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National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is used for documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *How to Complete the Multiple Property Documentation Form* (National Register Bulletin 16B). Complete each item by entering the requested information. For additional space, use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

X New Submission ___ Amended Submission

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Footlights in Farm Country: Iowa Opera Houses, 1835-1940

B. Associated Historic Contexts

(Name each associated historic context, identifying theme, geographical area, and chronological period for each.)

Historical Development of Live Stage Entertainment in Iowa

C. Form Prepared by

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organization Prepared for PHR Associates date 5 March 1993

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D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Archeology and Historic Preservation. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature and title of certifying official — Date 8/16/93

State or Federal agency and bureau

I hereby certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

for Patrick Andrus — Signature of the Keeper — Date of Action 9/21/93

Statement of Historic Contexts: Historical Development of Live Stage Entertainment in Iowa

Introduction

Iowa was opened for settlement in 1832 and from the mid-1830s until the Depression years of the 1930s Iowans erected structures to house theatrical performances in their towns. There were three general phases of theatrical development in the state during that period, from amateur strollers to travelling professional troupes to high quality resident stock companies. The development of the theater business roughly parallelled the settlement of the state, and both were significantly affected by the growth of railroads after 1855. After erecting the requisite post office, school, church and general store local citizens erected their own version of "a temple for the arts" — an opera house that represented "civic pride and permanence" in the new country.[1]

The opera house represented the cultural standards of the community in more ways than simply housing dramatic performances. Lectures, concerts, recitals and other lyceum events were offered there, and the exotic images from distant lands that were painted on the scenery often "constituted [a town's] art gallery."[2] Indeed, even plain, one story frame halls in small towns had scenery executed by some of the nation's best professional scene painting studios. The vitality of theater in Iowa in the late 19th and early 20th century is further exemplified by Iowa's own professional scene painting studio, and by several Iowa-based travelling repertory groups.

In spite of the name, opera was seldom performed in Iowa opera houses. The earliest opera houses were not so much theaters but community halls associated with entertainment in general. Although these were built throughout the period, there was a tendency to build increasingly larger and more specialized performance facilities over time, to accomodate the greater number of theatrical troupes and other entertainers visiting them. After the combined onslaught of the motion picture industry and the Great Depression effectively ended live stage performances in Iowa opera houses, many, especially the ground floor auditoriums, continued to serve the town as movie theaters during the 1930s and even later. Opera houses often became lodge halls, and others have been returned to the role of general community hall that the earliest halls in Iowa filled.

Three Phases of American Theater — Theater Development in Iowa

In his seminal article, "The Development of Theatre on the American Frontier, 1750–1890," Douglas McDermott outlines three phases of theatrical development in ten geographic regions across the country. Iowa falls into the "Lake Plains" region, where the first theatrical performances were given

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1 Davis, Ronald L. "Opera Houses in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas: 1870-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9: 1 (Winter 1989), 14.

2 Sweet, Oney F. "The Opera House," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 38 (1940), 350.

between 1825 and 1855.[3] Phase I theater consisted of strolling players, including "magicians, variety performers...and small repertory companies made up of one or two families." Troupe members usually numbered no more than ten. They were itinerant amateurs, who played in any available space: halls, barns, courthouses, churches, warehouses, stores and any other building capable of holding a group of spectators.[4] Phase I theater troupes followed the advancing frontier, playing in towns along the Mississippi, Des Moines, Cedar and smaller rivers in eastern Iowa, and along the Missouri River in western Iowa.

Little is known of the earliest theatrical troupes in Iowa. Between 1837 and 1840, the famous Joseph Jefferson company attempted to establish a regular circuit in the Upper Mississippi Valley; they performed in Iowa,[5] but few specific dates and places are readily available from the secondary literature. The troupe, under the name "The McKenzie-Jefferson Company," did visit Dubuque in 1839, performing comedies and Shakespearean classics for admission prices of 50¢ and $1.00.[6] A few strolling players toured the Upper Mississippi Valley "during the summers of the late 1840s and '50s," but their names and the places they performed also remain anonymous. Bruce E. Mahan describes the circuit that travelling repertory companies followed in Iowa at about that time as "'a comprehensive tour of the state. They visited in Dubuque, Clinton, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk; swung inland to Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, Fort Dodge, Marshalltown, Des Moines, and Ottumwa; and then played in Council Bluffs and Sioux City on the Missouri River.'"

Phase I theater in Iowa roughly spanned the period 1830–1870, with entertainers travelling by steamboat, wagon and stagecoach until railroads provided easier access to the interior of the state. The first railroad entered the state in 1855, and in the next fourteen years the southern two-thirds of the state was transected by three major railroads, all of which fed into the first transcontiental railroad line, completed in 1869. The northwest quarter of Iowa was the last to be settled; the first railroad to transect that region was completed in 1870. Dramatic companies undoubtedly travelled by train whenever possible, depending on the size of the group, its finances and the availability of railroad transport.

Even after the railroads tapped an area theatrical facilities remained primitive until a solid population and commercial base was established. Because the southeastern quarter of the state was settled first, stable population and commercial centers were established in counties in this area before they were established in the more northerly and westerly counties (1850s-'60s). Townspeople along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers probably saw more and better performances than those in inland

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3 McDermott, Douglas, "The Development of Theatre on the American Frontier, 1750-1890," *Theatre Survey* 19: 1 (May 1978), 63-65.

4 McDermott, 65.

5 Bloom, Arthur W., "The Jefferson Company, 1830-1845," *Theatre Survey* 27: 1-2 (May and Nov. 1986), 135.

6 Funk, Nancy Louise, "Professional Theatrical Activity in Iowa From 1890 to 1895," M.A. Thesis, University of Iowa, 1966, 17.

towns until those towns along the trunk railroad lines possessed enough population and commercial activity to attract theatrical troupes (late 1860s to the 1880s).

In a sample of twenty-two Iowa counties with 140 towns, the first communities to possess halls for theatrical entertainment were in Burlington, Davenport and Dubuque between the 1830s and the 1850s. In the 1850s and '60s, Waterloo, Council Bluffs, Sioux City and Des Moines joined them. Interest in the arts is further evidenced by the fact that the earliest Iowa cities developed local thespian clubs, music groups, "literary and scientific societies" before the Civil War. Shows given by travelling repertory companies were usually no more than yearly (or semiannual at most) events, and in the intervening months local societies and associations often held lectures, demonstrations and recitals in early halls. In addition to these, magic lantern shows, dances, boxing matches and political rallies also took place in halls. This multipurpose aspect extended to opera halls and opera houses of the post-Civil War years, although their primary function was more often theatrical.

By 1855 Dubuque citizens, especially, were actively promoting the arts via several literary societies. "Numerous lecturers appeared each year, and vocal and instrumental concerts" along with amateur and professional theatrical performances were given. The Iowa Thespian Association was organized in Dubuque in 1838, and it is thought to have been the first amateur dramatic society in Iowa. The club existed for only a few years, giving performances in a room over the Shakespeare Coffee House and Free Admission News Room.[7]

Phase II

As settlement progressed west and north across the state, new villages were built, and older villages were transformed into towns, sometimes almost over night. This was particularly true when areas of Iowa's fertile land were opened for pre-emption, homesteading and sale, or when a railroad platted a town and sold lots. Nearby towns became supply centers and transportation hubs, especially if they had railroad access and a land office, for people scouting out and breaking new farms. Increased agricultural production from surrounding farms and increased commercial activity within the towns provided a more stable market for the second phase of theater development, which was itself marked by greater stability.

This phase was characterized by slightly larger troupes, of one to two dozen players[8] with some previous acting experience, who toured the towns and cities of a region (a circuit) year after year, and who performed a standard repertoire of plays supplemented by recent hits. These repertory

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7 Funk, 17.

8 Benjamin McArthur states that in the early 1900s the average number of players in travelling repertory companies was ten. McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984, 4.

companies tended to play in structures "specifically designed for performance."[9] Such buildings were called opera halls or opera houses (for reasons discussed later).

The phrase "specifically designed for performance" can mean a number of things, however. For example, many so-called opera houses had the open plans, flat floors, and movable seating of the early "utility" halls,[10] but with the addition of a stage, a couple of dressing rooms, and three or four standard sets of scenery, they were "designed for performance." Nevertheless, there was a trend toward more theater-specific design in the late 19th century, particularly in county seats and cities. There, troupes were probably more likely to find auditoriums with raked floors, balconies, fixed seating, and stages with ample scenery.

It was in the small towns that opera houses were not so much theaters but structures associated with entertainment in general. Seats could be pushed against the walls or piled on the stage for dances, athletic contests, rollerskating and other activities. In fact, like the plains states west of Iowa, some opera houses probably "had their origin in the craze for roller-skating that spread across the nation in the 1880s." Built as "rink halls" they were then converted to more theatrical purposes. Glenn and Poole's survey revealed that at least nineteen Iowa towns in the late 1880s had a "rink hall."[11] Some of these may have been built with stages, but many had stages added after the roller-skating fad died. In the Lewis Opera House bleachers were also erected (in lieu of a balcony), to help alleviate the bad sightlines inherent in flat-floored halls.

Impact of the Railroads

Rail transportation profoundly affected the economic development of American theater, which translated into the growth of theater in Iowa. First, the rapid expansion of the railroad network in the 1870s and '80s encouraged the rise of what is called the combination system, a system in which a play is rehearsed by a single company (usually headed by a star actor or actress) and then performed around the country.[12] The combination system first emerged during the 1860s and by 1880 it had replaced the resident stock companies of the larger American cities, mainly due to the burst of railroad construction and increased media coverage of the stars following the Civil War.

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9 McDermott, "The Development of Theatre...," 67.

10 Reynolds Keith Allen uses this term in his evolutionary typology of theaters: "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures in Iowa and Nebraska...," Ph.D. Dissertation, Florida State University, 1981.

11 Glenn, George, and Richard Poole, "Opera Houses of Iowa [Survey Data]," c. 1987. These towns were: Anita, Aurelia, Battle Creek, Belmond, Corning, Eldora, Farley, Hawarden, Kingsley, Lennox, Lewis, Macedonia, Melcher, New Sharon, Orange City, Reinbeck, Spencer, Tama, and Williamsburg.

12 The combination system probably gets its name from the fact that for the first time the play, performers, scenery and stage effects were rolled into one travelling production.

The nation's expanding rail system enabled both travelling combinations (single productions) and repertory companies to reach a larger audience than ever before. In 1870 the total railroad mileage in Iowa stood at just over 2,000 miles. By 1900 Iowa ranked fourth in the nation in rail trackage, with over 9,000 miles of rail covering the state.[13] Almost every hamlet was linked to the railway network, and in the last two decades of the 19th century the number of travelling entertainers and theater companies mushroomed, taking advantage of the new access to their markets.

Railroads increased accessibility and, indirectly, the number of troupes on the road, but they had a second effect on the growth of theater in Iowa. Rail fare for transporting an entire cast, luggage, costumes, and scenery could be expensive, and it was necessary for the combinations to play "one night stands" in small town en route to the next major stop. It was more profitable, for instance, for shows travelling from Chicago to San Francisco to play in small Iowa towns than to simply jump from city to city. "[Troupes] visiting California will find it to their interest to play Iowa and avoid long jumps," advertised one opera house manager in Ottumwa in the early 1880s.[14] Smaller Phase II repertory companies had lower overhead expenses but also probably needed to play in as many small towns as possible to ensure their financial survival. This economic circumstance undoubtedly inspired some Iowans, especially those in towns along the trunk lines, to erect opera houses.

Towns along the major east-west lines, the transcontinental lines, probably lured more shows than towns not along a direct route. Reynolds Keith Allen emphasizes the importance of the trunk lines in his study of Iowa and Nebraska opera houses. "The majority of public halls and 'opera houses' cited by Jeffery [in his theater directories] were in communities serviced by one of the four trunk lines."[15] Transportation costs declined in the last quarter of the 19th century, however, and one might hypothesize that a greater number of travelling shows could afford to play in towns off the trunk lines. Lower costs might also have encouraged travelling companies or productions to tour a region's small cities and towns exclusively. Lower rail fares would certainly also benefit other travelling entertainers like minstrels, magicians, lecturers, etc. Local or regional studies that show the relationship between railroad expansion, transportation costs, and entertainment are needed to test these hypotheses.

Phase III

The third phase of theatrical development depended upon the growth of towns into cities, into communities with some measure of economic independence from their region. These were large enough to support stationary theatrical companies, called resident stock companies. The third-phase companies were significantly larger than the second-phase groups, numbering almost two dozen

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13 Bryant, Ray L., *A Prelimiary Guide to Iowa Railroads 1850-1972*. Bryant, 1984, no page.

14 Jeffrey, Jonathan B., *Guide and Directory to the Public Halls, etc., of the Cities and Towns of...America* 6th edition, Chicago: Jonathan B. Jeffrey, 1883-84, 103.

