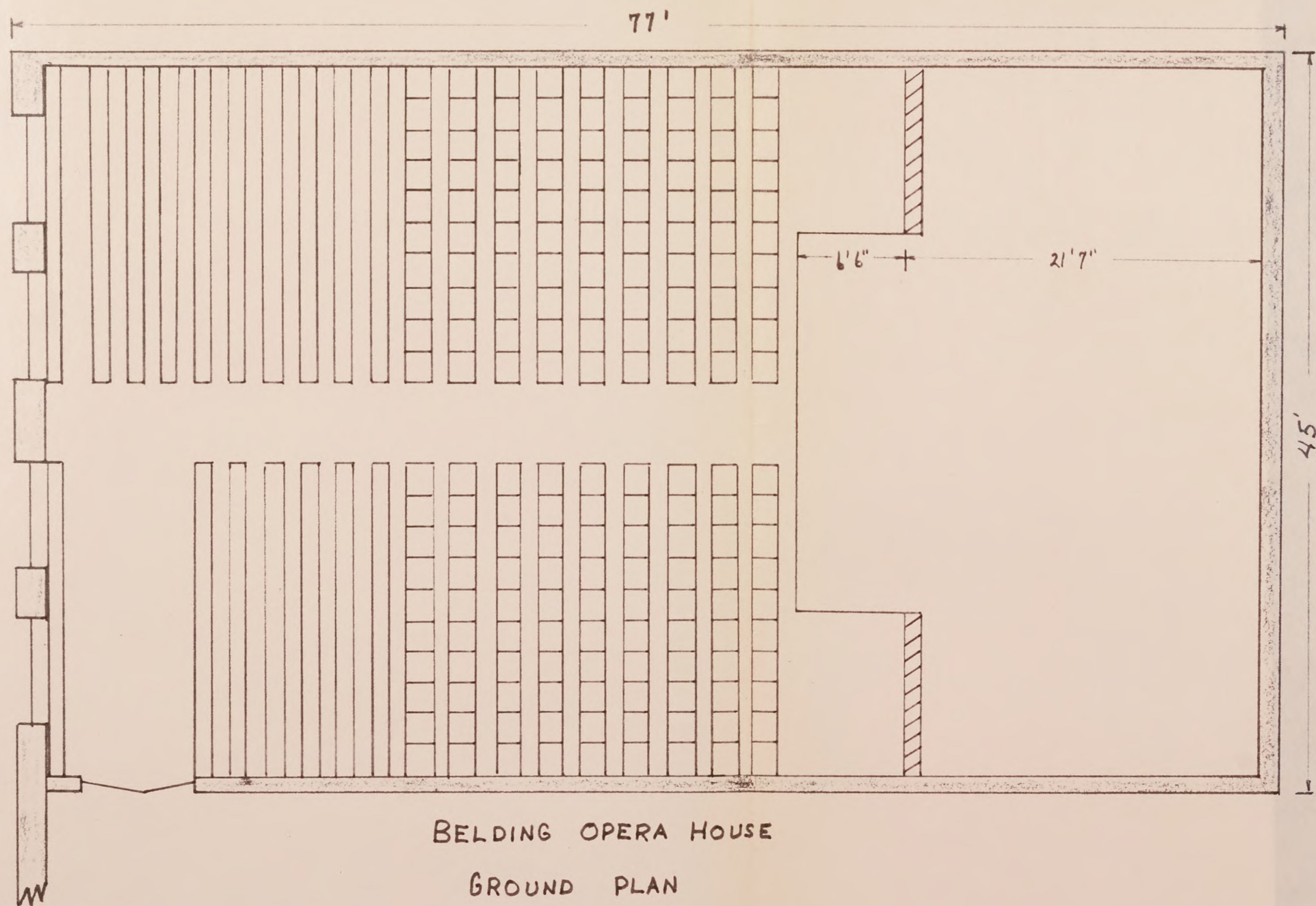


Fig. 3

Scale $\frac{1}{8}" = 1'$



This leaves 21'11" to the rear wall of the auditorium. The Belding Banner states that after its re-opening in 1901 the Opera House had 340 reserved seats and would accommodate about 600 in total. This means that a minimum of 260 could be seated behind the reserved section in the remaining 21'11". It is assumed that benches, popular during the period in such cases and removable for dancing if desired, were used in this rear area.

Seventeen rows of benches could have been placed in the unreserved seating area, allowing 2'2" per row. Fifteen people could then have been seated in each row on either side of a 5' center aisle. This would provide approximately 15" of seating space per person. This allows a 7'0" entrance as far as the center aisle and would provide space for additional rows to be added or standing room when all seats were sold (Fig. 3). Approximately 440 seats in the original auditorium and 600 seats after 1901 can thus be accounted for.

The back wall of the auditorium contains today, and by evidence shown in early pictures, has always contained four large arched windows with shutters on the inside to keep out the light for daytime productions. Each arch contains two 2'7" windows divided by a 6" support. The clear-paned windows are 7'6" high with a cross-piece on top, above which are stained glass panes in an



Fig. 4. Present Stage.



Fig. 5. Rear of Auditorium 1962.

arch (Fig. 5).

At the right rear of the auditorium there is a large entrance door which is now divided. This division does not appear to have been part of the original architecture, although when it was divided is not known.

Outside this entrance there is a landing for the stairs on the street side on which there was once a large window similar to the ones in the auditorium. Descending from this landing are two sets of thirteen steps with a $6\frac{1}{2}$ " rise per step. One set runs toward the stage and the other reverses and descends to the street entrance. The stair case is 7' wide. At the foot of the steps near the street is a small room which appears to have been a coat check room and perhaps a ticket window although most of the advertisements state that tickets were sold at the adjoining hotel. There is also some evidence which points to an entrance to this set of stairs from the hotel as well as from the street.

In general, this is all that can be concluded from the existing evidence concerning the original structure.

In 1901 the Belding Opera House underwent major modernization. A large stage house with much greater height was added to the rear of the building and the roof was modified. The stage house is 39'6" in height from the stage level and 60' from the ground to the roof. The

depth calculated from the old back wall to the present back wall is 17'8" plus 16" structural wall thickness which approximates the 20' as stated in the Belding Banner.¹ The addition is also about 5" narrower on the inside than the old building. It is only 42'10" as opposed to the 43'3" width of the old part. This 5" discrepancy is probably the result of an extra row of bricks which is evident in the new part continuing up about half the height of the stage house.

Although all of the sets, drops, and various other stage equipment have been taken out, the grid. pin rail, and other skeletal forms remain.

In the back wall of the stage house, approximately 8' from the SR side, there is a scene door which is 5' wide by 7'1" high. On the outside of the building above this scene door, a large wooden beam protrudes from the building with two long iron links attached to it. To the ring in the lower of the two, a large pulley was attached with ropes to aid in hoisting the scenery up from the ground below (Fig. 13). To the left of the scene door and on the outside of the building an iron fire ladder was attached for emergency. That has now been removed.

On the stage right side in the rear corner a flight of stairs descends to the dressing rooms. In a

¹Belding Banner, June 27, 1901.



Fig. 6. SR Electric Floor Pocket.

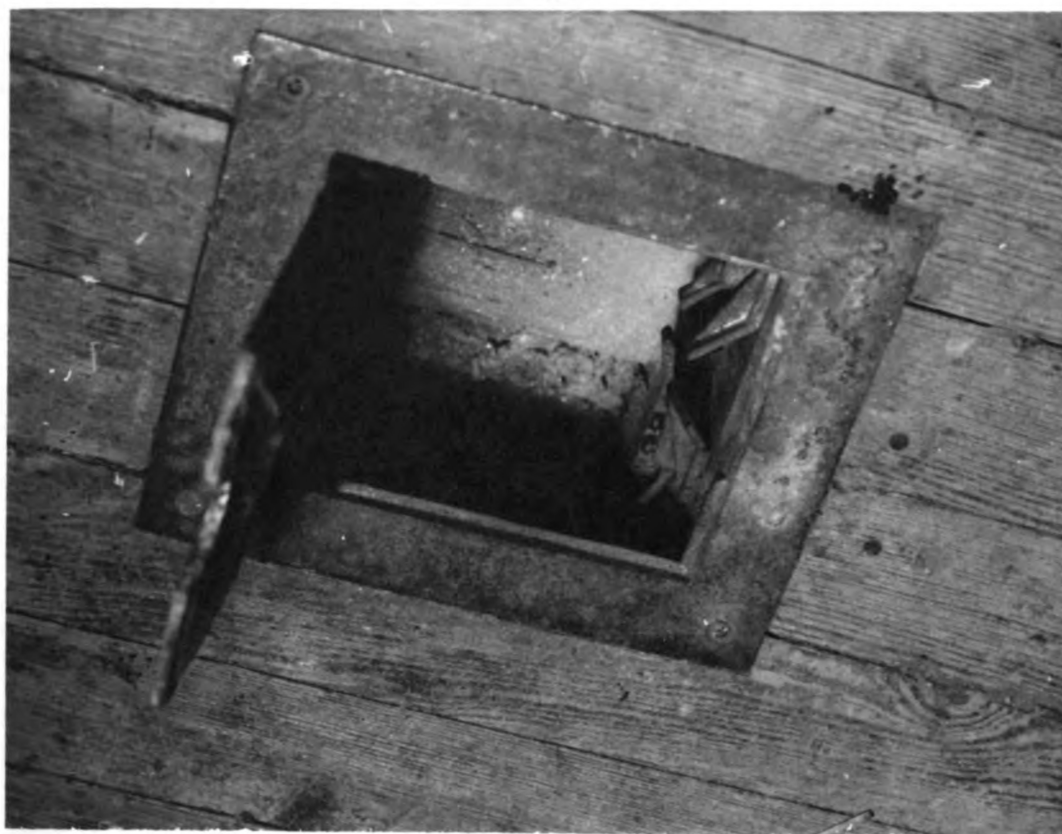
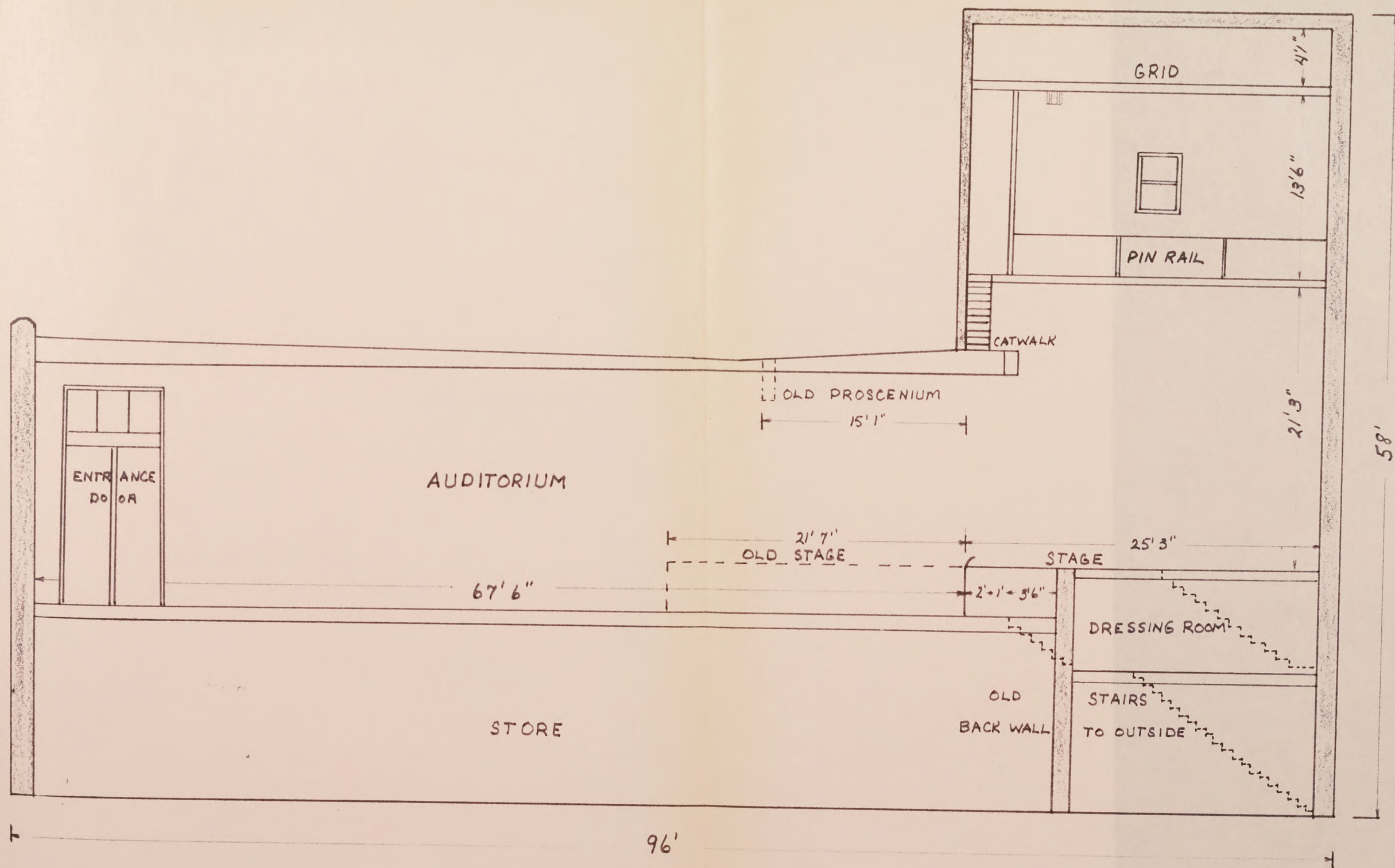


Fig. 7. Interior of Floor Pocket.
Triangular Female Receptacle.



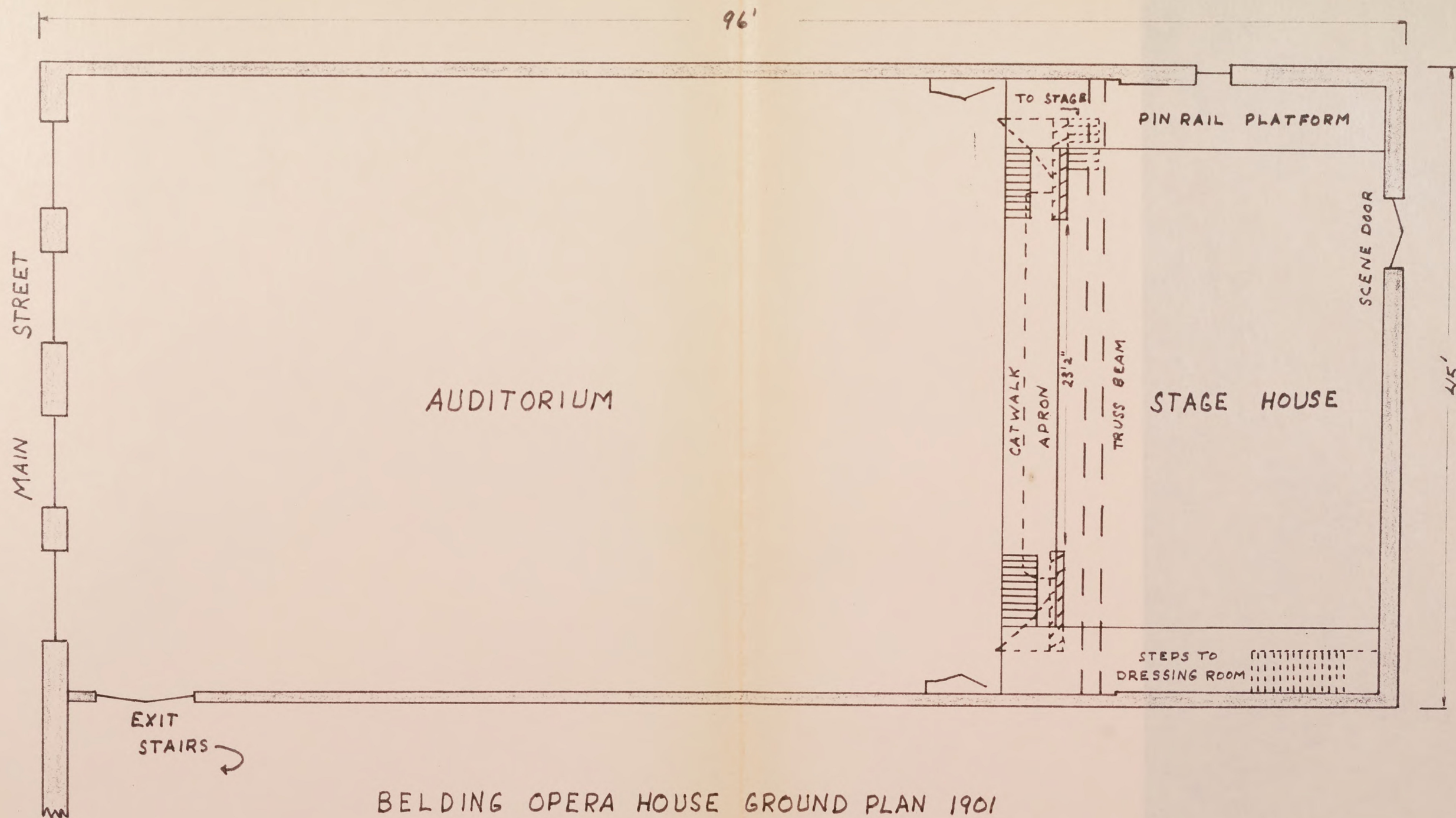
BELDING OPERA HOUSE

LONGITUDINAL SECTION

Fig. 8

Scale $\frac{1}{8}'' = 1'$





BELDING OPERA HOUSE GROUND PLAN 1901

Fig. 9

Scale $\frac{1}{8}" = 1'$



similar position on stage left there is a trap door but no steps or ladder is evident.

