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THE OPERA HOUSE - Part II

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The tradition of home-talent and traveling theatricals has been a part of Kearney's cultural history from its early years to the present time. The first community building was More's Hall on the second floor of L. R. More's lumber and banking business house on the west side of Central Avenue just south of the railroad tracks. The early newspapers reveal many events taking place there.

The play *David Copperfield* was one of the first offerings of the Kearney Dramatic Association held in More's Hall. Two full columns in the *Central Nebraska Press* of November 30, 1876 were devoted to the production which had been held the week before. This critique of the *Press* included everyone involved in the play, from the opening overture by "Smith's full string band with accompaniment by F. C. Grable on a pipe organ," to each and every character in the play's cast. The report was less than kind to the players and concluded:

To be concise, the play was a failure, and from natural causes. Too many of the characters were attempted by persons totally unfit to appear on the stage . . . wax ones would be better.



Kearney Opera House, 1891-1954

One wonders how the Kearney Dramatic Association had the courage to forge ahead to its next theatrical effort.

Another event is mentioned in the *Kearney Times* of December 21, 1876. "Remember the Christmas supper to be given the Sunday School children at More's Hall Saturday evening . . . 10¢ admission. Don't fail to go as you will never be at another centennial Christmas jollification."

In 1884 Themanson's Skating Rink at 2110 Avenue B was remodeled to include a stage and dressing rooms in order to secure "first-class theatricals and musical entertainments," according to the *Kearney New Era* of September 20, 1884. The annual Firemen's Ball and a play by Sedgwick Post No. 1, G.A.R., were held later that year at "the Model." During the next few years the Model Opera House became the place in Kearney most often used for balls, school events and political rallies, as well as traveling and hometown entertainment. According to the City Directory of 1889, the Model Opera House had a seating capacity of 600.

The remodeled rink was not suited for play productions, or even for musical concerts. The acoustics were such that a program at one end of the building could not be heard at the other end, so performances were given near the center of the building. After the opening of the "new" opera house in 1891, the Model apparently reverted to its original purpose and became the Kearney Skating Rink.



Kearney Roller Skating Rink, 1910.

Photo by S. D. Butcher

The Kearney Opera House was built at the height of Kearney's booming heyday. For some time citizens had grumbled at having to attend plays and opera at the Model Opera House, and in the early part of 1890 talk of building an opera house in keeping with Kearney's progress in other directions began to be heard frequently. A company was formed and incorporated under the name of Kearney Opera House Company, and the

southwest corner of 21st Street and Central Avenue was chosen as the place to erect the building. Starting on May 1, 1890 to clear the site, it took a full year to complete the building, described at its opening on May 1, 1891 as "the most imposing structure in Nebraska outside Lincoln and Omaha."

Built at a cost of \$140,000, including the three lots it stood on, the Kearney Opera House was a massive structure of Rawlins gray stone, quarried near Rawlins, Wyoming. The blocks were brought to Kearney on flatcars and were cut and carved in a stone yard east of the city. The stones were cut to provide arches over windows on the upper floors, and a number of carvings, including the traditional Greek masques of tragedy and comedy, were placed at convenient points.¹

The building was five stories in height plus a basement, with ground dimensions of 75 x 130 feet. Walls were 22 inches thick to a height of 50 feet, less for the remaining height. Among the unusual features of the building were the circular windows on the main and second floor corner rooms, so large that only one glass factory in the country could make them. The second floor balcony which projected over the main entrance was capable of holding an 18-piece band for events in front of the theater.

Entering the main theater doors on the east, playgoers stepped over a marble threshold into a vestibule which also housed the main floor entrance to an elevator. The vestibule also afforded a view into the show window of The Fair, a department and grocery store which occupied the L-shaped portion of the ground floor.

From the front vestibule a flight of ten stairs of clouded Italian marble 10 feet wide led to a landing paved with marble tiles. At the landing the stairway divided into two 5-foot stairs with ornately carved newel posts and banisters of oak. From the second floor an oak stairway led into the theater itself; another stairway led to the galleries. Two sets of double doors opened into the theater from the grand staircase. A dark red carpet extended down the main aisle and through the promenade. From orchestra rail to foyer was 52 feet, and the room was 50 feet wide.