15 Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures in Iowa and Nebraska...," 24. The four trunk lines were: the Chicago & North Western; the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy; the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific, and the Illinois Central railroads.

members. The actors were experienced professionals and were usually recruited from other cities. According to McDermott's definition third-phase companies had large repertoires of "old standards" interspersed with newer hits. According to Benjamin McArthur, however, resident stock companies of the late 19th and early 20th century performed few classics, relying almost exclusively on contemporary plays.[16] Finally, Phase III companies tended to inhabit large theaters, grand opera houses, in which they offered a several-month-long season of plays and musicals during the fall and winter. In summer they often played under tents or in "open-air theatres, imaginatively called air domes,"[17] as did the travelling repertory companies. The Princess Theatre Company of Des Moines (1909–1928) was the only resident stock company in Iowa to fit the Phase III definition for any length of time during the period 1835–1940. This company falls under the McArthur definition in that their repertoire shied away from the classic hits.

One reason for the relative rarity of resident stock companies in Iowa may have been the state's excellent railroad connections. Centrally located in the nation's midsection and having five major transcontinental railroads crossing its borders by the early 1900s — in addition to numerous short lines and branch lines feeding into nearly every Iowa community — it is likely that a great variety of travelling entertainers and repertory groups stopped in Iowa. Rail connections enhanced the development of Phase II theater, but because that kind of entertainment was so readily available, the resident stock companies may have been prevented from establishing themselves, smothered in their infancy, so to speak.[18]

The Three Phases — Discussion

McDermott cautions against viewing the development of the three phases of theater as the "orderly" process that his hypothesis may imply. "Within each region the phases overlapped, and regression to an earlier phase was not uncommon."[19] With the uneven pace and hop-scotch pattern of settlement, first-phase theater often existed alongside second- and even third-phase theater within a region of the state. Frontier conditions existed in northwest Iowa until the 1870s, while the southeastern portion of the state had become relatively well-developed by then. Thus, it is difficult to assign dates to the three phases of theater in Iowa for all three existed in various places throughout much of the 19th century.

Phase I theater came first to the towns along the navigable rivers, and then to interior towns that had rail access; Phase II theater also tended to come to these towns first. The great majority of communities in Iowa probably experienced Phase II theater after frontier conditions ceased to exist and until live stage entertainment ended (essentially the 1930s), but the quality of entertainment

16 McArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 8.
17 Ibid.
18 Christian, Ralph. Personal communication to Lisa Linhart (HPB), author copy, 25 February 1993.
19 McDermott, 69.

offered in this phase likely varied according to a town's proximity to a major rail line. None but the largest cities experienced Phase III theater, and Des Moines is the only known Iowa city that supported it for more than a year. More primitive theatrical facilities tended to be found in the smallest towns throughout the period 1835–1940, with the exception of towns that experienced a sharp decline in population. For example, it is possible that some coal towns in central Iowa experienced a boom during which a hall or opera house was built. After mine operations ceased, population dwindled, leaving a town with a theater seemingly much larger than the town's new, lower population warranted.

Founded in 1833, Dubuque provides an example of the attempted transition from first- to third-phase. By 1854 the need for a building to be used primarily as a theater prompted the construction of the Julien Theater. The third floor playhouse was plain and "unostentatiously painted," but it sported a gallery and box seats. In 1857 a rival theater opened, the People's Theater. People's had a so-called permanent stock company with nineteen members, supplemented by appearances of "such visiting stars as Maggie Mitchell and the great tragedian J. S. Wallack." But People's encountered financial difficulty within the year, probably because the community could not support the enterprise, and it was leased to the Julien Theater. The stock company was probably soon disbanded. People's Theater burned in 1859, leaving the Julien as Dubuque's primary theater until 1890.[20] The Julien Theater illustrated the transition from Phase I to Phase II, while People's Theater briefly represented Phase III theater in 19th century Dubuque.

Phase II, the Combination System, Circuit Repertory, and "Tent Rep"

As stated above, most Iowans probably experienced Phase II theater — travelling companies of relatively experienced players performing mainly in opera houses and public halls designed for dramatic entertainment — between 1835 and 1940. Under the umbrella of Phase II theater are the following forms of theatrical entertainment: the combination system, circuit repertory (which includes comedy and vaudeville companies for ease of definition), and "tent rep." Circuit rep and tent rep are related, tent rep being a variant of the former, played mainly in large tents (this will be further discussed below). The combination system probably coexisted with circuit repertory and, after 1900, tent repertory theater. While the country's most prominent performers toured the Midwest with a single production, many more lesser-known performers in repertory troupes continued to travel a more limited circuit of small and medium-sized towns offering a collection of plays and comedies. Of the hundreds of small theater companies that toured the country between the 1880s and the 1930s, the Midwest hosted a high percentage of them.[21]

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20 Funk, "Professional Theatrical Acitivity in Iowa...," 18.

21 Kramme, Michael, "Opera House Illusions, Jesse Cox and Theatrical Scenery," *Palimpsest* 71: 4 (Winter 1990), 154.

The peak period for travelling repertory players was roughly 1890 to World War I. Some troupes wintered in the South and toured their circuit of small midwestern towns during the spring, summer and autumn. Others toured year-round playing in opera houses, tents or airdomes during the summer and solely in opera houses during the winter.[22] Outdoor performances in tents were often necessary when the local hall or opera house was poorly ventilated. Minstrels and vaudevillians followed similar patterns. Some companies, especially those whose sole offering was the ubiquitous *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* played one night in a town and then moved on to another town the next day. Other companies stayed a weekend or longer performing a selection of plays. The normal schedule was one week per town with a daily change of bill.

The arrival of a theater, comedy or minstrel troupe was a big event in Iowa towns where "professional" entertainers were infrequent visitors. Many theater companies customarily made a "grand entrance" into the town from the railroad station, parading through the town to their hotel, dressed in their best finery. Sometimes a minstrel band or the members of the opera house orchestra (if it had one) led them to the opera house, where they played "a few more pieces to draw the people in" for the evening's show.[23] "Since many of the companies played the same community year after year, several of the performers became celebrities in the eyes of the local fans."[24] The Cora Warner Comedy Company visited Hampton each year at county fair time, and the leading lady of the company became the "first love" of at least one local boy, who later wrote that, sitting near the footlights, "impressions of her were imprinted almost indelibly on my consciousness."[25]

The troupe's business manager, overall manager, or "front man" (not the same as a manager) was responsible for preceeding the company to each town, when he would make final arrangements with the opera house manager, make hotel reservations for the group, and have handbills printed for local distribution. The bills were displayed in store windows, and local boys would hand deliver them to town residents and post the remainder in exchange for free admission to the evening performance. Sometimes an actor accompanied the bill posters "to make sure that none of the bills were thrust through the cracks of board sidewalks or disposed of otherwise...." The emphasis on advertising performances via hand bills complicates the job of the historian; because of their transitory nature few have survived to the present, and historians are forced to rely on newspapers, which did not always publish the same information printed on the bills, such as: the names of the entire cast (not just the stars as published by the paper), admission prices, and other information

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22 Jere C. Mickel credits Fayette Lodavik "Yankee" Robinson with originating tent theater when his company played in Davenport in September 1851; he began performing in tents in the summer and halls only in the winter because most halls were inadequate. Robinson abandoned travelling repertory after 1866 when he went into the circus business, eventually joining up with the Ringling Brothers Circus, which Mickel says was begun by the "Rünglüng" brothers in McGregor, Iowa. Mickel, *Footlights on the Prairie, The Story of the Repertory Tent Players in the Midwest.* St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 1974, 13, 16-17.

23 Ekdale, Edith Harper, "The Grand Opera House," *Palimpsest* 28 (1947), 189.

24 McArthur, 4; and Kramme, 154, 157 (quotation from 157).

25 Sweet, Oney F., "The Opera House," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* 38 (1940), 349.

about the show. When a company brought along its own scenery, for example, the fact was emphasized on the hand bill; special stage effects were also key advertising points.[26]

Most of the travelling repertory companies and other performing groups "remained on the economic fringes of the dramatic world." Their success depended heavily upon the economic prosperity of the towns in which they played, as well as the group's own internal management.[27] (The general agricultural prosperity in Iowa between 1880 and 1920 may explain the popularity of dramatic entertainment during the same period.) Planning a route or circuit, bill posting and other advertising were very important to the economic survival of travelling dramatic companies and other performers. Troupe or show managers had to be familiar with the territory they travelled: they had to be sensitive to the tastes of their audiences as well as the economic trends of the regions they visited. As one early 20th century performer said, "The man who lays out the route can make or break a show."[28] Newspaper advertising did not reach everyone in a city or town, especially in towns without a daily paper. Bill posting, especially delivery to each household, insured the best possible turnout. There was also heavy reliance on the "doubling of rôles, for...[the manager was] obliged to keep expenses down."[29]

Similarly, opera house owners seldom found the business profitable from their end, and in many Iowa towns the theater's operation was probably discontinuous.[30] There were at least two common contract agreements between the theater owner/manager and the performing group in the 19th and early 20th century. In one arrangement both parties agreed to split the gross receipts for an evening's performance. In the other, the performing company rented the hall or opera house for a given number of shows. Some owners may have felt the former arrangement was too risky or too time-consuming because of the bargaining to be done, and they only rented their facilities. Charles M. Steele, owner of Steele's Opera House (1879) in Bedford, let his theater with scenery and organ for $15 per night in the early 1880s; he was one of those who refused to "'play on shares.'"[31] In either case, the opera house was dependent upon the prosperity of the community in which it was located, and its financial success was probably marginal much of the time. It is likely that the bigger the town, the greater chance for success a theater owner had.

It is precisely because of the financial uncertainty of the opera house business that most owners incorporated their hall or theater into a larger commercial building. Until c. 1910, most theater facilities in Iowa were located on the second (occasionally third) story of a commercial block, with

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26 Sweet, 348, 350; and Mickel.

27 McArthur, 4; and Caroline Schaffner, telephone interview with author, 2 March 1993.

28 Schaffner, Caroline, telephone interview.

29 Sweet, 349-50.

30 The New Opera House in Clear Lake was a good example of this. It was built in 1896, but by 1899 theater directories listed it as "closed indefinitely." Glenn and Poole.

31 Jacobsen, James E., "Steele's Opera House," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, prepared for the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1988.

another commercial enterprise below. Shops selling general merchandise, dry goods, groceries, clothing, furniture, hardware and agricultural implements, drugs, and even jewelry were commonly located on the first floor of these buildings. Banks, offices, restaurants, and billiard parlors were occasionally below the opera house. Opera houses located above banks seem to have been most common in small towns.[32] Sometimes offices were also located on the second floor, streetside, with the theater located behind them. In some towns, the opera house was on the second floor, above shops, and a lodge hall or dance hall was located on the third floor. After c. 1910 many more theaters were located on the ground floor for safety reasons, but unless the opera house was a freestanding structure, a commercial venture all its own, most theater facilities were still associated with other businesses, only this time the businesses were on the upper floors.

When motion pictures became popular after the turn of the century, especially after 1910, the repertory troupes were increasingly relegated to tent performances because the opera house was given over to movies. Because they played primarily in tents, this kind of theater became known as "tent rep." Tent rep was "especially common in the Midwest and South," according to Benjamin McArthur. It provided summer work for many actors; "in the summer of 1914 it was estimated that 800 actors found employment in a 300-mile radius of Kansas City" for example.[33] The greatest development in tent rep occurred between 1919 and 1930, during which time opera houses were generally dominated by motion pictures. After about 1930, however, when the movies abandoned the opera house for sparkling new movie theaters, the so-called tent rep troupes tended to move back into the opera house.[34]

The Opera House as "Civic Monument"

In Eastern theaters of the 1830s and '40s there occurred a general transition from a hierarchical organization of space within the theater to a more "democratic" organization. This transition parallels the rise of the middle class, according to Bruce McConachie. By the 1850s most large theaters had a "parquet" suitable for fashionable and respectable middle class women instead of a "pit," which had been an unruly, exclusively male domain. A "dress circle," "family circle" or "balcony"[35] for the middle classes replaced the old "second tier," which had been comprised mainly of boxes or stalls for upper class viewers. The "gallery" replaced the notorious "third tier," where prostitutes had previously plied their trade. The gallery did, however, retain its working class associations; in some theaters African-Americans were allowed to watch shows only from gallery seats. Many theaters eliminated the third tier/gallery all together.

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32 Opera houses in Blairsburg, Calmar, Clutier, Corning, Dallas Center, Iowa City, Lake City, Mantelle and Whiting were known to have been located above banks. From Glenn and Poole.

33 McArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 4.

34 Mickel, 13.

35 The terminology for this area of the theater is confusing and so full of variety as to virtually defy standardized definition. Some theaters had a flat parquet with a raked or tiered horseshoe-shaped area around it called the parquet circle or dress circle; the balcony jutted out over this area. In some theaters the balcony was called the dress or family circle, the first gallery or the first balcony.