On the SR side some 8' or 10' in from the side wall there is a floor pocket installed by the American Reflector and Light Company of Chicago (Fig. 6). Inside there is what was probably the original wedge-shaped fixture which is now disconnected (Fig. 7). Presumably a similar fixture is present on the SL side but it is now covered by part of the band shell or the heating and air conditioning equipment. Electricity does not appear to have been a new addition in 1901.

With the addition of the new stage house, the total length of the building became 96'. Of this, 45'11" had previously been occupied by seating. The Belding Banner² states that eight more rows of reserved seats were added at this time. Eight new rows of reserved seats at the existing 2'8" per row took up 21'4" of the old stage area. This makes the seating area occupy 67'6". The extra 3" was, no doubt, added to the distance between the first row of reserved seats and the apron of the stage.

The new stage was raised 3'6" from the auditorium floor. (The height from the auditorium floor of the original stage is not known but is approximated in Fig. 8)

²Ibid.



Fig. 10. SL Fly Gallery. Note truss support at center and proscenium wall at the right.



Fig. 11. Gridiron showing Support Truss. Note that the grid supports run up and down stage.

A 2' apron in front of the proscenium was constructed, including a footlight trough. This still exists. The proscenium arch was raised 2' to 14' in height³ and is 23'2" wide (Fig. 9). The proscenium wall is 1'0" thick. The stage is 22'3" deep from the proscenium wall to the back wall of the new stage house. Totaled, this makes the modernized stage 25'3" from back wall through the apron (Fig. 8). This, added to the 67'6" of the auditorium and the 2'8" for the two structural walls and allowing 4" for the facing, makes the modernized building 95'9" in length. It is believed that the building is actually 96' long but that three inches were lost in the difficult situation of taking present measurements.

On either side of the stage some 17' or 18' from the back wall, ladders rise to the pinrail platforms through trap doors on the platforms. The SL pinrail platform is 21'3" from the floor. The rail itself is some 3' higher and contains 32 pin holes (Fig. 10). The SR pinrail platform is 21'2" from the floor. The one-inch discrepancy between SL and SR is probably due to sagging of the SR platform as a result of age. The SR rail also has 32 pin holes. Each platform is 4'7" wide. On SR a flight of steps 1'8" wide and on SL a flight of steps 2'5" wide descend 5'6" to a catwalk 3'10" wide

³Ibid.

running between the two pin rails on the down stage side of the loft (Fig. 9).

The grid begins 13'6" from the pin rail platform (Fig. 11). The grid is composed of 8" timbers resting on edge approximately one foot apart running from the back wall to the proscenium wall. A center truss of bolted 2" x 10" supports the grid approximately 19'9" from the back wall (Figs. 9 & 10). This truss rests on special palasters above and on the corners of the original back wall of the theatre below. A ladder leads to the grid from the SR pin rail platform.

At this point a unique characteristic of the 1901 addition requires discussion. The downstage upper stagehouse wall is 26'0" from the back wall. This wall is the only outside wall of the building which is not constructed of brick or stone. It is constructed of 2" x 6" crossbraced at irregular intervals and covered with rough wood siding which in turn is covered outside by zinc sheeting. The only apparent explanation is a very practical one. The wall is not required to support anything of major weight, and wood plank in a town with a lumber mill would be a great deal cheaper than brick or stone which would have had to be transported and supported.

As mentioned previously, there are stairs in the rear corner of the stage left side leading to the dressing rooms (Figs. 8 and 9). According to Wes Porter, stage



Fig. 12. Voice Tube from Fly Gallery to Stage.

hand from 1900 to 1904 and stage manager from 1904 until the theatre closed, this was the only access route to the dressing rooms.⁴ Today there are two new sets of stairs leading from the auditorium to restrooms now occupying a portion of the dressing room space; these were added sometime after the theatre closed in 1915. No toilet facilities were ever available in the Opera House during the time of its use as an opera house, but toilets were part of the Belding Hotel facilities next door.

An opening in the curved portion of the proscenium wall SR leads to a set of steps which rise to the stage level parallel with the proscenium arch (Fig. 9). This appears to be the only means of access to the stage from the auditorium. According to Mr. Porter,⁵ the stage manager was stationed at position SR near these steps. The stage manager's job was to communicate with the stage hands and the company manager. A copper tube with a mouthpiece leads down to this point from the pinrail above (Fig. 12). Mr. Porter believes this device was installed after the modernization.⁶

The Sept. 12, 1901 Belding Banner stated that eight new dressing rooms were among the improvements

⁴Porter, Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

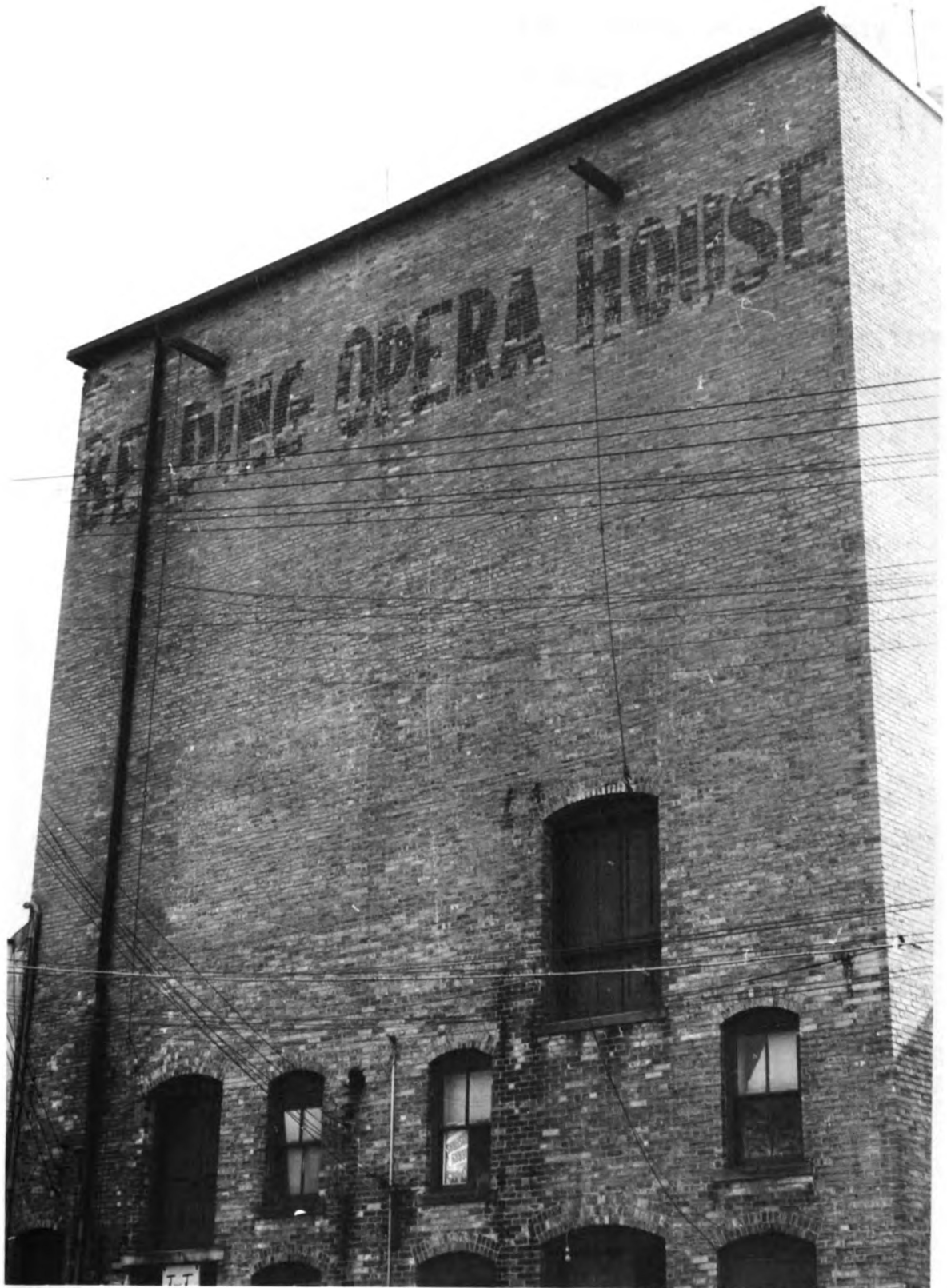


Fig. 13. Exterior of Scene House.
Note beams and iron links.

included in the Opera House. (Mr. Porter recalls only six⁷) There is little evidence today to indicate how this under-stage area was divided into dressing rooms and what other facilities may have been provided. The only division which remains and appears to be part of the original structure is a brick partition which separates the area into slightly unequal parts. This wall runs from the new back wall to a point about 3' from the outside back wall of the original structure. The 3' would have provided for a door between rooms.

The brick wall at this level contains three windows and a costume door (Fig. 13). The latter is 4'4" wide by 6'6" high and is located on the SL side 3' from the steps which descend from the stage. On the outside of the building far above the costume door a second wooden beam protrudes similar to the one over the scene door. Three long iron links are attached to the beam with a ring on the end of the lowest link. A pulley and rope were attached to facilitate raising and lowering trunks filled with costumes for the various productions.⁸

Behind and beneath the SL set of stairs descending from the stage there is a 3'11" wide flight of steps beginning at the opening in the curved portion of the

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

proscenium wall on the SL side of the auditorium and leading to the outside rear of the building (Fig 8). From this stairway to the brick partition mentioned previously with regard to the dressing room area is 16'9". This part of the under stage area may have served as the costume room. It is then assumed that the area on the other side of the brick partition, which is now inaccessible, was divided into the eight dressing rooms,⁹ each of which may have been approximately 5'6" by 7'6" or slightly larger if Mr. Porter is correct in stating that there were actually only six.¹⁰

The hallway leading from the street to the second floor entrance of the Opera House was frescoed and the entire auditorium was redecorated in 1901.¹¹

The contents of the Opera House changed considerably during its renovation. The old sliding scenery was disposed of and new scenery costing \$650 was purchased.¹² Two drop curtains and several sets were purchased from W. Monsel Minor and Brothers of Chicago. The sets included: parlor, plain chamber, kitchen, garden, woods scene, landscape, set cottage, set rock, rocky pass, and set bridge.¹³

⁹Belding Banner, Sept. 12, 1901.

¹⁰Porter, Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

¹¹Belding Banner, Aug. 22, 1901.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Belding Banner, Sept. 12, 1901.

A new carpet, curtains and draperies were purchased along with 240 new wooden opera chairs with folding wooden seats.¹⁴

Whether the building was altered in any other way in 1901 is not known. In general, these are the physical changes which seem to have taken place during the summer modernization period of 1901 at the Belding Opera House.

The only physical additions known to have taken place after modernization period and during the life of the Opera House as a theatre were those required by changing state fire laws. Mr. Porter¹⁵ says that three outside fire escapes once existed and he thinks they were added at different times. The previously mentioned iron ladder descending on the outside of the back of the building near the scenery door he remembers as always being there. A self-activating iron step fire escape was later installed near the costume door for quick exit from the dressing rooms. Still later, he says, the fire inspector said that the front entrance stairs and the rear stairs leading from the auditorium to the alley behind the Opera House were not sufficient. An iron platform, three or four feet in width with retractable iron steps, was attached to the front of the Opera House so that in case

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

of fire in the hotel, which might block both other means of escape, the patrons in the theatre might crawl out the large front windows and descend to the street. No doubt this was an unsightly contraption viewed from Main Street which would account for its not being there today.

This, then, is the physical reconstruction of the Belding Opera House based on existing features and newspaper reports. The original 77' by 45' rectangle with its 21'7" stage (depth), equipped with draw scenery, was extended to 96' and the 40' scene house was added. The 440-seat capacity of the original structure was also increased by removing the old stage and installing new seats in its place which allowed the remodeled opera house to accommodate 660 persons.

CHAPTER III
PERFORMANCES AND RELATED EVENTS

To construct a comprehensive narrative of what events actually took place at the Belding Opera House the events have been listed chronologically in this chapter. Related happenings are included such as: (1) where the show appeared appeared before coming to Belding; (2) description of the staging - limited because all information comes from newspaper articles which were interested only in general description, not technical recording; (3) critical comments pertaining to the performance; and (4) pertinent information concerning author, star or New York run. Trends and occurrences in the community which might have had some effect on the Opera House are also recorded in order to give perspective to the study.

No newspapers or official records of any form exist prior to 1895 in Belding because of the 1893 fire which destroyed the newspaper office and the city building, along with several other buildings. Library scrapbook files and private collections of odds and ends belonging to Belding residents have revealed a few of the events which took place between 1889 and 1895.

The first known event was a dinner followed by a program held in the Opera House by the Oak Leaf Club of Belding in April 1889. An invitation to this dinner

*The Company of Yourself and Lady
is Respectfully Solicited to
Attend the First of a*

SERIES OF PARTIES,

Given by the

OAK LEAF CLUB,

—At The—

OPERA HOUSE,

BELDING, MICH., ON

FRIDAY EVENING, SEPT. 27, 1889.

FIRST CLASS ORCHESTRA.

Membership Tickets, \$2.00. Single Tickets, 75 Cents.

PROGRAMME.

1. Waltz.
2. Quadrille.
3. Quadrille.
4. Schottische.
5. Quadrille.
6. Quadrille.
7. Ripple.
8. Money Musk.
9. Waltz.
10. Quadrille.
11. Quadrille.
12. Quadrille.
13. Schottische.
14. Fireman's Dance.
15. Quadrille.
16. Quadrille.
17. Waltz.
18. Virginia Reel.
19. Gallop.
20. Quadrille.
21. Lancers.
22. Quadrille.

FIG. 14. Program from the first recorded activity at the
Belding Opera House.

is still in the possession of a Belding citizen, Mr. L. Thomas. (Fig. 14) He recalls his father saying that such dinners were often held in the Opera House when the Belding Hotel dining room was too small and when a program was to follow.¹ Other Belding citizens substantiate this statement.

The first musical event for which there is record was the Schubert Male Quartette of Chicago which appeared at the Belding Opera House May 13, 1890 (Banner, 5/2/1890). The following article from the Belding Banner of May 2 of that year shows not only the quality of the performing group but the taste of the Belding audience during this period.

This presents to the people of Belding and vicinity a rare opportunity. This celebrated male quartette are not operatic singers as many might infer; they sing classical music but not the operatic style; one can hear and understand what they say. They are accompanied by Miss Inez McCusker, of Buffalo, N. Y., as soprano, and Miss Georgiella Lay as pianist. Nothing greater could be said in their praise than that they have been re-engaged for the fourth season to sing this summer at Chautaugua (N. Y.) Assembly, from August 5th to 23rd. They have been obtained at great expense, believing that the public will accept this privilege accorded them and meet the Schubert Club with a full house.²

On July 4, 1890 exercises to celebrate the

¹Interview with Mr. L. Thomas, Feb. 11, 1965.

²Belding Banner, May 2, 1890.

national holiday were held at the Opera House (Banner, 7/4/1890).

Labadie-Rowell, an English Comedy Company, is the only performing play group for which record is available in 1890. They appeared July 11 in Little Galatea, based on an old myth and the comedy of Pygmalion and Galatea by W. S. Gilbert and Sullivan, and on July 12 in A Taste of Woe (Banner, 7/18/1890).

On Dec. 17 the Grand Rapids High School Band gave a concert with admission for children at 15¢, adults 25¢, and reserved seats 35¢ (Banner, 12/12/1890). This is the first reference to ticket price for a performance and for reserved seats. Later all references to price and purchase of tickets indicate that a reserved section, a given number of the first few rows, was available with the price always 10¢ more than the regular price. Advance tickets for performances at the Belding Opera House were always sold at the adjoining Belding Hotel.

An Opera House band was formed during the first year of operation to entertain for civic and private programs and to play when an orchestra was needed by a traveling show. On Dec. 12, 1890 the following letter appeared in the Banner to the citizens of the community.

To the citizens of Belding who contributed to the Belding Opera House Band: We take this opportunity to thank you most cordially for your liberal response to the solicitors for the band. It was the right thing at the right time, in

the right place and given to the right organization. We would like to say here that we think (not as some of the prominent men think) that considering the length of time we have been organized, which is about six months, that we have played more and improved as much as any band in the same length of time. We have a very poor set of instruments, but we expect soon to have a new set, so you may expect to hear better harmony and more of it in the near future.

Again thanking you for your contributions and especially thanking the solicitors who did the work without even being requested, we remain,

Belding Opera House Band
R. A. Wilder, Leader³

Only two theatrical events are known to have taken place at the Belding Opera House in 1891. The first was the Ariel-Thomas Company which appeared on April 6. The nature of the group is not known but there appeared to be great anticipation for an excellent performance. An April 3 article in the Banner stated that only 150 seats remained to be sold and suggested that patrons secure their seats immediately so that they would not have to arrive one or two hours early in order to be sure of a place to sit (Banner, 4/3/1891).

