

THEATRES OF BYGONE DAYS

BRUCE OPERA HOUSE FINEST

Many Halls and Stages Provided Entertainment

The first outstanding theatre in Canastota was the Beecher Opera House which was located near the present Victory Chain store. Really good traveling companies appeared in this structure and many local talent plays were staged there. This burned down in one of the two great fires that swept the village. The Doolittle Opera House was run in opposition to the Beecher Opera House but never attained quite the success that its rival achieved. It was opened over a livery stable and so strong was the smell of horse that its productions had to be called off.

The old Skating Rink, located near the Lenox Shops of today was a show place before the opening of the Bruce Opera House. A fine production of "Camille" was the outstanding feature of its presentations. The Cronk Hall, directly across from the Jennings feed store was the mecca of church festivals, bazaars and dances. The old Academy Hall, the present Junior High school gym was the scene of many good traveling shows, to-wit Gorton's minstrels, Nugent and Gleasons Repertoire shows and Carmer's Repertoire shows. Each company carried its own band with it at this time.

Bruce Opera House Built in 1888

The acme of theatrical activity in the village was the construction of the famous Bruce Opera House by Hamilton Peckham and A. E. Dew in 1888. The stage was quite large for the time and the scenery consisted of sliding sets, that is, like a wall cut in half that slides together to form the background and sides of the scene. The opening show was the now-classic "Jim, the Penman."

The Bruce Opera House played the best of traveling companies as is illustrated by the appearance of Madame Januscheck, the matinee idol of her day. Another great performance was the opera "Poor Jonathan," featuring Fred Solomon, an outstanding vocalist of the time. The Al Fields Minstrels, perhaps the finest company of that sort, opened in the Opera House, staging all its rehearsals there and having the costumes made in the village.

The townspeople could and did stage superlative productions on all occasions. One of the favorite types of entertainment was the minstrel show. One of the finest ever staged here was the All-Girl Minstrel show, directed by Miss Bessie Rose. The girls in the circle wore red jackets, white shirt waists and were blacked up. The ends wore peppermint-striped costumes and the interlocutor wore white clothes. The end-women were Marie Cooper, Nellie VanIngen, Mrs. Hunt and Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Lynn Parkhurst was the interlocutor. Jane Phoenix was the musical director and under her played, Flute, Belle Field; Saxophone Hazel Childs; Violins Arline Hubbard, Lulu Skaden; Clarinet, Mabel Woodcock; Trombone, Gertrude Betsinger and Trumpet, Mabel Clarke.

"The Chimes of Normandy"

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One of the great musical presentations was the "Chimes of Normandy", under the direction of Frank Wooley of the Aborn Opera Co. of New York. The prima donna was Mrs. Maude Edgerton and a man named Griffith, who worked at the Biograph works, played opposite her. The local photographer Mr. Dunn, also appeared in the cast.

Typical of the amateur productions that went somewhat astray are two that provide a never-aging laugh to the old-timers. On one occasion a production of Macbeth was staged using a different cast in each scene. So rapid were the changes in the cast that the back-stage organization was a mad-house and the audience rolled on their seats in glee. One girl tripped demurely across the entire width of the stage and forgetting her lines, made her exit and then stuck her head around the corner of the stage and lisped "The Queen is dead!" Another old timer was "The District School" which began one night at 8 o'clock. One villager finally wearying of the production, went home at 1 o'clock and the show had displayed no signs then of ever running out.

Movies at "Music Hall"

At about this time, the present Grange Hall then called the Music Hall, was the scene of silent movies. Frank Lilly used to run the old Music Hall. When the Bruce Opera House went up in flames the Sherwood Theatre was built to replace it. It was a moving picture palace, being the same structure as the present Avon, excepting for repeated renovations. The Canoe Club Minstrels were also staged in the Sherwood Theatre, as well as some rather second-rate vaudeville performances. The present Avon Theatre is exclusively a motion picture house being under the management of the Kallet Chain.

Before the building of the present high school in 1927, Britten Hall in the Methodist church and the modern Grange Hall were the scene of all the amateur theatrical productions. With the coming of the new high school auditorium with its modern stage facilities the amateur theatricals received a new impetus and all the productions are staged there.

Perhaps again, a future day will see the return of the theatrical grandeur that was Canastota's. However, in this day of radio and movies and with television not so far away, it is sadly but truly improbable.