Accompanying the changes in spatial organization were changes in the degree and kind of decoration within theaters. By the 1850s and '60s the interiors of urban theaters were more opulent, plush and comfortable than before. The idea was that a theater outfitted in splendor would impart an air of taste and gentility appealing to the new middle classes, who were targeted by theater managers interested in developing new audiences.[36]

How did these spatial and design changes relate to theaters in Iowa? Much of the literature discussing theater structures focuses on large theaters in large eastern cities, with sporadic coverage of theaters in big western and midwestern cities such as San Francisco, Denver, Chicago and St. Louis. In Chicago and St. Louis spatial and decorative changes in theater design probably lagged behind those in eastern cities by only a few years. From Chicago and St. Louis the new theater design ideas were probably disseminated to budding Iowa cities, recently frontier towns or villages, between the 1850s and 1870s. The structures first designed to function as theaters in Iowa towns and cities were mainly open-plan halls with flat floors, rudimentary stages and sparse furnishings; these facilities were "democratic" in seating arrangement by default.[37] The kinds of theaters (opera houses) built in Iowa cities and larger towns resembled their eastern counterparts in spatial concepts and design themes, although the time lag varied according to the community's location and population within the state.

While the structures built in Iowa to show live entertainment fall under the general rubric of "theaters," they were rarely called that. The nomenclature includes a variety of terms: hall, academy of music, lyceum, music hall, theater (mainly after 1900), auditorium, and especially, opera house.[38] While the presence of a building specifically identified as a place where live entertainment could be performed indicated a town's "level of culture and sophistication,"[39] the fact that it was called something other than "theater" reveals the perjorative associations that the word conveyed to 19th century sensibilities. For most people in Iowa towns "theater" had a sinful connotation.

This negative association was rooted in a nationwide antipathy toward the performing arts, dating to the late 18th century, on the part of most Protestant churches. Throughout most of the 19th century well-known clergymen, the religious press, and occasionally the secular press condemned the corruptive influences of the theater. Audiences were prone to rowdiness, they said, theaters were frequented by persons of low morals and actors' morals were questionable at most. Plays advertised sinful behavior such as "cursing, drinking, flirting, murder, duelling, remarriage, and...slang." Even

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36 McConachie, Bruce A., *Melodramatic Formations, American Theatre and Society, 1820-1870* (Studies in Theatre History and Culture, Thomas Postlewait, ed.), Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.

37 Given the state's post-1830 settlement period it seems unlikely that any of the older forms of theater buildings were constructed in Iowa, and one might argue that it was the new theater ideas which introduced a hierarchical spatial organization to Iowa theater buildings.

38 Based on data for a sample of 22 Iowa counties, compiled from Glenn and Poole, Allen, and Sanborn maps for the selected counties.

39 Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures in Iowa and Nebraska...," 421.

when urban theater managers in the 1850s and '60s began offering plays of the "highest moral content," religious critics still decried the theater "because dramatic presentation itself pandered to the most dangerous human faculties: the imagination, the senses, the passions."[40]

Arguments in the prescriptive literature filtered down to, or were brought with individuals and families bound for, the growing number of communities dotting the Iowa landscape. The cultural pattern of early Iowa towns was dominated by a hard-working, "middle-class Protestant group given to religion and stern morality."[41] As the main proponents of the "cult of the immediately useful and practical," such persons often scorned literature, drama, music (except hymns), and art for cultivating impractical leisure skills which did not contribute to the family's economic growth.[42] If the predominant attitude generally considered the dramatic arts evil, one might well ask why so many theater buildings were built?

The answer to that question is complex to say the least. One reason is that not everyone in town believed in or adhered to the dominant middle class religious ideology. In addition to those on the lower rungs of the social ladder, there were "[virtually] everywhere on the middle border...families which held substantial and respectable places in society without bowing to the [regnant] code" of ethics. Many of these families played cards, drank wine, danced, and attended theatrical performances without guilt.[43] One Iowan wrote (probably referring to the period around the turn of the century), "We did not consider it sinful to attend shows at the opera house, but we were sufficiently under the Puritan influence to feel that local talent, feminine at least, should not venture in the field any farther than appearing in homemade programs or...in lyceum offerings sponsored by the church or school."[44]

Evidence of this is found in the various ways opera houses were financed and built. Often a well-to-do business figure would build an opera house in his new commercial block to exemplify the cultural standards of the town (as well as his personal standards, affluence and generosity!). Opera houses were often sponsored by several prominent businessmen as a joint venture, for similar reasons. A number of communities formed opera house associations spearheaded by business leaders; remaining funds for the theater's construction were then gathered from residents of the town and outlying farms in a subscription campaign. Of 140 communities from a sample of twenty-two counties, ten had theaters built by an association between the 1870s and the 1910s; further research would probably reveal more opera house associations.[45] Sometimes the associations solicited cash donations and sometimes they sold shares of stock in the organization.

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40 Carlson, Marvin, "The Theatre as Civic Monument," *Theatre Journal* 40: 1 (March 1988), 196.

41 Atherton, Lewis, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, 75.

42 Atherton, 113.

43 Atherton, 73.

44 Sweet, 352.

45 These were: Waverly (1877), Creston (1882), Whiting (1883), Corning (1902), Kiron (1902), Alvord (1908), Cedar Falls (1910), Ogden (1910), Waucoma (1912), and Breda (1915); Logan (1901) may have been built by an opera house association.

Arguments advanced to garner support for the construction of an opera house tended to highlight the cultural and educational benefits a town could reap from an opera house. Campaigners pointed to a need for a "high class establishment" that provided family entertainment, and competed effectively with lower forms of recreation associated with billiard halls and saloons. If "teaching and preaching [are] more noble than the arts because they directly [promote] religion and morality," then why not tout the "teaching" potential of the opera house?[46]

Wholesome plays such as the stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), were strong arguments in favor of opera houses. Performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* drew all but the hard-line religious critics to the theater. "The moral tone in many of the stage productions of the novel outweighed any compunction on moral grounds an opponent might have had to theater productions in general." Indeed, according to the *Sioux City Journal* in 1878, the play was "'so mild and moral that even tolerably strict church members may see it performed without compromising themselves....'" During the 1880s the "popularity of the play in Sioux City, and in surrounding towns..., created such demand for the novel that the local bookseller could not meet the requests."[47]

A broader but perhaps more important explanation lies in the pervasive desire for economic growth and prosperity, and the outward appearance of such success, that followed the Civil War. Business leaders who backed opera house plans believed that "whatever enhanced their town's image in time would enrich the local economy and attract desirable settlers as well."[48] As a result of postwar leaps in industrial and agricultural development, American attitudes toward recreation began to change. Strict rules governing behavior were "not allowed to interfere with the constant itch for bigness, growth, and numbers — in short, with progress."[49]

The standardization of industry combined with new marketing strategies (mass advertising) gave rise to increasing homogenization of material culture and popular culture in the last quarter of the 19th century. For the theater business, the effects of industrialization and homogenization were essentially twofold. In terms of material culture the opera house became a physical manifestation of community prosperity, progressiveness and civic pride. In terms of popular culture the development of the star or combination system, concurrent with rapid transportation improvements, enabled stars and drama to reach more audiences than ever before, via widespread publicity.[50]

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46 Atherton, 118.

47 Hewitt, William L., "Blackface in the White Mind, Racial Stereotypes in Sioux City, Iowa, 1874-1910," *Palimpsest* 71: 2 (Summer 1990), 69.

48 Davis, Ronald L., "Opera Houses in Kansa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas: 1870-1920," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9: 1 (Winter 1989), 14.

49 Atherton, *Main Street on the Middle Border*, 83.

50 Benjamin McArthur emphasizes the importance of the rise of mass media to the theater industry. By 1900, "[p]opular magazines were filled with commentary on the drama and illustrated features on the offstage life of players." Likewise, players actively cultivated media coverage because that "meant stardom." McArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 144.

For the origin of the name "Opera House" one must again look to the eastern seaboard. By the 1850s the upper and upper-middle classes of the large eastern cities had adopted "grand opera" as their preferred theatrical entertainment. Partially in response to the "democratization" of common theaters, the upper classes built and patronized grand opera houses, and opera became the highest form of performing art.[51] Writes Marvin Carlson, "by the second half of the nineteenth century the opera house had not only been appropriated by the upper bourgeoisie, but had become a symbol of their high aesthetic and thus an obligatory monument for any city anywhere in the world wishing to establish its European-oriented cultural credentials."[52]

Here is a clue to the proliferation of the words "Opera House" in Iowa towns, indeed, across much of the Midwest. The presence and ornateness of an opera house in Iowa towns and cities attested to the progressiveness of the community, and served as a "highly visible [sign] of civic dedication to the arts, especially the arts as defined by the high bourgeoisie culture of the nineteenth century," to which much of the middle class population aspired.[53] "Opera House" was synonymous with entertainment as an art form and the words connoted respectability, although opera itself was rarely performed in Iowa towns and cities. Additionally, the opera house symbolized permanence. Capping earlier achievements such as schools, churches, bank buildings, post offices, and hotels, the opera house was often an investment that signalled the coming of age for a town recently cut out of the prairie.[54]

The location of these structures in Iowa towns is another indication of the opera house's role as a central feature of town cultural life. Opera houses were usually located along the main thoroughfares of a town, in the business district or close to it for a number of reasons. First, entertainment traditionally has been found downtown. Second, sidewalks, street lights and livery services were conveniently located nearby for patron use. Third, and more important, opera houses were often associated with offices and other businesses (on one or more of the building's floors), and the structures needed to be adjacent to the business district in order to draw customers. Fourth, and on a more subjective level, the opera house was often centrally located so as to create a favorable impression of the town for visitors. The opera house was close to hotels,[55] restaurants, and the depot to make it noticeable and readily accessible to travelling strangers (who were potential patrons) and the theatrical companies that played in it.

The association of an opera house with a town's municipal offices emphasizes the role of the facility as a community gathering place, and therefore, its importance in town social life. A few towns —

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51 McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations.*

52 Carlson, "Theatre as Civic Monument," 24.

53 Carlson, 27.

54 Davis, Ronald L., "Opera Houses in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas," 14.

55 The Burtis Opera House (1867) in Davenport was next door to a hotel, and in tiny Hardin, the Finn Hotel and Opera House (1894) were located under one roof. Glenn and Poole, Survey Data, and Sanborn maps.

West Burlington and Dyersville are at least two — erected buildings that housed a hall or opera house, the city hall and the fire department. In some towns, like Corning, the opera house was adjacent to the city hall and fire department. The community building association has been perpetuated in many Iowa towns in the post-World War II era in that the opera house was often converted to a general purpose community hall.

Fraternal Orders & Ethnic Influences

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, numerous halls and opera houses in Iowa were built by fraternal orders to house both public entertainment and lodge activities. This association is evident in such names as: the Woodmen Hall, the IOOF Opera House, and the New Masonic Theatre. The Marathon Opera House, for example, was built in 1902 by the Odd Fellows to be used for all lodges and all community events in town. Other lodges had buildings constructed with an opera house on the ground floor and the lodge rooms above, as the Odd Fellows in Onawa did in 1900. The Onawa IOOF Opera House was also designed with space for an attorney's office in a corner of the first floor; this space and the theater were intended to generate revenue for the order. Although not constructed by fraternal orders, opera houses in Iowa were converted to lodge halls for the Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Columbus, Knights of Pythias, and the American Legion throughout the 20th century.

Some fraternal orders were ethnically-based, which is also reflected in structure names. The Czechs erected C.S.P.S. halls in Solon and Vining, and Z.C.B.J. halls in Clutier, Chelsea, Oxford Junction, and Richmond around the turn of the century and in several years afterward. These halls were primarily one-story frame community halls, but all were equipped with stages and scenery. The Czechs have a long theatrical tradition in Iowa, beginning in the 1870s, when they performed amateur theatricals "in the hall of the Reading Society" in Cedar Rapids. A Czech drama club staged plays and operettas "every second Monday night," in both English and Czech languages.[56] The scenery in some of the Czech halls was particularly fine, having been painted by large professional studios like Sosman & Landis in Chicago. Sosman & Landis painted an "elegant main curtain" for the Czech hall in Oxford Junction, the title of which is in Czech and translates to "A beautiful view of Prague."[57]

The German influence may be detected in halls and opera houses with names like, the Turn Halle (Des Moines), the New German Theater (Davenport), the Germania Halle (Walnut), and the Germania Hall (Manning). Some of these were undoubtedly sponsored by German Turnvereins, whose meetingplaces were often called "Turner" halls, but they have been included in the context because they were also known as public theaters. For instance, the Sanborn insurance map of Davenport in 1892 shows the Turner Grand Opera House on the second and third floors of the Turner Hall; the gynasium occupied the first floor. Germans living in Davenport had been actively

56 Funk, "Professional Theatrical Activity in Iowa," 14.
57 Kramme, "Opera House Illusions," 172.

involved in the dramatic arts since the 1830s, and the city sometimes supported more than one German theater.[58] The Turnhalle in Des Moines in 1901 also had a second floor opera house, first floor gynasium, and basement bowling alley. Both opera houses came complete with scenery, footlights and balconies. Another ethnic group or fraternal order known to have sponsored a theatrical or paratheatrical facility in Iowa was the Danish Brotherhood Society, who built a hall by that name in Latimer in 1900.[59]