The second event of 1891 was Mountain Pink, performed on June 5. A play program still exists from this performance which lists the cast and characters as well as giving a synopsis of the plot. (Figs. 15 and 16)

³Belding Banner, Dec. 12, 1890.

BELDING OPERA HOUSE.

"Mountain Pink."

FRIDAY · JUNE · 5 · 1891.

BROWN'S BAZAAR

Takes the Lead for

Ladies' and Gents' Safety Bicycles and Tricycles, Hammocks, Croquet Sets, Express Wagons, Glassware, Crockery, Tinware, Notions and Wall Paper.

BUY YOUR

GROCERIES

AND PROVISIONS

—At the—

West End Store

—Of—

C. M. Stoddard & Co.



The Boys
are Prepared
to Furnish Music
on
All Occasions.

R. A. Wilder,
Geo. Holmes, Band Leader.
Sec. and Treas.

Holmes & Connell

—THE—

Old Drug Store

ON THE CORNER

Is one of the Landmarks of
of the town.

It is where they sell

PURE DRUGS
AND MEDICINES.

DRUGGISTS' SUNDRIES
A SPECIALTY.

Go Down to

Ives & Day's

And Get the

Finest Glass of Soda Water

In Town.

BUY YOUR

CLOTHING · & · FURNISHINGS

J. M. EARLE.

The Best Stock and Lowest Prices.

- - - - Opposite Opera House.

W. F. Bricker,**Real Estate****Agent.****Great Entertainment!****4th of July****WILL SOON BE HERE**

And of Course you will want
a New Hat. Give us
A Call

DEED & HOLDEN.

THE MOUNTAIN PINK

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

Stincerity, A Mountain Pink,
Miss Rachel LaClaire.

Jack Weeks. A Native Specimen,
W. S. Sawdey.

Harold Wilmont, A New Yorker,
J. L. Hubbell.

Felix Bonnery. Captain of Moonshiners,
O. H. Sylvester.

Col Trafton. A Southern gentleman,
Grant Marshall.

Jerry Richards. Rough and Ready,
Bert Lewis.

Scrip, A Cotton Bud,
F. M. Van Pelt.

Bell Trafton. A Southern Rose,
Miss Myra A. Reed.

Samantha Weeks. A Holly Hock,
Mrs W. H. Gardner.

Nondas Runnery. A Tiger Lily,
Miss Grace O'Bryon.

Dastlers, Moonshiners and Revenue Officers.

—You can—
SAVE MONEY
and always be
ON TIME
by having a
watch of
W. H. WARREN.

HOT WEATHER!!!*Buy a Stove.**Buy a Gasoline Stove.**Buy the best Gasoline Stove.**Buy Clark's "Jewel" Stove.**Buy them of***T. Frank Ireland.***The Hardware dealer across the way.*

The Belding Opera House orchestra advertised in this program for people to attend its entertainments.⁴ It is possible that this band held regular programs or dances at the Opera House.

Nothing is known of the 1892 activity at the Opera House and evidence of only one theatrical performance in 1893 has been uncovered. On February 28 and 29 thirty local artists "held the boards" with The Colonial Minstrels.⁵

The year 1894, like 1892, is without theatrical record. Beginning with 1895 partial newspaper records are available, but 1895 could hardly be called an active year. Only seven theatre performances dotted the calendar.

The Mascot, presented by the Columbian Comic Opera Company, appeared May 21. This group had appeared before in Belding; the newspaper article states that Manager Hetherington had booked the company for a return engagement (Banner, 5/2/1895).

The Wilson Day Company, a repertoire group, was in Belding for three nights, May 9, 10, and 11 (Banner, 5/9/1895) A Cracker Jack was presented on June 17 (Banner, 6/6/1895), followed by the Gilbert Opera

⁴Play program, June 5, 1891.

⁵Clipping from a 1929 issue of an unknown newspaper in the scrapbook of E. B. Lapham now in the Alvah N. Belding Library.

Company (Banner, 7/29/1895).

November was the biggest theatre month of 1895 and anticipated the coming of an active new year. The Boston Rivals Company appeared on November 15 (Banner, 11/7/1895) and Mrs. Finnigan played on November 18 (Banner, 11/14/1895). The year concluded with a production of All the Comforts of Home on December 2 (Banner, 11/28/1895).

1896

The Opera House was much busier in 1896 with both social and theatrical events. A lecture-concert series, begun in 1895, was continued but resulted in financial failure. The year's activities at the Opera House began on February 6 with the Foresters' Social Club party (Banner, 2/6/1896). February 18 brought H. H. Emmet, "Indian Orator" as a part of the Belding High School lecture course (Banner, 2/13/1896). The Foresters' Social Club held a second party on February 21, this one a Washington Masque Ball (Banner, 2/20/1896).

In an attempt to balance the books of the lecture series, Professor VanWinkle of the High School arranged for Lovett's Boston Stars to appear on March 12 (Banner, 3/5/1896). Although the entertainment was good, the audience was small and the lecture course lost money (Banner, 3/19/1896).

Frank Tucker and Company presented East Lynne on May 3 (Banner, 4/30/1896). A June 4 article in the Belding Banner noted that Mr. Tucker had gone to Detroit where he died on the operating table while having a leg amputated. Later in May, A Tramp on Time, written by O. H. Sylvester, a local resident, and with a cast of local people was scheduled (Banner, 4/23/1896).

A concert to help the K. P. band purchase uniforms was held May 29 (Banner, 5/28/1896). Tickets were 15¢ each or two for 25¢. A church union memorial service in honor of Decoration Day with 100 veterans and wives plus other citizens overflowed from the Opera House on May 30 (Banner, 5/28/1896).

June 8 brought the Big Four Minstrels under Mr. C. Menkee with over twenty artists and a closing extravaganza called King of the Cannibal Islands (Banner, 6/4/1896). Baccalaureate was held June 14 and Commencement exercises June 19 for the class of 1896 (Banner, 6/11/1896). A Tramp on Time, scheduled for performance in May by local citizens, was finally presented on June 17 (Banner, 6/18/1896).

In July the ladies of the Congregational Social Circle decided to take over the lecture course previously backed by the Belding High School. They scheduled an illustrated lecture of the Oberammergau Passion play; the

New York Male Quartet; Herbert A. Sprague, the noted impersonator; and the Shipp Brothers, a group of English Hand Bell Ringers (Banner, 6/23/1896).

On August 6, Mrs. Emma Platt Guyton of Grand Rapids gave two free lectures to ladies only, entitled "The Awakened Women" and "Our Girls" (Banner, 7/6/1896).

A moment of excitement took place in October.

A. Bigelow struck the city Monday and told Manager Hetherington that he was arranging to bill a show for the Opera House in November. Hetherington didn't like his looks and fired him from the hotel. The Sheriff from Montcalm county wired the city marshal the next day to arrest Bigelow and hold him for jumping a board bill at Stanton. Bigelow is working the show racket on a bluff.

October was also a month of political oratory at the Opera House. On October 8 two hundred people were turned away from a speech by Republican Bingley R. Fales (Banner, 10/15/1896). A Free Silver meeting was held on October 12. On October 20 Honorable A. Kennedy Childs of Connecticut spoke for sound money (Banner, 10/15/1896).

November continued the political activity with Democratic Judge Smith speaking for sound money on November 1. Honorable Andy Fyfe of Grand Rapids was the guest on November 5 (Banner, 10/29/1896).

1897

The only theatrical entertainment of the winter

⁶Belding Banner, Oct. 8, 1896.

of 1897 was a production of Faust by Porter J. White's Company which was to appear several times with great success in the coming years. The play came to Belding from Owosso where it had played two nights with considerable success. The Owosso Argus is quoted as saying, "... no better play is produced on the American stage that draws the moral picture of life and keeps in favor with the audience as Faust and Mr. White's company is strong and well adapted to the piece" (Banner, 2/18/1897).

The next production was the June 2 performance of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. W. H. Hartigan, who starred in this production, had written a new play, Judas Maccabeus, which he hoped to return with the following season (Banner, 5/3/1897). The Bryan Comedians who played six nights beginning June 21 were billed as presenting a "... clean, bright and dashing new bill every night." Prices were 10¢ and 15¢ which seems to have been normal for companies which played more than one night in Belding; one night performance tickets were generally higher (Banner, 5/17/1897).

The Garrick Theatre Company played three nights in Belding August 12, 13, and 14 after a week at the Stone Opera House in Flint (Banner, 8/12/1897). No advertisement appeared in this issue of the Belding Banner and the names of the plays or other details were not included in the notice.

In October the school superintendent began a new campaign to sell season tickets for the winter lecture project which had failed in 1895 and had been adopted with slightly more success by a ladies church group in 1896. Presumably the advance sale of tickets was a new way to guarantee financial solvency.

School Superintendent Van Winkle is pushing to sell 400 full course tickets for a lecture course project. 200 \$1 tickets have been sold for the seven big entertainments. The list includes: Geo. W. Bain, Hon. Wallace Bruce, Hon. J. W. Giddings, Prof. Hamilton, J. W. Conary, the Mozart Symphony Company and the Smith Sister Concert Company. The names of Bruce, Bain, Giddings and others are among the foremost men on the lecture platform today and every person in this vicinity should hear them.⁷

October 25 began a one-week stand by an Indian Medicine Company (Banner, 10/21/1897). The nature of their productions is unknown.

November 3 and 4, 1897 were significant dates for the Opera House because they brought for the first time electrified pictures which, in later years, were to play such an important part in the decline of not only the Belding Opera House but other theatres like it throughout this part of the United States.⁸ On those two November evenings Carrington Illustrated Entertainments showed the Drummer Boy of Shiloh which had played

⁷Ibid., Oct. 14, 1897.

⁸Hoyt, p. 279.

342 consecutive nights in Chicago. Battle scenes of the civil war were accompanied by Mr. Carrington who attempted to "make the battle scenes of war more realistic"⁹ by playing his drum. This appeared to be a new and exciting form of entertainment for Belding citizens and the Banner recommended it highly.

The testimonials to the merits of the entertainments are numerous. Every old soldier, every citizen, school boy and girl should see and hear it.¹⁰

Side Tracked played to a packed house on November 18. Pat Kane, who played the tramp, was criticized in the Belding Banner review as "not up to the Jule Waters' rendition of it" (Banner, 11/25/1897). Whether Miss Walters had appeared in the play previously at the Opera House is unknown.

The 1897 theatre season concluded with a local school production of the operetta Choosing the National Flower on November 25 (Banner, 12/25/1897).

1898

The 1898 theatre season began on February 28 when Porter J. White returned with an "Elaborate Scenic and Electrical Production" of Faust (Banner, 2/24/1898). Regular price seats of 50¢, 35¢ and 25¢ were advertised.

On April 16 Belding citizens saw the "Original

⁹Belding Banner, Oct. 28, 1897.

¹⁰Ibid.

Big Four Minstrels" at the Opera House. A free mammoth illuminated parade was held prior to the 8:30 curtain (Banner, 4/14/1898).

On June 23 seven members of the Belding High School class of 1898 participated in graduation exercises at the Opera House (Banner, 5/26/1898). The Labadies appeared in a Duologue on June 28. Manager Hetherington, no doubt to encourage a large house, purchased electric fans to aid air circulation and make the Opera House more comfortable for the audience (Banner, 6/23/1898).

The second appearance of moving pictures in Belding took place July 7 when a cinema firm showed pictures by the Vitascope; they had spent the previous night in Greenville. Again the Banner encouraged the citizens: "Those who have not seen this modern wonder should not miss the chance." (Banner, 7/7/1898). On July 28 the Ionia County Battalion held a program in the Opera House after a picnic supper and campfire (Banner, 7/28/1898).

The autumn theatre season was opened by Porter J. White, now well known to Belding theatre goers. Since his last appearance in Belding in February, Mr. White was reported to have invested \$3000 in electric effects for his production of Faust which appeared on the Belding stage on October 3 (Banner, 9/22/1898). A Breezy Time, reported to have appeared in Belding before, played on

October 10 (Banner, 9/22/1898).

In anticipation of November elections, Mr. J. R. Whiting, the silver candidate for governor, spoke at the Opera House October 11. The speech did not appeal to Belding citizens for the Belding Banner said two days later: "It is safe to say that his vote will not be any the larger for his visit here." (Banner, 10/13/1898).

Chip O' the Old Block appeared on November 5 before a small audience. The company was reported to be "a up-to-date one." (Banner, 11/10/1898). Dr. Ashley was the November 19 attraction (Banner, 11/17/1898), and the Cuban Creoles performed on November 21 (Banner, 11/17/1898). The latter production was termed "rocky" by the Banner. Two social events rounded out the month. The Woodmen gave a dancing party on November 23, Thanksgiving eve, and the Social Club gave a 50¢ party on Thanksgiving night (Banner, 11/17/1898). A \$25 house greeted the Greenville Theatre Company on November 28 (Banner, 12/1/1898).

On December 16 a "poverty party", at which each guest was fined, was held by the Social Club (Banner, 12/8/1898). The year concluded with a "Special Holiday Engagement of the Bohemian Operatic Vaudevilles" on December 30 (Banner, 12/22/1898).

1899

The new year 1899 brought hope and new prosperity

for Belding citizens. In October the Banner stated "... the outlook for a prosperous future of greater dimensions than ever before is certainly in sight for Belding."¹¹ The writer had good reason for his optimism. In January a new manufacturing company had been formed, the Sanitary Refrigerator Company, which increased employment. A great deal of enthusiasm was generated during the winter months concerning the installment of street lights. The excitement over letting the bids somehow ended in a law suit but was later resolved. There was a demand for tenant houses and both private and business real estate moved rapidly. The Grand Rapids and Saginaw Railroad was completing the last mile of track into Belding.¹² In December the Belding Brothers and the Richardson Silk mills were running extra hours in an attempt to catch up on back orders and new industry was in sight. Over a year later this boom brought about the needed improvements in the Belding Opera House.¹³

The Opera House reflected the spurt in the local economy for 1899 was an active year. The year began with a successful minstrel show by the local Recreation Club which cleared \$50 for the group (Banner, 1/12/1899). On January 19 the American Cineography Company showed

¹¹Ibid., Oct. 19, 1898.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., Dec. 21, 1898.

pictures of the Spanish-American War including the sinking of the Maine (Banner, 1/19/1899).

The Recreation Club held a dance at the Opera House on February 24 and on February 28 the Recreation Club's Colonial Minstrels gave another performance before touring Greenville and Ionia on ensuing nights (Banner, 2/16/1899).

April was an active month with three activities on the calendar. The first was the Litz Quartet of Grand Rapids which appeared on April 7 as part of the lecture course series (Banner, 4/6/1899). The Belding Woman's Club held a program of Shakespeare readings on April 18 with selections from Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth and Merry Wives of Windsor (Banner, 4/20/1899). The following night Gorton's New Orleans Minstrels performed (Banner, 4/13/1899).

Activity at the Opera House in May consisted of a band concert on May 1 with a party following (Banner, 4/20/1899) and a performance by the Schubert Symphony Club and Ladies Quartet on May 11 (Banner, 2/27/1899). Baccalaureate was held on June 17 and commencement on June 22 (Banner, 6/22/1899).

The Canadian Jubilee Singers presented a concert on July 21 (Banner, 6/13/1899). For August 15 the Hearts of the Blue Ridge were billed as the best troupe to appear in several months. They moved from Belding to

Grand Rapids for a four-night stand (Banner, 7/10/1899).

A young actor of the community left for Maryland about this time. Frank A. Ramsdell of Grattan took a job with the King Repertoire Company and was to begin a tour of the southern states. He was to receive a salary of \$25 per week which seems to have been an outstanding amount for this period (Banner, 7/10/1899).

Belding received Si Plunkard enthusiastically on September 6. Over one hundred patrons were turned away at the door and one hundred others were sold standing room (Banner, 9/7/1899). This was the first public indication that a new opera house was needed.

The problem of inadequate seating was followed by a complaint about the stage facilities themselves. On the Swanee River with Stella Mayhew as Old Aunt Linda singing her latest "coon songs" appeared on October 3. The review following the performance stated:

They had a car load of special scenery but could use but little owing to the size of the stage, even standing room being all sold.¹⁴

The new lecture course schedule was released in October with an increased number of events. The first selection was Andy Fyfe and the Liszt Quartette on October 25 (Banner, 10/12/1899). The Belding premiere of Uncle Tom's Cabin took place on October 31 at the

¹⁴Ibid., Oct. 5, 1899.

Opera House. This company was supposed to be the largest on the road and had a large amount of unusual scenery (Banner, 10/26/1899). Many more Uncle Tom shows were to come to Belding and all with increasingly more spectacular scenery and lighting effects.

The Opera House hosted the young people of the community on November 15 for a dance (Banner, 11/23/1899). The biggest event of the month was not theatrical but yet dramatic; it was the arrival of the first passenger train on November 29 on the newly completed Grand Rapids and Saginaw Railroad (Banner, 11/30/1899). The train was the Opera House's first rival. Wes Porter, who remembers the arrival of this first train, says that the Opera House and the arrival of a train were, for many years to come, the social events for young dating couples.¹⁵ The town had no other forms of entertainment.

