

Ravenna News  
Date of issue

+ Photo, Courtesy of Bob Roy, early 1900s p. 1

The article in the Centennial Book states that the Krug Brewing Co. built the Opera House in Ravenna in 1885. According to what I have found in the Ravenna News there seems to be some discrepancy.

Feb. 4, 1898 Frank Havlicek who built the Opera House in Ravenna and was in the saloon business for several years has opened a saloon in Omaha. — and again in

Aug. 27, 1926 Finder's Opera House was built by Frank Havlicek 40 years ago.

There are no known issues of the Ravenna News from 1886 to 1888. Some of the articles I made note of when researching in sequence:

May 31, 1888 There will be a meeting at Havlicek's Hall to discuss the 4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebration.

Jan. 31, 1889 The Bohemian entertainment and dance at Havlicek's Hall last Friday lasted till 8 A.M.

Sept. 26, 1889 Frank Havlicek will have new scenery for the Hall.

Apr. 16, 1891 Frank Havlicek has decided to quit the saloon business and has rented the building to John Vesely.

Dec. 17, 1891 The Opera House was packed by a large crowd of Bohemians last night, the attraction being an entertainment by Bartos, a Bohemian ventriloquist. After the program the floor was cleared and dancing commenced. The music for the occasion was laboriously ground out of an asthmatic hand organ.

Sept. 29, 1892 The Havlicek corner was sold this week to John Vesely for \$5000.

"Someone mentioned to me a month ago or so that the Opera House was next to the Big Onion. This next article would seem to indicate that it was on the upper floor."

Oct. 27, 1892 At the Opera House Friday evening during the Columbus Day exercises Rudolph Kaspar lost his footing and fell headlong down the stairs from the Hall to the floor. He was unconscious for 15 or 20 minutes but sustained no serious injury.

Jan. 19, 1893 A masquerade Ball was held at the Opera House. (These were held quite frequently in the early years with prizes given for the best costumes.)

Apr. 13, 1893 John Vesely has contacted the Nashville University students, a colored group, to give a concert in Ravenna.

Aug. 24, 1893 Blind Boone, the musical genius, to appear at the Opera House.

Oct. 26, 1893 A Bohemian juggler entertains at the Opera House.



- Dec. 14, 1893 The Bohemian Drama Co. now have a play in rehearsal titled "Mlynar a Jeho Dite." (The Miller and His Child) to be presented at the Opera House. The play will also be presented in St. Paul.
- Feb. 22, 1894 The John Vesely family plans to move to Litchfield in the Spring.
- May 11, 1894 Joseph Cernik is the new manager and later becomes the owner of the Opera House building.
- May 29, 1896 Maid from the Rockies will give a shooting exhibition at the Opera House on June 10. There will also be 50 Indians and Squaws. If Lone Bear comes to the Pow-Wow he will bring his medicine and flaming arrows.
- Dec. 4, 1896 Joseph Cernik leases the Opera House and Saloon to the Krug Brewing Co.
- Nov. 26, 1897 A Mr. Carson is the manager of the Opera House and Saloon.
- Feb. 12, 1898 The Opera House block has been sold to the Krug Brewing Co. of Omaha by Joseph Cernik for \$5000.
- Apr. 15, 1898 W.A. Carson is employed as manager of the Opera House and Saloon.
- Dec. 2, 1898 The Krug Brewing Co. in making improvements in the Opera House block.
- Jan. 25, 1901 Mr. Carson, Manager of the Opera House is to have Mr. Richmond and his company of 16 people to appear in a High Class Comedy.
- Sept. 13, 1901 The Krug Brewing Co. is to put brick or stone sidewalk on the east and south sides of the Opera House building. (I think the brick sidewalk is still there on the south side)
- Mar. 28, 1902 W.A. Carson's saloon business along with the lease of the Opera House building, now owned by the Krug Brewing Co. of Omaha has been sold to Amos Fiala and Lew Vesely.
- Aug. 26, 1904 W<sup>m</sup> Krug is thinking of building a new Opera House building. — but instead —
- June 2 - July 28, 1905 The Krug Brewing Co. plans to, and did, build a 24' x 40' addition on their Ravenna Opera House property.
- Dec. 22, 1905 Lew Vesely, manager of the Opera House and Opera House Bar, this week sold his lease and everything connected with the business to Mr. Rudolph Finder and is to give possession May 1, 1906.
- Jan 29, 1909  
on p. 3 Sometime between 1905 and this next article, I think Rudolph Finder purchased the property but I did not yet find the date.
- June 22, 1917 Rudolph Finder, who has opened a new and finely equipped cafe in the Opera House building wants an appropriate name that can be used. It must be short, catchy and have a good American 'zip' to it, one that once heard will be remembered. Offers \$5 to suggested name chosen. Contest open until July 1.



July 6, 1917 Prize doubled to \$10.