Drama, Scenery, and Atmosphere

The kind of dramatic fare offered in opera houses changed considerably between 1835 and the 1930s. Romantic or tragic melodramas were popular from the 1850s until the 1880s, when audience tastes shifted increasingly to farce-comedies and spectacles. There were a few exceptions however. *The Black Crook,* introduced at mid-century, was one play to be revived toward the end of the century. Another, more popular, was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* first staged in 1856; this perennial favorite was played so frequently and in so many places that companies performing it were nicknamed "Tom shows." Joseph Jefferson, whose company was one of the first to bring theater to the upper Mississippi River valley and who helped "make" American theater, first starred in *Rip Van Winkle* in 1859; in the 1890s he was still touching the hearts of audiences at Greene's Opera House in Cedar Rapids and the Grand Opera House in Burlington. Military melodramas, especially those about the Civil War, also retained their appeal into the 1890s.[60]

By the 1890s "folk comedies, sentimental comedies, and mild social comedies — all in a romantic vein" were the biggest box office draws.[61] These varied highly in quality and were sometimes criticized in the local press for "'their lavish displays of sensationalism together with a complete ignorance of the dramatic in script and presentation.'" Spectacles "consisted of light, airy plots and fantastic themes surrounded by humorous song and dance numbers, acrobatic pantomimes, and...colorful scenery and costumes." These could sometimes be identified by such names as *Panjandrum, Fantasma,* and *Superba.* They too were taken to task by local drama critics when thinly veiled plots and poorly executed stage effects produced a show which failed to live up to its billing or its name.[62]

But researchers must be careful not to rely heavily on newspaper reviews, cautions Nancy L. Funk. By comparing ticket sales and reviews she found that productions chastised in the paper for vulgarity or poor presentation sometimes played to a sold-out house, revealing that audience opinion

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58 Schick, Joseph S., *The Early Theatre in Eastern Iowa,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939.
59 Glenn and Poole, Survey Data.
60 Funk, Nancy L., "Professional Theatrical Activity"; and Ekdale, Edith H. "The Grand Opera House," *Palimpsest* 28 (1947), 184.
61 Funk, 106.
62 Funk, 123 and 144.

occasionally differed from the newspaper's.[63] On the other hand, there may be truth in the reviews. In 1895 the drama critic for the Cedar Rapids *Gazette* reported that "'the revival of legitimate drama [is] heartily welcomed.' He stated that after six years of 'stage tomfoolery,' the people were tired of 'stale wit, scant garb, and strange dancing.'" Evidence of this might be found in the successful Iowa tours of Helena Modjeska, Minna Gale, and Louis James who starred in Shakespearean classics and plays with a literary or historical theme like *Mary Stuart* and *Henry VIII*.[64]

As discussed above, although called "opera" houses, theater structures in Iowa showed operatic productions only rarely. Comic opera, light opera or operettas were probably the most common forms of opera that Iowans saw in the 19th and early 20th century, and most of these productions probably took place in grand opera houses in the cities and larger towns. The Emma Abbott Grand English Opera Company was the opening bill at Burlington's new Grand Opera House in 1882, and *Carmen* was the opening show at the Grand Opera House in Dubuque in 1890, for instance. *Faust*, another "heavy," played at the Peavey Grand in 1893. Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Gondoliers* was popular at the Peavey Grand in 1892 as was *H.M.S. Pinafore* at Burlington's Grand Opera House later on, but productions like *Pirates of Penzance* also appeared in smaller theaters such as the Colby Opera House in Onawa.[65]

Travelling productions and repertory companies stopped in Iowa communities only a few times a year, and opera house managers booked a variety of performers to fill openings in their schedules and, they hoped, empty seats. Vaudeville companies, minstrels, hypnotists, magicians, "educated animals," and lecturers were engaged. Individuals came to demonstrate new inventions like the phonograph or early motion picture machines at the opera house.

Vaudeville, or variety, gained momentum around the turn of the century and reached its peak in the 1910s and '20s. After competition from movies hastened the demise of so-called legitimate drama in the 1910s, especially after World War I, vaudeville became the staple of many small town opera houses. The "Musical Monroes" and "Ralph Richards and His Hi-Class Vaudeville Co." played the Bloomfield Opera House in 1913, and a member of the "Curtis Comedy Co." scribbled "good biz." on the backstage wall at the Worthington Opera House in 1923. Other houses, on the other hand, attempted to withstand the combined motion picture-vaudeville onslaught. Manager F.C. Reese advertised the Corning Opera House in 1914 as a legitimate theater, presenting no films or vaudeville,[66] but for many managers the attempt was futile.

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63 Funk, 132.
64 Funk, 96-97.
65 Ekdale, 184; Funk, 144; and Cunning, Tracy A., Onawa Opera House NRHP Nomination, 1990.
66 Gus Hill's Theatrical Directory, 1914.

Staging

The change in the kinds of drama presented between 1835 and the 1900 was accompanied by an overall shift toward realism. As Funk puts it, the story became secondary to the staging. Stage technicians and scene painters gained importance in the attempt to satisfy audience demand for realism in the theater.[67] This shift prompted and was itself spurred by improvement in stage effects. Technological improvements included such basic things as electric lighting and the construction of larger playhouses with bigger stages. The improved stages included flylofts for suspending scenery, as opposed to the older system of rolldrops and wing and groove scenery. They also allowed for the use of traps for dramatic entrances or exits. Regardless of the size or modernity of the facility, theater companies attempted to reproduce reality in their productions by including real life objects and even live animals. In her intensive study of theater in Dubuque, Cedar Rapids and Sioux City during the 1890s, Nancy L. Funk found that audience praise or criticism of a production was often based on the realism of the staging as much as the plot's credibility and the performers' abilities. With props and scenery that approached reality and with good acting, players could truly transport their audiences into a fantasy world. Both setting and acting were highly variable, however.

The first thing many audiences in Iowa saw when they entered the opera house auditorium was a front or main curtain of rich fabric such as velvet or velour, often red. Others saw a drop curtain with an attractive outdoor scene or a representation of a famous historical painting, figure, event or place, complete with a painted-on frame; water scenes were common. This center image was often ringed by advertisements for local businesses in many opera houses, and for this reason it is called an "ad drop." The Hampton Opera House varied slightly from this, by sporting a curtain with the Rock of Gibraltar as the centerpiece, and advertising painted on panels on the three sides of the proscenium arch. If painted by an out-of-town company the drop frequently came with blank spaces so that a local artist could add the names of supporting businesses. Joseph Schick claims that the practice of decorating the margins of the front drop curtain with local advertisements originated in LeClaire Hall in Davenport, during an engagement of "Hough's Lyceum." Oney F. Sweet recalls that in Hampton, even if some of the advertisers were no longer in business, "there was never any change in the lettering."[68]

In addition to the front curtain or ad drop most opera houses possessed a collection of four standard sets representing what was "known in the profession as 'front room, back room, timber and town.'" Translated, these were parlor, kitchen, outdoor scene usually with water, and streetscape. "The larger and more prosperous [theatre] companies brought their own scenery in railroad boxcars, but the smaller companies had to rely on scenery owned by the opera house." Of course, the larger the opera house, the greater the variety of stock scenery. The small Hampton Opera House had only

67 Funk, 138.
68 Kramme, 161; Schick, cited in Mickel, "Footlights on the Prairie," 45; and Sweet, "The Opera House," 350.

four basic scenes: "a street scene, a woodland, and a 'fancy door center'... [with] a prison scene painted on the back wall" of the stage.[69]

The "wing and drop" system was the one most commonly used between 1835 and 1940. In this system,

The sides of the stage were masked by a series of wings (or flats), wooden frames covered with canvas and then painted to represent the setting. The wings were lined up behind one another at intervals so they would mask the side of the off-stage area from the audience and provide entrance space for the performers. [Hence the phrase, "waiting in the wings."][70]

The wings were set in grooves in the stage floor, and could slide out of view during scene changes. Drops were painted canvasses that matched the wings. They were suspended from pin rails over the stage and they formed the back of the setting. When not in use they were either "tied to a batten and hoisted above the stage," or in small opera houses with no overhead space they were "rolled up out of sight on a wooden cylinder."[71] The fly system eliminated the need for rolldrops, with a flyloft or stagehouse towering over the roof of the auditorium. Except for the grand opera houses in the larger cities, especially after the turn of the century, most opera houses in Iowa probably used rolldrops.

Scene Painting

Most of the scenery owned by Iowa opera houses was probably produced in the Midwest. Many sets were undoubtedly painted by local or itinerate artists, but some were produced by professional scene painting companies. The largest companies identified in a survey of Iowa opera houses included: Sosman and Landis (Chicago); Twin Cities Scenic, Flour City Scenic and Universal Scenic Studio (all from Minneapolis-St. Paul), and Kansas City Scenic Studio. The Omaha Scenic Company also produced scenery for at least one Iowa opera house (the Clutier Z.C.B.J. [Czech] Hall). Sosman and Landis scenery has been found in the Corning, Harlan (a full set) and Vining opera houses, and in the Oxford Junction Z.C.B.J. Hall. The Central City Opera House, Coggon Opera House, Cotton Theatre in Cedar Falls and the Wieting Theater in Toledo all had scenery painted by Twin Cities Scenic; Flour City Scenic supplied scenery for the Akron Opera House, and the Kansas City Scenic Studio produced scenery for the Westgate Opera House.[72] Scene painting companies distributed catalogues of their work, and opera house managers ordered individual drops or wings, or a whole set of scenery from them. Opera house managers may have ordered from a variety of sources or they may have patronized one company more than any other.

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69 Sweet, 350.
70 Kramme, "Opera House Illusions," 158.
71 Ibid.
72 Glenn and Poole, "Opera Houses of Iowa [Survey Data]."

The Cox Scenic Company in Estherville was Iowa's own professional scene painting company from about 1900 through the 1920s. Jesse Cox invented a special technique to alleviate problems associated with painted scenery. "Moving and storage of scenery were very difficult and expensive — especially for the traveling companies that transported their own. Although the wings were built so they would fit sideways into a standard boxcar and could be moved easily, the drops...were too large to move without folding them."[73] When folded, the paint on the canvas would crack and eventually flake off, and the drop would need to be replaced, which increased a troupe's or show's expenses.

Cox developed and patented [the 'Diamond Dye process',] a process of painting scenery with a heated dye rather than paint. The use of a dye process provided a full array of vivid colors that would not rub off or crack....With this process, drops could be folded up, packed into trunks, and easily transported from theater to theater [allowing repertory companies] to carry a greater selection of scenery with them.[74]

In the wake of Cox's innovation many scenery studios changed from paint to dye. Some attempted to replicate his invention but were unsuccessful, and his technique "has remained a trade secret to this day."[75]

Jesse Cox moved with his family from Illinois to Estherville, Iowa, in 1891, when he was thirteen. He "began his theatrical career as a prop boy at the Lough Opera House in Estherville." At sixteen he became an actor with the Warren G. Noble Dramatic Shows of Chariton. After working for several years for repertory companies, tent shows and a circus, Cox returned to Estherville. There, "he and his older brother George, owned, edited and published *The Opera House Reporter,* a weekly show-business newspaper," from 1898 to 1907. Intended to assist local theater managers "in hiring traveling talent," the newspaper provided advertising space for theater-related businesses and "box office reports from theaters."[76] The paper circulated around the Midwest.

His in-depth knowlege of the theater business led Jesse Cox to create scenery that was readily transportable and long-lasting, and his artistic abilities produced scenery that was "convincing" as well. It also helped him market the new process he developed while painting scenery for the Lough Opera House. In his 1916 catalog Cox wrote, "'If you have a large production it will save you $1.00 to $3.00 on baggage transfers every day....If you play a small house you can fold in the stuff to fit the stage and use the scenery every night in place of leaving it in the alley about one-half of the time.'"[77]

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73 Kramme, 159.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Kramme, "Opera House Illusions," 157-158.
77 Kramme, 156.

Theater managers around the country praised Cox for the realism and high quality of his studio's sets. Jesse Cox established his studio around the turn of the century and he was "soon providing scenery to theaters across the nation as well as Canada, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico. At the height of production, in the 1920s, the Cox Scenic Company had a standing order for two thousand yards of cloth weekly." The scene painting business died as live theater waned in the late 1920s and early '30s. Cox, with his son Robert, established a sign painting business, but he and the theatrical recognition that he brought to Estherville faded from the limelight.

Opera houses in Iowa known to have purchased Cox scenery were in Pocahontas, Gladbrook and Chariton, probably only a small fraction of those houses that once owned Cox scenery. According to Glenn and Poole, a number of houses in Buena Vista County also purchased Cox scenery. Other known Iowa scene painters were Hugh Lanning of Ottumwa (for the Blakesburg Opera House), Louis Syberkrop of Creston, J. S. Butler and Son of Springville (for the opera house in that town), and J. F. Briggs of Waterloo (for the Columbia Opera House in Correctionville).[78]

Theater Companies in Iowa

Large individual shows (combinations) that began touring the country's cities in the 1870s and early '80s effectively ruined the highest quality resident stock companies, but "so-called popular-priced stock companies appeared in the 1890s as alternatives to the more expensive [New York-based] touring combinations." Resident stock companies existed only in cities large enough to support them and were "autonomous local operations headed by a manager who owned or leased the theater, hired the actors, picked the plays and offered a rudimentary form of direction to the cast." These companies had twenty to forty players, depending on the size of the city. Popular-priced stock theaters offered few classics, relying almost exclusively on contemporary plays; they were open more months of the year than the small town opera houses were, and they usually offered six performances per week. This kind of stock operated "well into the 20th century as a kind of minor league" theater.[79]

While there is evidence of Dubuque and Sioux City having resident stock companies, the Princess Stock Company of Des Moines is the best known and probably also the longest lived in Iowa. It fits the definition given above except that its owners/managers never served as directors. The Princess Stock Company was the first high-quality professional resident stock company in Iowa.