The Opera House closed the year with a rural comedy drama Seth Haskins on December 16 (Banner, 12/4/1899).

1900

The population of Belding had grown to 3282 by the turn of the century; the town's prosperity was also growing. Activity at the Opera House seemed to drop, however, partly perhaps as a result of the poor facilities

¹⁵ Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

afforded the traveling shows. The number of dances and parties seems to have decreased, too; however, announcements of dances may not have always appeared in the newspaper. Publicity for a particular club or church seemed to run in streaks. Perhaps Banner staff members had specific interests in some of these groups. If so, a change of staff might affect reports on social events taking place at the Opera House. The only party reported for 1900 was held by the Foresters' Club on New Year's night (Banner, 12/14/1899).

On February 23 and 24 a vaudeville troupe called the "Three J's" appeared (News, 2/9/1900). This particular troupe used an advertising gimmick which became more and more popular for such companies. It was the use of testimonials by theatre goers of a nearby city, such as the following.

A very large and appreciative audience composed of some of the most prominent citizens of Caro, witnessed the performance of Jack's Jolly Jokers in "A Night Out with the 3 J's" at the Opera House last evening, and by permission the manager of the company has authority to refer the citizens of Belding to the editors of the Caro papers and the following named citizens who can testify to the superiority of the acting of the players. This performance surpassed their expectations and patrons of a theatre are safe in taking any members of their family. The audience were convulsed with laughter in every particular. Jack's Jolly Jokers is the best comedy and vaudeville show we ever had in Caro, and is well worth the

price of admission. W. O. Luce, Postmaster.
F. B. Ransford, James Bullen, O. E. Thomas,
E. H. Streeter, Courier.¹⁶

Another show did not appear until November 13.

The article advertising At Piney Ridge is reproduced here as an example of many similar ones.

The management of the Belding Opera House announces as the next attraction David Higgin's beautiful Southern romance At Piney Ridge. The six scenes of the play are laid amid pine clad hills of Tennessee where the people speak with a soft drawling accent and where they love and hate with an intensity the cold Northerner knows not. The story is that of a young white man, who when an infant had been stolen by a revengeful slave and abandoned in the mountains, only to be cared for by a mountain woman who bequeathed him property on which were rich deposits of iron and coal. . . . The opening of the play find the young man rich and on the eve of marriage to a beautiful girl. The engagement is broken off when he is accused of being a Negro by his rival, who is himself tinted with black blood. The plot and denouement are strong and powerful and the run of incidents exciting and unexpected.

The race question is handled in an unusual way. There is quite a thread of characteristic comedy and the play is one of absorbing interest. The producing company is a powerful one and the scenery and electrical effects are novel and beautiful.¹⁷

In order to book this company, Manager Hetherington had to raise the prices to 50¢ and 75¢. The Belding News commented:

The price of seats may seem to be rather high but when you take into account the number

¹⁶Belding News, Feb. 9, 1900.

¹⁷Ibid., Nov. 9, 1900.

of people and the rich scenery connected with the play, the company could not well afford to place the price at any lower figure, even with the guarantee of a full house. Remember that one good show is worth a dozen poor ones.¹⁸

Ten days later, on November 19, Baby Blanch appeared as Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin (News, 11/16/1900). This was the second visit of an Uncle Tom's Cabin show. The play, based on the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe and first produced in New York at the National Theatre on August 23, 1852 is credited with bringing more people to the theatre than any dozen other plays during its sixty years of popularity.¹⁹

The return of Porter J. White and Faust concluded the appearances of traveling shows for the year on November 24 (News, 11/23/1900), but the Greenville Opera Company performed H. M. S. Pinafore as the final production of the year. The group, which had spent considerable time and money to organize and train the 40-member cast and eight-member orchestra, had been very successful in Greenville. They anticipated a large crowd at Belding for the 35¢ tickets (News, 11/30/1900).

1901

When 1901 dawned Belding found itself nearing the peak of prosperity which the town had enjoyed since 1899.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Mantle, Burns, Best Plays of 1899-1909. (Philadelphia: Blakiston Company, 1900), p. 390.

The town, still growing, now had 4000 inhabitants who were actively seeking improvements and modernization. In March the Banner asked editorially.

What about paving Main Street this spring? Must we continue to have mud a foot deep during wet weather upon our principal thoroughfare for a while longer or will a start be made now towards paving?²⁰

In April several citizens submitted a petition to the City Council for sidewalks on Main Street. At the same meeting, the Council decided to pave Main Street.²¹ In May a road grader arrived for sixty days.²² The Banner suggested in the same month that the city rebate a per cent of the cost to all citizens who would put cement sidewalks in front of their properties.²³ The City Council accepted a petition for new sewer construction at its May 17 meeting²⁴ and shade trees, ordered in April, were set out to beautify the streets.²⁵

The Belding boom was large indeed as the Banner indicated on April 4.

During the past week this city has been visited by a number of gentlemen interested in the firm of Belding Brothers and Company, and such called into consultation regarding the new factory to be built here at once. .

²⁰Belding Banner, March 14, 1901.

²¹Council record, April 8, 1901.

²²Ibid., May 10, 1901.

²³Belding Banner, May 30, 1901.

²⁴Council record, May 17, 1901.

²⁵Ibid., April 19, 1901.

As soon as plans can be completed the contract will be let and work will be under way in less than four weeks, the expectation being to have all completed, machinery installed and ready to operate in about four months.

But this is not all. There are other important and extensive building improvements that are certainly coming this present season. Details have not been settled yet so that we can give our readers very definite information. One of the things receiving consideration is the building of a fine large business block on the vacant corner east of Hotel Belding, the upper part of which should contain a modern, commodious, up-to-date opera house. If this is not carried out, the present opera house will be remodeled and enlarged by adding about 15 feet more on the north end, raising the roof, enlarging stage, and building gallery.

The construction of the electric line is now considered certain this season and will help the boom along. The only trouble is where will the new families live. Houses are going to be a premium inside of a month and there ought to be a hundred houses built here this season. There are mighty few unemployed men in the city now and with the amount of additional work now in sight there certainly will be a lot of new people required here.²⁶

New industry, new electric power, the possibility of a whole new business block with a new opera house, the need for new housing - all were part of the growing community in 1901. Education also got a boost that year. The University of Chicago placed Belding High School on the approved list and Belding graduates were accepted without examination. During the summer teachers attended

²⁶Belding Banner, April 4, 1901.

Hillsdale College and Oxford College in Ohio.²⁷ Rumors spread that Yerington's College wanted to locate in Belding, providing suitable buildings could be found.²⁸

The success of Belding, the city, was in a great portion due to the success of the Belding Brothers and their silk business. A Detroit journalist asked A. N. Belding to account for his success in an interview in 1901. His answer helps show why the city was so prosperous and hints at what was later to cause its decline.

I think our success is accounted for in the fact that we have produced the best product it was possible to build and that we have produced our product cheaply. We run our own boarding house here for the girls in our employ if they wish to live in it. We have built such perfect mills that our insurance rate is the lowest obtainable, one-fifth of one per cent, and we employ only intelligent American labor. Indeed, all the girls in our employ here in Belding are the daughters of farmers, who have come to town to work in our mills preferring such work to the farm drudgery.

Belding is a city of labor, a city in which labor is honored, and respected, and here morality is not at a premium, as in so many mill towns. Despite the fact that there are 800 girls, ranging in age from 16 to 28 employed in the two mills of Belding: girls who are away from home, and acting on their own responsibility, only twice in the last ten years has there been anything approaching a "mill scandal" in this model town. The young women employed in the big establishments are not hollow-eyed and wan. Their cheeks and the lines of their bodies

²⁷Ibid., June 20, 1901.

²⁸Ibid., April 11, 1901.

show that there is good, rich, red blood flowing through their arteries. They look well-fed, not half-starved, as look girls in so many mills. Many wear eye glasses, but not because their eyes are not normal. They wear glasses as the watchmaker wears the single glass, to make their eyes more acute than normal.²⁹

These young women comprised a very important part of the Belding Opera House audience. As many would go as could get dates for a performance and, according to Wes Porter, getting a date in Belding at this time was no problem. "All a fellow had to do was walk past one of those boarding houses and he'd have a girl on his arm."³⁰ Porter also indicates that groups of girls often went unescorted. This was possible because they had independent incomes of six dollars per week for their sixty hours work and only had to pay two dollars per week room and board. Money for such activities as those at the Opera House remained even after sending a portion to their families.³¹

In the conclusion of his article on A. N. Belding in the Detroit Journal, Mr. Harriman gives a good description of Belding during this period and explains how the citizens saw their city.

The people of Belding see a great future

²⁹Ibid., April 18, 1901.

³⁰Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

³¹Belding Banner, April 18, 1901.

for their town. Its growth has been steady for the past ten years. There is not a rickety building in it. Its main street is lined with stone and brick stores, mostly two stories in height, but so constructed that another or two more stories may be added at will. Just now ground is being broken for the erection of a new mill by the Beldings opposite the model hotel. In this mill silk fabric, that is, cloth will be manufactured and employment will be given 500 more hands. But silk is not the only industry of this really wonderful town. There is a refrigerator factory employing hundreds of male workers, and managed by the Belding Hall Company and a box, basket and shoe factories. It would seem, to the stranger in Belding, that its inhabitants are right in prophecy for its³² future that shall be more prolific. . .

The Belding boom was reflected in the number of theatrical companies which visited the city and in other activities which took place at the Opera House in 1901. Nine different companies performed and at least eleven other events took place. January saw three companies perform five different routines. The Jubilee Singers appeared on January 15 before a packed house (Banner, 1/17/1901). January 17 was the first night of a three-night stand by the Stark Comedy Company (Banner, 1/10/1901), and on January 31 the Young Opera Company performed (Banner, 1/24/1901).

The only event to take place in the Opera House in February was a concert by the Mozart Symphony Club on February 28 (Banner, 2/21/1901), although the John E.

³²Ibid.

Young Opera Company had been scheduled for February 30 (Banner, 2/28/1901). Whether they cancelled because there was no such date or for other reasons is not known. The date may be a misprint.

The appearance of the Mozart Symphony Club is significant because they attempted to inhibit the actions of the audience. Mr. Stoelzer, club manager, wrote Mr. Hetherington that in the past programs had been issued to the audience but that this had been discontinued as a result of complaints by attentive listeners who found it difficult to listen while others were rattling paper. As a substitute the club adopted a large 3' by 5' stage announcement placard. At the conclusion of the Banner article there appeared a program listing the various numbers. (See appendix) At the bottom of the program another announcement attempted to restrain the audience: "As the last number is a patriotic selection the audience is requested to refrain from adjusting their wraps, etc. until the close."³³

The appearance of P. S. Henson on March 21, who lectured on "Fools, Gunnery and Backbone", was the only event of the month (Banner, 3/14/1901).

April was slightly more eventful with the appearances of the Gus Sun Minstrels on April 4 (Banner,

³³Ibid., Feb. 21, 1901.

3/21/1901) and the Elias Day Entertainment on April 10 (Banner, 4/4/1901). One social event is recorded, a masquerade dance given for the members of the dancing class which had been meeting regularly at the Opera House (Banner, 4/4/1901).

No professional performances were held at the Opera House in May. On May 26 the Opera House was the scene of the annual union church service and on May 30 the Belding High School chorus presented the cantata "May Day" (Banner, 4/25/1901). The High School held Baccalaureate at the Opera House on June 16 and Commencement exercises there on June 20 (Banner, 6/13/1901).

June is an exceedingly important month because it marks the announcement of the beginning of construction on the addition to the Opera House. An article in the Banner gives the following account of this construction.

The contracts have been let for the contemplated improvements in the Belding Opera House and work has commenced. J. F. Huntley and Co. who are building the new factory and Fales livery barn, also secured the contract on this and began to prepare for the foundations Monday. An addition of 20 feet will be built on the rear end of the block and it will be carried 20 feet higher than the present building. The object of the extra height is so that instead of using the present style of draw scenery, nothing but drops will be used which can be drawn up out of sight and out of the way when not in use leaving the stage entirely clear at all times of all scenery not in actual use. This gives more room, is a great deal easier and quicker done and is the plan now in vogue

in all the best and up to date theatres in the country. This means of course that the present outfit of scenery will be rendered useless here and a complete new outfit has been ordered from a Chicago establishment making a speciality of that work, at large expense.

The stage will be moved back sufficiently to give room for about eight more rows of seats, increasing the seating capacity of the house about 170, and yet having a stage considerably larger than before. The opening arch also will be made about two feet higher, and there will be sufficient room so that any company coming here having special scenery can use it, and plays can be put on as well mounted here as they can in any but the largest theatres in the large cities. This has not been the case in the past as we all very well know, and many companies that have played here have been unable to do themselves justice on that account. It will mean in the future a better class of plays than the average of the past, quite a number that never came here before being booked at once as soon as the improvements became a certainty.

Another great improvement which, however, will be of more interest to the players than the audience is that a series of neat, comfortable and convenient dressing rooms will be provided under the stage. The lack of proper provisions in this respect has always been a drawback to the house in the past. New seats will be purchased for the entire front or reserved portion of the house, and when it is again thrown open to the public they will find the new house a great improvement over the old.³⁴

During July and August there were, of course, no performances due to the construction but the newspaper kept local citizens up-to-date on the progress being made in the remodeling. On August 22, the Banner stated:

³⁴Ibid., June 27, 1901.

The Opera House improvement is to be even beyond original plans. The job has been let to Mr. Seitz of Grand Rapids and the entire auditorium and hallway leading to it will be beautifully frescoed and decorated. The new scenery costs \$650 and will be the best. The stage is constructed on the same plans as those of the largest and best theatres in the large cities and will have all the modern conveniences. Our people certainly cannot help but be pleased with this handsome little playhouse³⁵ when the doors are thrown open Sept. 9.

Again, a week later, a comment on the rate of construction and the announcement of the opening show appeared in the Banner.

The work upon the opera house is moving along at a rapid rate and everything will be ready and complete for the opening Sept. 9 by that popular exponent of rural comedy, J. C. Lewis in "Si Plunkard". The sale of seats will be open Monday morning next at Hotel Belding and it is expected that with the popularity of the company and the wish to be present at the reopening of the house there will be a big rush for seats and it is not improbable that the entire house may be sold out on that day. Better be on hand early if you want to³⁶ secure good seats. Prices 35¢ and 50¢.

Indeed, the remodeled Belding Opera House did open September 9, 1901 with J. C. Lewis and his Big Comedy Company in a production of Si Plunkard. A review of the opening in the following issue of the Belding Banner indicated that extensive rain had reduced the

³⁵Ibid., August 22, 1901.

³⁶Ibid., August 29, 1901.

crowd but that there was still a good house with door receipts exceeding \$200. Mention was made of 240 new opera chairs which were purchased for the reserved seat section, bringing the total seating capacity to over 600. The article further states:

The new scenery is very fine and reflects great credit upon their artists, W. Monsel Minor & Bros. of Chicago. There are two drop curtains, one entitled "A Venetian Festival" and the other a fine advertising curtain and the following sets: parlor, plain chamber, kitchen, garden, wood, landscape, set cottage, set rock, rocky pass, set bridge. The carpet, curtains and draperies are all new. . . .

Mr. J. C. Lewis spoke in highly complimentary terms of the house, declaring that it was now as fine and convenient a little theatre as he knew of in a city of this size. The stage, he said, was plenty large enough for the presentation of any show which could be booked here.³⁷

The death of William McKinley caused the cancellation at the last moment of Rice and Mack who were to have performed on September 19. The mayor of the city of Belding proclaimed that all places of business would be closed and that public memorial services would be held in honor of the dead president on September 19 at the Opera House (Banner, 9/19/1901).

October productions included Little Trixie on October 4 (Banner, 9/26/1901), The Man from Mexico on October 25, and the opening party of the concert

³⁷ Ibid., Sept. 12, 1901.

orchestra on October 26 (Banner, 10/31/1901).

For November 15, the Opera House booked a melo-dramatic production of The Span of Life in which "the world's most famous acrobats, the Domanzittas, form the human bridge 30 feet above the stage over which three people run to safety" (Banner, 11/7/1901).

However, the night of November 14 proved to have a more dramatic effect on the theatrical life of Belding than even the Domanzittas could provide the following night. The Powers Opera House in Grand Rapids burned on November 14. As a result, Manager Hetherington was able to secure for Belding Harry Glazier in Robert Louis Stevenson's Prince Otto which included all the scenic equipment and all the costumes used during the New York run (Banner, 11/14/1901 and News, 11/15/1901). The play, which had run forty performances beginning September 3, 1900 at Wallack's Theatre, had been adapted from the novel and produced by Otis Skinner.³⁸ The Belding performance took place on November 21 with all the reserved seats sold out prior to the performance. Hetherington was praised for persuading the company to give Belding preference over Ionia or Greenville (Banner, 11/21/1901).

The night after the performance the Belding News stated:

³⁸ Mantle, p. 368.