July 20, 1917 A committee selected by Rudolph Finder chose "The Big Onion" as the name for the cafe. Of several hundred names suggested, "The Big Onion" by W.H. Schanse, Burlington brakeman between Ravenna and Lincoln won the prize. Chosen because the name once heard would be remembered suggestive of a big and generous service, easily adapted as a trademark. Members of the committee were Frank Howard, Carl Linn, Dr. Wilke and C.B. Cass.

\* I forgot this next item if you care to use it.

Jan. 29, 1909 The Bohemian Turner's Sokol group entertained at the Opera House under the instruction of Frank Slavetinsky who recently came to Ravenna and introduced athletics in the community. These were local people who performed on parallel bars, the horse, and did calisthenics and various fancy drills and flag drills.

There were many activities from 1888 to 1917 and did not make note of every one of them. High school graduation exercises were held there until they began holding them in the school.

There were many dances, masquerade Balls, Fireman's Ball, various benefits, Speakers, entertainments of various kind, plays, given by high school students and a play in the Bohemian or Czech language almost annually from 1889 to 1940. There were also numerous Czech orchestras that came from other Czech communities to furnish Polka music and waltzes for many dances at Finder's Hall. When the Auditorium was built in Ravenna, in the mid 30's the "Big Name Bands" often played there <sup>at the Auditorium</sup>. A dance would also be in progress at Finder's Hall and both places had good crowds.

Sometime during the ~~20's~~ late 20's Art Finder, son of Rudolph owned the building and managed it until the mid forties.

I also do not have the year that the upper floor was said to be unsafe, but it was after 1940.

After the Hall was condemned, there was no activity there, of course, but the Big Onion Tavern on the ground floor continued in business. The Finders retained ownership but employed others as managers.



# Kearney Opera House Popular During 1906-07

By Joanne Baxter  
Student of Nebraska University

"Every lady who removes her hat during a performance shows a graceful consideration for those who occupy seats behind her."

This tactful reminder was included in a theater program on opening night, Nov. 23, 1903. It was the Lyric Theater in Lincoln, "devoted to continuous vaudeville" and "catering to ladies, children and gentlemen."

But the Nebraska capital was not the site of the state's first cultural awareness. As early as the state was being settled, culture, in one form or another, existed throughout Nebraska.

During the first years of settlement, the 1850s and 1860s, the homesteaders had little time to devote to "formal" culture. But amateur theatricals, spelling bees, school plays and musicals — often in the schoolhouse or an early sod church — were the beginnings of cultural activity.

While the amateur dramatic presentations may not have been considered legitimate theater, the local paper often employed a "critic" who reviewed the plays. The "critic" was usually the paper's editor.

One of these reviewers wrote of a Fairbury presentation in the early 1870s: "Mr. Slocumb as a confirmed drunkard was a decided success. W. W. Watson as a temperance lecturer was eminently fitted for his part."

These early reviewers weren't always favorable to their local talent, either. When the Loup City Dramatic Association of 1888 presented "Esther the Beautiful Queen, a Religious Drama," one of the town's three papers commented that it was given "with too little practice." The paper conceded, however, that the play was "an ambitious effort and worthy of praise."

## Opera House Era

Cultural interest grew as the towns grew. Opera houses soon were being built along with houses, government buildings and churches. Perhaps the 1880s to 1890s could be termed the "opera house era" in Nebraska, for several towns built local opera houses in this period.

Among these were Seward and Fremont, building opera houses in 1888, and Holdrege and Wayne, the following year. Fremont's Love Opera House cost \$40,000 — with \$900 for a stage curtain — and seated 1,075 persons. One of its early spectacles was the Equine and Canine Paradox, consisting of 40 dogs valued at \$2,500. And one of the dogs was an imported Arabian Greyhound, the only one in America at the time.

The Kearney Opera House, dedicated in May, 1891, was possibly the best-known of the early opera houses. It boasted a dual lighting system — electric-

era houses in the state, had ceased to be important in the cultural life of the community. Some opera houses became movie houses as business was lost to the "talkies." Others, like Kearney's, were simply torn down — a somewhat poignant end to the "opera house era" in Nebraska.

In the early 1900s an arrangement similar to the local opera house provided entertainment for early Nebraskans. These were the chautauquas, an assembly at which lectures on any and all topics were the main feature.

Nebraska City, Hastings and Scottsbluff were on the chautauqua circuit, as were many other Nebraska points. Scottsbluff formed its chautauqua association in 1907. A distinctive looking beehive structure was built in 1909 to house the meetings.

Lecturers included Carrie Nation, "the eccentric but talented temperance advocate," and Senator Robert LaFollete of Wisconsin.

The then state superintendent of schools, J. L. McBrien, also spoke at the 1908 chautauqua. His ever-popular subject: "Our Young Folks; What Shall We Do With Them?"