During the 1906–07 season Benjamin F. Elbert and John A. Getchell tested the "Des Moines theatre market" by offering one-act plays in between films at their Nickeldome. Des Moines was the largest

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78 This information was gleaned from Michael Kramme's article, and Glenn and Poole's survey. Cox's workbench, dye pigments and brushes, as well as a wide variety of scenery painted by him and others are on display in the Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

79 McArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 5 and 8.

city in the state (population 90,000), but had "only three fully operating legitimate theatres and several vaudeville houses." Other cities in the state with fewer people had nearly the same number of theaters. The experiment was a success, and "Elbert traveled the Midwest and East to study theatres, actors, and stock companies. The partners then gathered capital to build a theater and hire a staff of artists for the 1909 season."[80]

The large, classically-styled Princess Theatre (4th Street, between Locust and Walnut, nonextant) was indeed completed in time for the 1909 season. Getchell was the business manager and Elbert was in charge of hiring directors, actors, and technicians. The Princess Theatre was the only truly legitimate theatre in Des Moines; it offered no vaudeville or "paratheatrical performances." The Princess "played a single bill each week during the winter and toured the region under canvas in the summer." The repertory consisted mainly of melodramas, comedies, and musicals. "The management generally avoided classics [like Shakespeare] and controversial or avant-garde works. Such productions drew poorly at the box office and often required a large cast."[81]

The Princess Theatre was a smashing success in Des Moines for many years, because of the managers' sound judgment, careful planning, and strict policies, and also because "Getchell and Elbert owned some of the vaudeville and road houses in the city, hence they could control competition" to some extent. They offered Des Moines residents and visitors a state-of-the-art, comfortable theater and several months of the best and most recent plays performed by talented actors and actresses. Margaret Lawrence, Blanche Hall, Conrad Nagel, and Fay Bainter were a few of those who worked for the Princess Stock Company and went on to further success in theater and related performance media.[82]

Getchell and Elbert sold the theater to Oscar Lofquist in 1923, due to pressure from the movies and probably also a fire which gutted the theater that year. The success of the Princess declined, and Lofquist closed it in 1928. "Another fire in 1933 finally brought an end to all occasional use of the Princess Theatre." Throughout its nineteen seasons of providing high quality live stage entertainment in Des Moines, the Princess Theater and Stock Company was a source of community pride.[83]

Several travelling repertory companies originated in or were based in Iowa in the late 19th and early 20th century. Most probably offered the standard melodramatic-comedy fare, but one or two may have performed vaudeville acts or dramas. Two of the oldest known troupes were based in Centerville, and both were formed around a core of family members: the Payton family and the

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80 Bruegge, Andrew Vorder, "Princess Stock Company," in *American Theatre Companies, 1888-1930*, ed. Weldon B. Durham. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987, 370.
81 Ibid, 371.
82 Bruegge, 371-372. Quote from 371.
83 Ibid, 372.

Spooner family. These interrelated families played in New York and along the eastern seaboard in addition to inland towns during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Corse Payton had the dubious distinction of being known as the 'world's best bad actor.'[84] The Warren G. Noble Dramatic Shows from Chariton were also touring in the 1890s and early 1900s.

The Trousdales of northwest Iowa were also a company centered around a family core. Four brothers (Winn, Merle, Earle and Boyd) played four to six weeks in one town during the winter, and then played one night stands in the surrounding area from the early 1900s until the '20s. Their circuit was typically to play Lake City on Monday, Ida Grove on Tuesday, Sac City on Wednesday, Rockwell City on Thursday, Manson on Friday, and Fonda on Saturday. The Trousdales rarely played week-long stands. The brothers remained in show business for many years, but Boyd was the only one to "graduate" from this so-called "circle stock"; he went on to manage resident stock companies in various Midwest cities.[85]

Yet another family group, the Cherry Sisters of the Cedar Rapids area performed in the 1890s and early 1900s. Theirs was a one-act show of skits, original plays, songs, recitations and some instrumental pieces. In addition to their "plain" features, the Cherry Sisters gained national attention for their notoriously poor performances. Their opened at Daniels Opera House in Marion in January 1893, and at a performance in Dubuque a short time later they were the targets of rotten vegetable missles launched from the audience. In their perhaps decade-long career they played in the large cities of the East and Midwest, and the vegetables became an audience tradition.[86]

The Chase-Lister Company was based in Newton, and Lister once operated an opera house there. This company toured the middle part of the country from the early 1900s until c. 1930, playing in tents during the summer and in opera houses in winter. Contemporary with Chase-Lister were the George Sweet Players, a company which operated out of Storm Lake. This troupe played mostly in tents but also had a reputation for offering high quality, "legitimate" productions. They played 3-day stands (compared to the more typical week-long stands of other companies), offering mainly heavy dramas — Broadway plays — of four to five acts with a change of scenery for each act. Their actors were well-qualified, having been recruited from many city stock companies. Neil Schaffner later called the George Sweet Players the finest show on the road.[87]

Hila Morgan was one Iowa native who made a successful living in show business before World War I. Billing herself as "Iowa's Sweetheart," she cultivated a loyal following across the midwest. She played leads in the Hila Morgan Show, and with her husband's good managing skills, she eventually

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84 Mickel, "Footlights on the Prairie," 29.

85 Mickel, 23-24.

86 Crane, Frederick, Professor of Music History, University of Iowa. Telephone interview with the author, 8 March 1993.

87 Mrs. Caroline Schaffner, later of the renown Schaffner Players, recalls that the first theatrical performance she attended as a child in her hometown of Orange, Texas, was given by the Chase-Lister Stock Company in 1906. Telephone interview with author, 2 March 1993.

owned her own private railroad car. The Hazel M. Cass Players, out of the Waterloo area, had four different tent shows on the road at one time, and were perhaps the most elaborate of the tent shows during their period of operation (1919-1938); their actors were also among the best-paid in the business. Unlike other troupe namesakes, Hazel Cass herself did not perform. The Hatcher Players, from Des Moines, operated two travelling tent shows during the 1920s (and possibly earlier); one show was managed by Mr. Hatcher and the other by Mrs. Hatcher. Angel's Comedians were another multiple show troupe, Mr. Angel operating eight tent shows across the nation for several years. This troupe also toured during the 1920s. The Jack and Maude Brooks Stock Company, based in Sabula, were among the last repertory groups in the upper midwest. They may have begun touring in the 1930s, and continued until the 1950s.[88]

Perhaps the best known of the 20th century Iowa-based companies were the Schaffner Players. Neil and Caroline Schaffner organized the company shortly after 1925 and "after ten years of touring" chose Wapello as their home base, perhaps because it was centrally located for their circuit through Iowa, western Illinois and northern Missouri. The company schedule and repertoire were typical of "tent rep." They played in tents during the summer and in opera houses during the winter. "A typical week's offering would include a Broadway play, a mystery, a comedy, and a drama."[89] Neil and Caroline were best known for the stage characters they created: "Toby and Susie, the wise country bumpkin and his sharp-tongued girl friend." The characters grew to be so popular that 'Toby Plays' became a staple of the offerings of nearly every repertoire company" during the Great Depression.[90] Movies and the Depression broke many repertory companies, but the Schaffner Players survived mainly because Neil and Caroline played "on the radio in the winters and thus widened their audience." The troupe performed until 1962, when its founders retired.[91]

Hard Times

The peak period for opera house popularity in Iowa appears to have coincided with the golden age of theater nationwide, which is generally accepted as 1880–1920. That period roughly corresponds to a period of agricultural prosperity, and there may be a correllation between agricultural prosperity and the existence of opera houses in Iowa. Iowa historian Leland L. Sage called the period 1897 to 1920 "The Golden Age of Agriculture." By 1915 Iowa was first in the nation in the value of farm crops and cultivation of fruits and vegetables, and...second only to Texas in the extent and valuation of livestock production."[92] Indeed, of the opera houses in Glenn and Poole's survey with known construction dates the largest number by far were built in the 1910s. This may have been the

88 Schaffner, Caroline, telephone interview with author; and Michael Kramme, telephone interview with author, 20 January 1993.
89 Erickson, Lori, "At Home in Mount Pleasant—The Museum of Repertoire Americana," *The Iowan* (Summer 1988), 15.
90 Erickson, 14.
91 Erickson, 15. The Museum of Repertoire Americana was the brainchild of the Schaffner's and they were largely responsible for its founding.
92 Thompson, William H., *Transportation in Iowa, A Historical Summary*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa Department of Transportation, 1989, 86.

swansong of the opera house, however, because after World War I opera house popularity declined sharply, for a number of reasons.

First was the overall decline in the farm economy, due to lower commodity prices and reduced farm credit following the war. These effectively burst the bubble of agricultural prosperity for many Iowa farmers, and when money is tight all expenditures cease but the most necessary. Opera house managers noticed a drop in attendance, for this reason (and others to follow).[93]

The postwar economy touched the theater business in another way. Fewer shows were on the road due to the increase in expenses involved in producing and travelling with a play, according to Jack Poggi. He cites cost increases due to post-World War I inflation, and an "80% increase in transportation costs between 1913 and 1928." It became cost prohibitive for touring shows to stop at all the one night stands between major cities. Producers asked local managers for a greater percentage of the gross receipts instead of cutting their production costs. Thus, small town theaters could not make enough in an evening to meet the producer's demand; they had smaller seating capacities and stood to lose more because of that. The one-night stands located on direct routes between major cities "survived longer than others, because producers could stop there without increasing their railroad fares."[94] Higher transportation costs also affected other travelling troupes and entertainers. Theater managers could ill afford to raise their admission prices to accomodate the reduction in ticket sales because of the aforementioned attendance drop. With higher ticket prices even fewer would patronize the opera house.

In addition to a sour agricultural economy, another reason for the decline in opera house attendance, perhaps of even greater impact than the economy, was the arrival of the motion picture. Moving pictures on celluloid were developed in the 1890s, and naturally the new technology was first exhibited publicly in opera houses across the country. There were many kinds of projectors made by different inventors, who toured the country giving public demonstrations of their machines. Their scientific achievements were "premiered commercially in theaters and music halls."[95] By World War I many Iowa towns had movie theaters in addition to opera houses, but most probably showed the silent films in the opera house. In some towns live stage performances shared the opera house with motion pictures, but in others the latter dominated. Theater managers recognized the drawing power of the new medium and they often switched from primarily live stage to primarily film entertainment; they showed movies in the opera house with dramatic or vaudeville shows between

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93 Attendance declined although ticket prices had changed little since the turn of the century. The traditional 10-20-30 cent admission prices — or something close to it — in many opera houses is an example. Another reason for declining attendance, at least temporarily, could have been the influenza epidemic of 1918-19. Both the Onawa IOOF Opera House and the Princess Theatre in Des Moines were closed for a season because of the epidemic, and surely others were too. The secondary literature is silent on this subject and the extent of theater closures during the epidemic may only be revealed through local records.

94 Poggi, Jack, *Theater in America, The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966, 36.

95 Herzog, Charlotte, "The Archaeology of Cinema Architecture: The Origins of the Movie Theater," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9: 1 (Winter 1984), 22.

films to increase attendance. Sometimes short live productions (vaudeville or farce/comedy) were performed on the small stages of the new movie houses.[96]

With *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, film became an art form in its own right. Ticket prices for motion pictures were lower than prices for live performances at the opera house (a larger theater meant higher overhead), and the first patrons to leave the opera house were those with less income. The price of a movie was usually 5¢ in the early 1900s, half the price of the cheapest ticket in some opera houses and less than half of other houses. By 1915, admission to the movies was generally 10¢,[97] but even then opera houses could not compete with motion pictures.

The decline in opera house attendance began during the war and gathered momentum from the end of the war onward, largely as a result of the meteoric rise of the film industry, and aided in this region by declining farm income. In those opera houses that remained in use, projection booths were often constructed in the rear of the auditorium, or in the balcony area if they had one. Thus, because of lower profits or simply because their particular town was now being skipped by theatrical companies, managers increasingly turned to film. The live performances that remained were primarily those which Hollywood could not reproduce effectively, namely vaudeville and literary dramas.

Other reasons for the demise of the opera house were the development of the school auditorium and gynasium, built because of burgeoning enrollments and a wider variety in school curriculum after 1900. School dances, presentations, thespian competitions and graduation ceremonies consequently moved from the opera house to the new high school auditorium or gynasium. Similarly, the consolidation of school districts and the genesis of bussing rural children to area schools may have affected opera house usage: the opera houses in the smallest towns may no longer have been used for local school productions as the children and school productions moved into auditoriums of larger, newer, area schools.

Additionally, just as improved transportation had once brought people and better entertainment to many small towns in Iowa, it now reversed the movement. With better roads and the automobile ever more available after World War I, it was easier to drive to the nearest city or county seat for weekend shopping and a movie. And finally, the introduction of the radio for public consumption brought drama, music and comedy — the same entertainment found in the opera house — into people's own homes, reducing the need to go out for entertainment.