It was a case of "Go Away Back and Sit Down" if you didn't have a reserved seat at the opera house last night, the occasion being Harry Glazier in "Prince Otto". By all means it was the finest production ever witnessed in Belding.³⁹

In the following edition of the Belding Banner a review of the show appeared. In it the director of the company was quoted as saying that they had come expecting to lose money but were surprised and also "pleased with the Opera House, elegant hotel accommodations, and the general thrifty and prosperous appearance of our city."⁴⁰

A very active theatrical year was completed at the Opera House by a performance of the Hungarian Court Orchestra of Budapest, well received by Belding citizens (Banner, 11/28/1901), and the appearance on December 10 of Charles Cowles and his group of character comedians (Banner, 12/5/1901).

1902

Unfortunately, no copies of either the Belding Banner or the Belding News are available for 1902. It may be reasonably assumed that 1902 was a very active year since it followed so closely the remodeling of the Opera House and it is quite possible that other companies

³⁹Belding News, November 15, 1901.

⁴⁰Belding Banner, November 28, 1901.

were rescheduled from Grand Rapids as a result of the Powers Opera House fire.

1903

The year 1903 brought appearances by seventeen professional companies. The first company produced A Bunch of Keys on January 9. According to the advertisements it had appeared 350 times in New York although when is not clear (Banner, 1/15/1903). No reference is made to this play in Best Plays of 1899-1909. As a part of the Lyceum course Elbert Hubbard and Fra Elbirtus came on January 28 (Banner, 1/15/1903).

A Children's Grand Carnival was held on February 6 at the Opera House and the Peet Brothers provided entertainment on February 9 in an effort to raise money for a piano at the high school (Banner, 2/5/1903). The George H. Lott Concert Company performed at the Opera House on February 22 as part of the concert course (Banner, 2/19/1903). The Markle-Harder Stock Company produced Caught in a Web on February 23 and 24 (Banner, 2/12/1903).

Ritchies Unique Entertainers appeared on March 17 in Peoples Popular Course (Banner, 3/12/1903). A misfortune befell the group while in Belding. Mr. Ritchie, a sleight of hand man, injured one of his canaries during the performance and it died the next morning before the group left for Manistee (Banner, 3/19/1903).

Nettie DeCoursey and Mae Cody starred in Orphan's

Prayer, a pastoral comedy, on March 31 (Banner, 3/19/1903). The Banner noted that "Miss Cody promised to wear during this organization's appearance here the same stunning gowns that have won her so much free newspaper notoriety."⁴¹

Honorable Charles A. Landis gave a political speech on April 16 at the Opera House, followed on April 17 by a production of A Royal Slave (Banner, 4/2/1903). The Home Talent Dramatic Club presented a "modernized" version of A Merchant of Venice on April 24 (Banner, 4/2/1903). The production was advertised widely for the whole month prior to the performance. One advertisement states that ". . . daintiness of its love scenes, briskness of its action and the quaint breeziness of its humor combine to make it an ideal play."⁴²

My Friend from Arkansas, given on May 1, was the only theatrical performance of the month (Banner, 4/30/1903). The Kelly and Mack Company were to have appeared on May 16 but they cancelled the date (Banner, 5/14/1903). Decoration Day exercises were held at the Opera House in memory of the dead soldiers of the community on May 30 (Banner, 5/28/1903).

The Franklin Stock Company came to Belding with

⁴¹Ibid., March 26, 1903.

⁴²Ibid., April 16, 1903.

three productions: A Man of Mystery, Under Two Flags, and the Octoroon for three nights, June 4, 5, and 6 (Banner, 6/4/1903). Of the three plays Under Two Flags was the best known. It ran 135 performances and was first produced by Charles Frohman in arrangement with David Belasco at the Garden Theatre in New York on February 5, 1901.⁴³ As was customary, Baccalaureate was held at the Opera House on June 21 followed by Commencement exercises on June 25 (Banner, 5/11/1903).

In July the Opera House took on a new function. For the first time on record it housed evangelistic services. The Church of Christ revival services began on July 12 and continued, well attended, for one month nightly; the services resulted in many baptisms. On one occasion over 200 people from Ionia heard Rev. Kindred, a forceful evangelistic speaker. New competition, a tent show of Uncle Tom's Cabin, appeared for several nights during the time the Opera House was hosting the revival meeting (Banner, 6/16/1903). Such tent shows were to add to the decline of the Opera House as they grew in popularity.

At Cripple Creek, which had played in New York, Chicago, and Detroit appeared on August 18. A crowded opera house received an excellent performance (Banner,

⁴³Mantle, p. 387.



Fig. 17. Play Bills on Dressing Room Wall.

8/13/1903). A Country Kid, which had played the two nights before at the Phelps Opera House in Greenville, came to Belding on August 27 (Banner, 8/27/1903).

September 7 marked the return of Gordon and Bennet's production of A Royal Slave after 103 consecutive nights in Philadelphia and one week in Grand Rapids. It drew a packed house even though it had appeared in Belding the previous year. The company promised to return to Belding with Holy City during the 1904 season (Banner, 9/10/1903).

On September 17, J. C. Lewis appeared with a bigger production of Si Plunkard than had visited Belding for the reopening of the Opera House in 1901. One of the advertisements shows a "black face" picture of Billy Clark, one of the cast members, in his "famous mind wandering pose" (Banner, 9/17/1903). The month ended with Missouri Girl on September 29 (Banner, 9/24/1903).

The biggest attraction in October was the production of Quincy Adams Sawyer which had played 36 performances at the Academy of Music in New York, beginning August 7, 1902. It played in Belding October 13. Manager Hetherington noted in regard to the performance that no latecomers would be seated until the act was completed (Banner, 8/20/1903). Montana Outlaw was billed for October 26 (Banner, 10/22/1903).

As a part of the concert course, Nellie Peck

Saunders Company appeared on November 20 (Banner, 11/5/1903). On November 25, Henry Arthur Jones, E. S. Willard and Horace Lewis starred in The Middleman (Banner, 11/12/1903). Willard was an actor and producer of some stature. His debut and that of Middleman in New York came on November 10, 1890. In 1900, 1902, and again in 1905, Willard and his company produced a repertory of plays at the Garden Theatre.⁴⁴ Willard was probably the best known actor and producer ever to appear in Belding.

On December 4 the Slayton's Women's Symphony held a concert at the Opera House (Banner, 11/26/1903). The Convict's Daughter played December 15 (Banner, 12/3/1903). The Colonial Moving Picture Company showed a moving picture of a theatre production of Uncle Tom's Cabin on December 28 (Banner, 12/24/1903).

1904

The year 1904 proved to be a big year at the Belding Opera House. A total of twenty professional productions took place over the year. The first scheduled play, The Merchant of Venice with Elmer Buffham and Charles Pierson, both veterans of the New York stage, failed to appear because of Mr. Buffham's illness (News, 1/8/1904). The Old Plantation, a story of chivalry and romance set in the old South, did appear on January 14

⁴⁴Mantle, p. 384.

as scheduled (News, 1/8/1904). Two nights before the Boston Ladies' Symphony Orchestra had entertained local citizens as part of the concert course (News, 1/8/1904).

Six weeks passed before the next performance, a production of the Minister's Daughter, on February 25 (News, 2/19/1904). The schedule of this traveling company is interesting to note. They played at the New Majestic in Grand Rapids on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; at the Belding Opera House on Thursday; at Saginaw, Friday; at Bay City, Saturday; and then jumped down to Toledo. Mr. Hetherington kept the price of tickets at 50¢ although it was reported that this company was drawing 75¢ and \$1.50 in the other towns (News, 2/19/1904). Hetherington was well pleased with the packed Opera House and the audience found the production one of the best shows ever to come to Belding (News, 2/26/1904).

Three traveling companies came to Belding in March. John Sturgeon starred in Alexander Dumas' Count of Monte Cristo on March 17 (News, 3/11/1904). Although Sturgeon does not appear in Who's Who in the Theatre, he was billed as having played beside such noted actors as Edwin Booth, Lawrence Barret, Joseph Haworth and Fredrick Ward. The second play presented during the month was A Run on the Bank on March 24 (News, 3/18/1904), followed on March 31 by Gorton's Minstrels which included several European novelty acts (News, 3/25/1904).

On April 11 A Romance of Coon Hollow, then in its tenth season, appeared at the Opera House. The show originally played at the Fourteenth Street Theatre in New York. The scenery and effects were by Ackerman of New York and included a dynamite scene and a steamboat race (News, 4/8/1904). The show came to Belding from Ludington and continued on to Saginaw.

The Lyman Twins appeared on April 21 in their successful musical comedy At the Races (News, 4/15/1904). Thomas Green had been scheduled as a lecturer sometime in April but cancelled once and then rescheduled; in the end he lectured at the Disciple Church (News, 4/8/1904).

Mary Queen of Scots was to have been presented under the auspices of the ladies of the Methodist Church. Announcements of the coming production were made on April 1, 8, and 15 stating that the play would be presented soon and that tickets could be purchased for 35¢. No other mention was made about the production so it is unknown if the performance actually took place and if so, exactly when (News, 4/1/1904).

During May three plays "held the boards" at the Opera House. The first, Old Arkansaw, was presented on May 10 (News, 4/22/1904), and the second, Legally Dead, a four-act comedy by Eunice Fitch, appeared on May 17 (News, 5/13/1904). The latter production included two child artists, Hazel and Harry Shannon. The third play,

Joshua Simpkins, a realistic pastoral comedy, finished the spring season on May 23. This company carried its own orchestra and held a band parade at noon (News, 5/20/1904).

Three months lapsed before activities began again at the Opera House on August 22 with A Royal Slave (See Fig. 20), a play well known from previous seasons to Belding residents. Scenes from the play depicted a great tropical palm island by moonlight, the gorgeous palace of the king, and a great volcano erupting. The company carried a whole carload of scenic effects and a cast of thirty (News, 8/19/1904).

The Hoosier Girl, by Dave B. Lewis, a satire dealing with mannerisms and customs of the natives of Indiana, rounded out the month on August 30 (News, 8/26/1904).

The new lecture course which had been held at the Opera House since 1895 moved to the Disciple Church because rent was only \$10 per appearance there while Hetherington charged \$20 for the Opera House (News, 9/2/1904).

A Devil's Lane appeared on September 12 (News, 9/12/1904). On September 19 a production of Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House starred Clara Thropp as Nora. Mr. Hetherington raised the ticket price to 75¢ but in Lansing where the company had last played tickets had

been \$1.50 (News, 9/16/1904). A Doll's House was first produced in New York on December 21, 1889 at the Palmer's Theatre, but had most recently been revived at the Manhattan Theatre in May 1902.⁴⁵

On October 5 Micheal Strogoff, a drama of the Russo-Japanese War, held the stage at the Opera House. The company carried a carload of electrical and scenic effects plus 20 performers (News, 9/30/1904). The Gus Sun Minstrels displayed their talents for Belding residents on October 1 (News, 10/1/1904). The Mitchell Lawman Company presented Ten Nights in a Bar Room October 18 (News, 10/14/1904) and Porter J. White's Faust returned to Belding on October 22 (News, 10/20/1904).

The new month's activities at the Opera House opened with speeches by Senator James Helme, A. B. Morse and James Scully on November 4 (News, 10/27/1904). Allen Villair and Company in The Heart of Texas ran for three nights and a matinee beginning November 10. As a gimmick to increase attendance, ladies were admitted to the best 30¢ seats for 15¢ on Thursday night with tickets bought before 7 p.m. (News, 11/3/1904).

November concluded with what the Philadelphia Record called ". . . a scenic production in play form of the best New England story ever written. It is

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 411.

sweetly natural as the breath of the fields."⁴⁶ The play, Quincy Adams Sawyer, was presented on November 19 for 75¢, 50¢ and 35¢ for children (News, 11/17/1904). This same production had appeared in Belding in 1903.

The year ended with The Real Widow Brown on December 6 (News, 12/1/1904) and the romantic melodrama, When the Bell Tolls, on December 29 (News, 12/22/1904).

The Opera House employed seven local men in 1904 besides the Manager W. P. Hetherington. Wes Porter was stage manager; Edgar Stanton, Electrician; C. Piefer, stage carpenter; William Fish, property man, advertising agent and bill poster; J. E. Ferguson, M.S., Physician; and I. L. Hubbell, Attorney. Except for the stage manager, all jobs were part-time and non-paying.⁴⁷

1905

Twenty-two professional theatrical companies "held the boards" at the Opera House in 1905. The first appearance in the new year, however, was a lecture given by Eli Perkins and sponsored by the Baptist Church (News, 1/5/1905). An Orphan's Prayer, billed as "sweet, pathetic, and soul-stirring" was the dramatic offering on January 10. The Ionia County Farmers Institute used the Opera House on January 12 (News, 1/5/1905).

⁴⁶Belding News, November 17, 1904.

⁴⁷Belding Boomerang, Dec. 1904.

The Old Clothes Man appeared on February 8 after being postponed from January 27. The play showed how "Hebrews, despite reputed love for amassment of wealth, possess an exquisite sense of humor" (News, 1/19/1905).

Thomas J. Smith starred in Rowland and Clifford's production of the Irish comedy, The Gamekeeper, on March 10 (News, 3/2/1905). Theatre-goers saw My Friend from Arkansaw on March 23 (News, 3/16/1905).

A benefit ball honored Arthur Chickering on April 14 (News, 3/23/1905). The Two Orphans by Lillian Lyons and Company played on April 17 as the month's only road show (News, 4/13/1905). The play had been first produced on December 21, 1874 at the Union Square Theatre in New York and was revived at the New Amsterdam Theatre for 56 performances beginning March 28, 1904.⁴⁸ The Lyman Twins came to Belding on April 26 in At the Races (News, 4/20/1905).

Two companies traveled to Belding in May: Gordon and Bennett's production of Holy City on May 5 (News, 4/27/1905) and Margaret Ralph in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew on May 22. The latter was modified to meet the requirements of the audiences to which it played (News, 5/11/1905).

The Modern Woodsmen Association gave Belding

⁴⁸ Mantle, p. 456.

theatre-goers an evening's entertainment on June 15 when they presented Gay Mr. Davis with all local talent (News, 6/8/1905).

On August 3 the professional performances began again with Si Plunkard on the Belding stage. New raised seats would, according to the Belding News, make old-style neck craning unnecessary (News, 7/27/1905). Although Wes Porter, stage manager at this time, does not remember the floor being ever anything but flat, it appears that something did happen in the summer of 1905 to facilitate better viewing by those in the rear of the audience.

The Middleton Stock Company began a three-night stand on August 10 with three plays: Beyond the Law, Just Plain Folks, and Dangers of a Great City (News, 8/10/1905). What Women will Do, presented by the Holden Brothers Company on August 25, completed the month (News, 8/17/1905).

During September the Opera House hosted A Royal Slave on September 15; Trilby, September 20; and A Prince of Love, September 30 (News, 9/7/1905). Trilby was the road version of W. A. Brady's New York revival which had had 24 performances at the New Amsterdam Theatre in May 1905. The play had originally been produced on May 22, 1895 at the Garden Theatre.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 491.

Four traveling companies passed through Belding in October. The Porter J. White production of Faust returned on October 4 with ". . . the acme of stage realism - the startling electric effect, the duel of death. . . Mephisto kills Valentine with an electric sword." (News, 9/27/1905). On October 9, 10 and 11 the Imperial Stock Company performed at the Opera House. At Sunrise played on October 27 and Hoosier Girl on October 31 (News, 9/7/1905).

Gorton's Minstrels displayed their talent on November 13 (News, 9/7/1905), followed by A Bell Boy on November 17 (News, 11/16/1905).

The year closed with two performances in December. The largest Uncle Tom's Cabin company ever to appear in Belding performed on December 2 (News, 11/30/1905). The Great Lighthouse Robbery concluded stage activities for the year on December 12 (News, 12/7/1905).

1906

Probably the most important theatre news of 1906 was the formation of a theatre circuit in the western Michigan area with W. P. Hetherington as president. The managers of the opera houses in Belding, Alma, Ithaca, Greenville, Big Rapids and Mt. Pleasant united in an attempt to secure better theatre attractions. The group guaranteed a week's engagement in the six neighboring

towns.⁵⁰

Lyman Howe opened 1906 with moving pictures of the surrender of Port Arthur on January 3 (News, 12/21/1906). A home talent play Under the Laurels played on February 20 to a receptive audience of local citizens (News, 2/22/1906). The Little Homestead appeared on the Belding stage March 9 (News, 3/1/1906). On March 23 the Opera House hosted a mass convention of the Good Citizen League (News, 3/22/1906).

Three events took place on the Belding stage in April: East Lynne on April 4 (News, 3/29/1906), the Ladies Chorus and Apollo Quartet of Grand Rapids on April 17 (News, 4/12/1906), and A Human Slave on April 25. The last was a social comment on the inhuman treatment of workers by some unscrupulous employers (News, 4/19/1906).

Two moving picture showings and a concert occurred in May. Liberty Moving Pictures showed silent movies at the Opera House on May 2. On May 9 a harp concert featured Miss Helena Stone (News, 4/26/1906). Moving pictures of San Francisco before and after the earthquake were shown May 24 for 15¢, 25¢, and 35¢ (News, 5/17/1906).

In June two professional companies and an amateur group shared the Opera House stage. Texas Sweethearts appeared on June 7 (News, 5/31/1906) and the Benson and

⁵⁰Belding News, January 25, 1906.

Flynn Stock Company arrived with Hazel Kirk, Loyal Hearts, and My Aunt from Brazil on June 18, 19 and 20 (News, 6/14/1906).