The chautauquas apparently suffered a demise similar to that of the opera house. As motion pictures improved, interest in the chautauquas began to decline. The Scottsbluff chautauqua, for example, was discontinued in 1915.

The opera houses and chautauquas were important cultural influences in early Nebraska, but what one might consider a

less refined culture was also very evident. It bore the influence of the legendary Wild West.

One of the most famous wild west shows was born in North Platte in 1882. The city was planning an "Old Glory Blow-out," an elaborate Fourth of July celebration. Buffalo Bill Cody was chosen Grand Marshal for the celebration. That choice marked the birth of the Wild West shows in the state. These shows resembled a circus, a rodeo and a melodrama all in one.

One of the more amazing of Cody's feats, according to one writer, was his ability to shoot out every glass ball tossed into the air without a miss — "in a condition of continual drunkenness."

## Variety Shows

After much success with his Wild West shows in Nebraska Cody toured the eastern states and then went on to Europe, where this "circus, rodeo and melodrama all in one" was also popular.

While it might be difficult to judge Nebraska's "culture quotient" on the basis of the Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, a more serious indicator is the interest and promotion of art by residents of the state.

Art instruction was underway at the University of Nebraska by 1877, two years before it was offered at the New York Metropolitan Museum, and only six years after Harvard and two years after Cambridge established art courses.

The Hayden Art Club, now the Nebraska Art Association, was the first art association in the nation. It was formed in 1888, when the state was only 21 years old and still having Indian trouble.

That same year the club exhibited its first painting — a huge canvas entitled "The Wise and Foolish Virgins" by a German artist. It was displayed in the courtroom of the federal building, amidst potted palms and gold rope. Some 78 years later, the association had acquired 115 pieces, insured for more than \$210,000.

The two largest art galleries in the state — Sheldon in Lincoln and Joslyn in Omaha — are considered by some observers as much a work of art as the objects inside them. Again, it was the interest of Nebraskans which resulted in these buildings to house art.

## Wholesome Activity

Sheldon gallery was built in 1963 from a \$3 million bequest of two Sheldon family members: Miss Frances Sheldon of Lincoln, and her brother, A. Bromley Sheldon of Lexington. Located on the University of Nebraska campus, it houses one of the best contemporary American art collections between the Mississippi River and the West Coast.

By Omaha Mrs. Sarah Joslyn



"opera house era" in Nebraska, for several towns built local opera houses in this period.

Among these were Seward and Fremont, building opera houses in 1888, and Holdrege and Wayne, the following year. Fremont's Love Opera House cost \$40,000 — with \$900 for a stage curtain — and seated 1,075 persons. One of its early spectacles was the Equine and Canine Paradox, consisting of 40 dogs valued at \$2,500. And one of the dogs was an imported Arabian Greyhound, the only one in America at the time.

The Kearney Opera House, dedicated in May, 1891, was possibly the best-known of the early opera houses. It boasted a dual lighting system — electricity, and gas. The gas system was installed evidently because the early planners were a little wary of the city's electric system.

The 1906-07 season of the Kearney opera house indicates how interested in culture of various sorts the townspeople were: during the 10-month season, 69 attractions were scheduled.

The opera house performances weren't solely "opera", as the name might imply. A certain play came to Kearney, which one person believed had gotten a "bad name" and was a strictly "for men only" production.

That person was Mrs. Mary Jacobson, pianist for the opera house's own orchestra. Mrs. Jacobson decided later that the play was actually a respectable production, and she took her place at the piano as usual. The predominantly male audience — there was only one other woman besides Mrs. Jacobson — kidded the two women until the other left without seeing the play. But Mrs. Jacobson stayed.

#### Poignant End

The Kearney opera house stood for 63 years, until it was razed in 1954. It, like other op-

1888, when the state was only 21 years old and still having Indian trouble.

That same year the club exhibited its first painting — a huge canvas entitled "The Wise and Foolish Virgins" by a German artist. It was displayed in the courtroom of the federal building, amidst potted palms and gold rope. Some 78 years later, the association had acquired 115 pieces, insured for more than \$210,000.

The two largest art galleries in the state — Sheldon in Lincoln and Joslyn in Omaha — are considered by some observers as much a work of art as the objects inside them. Again, it was the interest of Nebraskans which resulted in these buildings to house art.

#### Wholesome Activity

Sheldon gallery was built in 1963 from a \$3 million bequest of two Sheldon family members: Miss Frances Sheldon of Lincoln, and her brother, A. Bromley Sheldon of Lexington. Located on the University of Nebraska campus, it houses one of the best contemporary American art collections between the Mississippi River and the West Coast.

In Omaha Mrs. Sarah Joslyn gave a \$2.4 million grant in the memory of her husband, George, for the construction of the state's first art gallery in 1931. After viewing the pink-marble structure in 1958, the Christian Science Monitor art editor wrote: "It is a genuine pleasure for a visitor to witness the wholesome cultural activity. . . in Nebraska."