Some opera houses offered live entertainment for years after the introduction of motion pictures, but most probably did not. Live theater lingered in the towns and cities on direct rail lines in the 1920s but the onset of the Great Depression doomed most of the travelling shows. Also, by the 1920s and

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96 Mickel, 167.
97 Davis, "Opera Houses in Kansa, Nebraska and the Dakotas," 24.

'30s many opera houses were becoming well-worn and in need of repair. Without a healthy live theater business some managers could ill afford to make repairs, and as a result their opera houses were probably closed indefinitely, eventually condemned and torn down.

But a surprising number of opera houses seem to have survived. Even during the height of live stage theater (about 1890 to World War I) the majority of Iowa opera houses were multifunctional, and after end of live stage theater many continued to function as community entertainment facilities, housing movies, basketball games and in some towns, a revival of rollerskating. Others were remodelled and converted into true community halls, lodge halls or V.F.W. posts. Occasionally the opera house itself might be razed but the site continued to be associated with community gatherings, as in Hastings, where the opera house was torn down in the 1930s and the WPA erected a community hall on its site.[98]

For those who lived between the day of the frontier and the day of industrialism in full stride, the opera house "was in music, in elocution, and in painting, the source of the best cultural influence with which [they] could...come in contact."[99] Opera houses help describe for present generations the morals, standards, and entertainment preferences of past generations. The history of Iowa opera houses also reflects the general pattern of growth of the state's towns, from mere frontier settlements to thriving population centers trying to emulate the culture and style of the big cities, to waning communities struggling to maintain their individual identities. The opera house was a plaything of an industrial people, an exciting toy during childhood, but discarded during adolescence for faster, more mechanized, modern novelties.

98 Glenn and Poole, Survey Data.
99 Rusk, Ralph Leslie, *The Literature of the Middle Western Frontier*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1926, 439.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BAND BALCONY — a small balcony attached to the main facade of the opera house building, usually at the second floor and usually made of iron, where members of the opera house orchestra or local band performed.

BALCONY — a platform-like structure that projects from the side and/or rear walls of an auditorium over the main floor seating, and is supported from below by posts or is suspended (cantilevered) from the walls of the building. Balconies usually had a railing or closed balustrade at the front edge, and often had sloped floors for better vision.

BOX — a theater box, box seats. A special compartment, set off physically and sometimes architecturally from the rest of the audience, from which a small group of people may watch a theater performance. Usually prominently located in the front corners of the auditorium near the proscenium arch and flanking the orchestra pit.

DRESS CIRCLE — "a tier of seats above the main seating area—usually the first or lowest," sometimes equated with the parquet circle, and sometimes the balcony. See PARQUET CIRCLE. (*Dictionary of Architecture and Construction*, ed. Cyril M. Harris. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975, 166.)

FAMILY CIRCLE — the term occasionally applied to the dress circle, parquet circle, or balcony. Sometimes also known as the first balcony.

FLYLOFT — the large open space above the stage from which scenery is raised and lowered by a system of ropes and pulleys.

GALLERY — essentially the same as a balcony, although in some theaters (grand opera houses) the gallery was the uppermost balcony and it had a tiered floor rather than a sloped floor. Seats here were often hard benches or chairs rather than the more comfortable seats below.

LOGE — a type of theater box, sometimes suspended from the balcony.

MELODRAMA — Plays that were emotional, tragic and comedic all in one. Very popular in the 19th century. The standard formula for such plays was: the virtuous heroine, the "manly but misunderstood hero," and the dastardly villain in an improbable plot (Nancy Louise Funk, "Professional Theatrical Activity in Iowa From 1890 to 1895," 1966, 137).

ORCHESTRA PIT — when viewed from the audience, it is the area immediately in front of the stage, paralleling the stage. It is most often lower than the rest of the auditorium floor, but in some Iowa opera houses may not have been much lower, or it may have referred instead to an area where the musicians sat but that was not lower than the main floor.

PARQUET — on the main floor of a theater, a section between the musicians' area or orchestra pit and the parquet circle or rear of the auditorium. This area could be either flat, raked, or tiered (rare).

PARQUET CIRCLE — on the main floor of a theater the section, often horseshoe-shaped, between the parquet and the walls of the auditorium. It surrounds the parquet on three sides. This area was usually under the balcony or gallery. This area could be raked, tiered, or flat (rare). Sometimes also known as the DRESS CIRCLE.

STALL — an area of the main auditorium floor or balcony separated from the rest of the audience by railings or low partitions from which a small group of people may watch a performance, but not quite the same as a box.

THEATER or THEATRE — the structure or part of a building for housing dramatic performances. In this paper theater is synonymous with playhouse, opera house, opera hall, and music hall. Also, the dramatic or performing arts as a profession; "dramatic performances as a branch of art...; dramatic works collectively, as of literature, a nation, or an author" (*Random House College Dictionary*, Rev. Ed., Jess Stein, Editor-in-Chief. New York: Random House, Inc., 1980, 1361).

TRAP — a trap door in the floor of the stage leading to a passage underneath, and through which actors may make sudden entrances or exits for heightened dramatic effect.

VAUDEVILLE — a series of short acts or skits featuring comedy, comic song, dancing, pantomime, magic tricks, juggling or other acrobatic skills; also called "variety."

WING AND DROP — the system of hanging and sliding flat pieces of scenery, that preceeded the fly system. Also called "wing and groove." More fully defined previously in the text of this paper.

Associated Property Types: Opera House Buildings

The term "opera house" is a general term that most Iowans in the 19th and early 20th centuries applied to structures where theatrical performances took place. When Iowans spoke of opera houses they rarely meant the palatial theaters where long dramas sung to music were presented. Instead they referred to the multipurpose halls found in almost every downtown commercial district in the state.[1]

An opera house could be a variety of structures in which the number of dramatic performances offered varied greatly from town to town, and city to city. Some were not so much a "theater" as a structure associated with entertainment in general, in that they housed theatricals only a few times a year and the remainder of the year they held dances, town meetings, political rallies, and church or school events. Others held mainly theatrical presentations, occasionally supplemented by political rallies, lectures or homegrown productions.

SURVEY DATA

Based on a sample of 22 Iowa counties, which includes 140 communities, 341 theatrical facilities were identified as having existed between 1838 and 1940. The sample data is based on information from Allen's intensive study, Sanborn maps, Glenn and Poole's survey (which includes information gleaned from theater directories, local records and informants), and miscellaneous journal articles.

For 144 structures, or 42 percent of the sample, we have no information beyond the name of the hall — or the fact that something did exist that townspeople called an opera house. Given that names of the structures were changed over the years, it is likely that the 341 total includes some opera houses that have been counted twice or possibly more. The total may also include a few structures that were primarily movie theaters, but it is difficult to weed these out without more intensive local research. Lack of information on many theaters precludes linking their names with buildings that were actually known to have existed, and there is no way to reliably estimate how many of the 144 actually existed. We do have some structural information on 197 (58 percent) of the theater buildings identified in the twenty-two county sample. The total number of communities in the sample is 140, which means that each town had at least one opera house or hall during its history.

Few opera houses resembled other opera houses. After visiting several extant opera houses while preparing his 1981 study, Reynolds Keith Allen wrote: "Perhaps the most enduring impression was the wide variety exhibited in the differing design of each structure. Each opera house had its

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1 "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867-1917." National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form prepared for the Nebraska State Historical Society, 1988.

individual charm and character."[2] "[T]heater structures built concurrently or within a few years of one another were often quite different in a number of significant characteristics," but a few trends can be noted.[3]

Over the period studied there was a general trend away from upper floor theaters toward ground floor theaters. Third floor facilities generally existed between the 1830s and 1880. The earliest structure in the sample known to have housed dramatic performances was a third floor hall, Rorer Hall in Burlington, built in 1838. Third floor halls do not appear to have been very common. The sample shows an equal number of second and third floor theaters existing during the 1850s, but in the next decade, the 1860s, second floor theaters were the norm. Most opera houses were located on the second floor of a commercial building (usually in a commercial block) until after 1910, when there was an increasing tendency to locate them on the ground floor of a commercial building or to erect free-standing theaters. Some ground floor playhouses had raised basements that might be occupied by businesses, or by a dance hall or community hall.[4]

There was also a trend toward buildings with a more theater-specific function, that is from the distinctly utilitarian halls that were first erected in most towns on the frontier, to structures designed for the presentation of drama more than anything else. Based on the work of Ned Donohoe, R.K. Allen developed a typology of theater structures that illustrates this trend: utility hall, opera hall, opera house. Allen's study, however, was limited to the towns and cities located along the four major railroad lines in Iowa between 1850 and 1900, and when compared with data for other towns, it appears that most theater structures in Iowa cannot be classified so rigidly. There is more overlap among the types that Allen identifies, and the evolution from the simple hall to the complex opera house was not applicable to all communities. Utility halls were constructed throughout the period, not just in the early settlement period in which Allen placed them, for example. There is evidence of a general trend toward specialized theater structures, but the trend does not preclude the existence or construction of "earlier" types in some Iowa towns.

The Donohoe-Allen typology is essentially valid, but requires modification. It appears that there were two broad types of theater structures in Iowa between the 1830s and the the 1930s: the general utility hall and the "theater," which Allen terms an "opera house." Because most Iowans applied the term "opera house" to a variety of building types, we prefer to call the more specialized types "theaters" or "grand opera houses" to avoid confusion. The physical characteristics of the two types are distinctly different, but the majority of opera house buildings in Iowa exhibit characteristics of

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2 Allen, 40.

3 Allen, 413.

4 A print shop operated beneath the Volga City Opera House (1913). A hall, dining room and kitchens filled the basement of the Grand Opera House (1889) in Cherokee. Glenn and Poole, survey data.

Graph 1 — Auditorium Location (Floor)

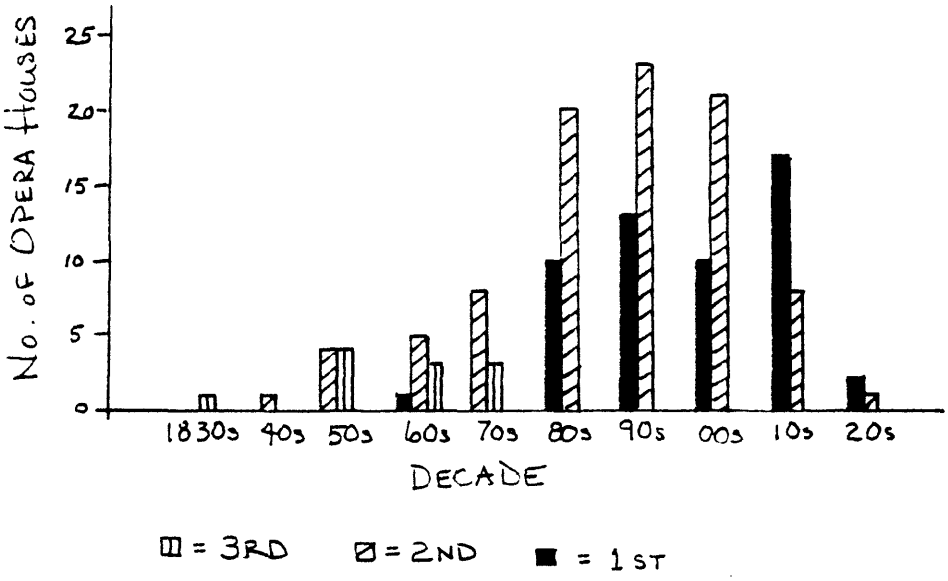

Table 1
Auditorium Location by Decade
Sample Data

Decade	1st Floor	2nd Floor	3rd Floor
1830s			1
1840s		1	
1850s		4	4
1860s	1	5	3
1870s		8	3
1880s	10	20	
1890s	13	23	
1900s	10	21	
1910s	17	8	
1920s	2	1	
TOTAL	53	91	11

Information for this graph was taken from the Sample Data (see Appendix). Only opera houses for which a date of existence/construction and the location of the auditorium within the building were known were tallied.