The Belding High School finished the month with scenes from Shakespeare on June 21 (News, 6/14/1906).

The usual summer lull in road shows was short in 1906. My Wife's Family was presented on July 25 (News, 7/17/1906). One week later on August 6, Uncle Josh Spruceby came to Belding with a hayseed band and a car-load of special scenery including a mechanized sawmill (News, 8/2/1906). On August 14 Miss Beulah Poynter starred in Lena Rivers (See Fig. 17) (News, 7/26/1906). The religious spectacular Holy City appeared on August 18 (News, 8/16/1906). An active month for Belding theatre patrons finished on August 24 with The Midnight Flyer (News, 8/23/1906).

Two companies performed at the Opera House in September: Hooligan in New York on September 14 (News, 9/6/1906) and Francis Labadie's Bostonians, a musical, novelty and moving picture company on September 29 (News, 9/27/1906).

Four professional companies shared the Opera House stage in October. A Bunch of Keys returned to Belding on October 2 (News, 9/20/1906), followed one week later by The Village Vagabond on October 9 (News, 9/4/1906), and two weeks later by the Show Girl on

October 16 (News, 9/4/1906). "A great labor union scene, big factory in full operation, realistic women's war on Blackwell Island, a courtroom scene and a great garden fire" were all part of the When Women See production when it appeared at the Opera House October 24 (News, 10/18/1906).

The Democratic campaign in 1906 closed on November 3 with addresses at the Opera House. The only play of the month was A Wife's Secret on November 7 (News, 10/25/1906), but Archie L. Shepard brought moving pictures on November 20 (News, 11/15/1906).

The year concluded with two shows: Dora Thorne on December 4 (News, 11/29/1906) and The Honeymoon on December 14 (News, 12/6/1906).

1907

The year 1907 marked the first major threat of competition to the Opera House by other entertainment media. Roller skating had become popular in surrounding communities and a rink opened in Belding in October 1907. But roller skating was a weak threat compared to the summer opening of the Bijou Theatre which showed moving pictures for 5¢.⁵¹ The Opera House had been showing moving pictures at various times for several years but at a price considerably higher than 5¢.

⁵¹Ibid., August 8, 1907.



NUMBER 20

BELDING, MARCH 11, 1907

SEASON 1906-7

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Pleases
Everybody.*

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PART I

Back to the old Plantation. Uncle
Eph comes home. The children
celebrate

Hana Slapabbae J. W. Turner
Ephraim Slapabbae B. H. Briggs
Hanna Slapabbae J. W. Turner
Ephraim, Jr. Robert Guthrie
Josephine Blanch Arlington
Julia Tip-top Gertrude Mitchell
Marie Edith Wheeler
Eph's Chum Julia Bernard
Uncle Zack's daughter Louise Turner

SOLOISTS

Big Chief Robert Guthrie
Way Down Home Bill Briggs
Kiss Me Do Gertrude Mitchell
Is Everybody Happy? Miles Dewey
Georgiaanna Daisy Fox
Trio, buck dance. Mandy, Daddy, Eph
Dear Old Georgia. Blanche Arlington
Nobody Cliff Brooks
I Wonder if they Miss Me?
..... Julia Bernard
Zacharia's Megaphone. Louis Turner
A whirlwind of buck and wing dancing
by entire Company

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"Custom Grade" Shoes stand out
from other makes like a superbly
gowned woman among the common-
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Henderson
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Fig. 18. Program, March 11, 1907.

Plays continued to come to the Opera House, however. Three shows appeared in January: Peter Paterson on January 10 (News, 1/3/1907); Human Hearts, January 16 (News, 1/10/1907); and Love in a Tangle, January 26 and 28 (News, 1/24/1907).

"A spectacular fire scene showing flames inside and outside with firemen in operation and loss of life" was one of the features of Mismated. The local production was directed by B. M. Garfield of Buffalo, N. Y. for the benefit of Knights of Pythias on February 11 and 12 (News, 1/31/1907).

Romeo and Juliet played March 1, starring Margaret Morrison and Mr. Owen of Owen and Company. Owen had played more great parts, including Hamlet, Romeo, Shylock, and Garrick, than any man his age on the stage, said the News. (News, 2/28/1907). By popular demand, Mismated, the local talent production, was repeated on March 6 (News, 2/28/1907). Rockwell's Sunny South Company played March 11.⁵² (See Fig. 18) A concert by the Glee and Mandolin Club of Kalamazoo College finished the month on March 19 (News, 3/15/1907).

The Warning Bell, an old New England scenic production by Gordon and Bennett, played April 6 (News, 4/4/1907), but the company presenting Gingerbread Man

⁵² Belding Opera House Program, March 11, 1907.

scheduled for the following week, cancelled because of a smallpox scare. The exact statement was published by the News.

The "Gingerbread Man", which was to appear at the Belding Opera House on Friday evening, April 2, will not appear on account of the existence of smallpox in this city. A representative of the show informed our reporter that he deemed it best to cancel their date here for the reason that smallpox scare here would doubtless result in a small attendance and a financial loss, on the one hand, and with the possibility that the 43 people connected with the show might be tied up here by quarantine. The necessity for cancelling the date was not only greatly regretted by Mr. Hetherington and the proprietor of the show, but by hundreds of theatre-going people in this city who have planned to see the play when presented here.⁵³

The smallpox scare must have subsided by April 19 because on that night Kate Watson and Gus Cohan appeared in Hoosier Girl at the Opera House (News, 4/18/1907).

"A play every mother and daughter should see," The Little Homestead, by W. B. Patton was staged May 1 (News, 4/25/1907). On May 13 Fred G. Conrad presented Eugene Moore in a lavish production of Monte Cristo by direct arrangement with the Dumas heirs. The advertising article carried a new approach to entice customers.

Drama lives by working on the collective sympathies of an assemblage of men and women, not insulated but in electrical contact and in such sympathies there is always and inevitably a moral element. The theatre was

⁵³Belding News, April 4, 1907.

from old, and ever will be, a school of virtue or of vice, even though it "hold a warped mirror to a gaping age." It reacts upon the manners in caricatures. There will be good plays and bad plays according to the audience attending. The demand causes the supply, as in everything else. The theatre is one of the greatest popular forms of interest and relaxation. Such plays as "Monte Cristo" which has always been considered the elder Dumas' greatest contribution to stage literature, are one of the forces that are⁵⁴ shaping the soul of mankind for good.

The Lyman Twins returned to Belding once more on May 16 in the farce-comedy The Rustlers (News, 5/9/1907). The Fool's Revenge, first performed with Edwin Booth at the Garden Theatre in New York in 1864 and revived by E. S. Willard in 1905 for his repertory company, played at the Belding Opera House on May 24 (News, 5/16/1907). Another Porter J. White Company offering, the Hidden Hand, appeared on May 30 (News, 5/30/1907).

Staged by the senior class on June 13, At the Sign of the Jack O'Lantern met great success. Commencement exercises, however, had been moved to the new high school (News, 6/13/1907). "Large, clear, bright and natural color moving pictures" were shown at the Opera House on June 24, 25, and 26 (News, 6/20/1907).

The Adorable Fritzie came to Belding on July 30 (News, 7/25/1907). In August the stage at the Opera House

⁵⁴
Ibid.

was shared by Josh Simpkins on August 14, Lyman Howe's motion pictures on August 21, and The Show Girl on August 31 (News, 7/18/1907). The Show Girl, first produced at Wallack's Theatre for 64 performances in 1902,⁵⁵ had been performed in Belding previously.

Four road shows visited Belding in September: As Told in the Hills, September 6 (News, 9/5/1907); East Lynne, September 11 (News, 7/18/1907); For Mother's Sake, September 18 (News, 9/12/1907); and Nobody's Claim, September 26 (News, 9/19/1907).

Humpty Dumpty, which had played 132 performances at the New Amsterdam Theatre in 1904 and was revived in 1906 at the New York Theatre in New York,⁵⁶ played in Belding on October 5 (News, 10/3/1907). A lecture followed on October 14 by Poet Scout Captain Jack Crawford (News, 10/10/1907). The Nellie Kennedy Company appeared for three nights October 10, 11 and 12 (News, 10/10/1907). Gorton's Minstrels completed the month with an appearance on October 22 (News, 10/17/1907).

A "mammoth scenic and electrical spectacular revival" of the original version of Uncle Tom's Cabin took place at the Opera House on November 4 (News, 10/24/1907). The Missouri Girl closed the year's theatrical

⁵⁵Mantle, p. 409.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 473.

events at the Opera House on November 8 (News, 11/7/1907). Nothing happened at the Opera House in December although the Bijou Theatre hosted a variety show in conjunction with its moving pictures.

1908

Moving picture competition accelerated greatly in 1908 with the opening of three new 5¢ theatres - Wilson, Star and Royal. These theatres often had vaudeville acts along with the moving pictures. This increased competition was reflected at the Opera House where the number of professional companies decreased to sixteen from over twenty-three the previous year.

J. C. Rockwell's New Sunny South Company, an all-Negro organization, opened the new year on January 30 at the Opera House (Banner, 1/23/1908). On February 10, Uncle Josh Jenkins, a New England comedy, came to Belding (Banner, 2/6/1908).

The Kalamazoo College Glee and Mandolin Club, which had been so well received in 1907, returned to the Opera House on March 14 under the sponsorship of the Baptist Young Peoples Society (Banner, 3/5/1908). The Little Prospector with Chic Perkins appeared on March 20, followed six nights later on March 26 by David Edwin's Ma's New Husband, produced by Harry Scott and Company (Banner, 3/19/1908).

The only event to take place at the Opera House

in April was a citizens' meeting to suggest and arrange entertainment for the summer season and make arrangements for the governor's visit (Banner, 4/25/1908). For the benefit of the Holy Trinity Mission a local talent group staged Sleeping Beauty on May 12 and 13 (Banner, 4/30/1908). Richard and Pringle's Minstrels, billed as the oldest in the business, booked Belding for May 19 (Banner, 5/14/1908). On May 29 J. C. Lewis' production of Si Plunkard, well known to Belding residents, reappeared (Banner, 5/28/1908). Masque of Culture, the senior class play, was presented on June 24 (Banner, 6/18/1908).

After six weeks of inactivity events began again at the Opera House on August 6 with Miss Mary Carew starring in the Moonshiner's Daughter (Banner, 7/30/1908). Pathe's Vaudeville Company performed on August 17 and 18 at the Opera House (Banner, 8/13/1908), followed by Bunco in Arizona on August 25 (Banner, 8/20/1908).

September's only performance was Fred Raymond's melodrama Old Arkansas on September 19. On the previous Tuesday it had been in Ionia where it had pleased a full house (Banner, 9/19/1908). Lena Rivers which appeared on October 7 came to Belding from an engagement in Petoskey (Banner, 10/1/1908). On October 18 the Opera House patrons saw Quincy Adams Sawyer which, since its last appearance in Belding, had had a successful run in New York (Banner, 10/8/1908).

The musical comedy District Leader was presented by a 42-member cast on November 5 (Banner, 10/22/1908). The show had played at Wallack's Theatre in New York, beginning April 30, 1906.⁵⁷ Germain the Wizard, recognized as the greatest magician on the platform, appeared on November 11 (Banner, 11/5/1908).

The West Henry Stock Company closed the year on December 7, 8 and 9 with 10¢, 20¢ and 30¢ tickets, the lowest prices in many years (Banner, 12/3/1908).

1909

Only thirteen professional theatre companies appeared in Belding in 1909, a drop of two from 1908 and nine from 1907. The first event to take place at the Opera House in the year was an amateur production of Cinderella and the Glass Slipper on January 28 and 29. The show played to a full house on opening night, but a bad storm diminished the crowd on the second night; still the sponsoring group, the St. Mary's Guild, made \$105 profit (Banner, 2/4/1909).

On February 4 the local theatre-goers were treated to an excellent production of the well-known play David Garrick, (Banner, 1/28/1909) which had first been produced in London in 1864 and in New York at Wallack's Theatre in 1873.⁵⁸ The romantic actor Clifton Malory

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 514.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 568.

played the title role.

The Opera House became the scene of citizens' meetings on March 7 and 14 to listen to speakers and discuss "the local option" - whether Belding would continue to be a "wet" (where alcoholic beverages could be served) community or whether it would become "dry". Such meetings always opened with the singing of "America" and a prayer. Local quartets and similar groups performed between speeches (Banner, 3/11/1909).

W. P. Hetherington, Opera House manager, made a move in March to absorb at least part of his competition. On March 18 the Belding Banner announced that P. J. Andrews, proprietor of the Royal Theatre, and Hetherington had formed a partnership designed to enable amusement-loving people to witness the best class of moving pictures in comfortable seats and without having to wait in line on busy nights. A fire-proof projection room was installed at the Opera House for safety.⁵⁹ The Banner article marks the first and only admission by Hetherington that movies had made their influence felt in the theatre world. The article continued by saying:

The moving picture business has made such inroads into the business of the regular traveling theatrical companies that Mr. Hetherington has found the Opera House an elephant on his hands, so has decided to try this venture with Mr. Andrews. Of

⁵⁹Belding Banner, March 18, 1909.

course, should any theatrical companies desire to book for this city, the picture show will stand aside for a night, but otherwise the public will find the Opera House open on every weekday for their entertainment.⁶⁰

The Opera House opened in this capacity on March 27, 1909 (Banner, 3/25/1909).

O Scar O'Shea in King of Tramps held the stage on April 1 at the Opera House (Banner, 3/25/1909). Three nights later on April 3 a mass meeting for men only was held at the Opera House to discuss the "local option" issue (Banner, 4/1/1909). When We Were Friends by W. B. Patton appeared on April 13. An article in the same issue of the Banner as that play advertisement noted that Belding had gone "dry" (Banner, 4/8/1909).

Nothing else was staged until the senior class play Mose on June 15 (Banner, 6/10/1909). Another local talent production Master Man followed on July 20 (Banner, 7/15/1909).

Stage productions were few in the spring and summer, but the Opera House still functioned with success as a moving picture house. In July Hetherington bought the equipment from his partner P. J. Andrews and the Opera House was reported to be a very popular place of entertainment on week nights because of its fine, unobjectionable pictures, and its ample comfortable seating

⁶⁰Ibid.

space (Banner, 7/29/1909).

A calendar of theatre events to take place in the coming months at the Opera House and printed in the Belding Banner noted that moving pictures would be shown between all acts at every performance. The fall season opened in August with three plays offered to theatre patrons: Moonshiner's Daughter, August 10 (Banner, 8/5/1909); Lena Rivers, August 19 (Banner, 8/12/1909); and As Told in the Hills, August 26 (Banner, 8/19/1909).

In September Belding citizens had an opportunity to attend a production at the Opera House once a week. The Angle and the Ox appeared September 1 (Banner, 7/29/1909). Cow Puncher, written by Hal Reid, came on September 8 (Banner, 9/2/1909). The Girl from the U.S.A. traveled to Belding on September 17 after a run in Fort Wayne, Indiana (Banner, 9/9/1909). A portion of a poster advertising this play still hangs on an Opera House wall. A new play by W. B. Patton, Blockhead, was presented on September 21 (Banner, 9/16/1909).

At this time the Belding Banner tried to give the Opera House a needed boost and encourage better attendance.

The Opera House since its enlargement and convenient dressing rooms under the stage is attracting plays and players who give high class entertainments and Mr. Hetherington is entitled to much credit for booking fine plays and giving our citizens an opportunity of witnessing some of the best dramatic talent and high class operas. Among the excellent entertainments which have been given there of late

were "The Blockhead", "As Told in the Hills", and "The Girl That's All the Candy", the latter being given last Saturday night, which drew a good house and was greatly enjoyed. It costs a lot of money to get good plays here and they should be encouraged when they do come by good patronage.⁶¹

The Girl That's All Candy, which appeared at the Opera House on October 2 (Banner, 9/30/1909), had a drama attached which was not part of the script. Miss Bernice Cunningham of Lansing had run away from home and joined the company as part of a chorus line. Her father, George Cunningham, followed her to Belding to take her home. Mr. Cunningham proved persuasive for the Belding Banner reported: "Miss Cunningham, who had become stage-struck and ran away with the company, was willing to accompany her father home, as abbreviated lingerie did not seem to appeal to her as strongly as it did at first."⁶²

Harry Shannon's comedy, The Banker's Child, on October 19 and Uncle Tom's Cabin on October 22 finished the theatrical activities at the Opera House for the month (Banner, 10/14/1909).

Lyman H. Howe's travel festival of motion pictures arrived on November 2 with pictures of Algeria and "other places where the average traveler never went" (Banner, 10/21/1909). This was the only event aside from regular

⁶¹ Belding Banner, October 7, 1909.

⁶² Ibid.

movies at the Opera House in November, and December offered little more. A jubilee group called the Southland Nightingales did perform on December 8 after the junior class play Flowerland had been presented on December 3 (Banner, 11/25/1909).

1910

No professional theatre activities took place in January 1910 at the Opera House but in February two shows passed through Belding. The weird melodrama The House of a Thousand Candles which had originally run two weeks at New York's Daly Theatre in January 1908 appeared on the Belding stage February 17 (Banner, 2/10/1910). The Toymakers, a musical absurdity by Charles F. Pidgin, played on February 24 (Banner, 2/17/1910).