The main floor was divided into the parquet at the front and the less exclusive dress circle at the back. The parquet contained 128 chairs with padded leather seats and plush backs. 28 of the best seats were sofas for two persons. The main floor had a seating capacity of 375. Above the main floor was the balcony, which could seat 350. The first four rows of

chairs were plain oak and plush, and the remainder ordinary wood and iron. The gallery, or third tier, had a seating capacity of 350. Seats in the gallery were benches, but even in the highest seats, one had an unobstructed, though somewhat distant, view of the stage. Kearney merchants had stocked up heavily on opera glasses to sell or rent to theater patrons. Ten boxes, with gilded ornamentation and plaster relief, draped with velour hung on brass rods, completed the seating capabilities.



View from the stage of Kearney Opera House.

The acoustics of the building were perfect. Whispers on the stage were audible anywhere in the auditorium. The dome of the theater was painted blue to represent the sky and covered with fleecy clouds. Holes in the ceiling at irregular intervals allowed 96 light bulbs of different candle power to twinkle as stars among the clouds.

The drop curtain depicting *The Rajah's Triumphant Entry into Singapore* was raised straight to the ceiling by windlass rather than being rolled up. The stage itself had 87 separate pieces of scenery. There were seven dressing rooms. From the stage two spiral stairways on either side wound up to the gallery and boxes high in front of the theater. An elevator in the alley behind the theater hoisted scenery, baggage and animals.

The building was heated by steam and lighted by electricity. A complete gas lighting system was installed with the electric wiring so gas jets could be substituted in case of power failure. Surrounding the theater on all of the upper floors were a total of 45 offices. The fifth floor was designed for clubrooms, first used by the Buffalo Club, a social organization of the city's prominent business men, later by the Chamber of Commerce and civic clubs.

On opening night a large crowd gathered to watch the first audience enter and go up the marble steps into the theater; carriages hurried hither and thither as the throng of ladies and gentlemen in evening dress alighted in beautiful costume - gentlemen in toppers and tails, and ladies in brocade, jewels and lace. Dignitaries present were Governor James E. Boyd, Secretary of State James E. Allen, State Treasurer John E. Hill, Commissioner George Humphrey and Labor Commissioner Andres. President Benjamin Harrison sent his regrets. The play, *Mr. Barnes of New York*, with an original Broadway cast of 38, played three nights.

A glance over the programs of the early years of the opera house reveals an impressive list of world-famous personalities: William Jennings Bryan, John Philip Sousa, Lionel Barrymore, George Cohen, Carrie Nation, Richard Bennett, Otis Skinner, and many others. One of the biggest shows was *The Garden of Allah* presented on January 31, 1917. It included 100 humans and nine live camels and assorted horses and donkeys which, together with scenery and properties, took seven railroad cars to transport. However, the opera house elevator was not designed to transport camels so only one of them was used in Kearney's performance. Theater goers that night went home with a fine layer of grit over their clothing from the sandstorm scene that escaped from the stage. Little Eva died countless deaths in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and many a *Ben Hur* race with galloping horses was staged. Harry Houdini left the spectators aghast with his escape from a strait jacket while swinging upside down from the fifth floor corner of the opera house.

When the theater was not booked for a star production, less exclusive entertainment was booked. The first movies in Kearney were seen in the opera house, brought to bolster profits on nights when no stage shows could be booked. However, movies never were a regular feature there. By 1907 Kearney had two motion picture houses and the opera house could not compete with the 5 and 10 cent admission rates. By 1916 the pinch was beginning to be felt and gradually bookings became more infrequent. Completion of the Kearney State Teachers College auditorium in 1916 took away college graduation exercises and other events. Kearney High School, which had held graduation exercises and class plays at the opera house since its opening, stopped using it in 1927 when the first Junior High School was completed. There were occasional local offerings by the Drama League players, the American Legion Minstrel Mimics and Sunday afternoon Municipal Concerts, and in the early 1930's stock company performances were given every Monday night by the Joe

Marian Players and the Ray Bash players. The last performance on stage was given May 14, 1932.

Although the theater stood empty and collecting dust for more than twenty years, the office space and main floor business rooms continued to be used. Partly because of the fizzling of Kearney's boom era, and partly because of lack of sufficient office space to rent, the Kearney Opera House just couldn't pay out. The first foreclosure action was filed four and a half years after the gala opening night, so financially, it was doomed to failure almost from its beginning.

The Kearney Opera House was torn down in 1954, the end of another chapter of the golden days of Kearney's boom era. Kearney's most impressive landmark had stood for 63 years.

1. Three of these carved stones are on the grounds of the Trails & Rails Museum.

SOURCES

The history of the Kearney Opera House is from the booklet, "*End of an Era*", prepared by Paige Carlin and published by the *Kearney Daily Hub*, 1954. See *Buffalo Tales*, September and October 1985 describing other events at Kearney's opera houses.