Graph 2 — Opera House Building Material

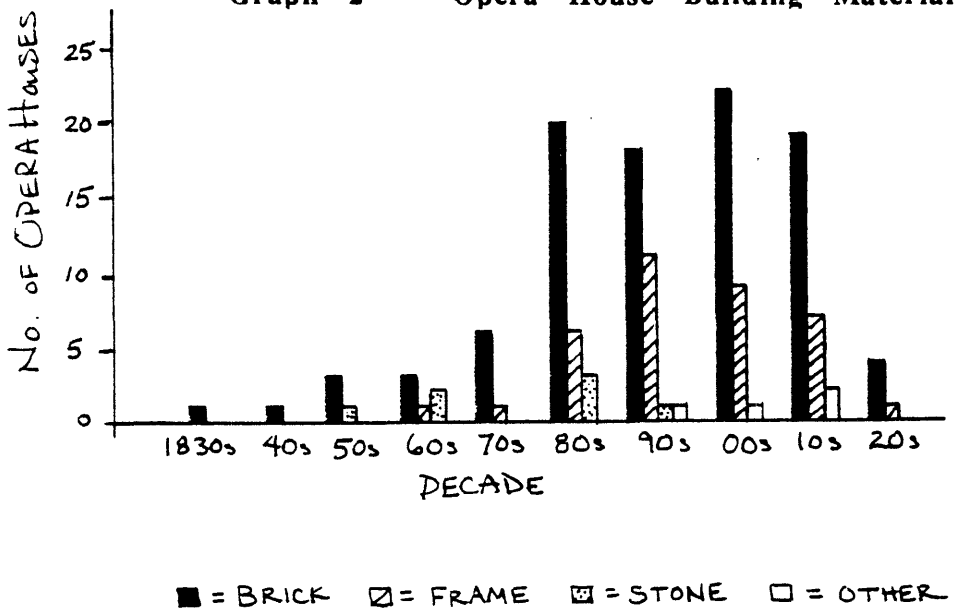

Table 2
Opera House Building Material
by Decade

Decade	Brick	Frame	Stone	Other
1830s	1			
1840s	1			
1850s	3		1	
1860s	3	1	2	
1870s	6	1		
1880s	20	6	3	
1890s	18	11	1	1
1900s	22	9		1
1920s	19	7		2
1920s	4	1		
TOTAL	97	36	7	4

Information for this graph was taken from the Sample Data (see Appendix). Only opera houses for which a date of existence/construction and the building material were known were tallied. "Other" includes: concrete, concrete block, and tile block.

each type, and the latter group constitutes a third type, an intermediate opera house, or what Allen calls an "opera hall."

General Halls

A general purpose hall was commonly a second floor auditorium incorporated into a commercial block with a flat or flat and tiered floor, fewer than three (and often only one) exits, movable seating, stove heat, and little if any interior decoration. Tickets might have been sold from a ticket window just inside the downstairs entry or just outside the upstairs door to the auditorium. Some may not have had ticket windows at all. The seating capacity varied from as little as 150 to 600 or more, and the building could have been as small as 20 x 40 feet, or upwards of 50 x 90 feet.[5]

The stage size was dictated by the size of the building, but overall it was small, from 18 to 38 feet wide by 10 to 28 feet deep. The proscenium opening was comparatively small, usually less than 12 feet high, and wing space often cramped, with less than ten feet on either side of the proscenium. Scenery was the wing and drop variety, and the hall probably possessed no more than the four standard sets. The audience watched performances from rows of plank benches (with or without backs), kitchen chairs or hard folding chairs. Exterior architectural style probably varied a great deal, from a plain, unadorned facade to the molded ironwork storefronts and arched windows of the Italianate and Romanesque styles. In general, however, halls were more vernacular than their larger, more theater-like cousins.

Grand Opera Houses

At the other extreme were the grand opera houses, which were true theaters. Unlike halls which were built throughout the period, grand opera houses appeared near the end of the 19th century, and became common c. 1910. These were more likely to be free-standing structures with ground floor auditoriums. The auditorium was characterized by a raked floor, balcony or balcony and gallery, fixed seating, box seats, orchestra pit, multiple exits, central heating and ventilation, and elaborate decoration. These theaters tended to have a lobby at the rear of the auditorium, indoor restrooms, a ticket booth, a theater office, and a coat check room. Occasionally they also had a separate entrance for gallery patrons, a smoking room, and a ladies parlor. Overall these facilities were much larger than halls, seating 500 to 2,000 people in buildings measuring 50-100 x 100-200 feet.

The stage was more ample than in halls. It had a fly loft rising anywhere from 40 to 70 feet above the stage floor, and one or more traps in the stage floor. The proscenium opening was more than 25 feet wide and more than 15 feet high; the entire stage width could extend 70 feet from sidewall to sidewall. Stage depth increased likewise, and could measure as much as 40 feet. Wing space could

5 Based on data from Allen, Glenn and Poole, and Sanborn maps.

vary from slightly less than ten feet to almost twenty. These theaters included four or more dressing rooms, five or more sets of scenery, and often a scene or prop room to store them in. Dressing rooms were located on the stage (backstage), under the stage, and occasionally on upper floors of the building.

Opera Halls

Many Iowa theater structures fall somewhere between the general hall and the theater, combining characteristics of each. Overall these were smaller than "true theaters" but larger than utility halls. Differentiation between opera halls and general halls depends less upon size than upon the structure's theatrical features: the determining features of the opera hall are those which indicate a more specific theater function. These were probably also built throughout the period, but perhaps in greater numbers between c. 1880 and c. 1910.

Opera halls were commonly second floor auditoriums incorporated into a commercial building with a lobby area at the rear of the auditorium, a ticket booth or small ticket window at the foot of the stairs, a single balcony (flat or horseshoe shaped), two to six dressing rooms, and modest scenery and interior decoration. Some had stove heating and window ventilation, but others, especially in the 20th century had steam heat and window ventilation aided by electric fans. The auditorium floor could be flat, tiered or raked. Stages were generally larger than in halls, some comparable to "theater" stages with some sort of rigging loft and a prop room. Seating was movable, fixed or both, such as cushioned opera chairs in the parquet and dress circle, and hard chairs in the balcony. Greater specification of this type is problematic because different combinations of characteristics were built in different structures, but these are the basic features.

The variation among theatrical structures in Iowa is surprising. The Spencer Grand Opera House was built in 1901 at a cost of $40,000. It was a large building measuring 75 x 120 feet and it had a spacious stage, 60 feet wide and nearly 40 feet deep. The rigging loft was over 40 feet above the stage, and it had eight dressing rooms, sixteen box seats, and a seating capacity of 744. Yet it was also a second floor theater, unlike other opera houses of its size and with the same "theater" characteristics. Small towns did not always have small theaters. The Royce Opera House in Sheldon for example, was a three story brick building measuring 50 x 150 feet built between 1893 and 1903. It had two balconies, three tiers of box seats and reportedly seated 2,000 people. Remarkably it was never used; it was condemned and razed in 1907 (perhaps for structural reasons). In 1905 the Sanborn Opera House was built in the much smaller town of Sanborn, only ten miles from Sheldon, perhaps because the Royce presented no competition. This theater, although smaller than the Royce, still seated 1,200 people, had a large stage, half a dozen dressing rooms, a coat room and multiple exits.[6]

6 Glenn and Poole, survey data.

Characteristics Common to All Types — Materials

Theater buildings were built of brick, wood, stone or concrete block. Most were of brick construction, either load-bearing brick or brick veneer. One may surmise that frame structures were the more common until the 1860s (because wood was cheaper than any other material in most of the state), but surviving information about theater buildings indicates that brick was a common material early on. Indeed, the sample data shows no hall or opera house of frame construction until the 1860s. That, however, may be due more to the fact that wood deteriorates faster than brick, leaving a higher proportion of brick theater buildings than actually existed for historians to study.

Iowa has good clay deposits and opera houses could have been built with locally manufactured bricks, or bricks produced somewhere else in the state. The Harriman Opera House (a.k.a. Hampton Opera House) was made with local brick in 1879. Further research will undoubtedly bring others to light.

Very few theaters were constructed wholly of stone, but many had stone trim, similar to other commercial buildings in Iowa towns. Stone was probably too expensive to use extensively, except where good quality stone was locally abundant. Capwell's Hall (1855) in Waterloo was one early theater in a stone structure. The Parker Opera House in Mason City was one built entirely of limestone in 1883. Several large opera houses were built of brick and stone in varying combinations, for example: Burtis Opera House (1867) in Davenport, Dohany's Opera House (1884) in Council Bluffs, Grand Opera House (1889) in Dubuque, and in Sioux City, McElhany's Hall (1870) and the Peavey Grand Opera House (1888).

Like other commercial buildings, some frame opera houses had pressed metal facades. Opera houses in Beaconsfield and Lowden (both 1895) were two such structures, and the Norway Opera House (1904) had metal siding embossed to resemble stone.

After 1900 more opera houses were constructed of concrete, tile block, or both. Concrete block halls were built in Gladbrook (1893), Alvord (1908), and Cedar (1916). Block for the Alvord Opera House was made in nearby Rock Rapids. Dexter had a tile block hall (1919), and the Nemaha Opera House (c. 1910) was built of tile and faced with concrete. The structural material for the Cotton Theatre (1910) in Cedar Falls was also tile block, but the building was faced with brick.

EXTERIORS

Stylistic Influences

The majority of Iowa opera houses probably looked like many of the other commercial buildings in a town's business district. They were rectangular in shape, and multi-storied.[7] A detailed discussion of known or expected architectural styles exhibited by opera house buildings in Iowa is pointless because so many were indistinguishable from other commercial structures. In general, however, variations on the Italianate and Romanesque architectural styles were common from the 1850s to c. 1900, with the Italianate influence predominating in the first part of that range, fading into the dominant influence of the Romanesque. These buildings tended to have hipped roofs, often with skylights. Some, especially the wood frame structures, were gable-roofed buildings with or without false fronts.

Some theater buildings were designed in the Neoclassical Revival style c. 1890 to c. 1910. The Princess Theatre in Des Moines (1909) was a good example of this style. Its vertical massing was emphasized by two engaged Ionic columns flanked by engaged pilasters almost two stories in height; patrons entered the theater under a lighted marquis at the foot of the tall columns. The whole classical effect was enhanced by an elaborate full entablature, and a facade entirely of white terra cotta. The Wieting Theatre in Toledo also exhibits classical detailing, and the architectural style of the Cotton Theatre in Cedar Falls has been described as Italian Renaissance, another variation on the classical theme.

Theaters built in the 1910s and '20s probably displayed stylistic influences of the arts and crafts movement and the "Chicago School" of architecture. The Waukon Opera House (c. 1914-1916) characterizes this architectural theme. Its massing is low and its facade wide. Overall the building is clean in line and spare in ornamentation, with the second floor distinguished by paired brick pilasters with concrete or terra cotta medallion-like decorations at the top under the building's cornice. The cornice itself is plain and angular with a deep overhang. The Denison Opera House and the Story City Theater are other examples of this kind of architecture.

Fenestration Patterns

In structures where the opera house was located on an upper floor, the ground floor was frequently broken into three compartments. Two retail or office spaces flanked a central entry and stairway to the theater. The entry was visually set off from the rest of the facade by pilasters, a large round arch or band balcony above the entry, or some other architectural device. Examples of opera houses

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7 The Dexter Community Hall (1919), is the only known round hall in Glenn and Poole's survey. Other theatrical structures may have been non-rectangular, but they have yet to be identified.

entered through a central bay on the main facade of a building were Steyers Opera House in Decorah, the Phoenix Hall in Cedar Falls, and Dohany's Opera House in Council Bluffs.

Other second floor halls were above only one or two businesses, and these may have been reached by an outside stairway (covered or uncovered) or an inside stairway located on a secondary facade or near the rear of the building. Two examples of these were Moore's Opera House in Des Moines, and Steele's Opera House in Bedford. Both were built in the 1870s. Moore's, the larger of the two, had an entry denoted by pilasters and a pediment at the cornice above it whereas Steele's was a simple doorway in a much plainer wall. The Colby Opera House (1893) in Onawa is an example of a second floor hall reached by outside stairs, above a single business.

When the opera house was on the ground floor, the tripartite division of the facade was still common. Sometimes the theater entrance was in a central bay notably larger than the flanking bays. In the Onawa IOOF Opera House for example, an office space was in one corner of the building and stairs to the second floor lodge rooms were in the other. Entry to both was made through a large round-arched, recessed entryway; both office and lodge opened into the recessed area not onto the street. In the Princess Theatre in Des Moines, the central bay of the facade dwarfed the flanking bays by virtue of monumental columns and pilasters.

The placement of windows in most Iowa opera houses probably differed little from that of other commercial buildings in town. There are two key differences, however, that are found on opera house structures only. First, a line of small, square (occasionally round) windows above the standard size windows is sometimes seen on theater buildings. These are found either between floors, that is between two rows of standard windows, or perhaps more commonly between the standard windows of an upper floor and the building's cornice (clerestory windows). The small windows usually indicate the presence of a large open auditorium with a balcony inside the building; the small windows provide light for the balcony. The Corning Opera House (1902) is a good example of this. The Princess Theatre in Des Moines had only two small square windows on its facade, which may have lighted restrooms or staircases rather than the balcony. The Pella Opera House had round windows instead of square ones. The Volga Opera House (1913) has somewhat larger windows — perhaps standard size — in the upper story of its facade, but two sets of smaller windows, one over the other, in the sidewalls belie the balcony inside.

The second difference between opera houses and other commercial buildings in window placement is one that indicates the nature of the auditorium floor. In some structures a descending row of windows can be seen, which means that the floor was sloped (raked). This may be more common on ground floor theaters. The Onawa IOOF Opera House is one example of this fenestration pattern, but others surely exist in the state.

INTERIORS

Sample data on auditorium sizes are incomplete, but it is likely that most hall and opera house auditoriums in Iowa were rectangular, rarely square. Three theaters in the sample, however, had square auditoriums: the Julien Theatre (50' x 50') in Dubuque; the Burtis Opera House (72' x 72') in Davenport; and the Maysville School and Opera House (27' x 27'). Two others were nearly square: the Burlington Grand Opera House and the Springville Opera Hall. Among the halls and opera houses there was a great deal of size variation.