Local talent of the Ladies' Social Circle opened the new month on March 1 and 2 with Kittie O'Connor, a romantic Irish drama, and grossed \$211.75 (Banner, 3/3/1910). The professionals returned to the stage on March 8 with The Man on the Box (Banner, 3/3/1910). The Belding High School Athletic Association brought the Kalamazoo Glee Club to Belding on March 14 (Banner, 3/10/1910). On March 21 the Barteno Vaudeville Company performed and two nights later, March 23, The Texas Cattle King was presented (Banner, 3/17/1910).

For the second time in six months, Lyman Howe's picture company came to the city. His Travel Festival,

which appeared April 7, this time included Switzerland, Scotland, India and the U.S. Army (Banner, 3/24/1910).

Ferocious Siberian wolves in a realistic snow-storm were the featured attraction of Daniel Boone of the Trail, the next performance on April 18 (Banner, 4/4/1910). The last production of the month was by J. C. Rockwell's New Sunny South Company on April 25. They advertised themselves as "entirely different from other colored companies - clean to a fault and not a line or action to which exception could be taken." They carried a band and held a parade at noon (Banner, 4/21/1910).

A Texas Ranger, with brass band and orchestra, appeared on May 6 (Banner, 4/28/1910), followed by a local talent production of Gipsy Rover on May 11 and 12 given for Holy Trinity Mission (Banner, 5/19/1910). A dramatized version of St. Elmo, a famous novel of the South, was presented on May 21 for 75¢ and \$1 (Banner, 5/19/1910). On June 15 the senior class play, The Deacon's Second Wife, brought live drama to a close until fall (Banner, 6/9/1910).

Stereoptican pictures of Joliet prison, with a lecture and vaudeville acts, entertained citizens at the Opera House on June 23 (Banner, 6/23/1910). Stereoptican and other forms of moving pictures lacked the sophistication of our movies today and were often criticized, as would be their successor television, for having damaging

effects upon the eyes. One such criticism appeared in the Belding Banner on the same page with advertisements for the 5¢ moving pictures. ". . . Flickering of moving pictures attended almost nightly for two months by a Mr. Britt is said to have aggravated former eye trouble until he is almost blind."⁶³

August began a more active fall season. Four companies appeared in Belding during that month. The Girl From Home opened the season on August 11 (Banner, 9/4/1910) and the rural comedy, The Farmer's Daughter, followed on August 18 (Banner, 9/11/1910). On August 24 The Vulture starred Miss Allie Ehismore at a slight raise in prices to 25¢, 35¢, 50¢ and 75¢ (Banner, 9/18/1910). The Girl from U.S.A. returned on August 30 (Banner, 9/25/1910).

"An audience. . . altogether too small for a production of such merit" was on hand at the Opera House on September 6 for The Bowery Detective (Banner, 9/8/1910). Joshua Simpkins, in its twelfth year, played at the Opera House on September 12 (Banner, 9/22/1910) and The College Boy appeared on September 22 and 23 (Banner, 9/22/1910).

Two plays were presented to the public in October: Lena Rivers on October 7 (Banner, 9/22/1910) and The Candy Girl on October 27 (Banner, 10/20/1910). Lyman Howe and

⁶³Ibid., July 7, 1910.

his Travel Festival came to Belding once again on October 31, this time with pictures of King Edward's funeral, the Japanese jubilee, fiords of Norway, the Eiffel Tower and Mt. Etna in eruption (Banner, 10/6/1910).

Little happened on the stage at the Opera House in November and December. A November 3 Republican rally (Banner, 11/3/1910) and a citizens' meeting to organize the board of trade on December 13 (Banner, 12/8/1910) were the only activities besides the senior class play produced on December 9 and entitled The Captain of Plymouth, a parody on "The Courtship of Miles Standish" (Banner, 12/15/1910).

1911

In January 1911 Lyman Howe again came to Belding with a new program of moving pictures in "actual hues of nature". His moving pictures of a trip in a dirigible balloon, a ride in the swiftest motor boat and a dangerous bull fight were featured on January 16 (Banner, 1/5/1911). Later, on January 27, the Opera House hosted a Farmer's Institute. Ladies of St. Mary's Guild produced Ionia County Fair on February 27 and 28 after a ten-week absence of any stage show in Belding (Banner, 2/23/1911)

March proved slightly more active with meetings on the local option question being held once more at the Opera House. John Lehn addressed the first meeting on the temperance question on March 12. (Banner, 3/9/1911)

For the first time since October, a professional company performed in Belding three nights, March 20, 21 and 22, with a change of show each night (Banner, 3/16/1911). On March 25 and 26 the Opera House was the scene of more meetings on the liquor question. The evening of March 25 M. G. Hotchkiss gave an illustrated lecture on the battle of Gettysburg (Banner, 3/23/1911). A drama of American social life, The Final Settlement, which appeared at the Opera House on March 28, drew this comment from the Banner.

. . . Only a small audience for "The Final Settlement". Hetherington tries to give good attractions but when shows meet with such a chilly reception it does not encourage him to secure many more shows of like merit.⁶⁴

The following month's only show in Belding, A Cowboy's Girl, appeared on April 20 after holding a street concert in the afternoon (Banner, 4/13/1911). Two professional groups visited Belding in May: Alan Villair and his company with Jim and the Singer on May 16 (Banner, 5/4/1911) and Just a Woman's Way on May 25 (Banner, 5/18/1911). Memorial Day exercises were held at the Opera House on May 30 although there was some misunderstanding over who was to pay the \$15 to secure the Opera House auditorium (Banner, 5/25/1911).

Theatrical activities began again at the Opera

⁶⁴Ibid., March 30, 1911.

House on September 6 with A Pair of Country Kids, a production with special scenery representing New York harbor and a full view of the Brooklyn Bridge (Banner, 8/31/1911). The Widow McCarty on September 19 (Banner, 9/7/1911) and Camille on September 21 (Banner, 9/21/1911) also offered Belding patrons entertainment during the month. The latter play was the road version of Camille as revived by Edward C. White at the Garden Theatre in New York in April 1911. The play had originally been done in New York at the Broadway Theatre in December 1853.⁶⁵

The Girl from U.S.A. returned to Belding a third time on October 18 (Banner, 10/5/1911), followed by Lyman Howe's pictures on October 24 of the terrible Austin, Pennsylvania flood (Banner, 10/5/1911). The month closed with The Golden Gulch, a local talent effort under the sponsorship of the Knights of Pythias (Banner, 10/12/1911).

Baby Mine, after 287 performances at the Daly, Majestic and Lyric Theatres in New York beginning August 23, 1910,⁶⁶ appeared at the Belding Opera House on November 3 (Banner, 10/12/1911). A melodrama with "hope in its theme", Human Hearts, was presented November 14 (Banner,

⁶⁵Mantle, p. 444.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 422.

11/9/1911). Clarence Bennett, who had starred at the Opera House in A Royal Slave, returned to Belding in The Squaw Man on November 16 (Banner, 11/16/1911). This play, originally produced at Wallack's Theatre in New York in 1905, had been revived in January 1911 at the Broadway Theatre in New York.⁶⁷

The year closed with productions of The Tramp and the Lady on November 27 (Banner, 11/23/1911) and Uncle Tom's Cabin on December 2 (Banner, 11/30/1911).

1912

The first play of 1912 was Paid in Full, written by Eugene Walter, a fairly well-known early twentieth century American playwright. He was an early rebel who rejected happy endings and sweet young heroines. Paid in Full is the story of a man who would have traded his wife to save himself. With this play Walter really began his attack on theatre conventions.⁶⁸ It had played 167 performances at the Astor Theatre in New York beginning February 25, 1908.⁶⁹ The play was produced in Belding on January 16 after being billed as the "greatest and most popular play ever produced in America." Some five companies traveled with it in 1911 (Banner, 1/4/1912).

Lyman Howe's company once more showed pictures at

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 436.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 387.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 559.

the Opera House on February 16, this time pictures of flying machines, hunting by aeroplane and the recent eruption of Mt. Etna (Banner, 11/8/1912). The following night, February 17, J. C. Rockwell's Sunny South Company held the stage. They had been well received in Belding several times before (Banner, 2/8/1912).

Harry J. Webster's Amusement Company brought The Convict's Daughter to the Belding stage on March 13 (Banner, 3/14/1912). On March 19 Gaskill and McVilly's The Rosary, which had played three months in Chicago and two in New York, appeared (Banner, 3/7/1912). The Greenville Glee Club Minstrels concluded the month with a performance at the Opera House on March 29 (Banner, 3/28/1912).

The Missouri Girl, which claimed 1000 house records throughout the country, played on April 11 (Banner, 4/4/1912). Oscar Eagle, a one-time director for David Belasco, brought Beverly, George Barr McCutcheon's romance of war, to Belding on April 22 after a long run in Chicago. Beverly passed through Belding on the way to the larger cities of Kalamazoo and Saginaw (Banner, 4/18/1912).

The Alvarado Stock Company opened a week's engagement at the Opera House on April 29 with a change of plays every night: Westerner, The Minister and the Maid, Way Down East Folks, Old Homestead, The Price of Silence, Captured by Wireless, and The Girl of Eagle Ranch. The

Banner declared it the best stock company of its kind to ever visit Belding (Banner, 4/25/1912).

May 22 marked the last professional performance until fall with the Mason Brothers production of Uncle Tom's Cabin (Banner, 5/16/1912).

An early summer Industrial edition of the Belding Banner had the following to say with regard to the Opera House.

. . . it is to be regretted, however, that our theatre-going people fail to take advantage of the finer offerings booked and as a result the better class of companies have seen fit to turn our people down. The stage is ample for the production of almost any of the popular plays of the day and it is certainly too bad that some of Mr. Hetherington's past bookings have been accorded such slim patronage.⁷⁰

The Ladies Social Circle broke the summer lull in theatre activity by booking the National Troubadour Company for July 9 (Banner, 7/4/1912). The fall season, however, did not begin until the appearance of The Minister's Daughters on August 26 (Banner, 8/22/1912).

A Royal Slave on September 2 (Banner, 8/29/1912) and The Lion and the Mouse on September 9 (Banner, 9/5/1912) were next to play at the Belding Opera House. Lyman Howe showed his Travel Festival again on October 18 (Banner, 10/10/1912), followed by Santan Sanderson on

⁷⁰Belding Banner, Industrial Edition, 1912.

October 23 (Banner, 10/17/1912). A crowded Opera House greeted Senator William Alden Smith on October 28 (Banner, 10/31/1912).

Faust pleased Belding theatre-goers at the Opera House on November 19. A Girl of the Underworld, a comedy which was "not risque and vulgar and would not cause one pang of shame", played on November 25 (Banner, 11/14/1912). The year closed with the ReRue Brothers Ideal Minstrels on December 3 (Banner, 11/28/1912).

The most important item affecting the history of the Opera House in December came from another theatre. "Owing to great demand for high class pictures, and for the benefit of farmers, Star Theatre will give Saturday matinees at 2:30 for 5¢."⁷¹ Competition for the Belding Opera House was increasing.

1913

Scenes of New York skyscrapers and how they are built; dynamiting a mountain; a pictorial excursion through quaint Holland; a model military academy at Culver, Indiana showing a student's life from raw recruit to graduation day all marked the opening event of 1913 by Lyman Howe on January 17 (News, 1/9/1912). Graustark, dramatized by George D. Baker from the novel by George Barr McCutcheon, played on January 24 for 50¢, 75¢ and

⁷¹Belding Banner, December 5, 1912.

\$1.00 (News, 1/16/1912).

The most important theatrical attraction of the season came to Belding on February 11. The company had just come from Detroit and continued on to Grand Rapids. The Belding News and the theatre encouraged attendance.

Manager Hetherington wishes to impress upon local playgoers and church people the unusual importance of "The Light Eternal", the big religious drama announced for presentation at the Belding Opera House Tuesday February 11. Never before in the history of Michigan theatricals has any attraction, no matter what its size, reputation, or merit been able to accomplish the things done by "The Light Eternal". Within a period of about two years there have been more performances of this play given in Michigan than almost any other drama or comedy in five times that period.

"The Light Eternal" has played every large town and city of the state from six to twenty-four times during the two past theatrical seasons.⁷²

February 17 Thoroughbred Tramp, a play ". . . holding up the mirror of nature and revealing the mysteries of the workings of crime in some of the big cities," appeared on the Belding stage (News, 2/13/1913).

The new month brought only one play to the Opera House - County Sheriff by Lem B. Parker on March 13 (News, 3/6/1913). John G. Woolley of Illinois, Prohibition Party candidate for president in 1900, spoke at the Opera House on March 22 (News, 3/20/1913).

A. G. Delamater, prominent producing manager of

⁷²Belding News, February 6, 1913.

New York, announced that Freckles, dramatized from the novel by Neil Twomey, would play in Belding on April 9 (News, 4/3/1913). Freckles first appeared at the Grand Opera House in New York on December 16, 1912.⁷³ A performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin, called that "exceptionally good emotional drama destined to outlast the period originally planned for its story" by the Belding News, took place on May 3 (News, 4/17/1913). Captain George W. McBride addressed a Decoration Day crowd at the Opera House on May 30 (News, 5/22/1913).

Theatrical events began again on August 21 with The Thief, by Henri Bernstein, which had played for a year at the Lyceum Theatre in New York (News, 8/21/1913). The Shepherd of the Hills followed on September 15 (News, 9/11/1913).

The Wizard of Wiseland, which appeared on October 6, received the following review.

The Wizard of Wiseland came and went Monday. During its meteoric career it neither electrified or dazzled us, although it did please a fairly large audience which was gathered in the opera house expressly to be pleased. There were some good musical numbers, notably "Kathleen", the chorus were well-drilled, good-looking and agile, there were but two scenic settings but they were good ones. The ladies, however, considered the handsomest male thing in the entire cast was the lion - he looked honest if he was

⁷³Mantle, p. 488.

imitation. It was a show built to get laughs, and we laughed at it. Done us good.⁷⁴

A Tom Thumb wedding with sixty little children trained by Mrs. Elery, a Belding school teacher, took the Opera House stage on October 28 (News, 10/23/1913). The children rehearsed on the Opera House stage several nights prior to the performance and often got into trouble. They were dressed for a wedding with the little girl in a long train and the boy in a swallow-tail coat, and there were a number of flower girls. "A night or two before when they were practicing up there I sure thought it was going to be somethin', because those kids wanted to be into everything and everything was new to them and so, but the night the show come off, say, them kids went right through that thing. . . and it was just dandy."⁷⁵

The last two professional shows of the year took place in November. The first was Brewster's Millions on November 7 (News, 10/30/1913), followed on November 17 by Uncle Tom's Cabin (News, 11/13/1913). The last event of the year, a public mock court trial on December 15, was sponsored by the Ladies Social Circle and drew a large crowd (News, 11/27/1913).

The year 1913 marked the beginning of the rapid

⁷⁴Belding News, October 9, 1913.

⁷⁵Interview with Wes Porter, February 12, 1965.

decline of the Belding Opera House. Eighteen professional shows were presented in Belding on the stage at the Opera House in 1912. Only eleven appeared there in 1913 and the new year of 1914 would bring only six, less than before the Opera House was remodeled in 1901. The reasons for this decline will be examined more fully in a following chapter but one fact points to much of the trouble. The Idle Hour, Majestic and Star moving picture theatres were in operation six nights per week plus Saturday matinees.

1914

No show appeared in January, but the February 16 production of Where the Trail Divides played to a crowded house (Banner, 2/18/1914). Two shows were staged at the Opera House in March. The first, a local talent production of Alice in Wonderland sponsored by the Pythian Sisters, played on March 12 and 13 with considerable success (Banner, 3/11/1914). The Flaming Arrow, booked for March 26, cancelled at the last minute because the costumes and scenery did not arrive, although the cast did (Banner, 4/1/1914).

On April 3 Horatio S. Earle spoke at the Opera House on the "good roads proposition". A concert on April 10 featured Miss Lulu Jones Downing, composer-pianist, and Miss Isabel Richardson, mezzo soprano. Miss Richardson was the daughter of G. P. Richardson of the

Richardson Silk Company (Banner, 4/1/1914). The high school chorus performed H.M.S. Pinafore on June 16 (Banner, 6/10/1914).

The fall theatre "bill" began on August 19 with Spendthrift, written by Porter Emerson Brown and produced by C. S. Primrose (Banner, 8/5/1914). The Great Divide, which had played 500 nights at Daly's Theatre in New York, played at Belding August 26 (Banner, 8/5/1914). The Light Eternal returned on September 3, followed on September 9 by the Good Samaritan (Banner, 8/5/1914).

The Trust of the Lonesome Pine, booked to appear in October, was cancelled because Klaw and Erlanger, the booking agent, claimed an infringement of dramatic rights and Manager Hetherington feared a law suit. The year closed on December 8 with The Forbidden Way, a play with "a moral punch" (Banner, 12/2/1914).

1915

Even less activity took place at the Opera House in 1915 than had occurred there in 1914. Only three professional plays were presented. The Opera House lay idle in January but on February 19 J. C. Rockwell's popular New Sunny South Company displayed their talent (News, 2/11/1915). Belding Lodge No. 120, K. P. Cabaret Minstrels performed on April 27 and 28, but nothing else appeared until September (News, 4/7/1915).

Two plays appeared in September of this last

year of professional theatre at the Belding Opera House. Henpecked Henry played on September 4 (News, 9/1/1915) and Within the Law was performed on September 22 (News, 9/15/1915). September also brought a new manager to the Belding Hotel and Opera House. E. W. Dunham replaced the retiring W. P. Hetherington.⁷⁶ The new manager evidently made no attempt to book theatrical companies for only two more appeared and they had, no doubt, been booked months in advance. The Dixie Cotton Pickers gave a show on November 1 (News, 10/27/1915). The year, and thus professional theatre in Belding, closed on November 10 with Pecks Bad Boy (News, 11/3/1915). Twenty-seven years of theatrical activity at the Belding Opera House had ended.

1916 to Present

After the change of management at the Opera House in 1915 no further attempts were made to book professional theatrical companies. The Opera House, in 1916 and 1917, once more housed the winter concert series with outside sponsorship, was the scene of the senior play as it had been many times in the past, and hosted evangelistic services. For many years after the curtain fell on the last professional road play, the Belding Opera House continued to serve the community as a place for dances,

⁷⁶Belding News, October 4, 1916.

amateur productions, political rallies, revivals, lectures, and concerts.

The Opera House was used in this manner until 1925 when the school board of the city rented it to be used as a gymnasium. Boys and girls had physical education in the Opera House during this period and many basketball games were played where theatre patrons had once watched Faust and Si Plunkard. Girls and boys both played basketball at that time and Mrs. R. A. Rummler, whose father came to Belding as superintendent of schools in 1925, recalls that the stage and rear windows of the Opera House were hazardous obstacles to ball players.⁷⁷ This activity continued until the new high school was built in 1931.

Exactly what happened to the Opera House during the next ten years is not known, but it is assumed that it reverted to some of its old civic functions and that perhaps dances and lectures were once again held there. On November 1, 1941 the Belding Hotel was closed because of lack of business.⁷⁸ In 1944 the buildings were sold and the Hotel was razed to make way for a large new movie theatre. The Opera House and stores below it remained, although the Opera House was given a face-lifting. All the remaining seats were removed and the walls and ceiling

⁷⁷Telephone interview with Mrs. R. A. Rummler, Feb. 11, 1965.

⁷⁸Thurza Durea Scrapbook, held by Alvah N. Belding Library.

redecorated. All the scenery and stage equipment were disposed of and a band shell was installed on the stage.⁷⁹ Today on the downstage side of the proscenium arch hangs a large curtain with the initials RBR on it. (See Fig. 4) A plaque bearing a 1958 date hangs on the wall near the entrance and gives recognition to the Rose Ball Room for ten years of service to the community. Thus, the Belding Opera House has been used in the capacity of a ballroom at least since 1948.

The dressing rooms under the stage have been modified several times to accommodate public restrooms. Just when these improvements took place is not known. Since 1963 the Opera House has taken on an added function. It is now used several nights a week for roller skating. Except for the shell of the building and those facilities which are almost unalterable, not a great deal is left of the early Belding Opera House, once the social center and pride of the Belding community.

⁷⁹

Mrs. Donald Olmstead, letter, Jan. 4, 1962.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS

This chapter classifies and summarizes the events which took place at the Opera House in order to give a better over-all picture from which to draw conclusions. With the summary as a reference point and with the addition of other factual material, several subjective conclusions are reached: (1) the Opera House was built as a business investment and to fulfill a community need; (2) the original facilities were outdated when built; and (3) the moving picture caused the decline in legitimate drama.

The Belding Opera House was built in 1888-89 by the Belding Brothers who formed the Belding Land and Improvement Company for this purpose. From 1889 until 1901 existing records show that a total of 98 events took place at the Opera House, of which only 29 could be called legitimate drama. Major improvements were made at the Opera House in the summer of 1901. They included the erection of a large scene house and stage and an increased seating capacity. From 1901 until 1915 when the Belding Opera House closed to legitimate theatre, a total of 331 events occurred. Of these, 215 were legitimate drama of the repertory or the single professional show type. During the life of the Opera House from 1889 to 1915, 185 other events were recorded. These activities included 35 amateur productions, 33 lectures and concerts not

sponsored by the Opera House management, 35 minstrel shows and vaudeville groups, 24 moving picture productions not a part of a regular schedule of movies, 7 unclassified, and 51 other events such as political rallies, citizens meetings, religious revivals and social parties.

In drawing conclusions from these summary facts and other aspects of the history of the Belding Opera House, certain concepts must be kept in mind. The most important is the reason for the existence of an opera house in Belding.

The Belding Opera House, Belding Hotel, and Belding Silk Mills were built because the Belding Brothers, who had grown up in the small village community and had started their silk trade there, saw a sound business opportunity and were sentimental about their boyhood home. The Opera House was also built for more specific reasons. The community had no building which could house a large number of its citizens. There was no social or cultural entertainment of a formal nature provided in the community. New manufacturing meant more money and more people of a managerial class who would become a part of the community. An opera house above two commercial stores and attached to a magnificent new hotel was a good business investment as well as an attractive asset to the business section of the village, and the Belding

TABLE 1 CLASSIFICATION OF EVENTS FROM 1889-1900

Year	Single Show Professional Co.	Repertory Productions	Minstrels and Vaudeville	Amateur Productions	Lectures and Concerts	Moving Pictures	Miscellaneous	Unclassified	Total
1889	0	0	0	0	0	0	1		1
1890	0	2	0	0	2	0	1		5
1891	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2
1893	0	0	0	1	0	0	0		1
1895	4	3	0	0	0	0	0		7
1896	1	0	1	1	8	0	8		19
1897	3	3	6	1	0	2	0	6	21
1898	6	0	3	1	0	1	6		17
1899	3	0	3	3	3	1	5		19
1900	3	0	2	1	0	0	1		7
Sub Total	21	8	15	8	13	4	22	7	98

120

Opera House appeared to answer community needs.

Based on the recorded number of events which occurred at the Opera House in the first ten years of its existence, the severity of Belding's need for an opera house and the soundness of an opera house as a business investment might be questioned. A total of 98 events, 29 legitimate theatre and 69 others, seems to indicate that the Opera House was used less than once each month during these early years. These figures may not tell the whole truth, however. Accurate records of the number and nature of activities which took place at the Opera House between 1889 and 1895 are lost forever. The six events recorded in this paper for these first five years are based on less than a handful of newspapers and miscellaneous sources. Any attempt to estimate the number of productions or other events would be pure conjecture and of doubtful value.

Also important to note is that the Belding Opera House was built with a stage designed for grooved scenery. This stage allowed no space for large machinery and rapid scene changes through flown drops. The nature of technical aspects of theatre was changing greatly at the time the Belding Opera House was built. In a sense, the Belding Opera House was out-dated when it was built. The circumstances surrounding the Belding Opera House's early history and the limitations of its facilities must be

TABLE 2 CLASSIFICATION OF EVENTS FROM 1901-1915

Year	Single Show Profes- sional Co.	Repertory Productions	Minstrels and Vaudeville	Amateur Productions	Lectures and Concerts	Moving Pictures	Miscel- laneous	Unclas- sified	Total
1901	6	3	2	1	5	0	6	23	23
1903	15	4	1	1	3	1	3	28	28
1904	20	0	2	1	1	0	2	26	26
1905	20	6	1	1	1	0	2	31	31
1906	17	3	0	1	2	5	2	30	30
1907	21	3	2	3	2	4	0	35	35
1908	10	3	5	2	1	0	1	22	22
1909	13	0	1	5	0	1 Reg. at this time	3	23	23
1910	16	0	2	3	1	3	2	27	27
1911	14	3	0	2	1	2	5	27	27
1912	11	7	2	1	1	2	1	25	25
1913	11	0	0	1	1	2	1	16	16
1914	6	0	0	3	1	0	1	11	11
1915	3	0	2	2	0	0	0	7	7
Sub Total	183	32	19	27	20	20	29	331	331
Grand Total	204	40	35	35	33	24	51	7	429

* Includes social parties; political speeches; banquets and rallies; revivals; citizens meetings; school commencements and baccalaureates.

considered in evaluating the usefulness of the Opera House in the community and its soundness as a business investment.

As previously documented, considerable modernization took place at the Opera House in 1901. There is no doubt that these improvements contributed greatly to the increase in activity at the Opera House. During the six years, 1901 to 1907, following the Opera House renovation (no records are available for 1902) a total of 173 events is recorded for an average of 29 per year. In the biggest year on record before the 1901 remodeling six different road companies had passed through Belding. In 1905 and 1907, the biggest years after the remodeling, 22 professional companies stopped in Belding. In 1906 in an attempt to provide even more and better companies as well as security for the traveling companies, W. P. Hetherington and the managers of five other opera houses in surrounding towns organized a theatre circuit. It is unfortunate that only a reference to the organization of the group is available in existing Belding records. Further research opportunities lie in a detailed investigation of the history of each of the opera houses in the other towns. Such research might reveal more information concerning the activities and the degree of success of the theatre circuit.

Other observations, based on the statistics of

the events, may be made concerning the use and value of the Opera House in the community. Amateur events averaged one or two each year with a high of five in 1909. An average of one lecture or concert took place each year with a high of five in 1901. Approximately two events of a social or a miscellaneous nature took place each year. These do not include extended revival meetings of seven to thirty days. From the time of their introduction in Belding in 1897, moving pictures were shown at least once a year. In 1909 Manager Hetherington showed movies regularly for an undetermined number of months. Starting in 1896 when the first minstrel show performed at the Opera House until 1915, approximately one minstrel group performed each year. The appearance of vaudeville troupes at the Opera House averaged less than once a year. Such groups more often appeared at rival moving picture theatres.

During the peak years of theatrical activity at the Opera House, Belding citizens usually had two opportunities a month to attend legitimate drama during the nine-month theatre season. In 1913 and 1914 activities at the Opera House declined rapidly and by 1915 only three professional troupes traveled to Belding. The reason for the decline and final demise of the Opera House appears to be obvious. The Belding Opera House, like many of its kind throughout the midwest, was unable

to meet the challenge of effective competition. There seems little doubt that the moving picture caused the death of the Belding Opera House as a place of theatrical entertainment.

Evidence of what was to come began to gather in 1907. Five traveling moving picture companies appeared at the Opera House in 1906 and on December 26, 1907 the first two-column full-page advertisement for the Bijou Theatre appeared. It listed the names of shows and advertised music by an orchestra every evening for 5¢.¹ Competition increased in 1908 with the opening of two more 5¢ movie houses, the Star and the Royal. The number of theatre productions at the Opera House was cut in half during the year.

The following March Manager Hetherington made an effort to capitalize on the growing movie business and to absorb some of his competition at the same time. He formed a partnership with the owner of the Royal theatre and began to show moving pictures at the Opera House, advertising greater comfort and better quality. This effort ran for at least six months but for unknown reasons finally died.

During 1910 and 1911, the number of professional productions increased slightly but never regained the

¹Belding News, Dec. 26, 1907.

1904-1907 pace. The quality of productions fell and when good shows were booked they were often poorly attended. Belding newspapers attempted to encourage attendance but with little success.

In 1913 the number of professional productions dropped to eleven, the lowest since 1901. Four movie houses were operating nightly. One picture theatre was closed by the state fire marshall in 1914 because of narrow aisles and an unsafe lantern booth but it soon reopened with the proper improvements.²

In 1914 the moving picture theatres were openly attacked by local ministers and church members who sought a movie censor board.³ Local citizens complained about the quality of the theatres through the columns of the newspapers, although the printing of citizens' letters was very unusual in Belding newspapers at this time. The following letter appeared on March 4, 1914 in the Belding Banner.

Through the columns of your paper I would like to register a "kick" against the kind of talent some local picture shows are bringing here to place on their stages in the vaudeville part of their show. Only a few days ago there was a bunch of colored people in the city that had no respect to themselves or for the girls and boys of our city. As they passed down the streets during the day

²Belding Banner, April 15, 1914.

³Ibid., Aug. 19, 1914.

they were constantly making demonstrations to attract attention and many times in a very suggestive manner. The women were very brazen in their indecent exposures.

I have children who would be easily affected by such demonstrations and I am not alone in saying that Belding people are getting pretty loose when they support the shows that bring such people to the city. A good clean vaudeville would not be objectionable occasionally but if we have them let us have people that will act as gentlemen and ladies should on our streets. Let them dress properly before going out on the street and have a certain measure of regard for our good citizens.

Yours for a bettering of conditions.⁴

A Father⁴

Indignant fathers and puritan-minded ministers may have improved the quality of moving picture entertainment but their attack did nothing for the dying Opera House. Only six professional companies performed in Belding at the Opera House in 1914, although two others were booked. Three legitimate productions appeared in 1915.

Why the moving picture was so effective in strangling the Opera House as a source of entertainment is best summed up in the words of Wes Porter:

They had picture shows come here and they would show a picture and some slides with a singer and you'd go see that for five cents. Well, the Opera House couldn't compete with that in price. More than anything else that is why the Opera House quit having shows.⁵

There were other reasons, too. There were fewer

⁴Ibid., March 4, 1914.

⁵Porter, Interview, Feb. 12, 1965.

and fewer good road shows and the good ones demanded a substantial profit which Belding could seldom provide. Accentuated realism, which many of the companies tried to provide in scenes of real sawmills, earthquakes and erupting mountains, could better be captured in film than on stage.⁶

The moving picture, although the most important, was not the only competition which the Opera House faced. In the first years of the new century, roller skating became a popular form of entertainment and thus took money which might have been spent on theatrical entertainment. Summer tent shows, sometimes specializing in one play such as Uncle Tom's Cabin or more often with a repertoire of several plays, became popular. Summer tent competition culminated in the Chautauqua which, between 1911 and 1915, often lasted one or two weeks in the community with a different type of entertainment each day and night.

The Belding Opera House had been built in 1889, partly as a business venture and partly to fulfill the needs of the community. By 1915 when a total of seven events took place at the Opera House, it was neither economically sound nor satisfying community needs.

⁶A. Nicholas Vardac, Stage to Screen, (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1949), p. 166.

Appendix A

Example of Concert Series Program
 Program from Mozart Symphony Club Feb. 28, 1901

Part I

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 1. Overture-Zampa.....Herold | Mozart Symphony Club |
| 2. Viola d'Amour Solo-Prelude and
the Virgin's last Slumber
.....Massenet | Mr. Richard Stoelzer |
| 3. Violin Solo-Hungarian Rhapsody
.....Hauser | Miss Marie Stori |
| 4. Cornet Solo-Fantasie....Hoch | Herr Theo Hoch |
| 5. a. Da Gamba Solo-Menuett
.....Boccherini | |
| b. Cello Solo-Fantasie Burlesque
.....Servais | |
| 6. Soprano Solo-Love in Springtime
.....Ardit | Miss Marie Stori |

Part II

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Quartette | a. Sonata in A Major.....Mozart | |
| | b. Intermezzo Russe.....Franke | |
| | c. Madrigal (Pizzicato)....Palicot | |
| 2. Alpine Echo Horn-Idylle.....Hoch | (with Zither acc.) | |
| | Mr. Blodeck and Herr Theo. Hoch | |
| 3. Ballad-Happy Days with Violin Obligato | | |
| 4. Descriptive Selection (In the Gypsie Camp) | Stoelzer | |
| Twilight | | |
| Tales by the Watch Fire | | |
| The Bugle Call | | |
| Invitation to the Dance | | |
| Xylophone | | |
| Bells | | |
| Fortune Tellers Story (Saxophone) | | |
| Castonet Solo Dance | | |
| Merriment in the Camp | | |
| Church Bells Heard in the Distance | | |
| Gypsies break camp and retire in sleighs | | |
| 5. Roman Triumphal Trumpet | Herr Theo Hoch | |

As the last number is a patriotic selection the audience is requested to refrain from adjusting their wraps until the close.

Appendix B

Behind the Scenes A Banner Reporter saw Si Plunkard
---September 24, 1904

There are probably but few of our readers but what have, at one time or another attended an entertainment at the Opera House and noted the quick transformation of scenes which are used to illustrate the various acts in the drama being produced, but few of them have any idea of the way these changes are brought about.

Through the kindness of the Stage Manager, Claude Peifer, our reporter, was given a chance to witness the play of Si Plunkard from behind the scenes last night and is thus permitted to tell to our readers the secrets which go so far toward interesting the audience in front of the stage.

In the rear end of the stage there is a large number of electric switches which control the various lights used on and off the stage. By means of these switches many different effects are produced that give a different tone to the stage settings when operated.

The curtains are operated by men 44 feet above the stage who handle pulleys to which are attached various drop curtains used in the production of the play. These men are instructed before the play and by other signals as to when they should raise and lower the curtains.

The other stage apparatus is placed in handy places for convenience and is fastened together with ropes that are easily detached at a second's notice.

Take the case of the tramp for instance who leaned so far forward when so very tired, he had a pair of hooks fastened to his heels to hold him firmly to the floor. The threshing machine was operated by a man turning a crank as was also the engine. The actors who appear hideous on the stage present a very good aspect from the audience.

Each of the small army of people has something to do and it must be done quickly, take it all in all the work of transformation on the stage is a work of hustle that requires making every move count.

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