One feature that almost all types had in common was some sort of ticket booth or ticket window. In some theaters this was located just inside the main entryway, off to one side, but in some second floor theaters it may have been found at the top of the stairs just outside the auditorium. How common the latter arrangement was is unknown, but opera halls in Baldwin and Smithland both had upstairs ticket windows. In large theaters, tickets were probably sold from a booth off to one side of the entry, that may have opened into the theater manager's office. In theaters with balcony and gallery seating, tickets to the gallery may have been dispensed from a separate window.

Floor options were as follows: completely flat; flat parquet but raked parquet circle; flat parquet with tiered parquet circle; and completely raked. Seating consisted of rows of benches, folding chairs, or "kitchen chairs;" fixed opera chairs (upholstered, with arms and sometimes also hat racks underneath the seat); chairs (plain or with arms and upholstering) in movable segments of six or eight seats — semi-fixed seating. The Parker Opera House (1883) in Mason City was a fairly expensive building, having been designed by William Foster of Des Moines and constructed of limestone, but its patrons sat in folding chairs. Late-comers in Odebolt were relegated to the plank benches in the rear of Mattes Opera House (1881).[8]

The degree of decoration varied immensely. The proscenium arch usually received special treatment in order to focus attention there. In plain, undecorated halls like the Hampton Opera House, that amounted to advertising panels; in others it was stencilling or paint of another color. On the other hand the Metropolitan Opera House of Iowa Falls, built 1899, had a mural of the muses over the proscenium arch. According to Glenn and Poole, the proscenium arch in Brown's Opera House in Riceville "is unique: it is framed with stencilled decoration and light bulbs, and across the top it reads 'All the World is a Stage [sic].'" Allen identifies other favorite motifs, often executed in bas-relief, found around the proscenium opening to be "cupids..., mythological creatures, Shakespeare and American patriots...[and] American Bald Eagles...."[9]

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8 Glenn and Poole, survey data.

9 Allen, 420.

Columns and pilasters with scrolled or foliated capitals engaged the sidewalls or marked the proscenium of a few Iowa theaters, especially grand opera houses at the upper end of the scale. Frescoed walls and/or ceilings with gilded plaster foliation, medallions and other motifs lined the auditorium, graced the balcony, gallery and boxes, and often encrusted the proscenium arch. The styles that influenced these fancies were often identified by newspaper articles which described the opera house interior as "Arabesque," "Gothic," "Grecian" or "Classical."[10] Such elaborate decoration tended to be found in the larger theaters — the restored Majestic Theatre in Dubuque is an excellent example — but many smaller halls were not without some kind of decoration. Coved and panelled ceilings of pressed tin displayed floral or geometric designs. Flat walls and plain prosceniums were commonly enlivened by stencilling and decorative wallpaper.

Various shades of red, blue, green and gold were common colors. The Sanborn Opera House (1905) was decorated in "Alice Blue," while the Cotton Theatre (1910) in Cedar Falls was in green, gold and ivory. Brown's Opera House in Riceville (1902) was "nicknamed 'Rainbow Hall'" for its plentiful stencilling, and painted wall and ceiling decorations. The color scheme was generally "rose with lime green and rose trim." The walls of some halls and opera houses were graced with murals. On the walls of the auditorium and lobby of the Cotton Theatre for instance, were painted scenes of Greek and Roman times, by local artist W.A. Reisinger. Even small halls were similarly adorned; the Z.C.B.J. Hall in Chelsea is decorated with "patriotic, scenic and symbolic paintings," probably by a local or itinerant artist. The "Battleship Iowa," "Yellowstone Park," and "Asia" are represented.[11]

ILLUMINATION

The earliest halls in Iowa probably used candles or kerosene lamps for illumination, but even after the advent of gas and then electricity for light, the smaller theaters continued to use older light sources. City theaters usually began using gaslight before those in rural areas. Lahrmann's Hall in Davenport had gaslight in the late 1850s, while the Coin Opera House apparently used candles well into the late 19th century.[12] Kerosene lamps were probably more common in Iowa opera houses than candles, especially through the 1870s and 1880s. Some, like the Hampton Opera House, had kerosene footlights until the early 1900s, however. Before each performance it was the janitor's duty to fill their reservoirs, trim wicks, and light them.[13]

Candlelight made for poor visibility, a problem that kerosene amended, but in the end cheaper and cleaner gas rendered kerosene obsolete in all but the smallest theaters. Gas produced a particularly

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10 From Allen and McConachie.

11 Glenn and Poole, survey data.

12 Allen, Reynolds Keith, "Nineteenth Century Theatre Structures in Iowa and Nebraska...," 432; and Glenn and Poole, survey data.

13 Sweet, Oney F., "The Opera House," 348.

bright light, and made theater lighting more efficient by means of a dimmer board which controlled all the lights in the house. An electric spark enabled the controller to light all the fixtures at once, whereas candles and kerosene lamps had to be lighted individually. The American Gas Machine Company of Albert Lea, Minnesota, manufactured the light fixtures for the Westgate Opera House, and its "Perfection Lighting System"[14] may be an example of such a system.

For all its brilliancy though, gaslight was still flawed. The abundance of gas footlights, chandeliers and wall sconces generated intense heat and fumes, but more important, like candles and kerosene it was highly flammable. A few theaters in small towns used other fuels for illumination. The Farley Opera House had gasoline lights in 1908. The Glidden Opera House (1893) had oil footlights, perhaps coal oil like the Ossian Opera House (1902) used, but again, all were flammable.

Gas lighting was first supplemented by electricity in Iowa theaters c. 1890. Electricity was preferable to gas, kerosene, coal oil and gasoline because stage and house lighting could be more easily controlled, and the intense heat and fumes of previous lighting methods forgotten. The fire hazard was also greatly reduced. But gaslight was not entirely supplanted by electricity until reliable power plants were developed. Dubuque's Grand Opera House was lit by gas in 1897, but was later switched to gas and electric lights. The Midland Opera House in Fort Dodge (1900) was both gas and electric. Eventually many of the older theaters were wired for electric lighting, although some continued to rely on gaslight until World War I.[15]

The first theater in the sample to switch to electric lights was the Burtis Opera House (1867) in Davenport, in 1892. Other houses that converted before 1900 were in Mason City and Cedar Falls. Most theaters in the sample went electric after 1900, with those in the major cities (Des Moines, Waterloo, Sioux City and Council Bluffs) converting first of course. The Coldren Theatre in Iowa City, built in 1877, was not converted until 1912, however. Other theaters with electric lights shortly after 1900 were in Tama, Ackley and Toledo. The opera house in Coon Rapids had electric footlights by 1901. As expected electricity reached the smallest halls last. The Dixon Opera House used gaslight until at least 1913. The Salmon Opera House in LaPorte City, and facilities in Dyersville and Lone Tree were converted to or built with electricity in 1914.[16]

HEATING AND COOLING

Heating in most small town opera houses came from several stoves placed strategically around the auditorium, but the temperature during winter performances could be inconsistent. In larger buildings a furnace was placed in the basement, providing heat through ducts and registers. Steam

14 Glenn and Poole, survey data. Information recorded during on-site visit.

15 Glenn and Poole, survey data.

16 Ibid.

heat was also a possibility, and the boiler was either in the basement or in a small room attached to the structure's exterior — for greater safety.

Most theaters had only windows to facilitate the flow of fresh air. Opera houses located within a business building typically got little cross-ventilation, but even in those with many windows, summer performances were often unbearable. To help alleviate poor air circulation, many opera houses were built with a domed ceiling with a skylight or a flat ceiling with a skylight. The dome facilitated the removal of the foul air that opera houses were known for; air rose to the dome where a flue or skylight discharged it from the auditorium. Fresh air was then brought in from the outside by a series of ducts placed around the room.

The advent of electricity made ceiling fans possible, but air conditioning as we know it was probably unavailable until the 1930s and '40s. The precursor to modern air conditioning was a method in which fans blew air over blocks of ice, forcing the chilled air into the theater auditorium through ducts. This technique was employed in the Princess Theatre in Des Moines when it was built in 1909. It is not known how many other theaters in the state had this kind of cooling system, but it was most likely limited to newer structures in the cities.

SAFETY FEATURES

In response to a number of major fires around the turn of the century, towns and cities began enacting municipal fire codes stipulating that buildings in the central business district be constructed of non-combustible materials. Theaters especially had a reputation as fire traps, because props, rope, paint and scenery stored on or near stages were so flammable, and because many halls had only one or two exits. According to Allen, "The greatest changes in auditorium and in opera house construction generally were produced in the interest of audience safety."[17]

After 1900 there was a tendency to erect brick or concrete buildings, and to design buildings with more exits, wider aisles, and doors that opened outward or hung on reversible hinges. Exterior metal fire escapes became standard. Balconies and galleries were increasingly supported independently of the main auditorium floor, with pillars of their own. That way, if the main floor collapsed it would not bring the balcony down with it. Other changes for opera house patrons included: brick walls separating the stage from the rest of the auditorium, metal or asbestos "fire curtains" covering the proscenium opening to prevent stage fires from spreading, wider landings on stairs and lobbies outside the auditorium, and water hoses in the building or water reservoirs over the stage.[18] Ultimately, concern about the safety of upper story theaters resulted in a trend toward ground floor theaters in the early 20th century.

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17 Allen, 420-21.

18 Allen, 185, 251, and 339.

The Princess Theatre (1909) in Des Moines is a prime example. The three-story building represented the finest in early 20th century theater construction. "Built at a cost of $75,000..., it seated 1,700 with clear sightlines" to the stage. Safety was a top priority, and the building was almost entirely constructed of non-combustible materials to protect the theater from the fate of many opera houses of the period. "[The] backstage floor was the only section of the entire building constructed of wood." The Princess had a ground floor auditorium, ample lobby areas, nineteen exits, a steel grid and fly system, and an asbestos fire curtain that separated the audience from the stage area in case of fire.

ARCHITECTS

The majority of theater buildings in Iowa were probably designed by local builders, but several theater buildings were architect-designed. Table 3 is a list of some known architects of Iowa theaters. This list was compiled during the preparation of the opera house context document, and does not represent a systematic survey of the available literature.[19] The influence of Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City on theater design in Iowa is suggested by Table 3.[20]

Oscar Cobb was perhaps the most significant of all these architects. Reportedly, "he designed and supervised the construction of 148 theaters," including the two below and several others in the upper midwest. He began designing opera houses c. 1866, and is "credited with changing [the shape of the balcony] from the old horseshoe curve...to a consistent concave curve..., [and] with introducing encore doors placed at the sides of the stage apron in front of the proscenium arch." He began moving theater boxes away from the proscenium, placing them inside the auditorium proper, and he is also said to have originated "overlapping step-boxes where one box rises above another (first installed by Cobb in the Keokuk Opera House). With regard to seating, Cobb is credited "with changing the old style seat to the padded seat and with suggesting the [addition of a] hat rack, umbrella rack and foot rest as part of the opera chair."[21]

George L. and C.W. Rapp of Kansas City were recognized nationwide for their theater designs, especially movie palaces during the 1920s. They were known for designing auditorium ceilings

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19 From Allen, Glenn and Poole, and Ralph Christian, Architectural Historian for the State Historical Society of Iowa. Telephone interview with T. A. Cunning, 14 January 1993.

20 The influence of these Midwest cities can be seen in another way. Businessmen embarking on an opera house construction project sometimes visited theaters in the region and even across the country, looking for a good design. The Princess Theatre (1909) in Des Moines was built after such a campaign, and the Cresco Opera House (1914) was modelled after an unidentifed Chicago theater.

21 Allen, 423-24.

painted with stars, planets, and other "atmospheric" effects, but whether any of their Iowa theaters displayed these is unknown at this point.[22]

Less is known about George Johnston of St. Louis. He was a theater architect and scene painter who "reportedly designed over twenty opera houses including [the two listed below]." While not known so much as interior decorators, Noxon & Toomey (a.k.a. Noxon, Albert & Toomey) of St. Louis decorated the interior of Greene's Opera House in Cedar Rapids (1880), and the Peavey Grand Opera House in Sioux City (1888). They were mainly known as premier scene painters in the Midwest region between 1876 and 1898. They painted scenery for Greene's Opera House and the Grand Opera House in Des Moines (1883).

William Foster moved to Des Moines in 1867, and eventually became one of the leading architects in the state. He was particularly known for his opera house designs, and was perhaps the most prolific opera house architect from Iowa. Foster designed several of his own opera houses: Foster's Opera House and the Academy of Music, which burned at least twice and was redesigned each time. When Foster retired near the end of the century, he became full-time manager of the Grand Opera House in Des Moines, which he had owned for a number of years. Joseph Blake lived in Des Moines between 1873 and at least 1887; he was William Foster's partner for a time, but he is less known for opera house design than Foster. Miffland E. Bell and W. F. Hackney were two other prominent Iowa architects, but the Grand Opera House in Des Moines is the only known opera house they worked on.

22 Christian, Ralph, Architectural Historian for the State Historical Society of Iowa. Telephone interview with T. A. Cunning, 14 January 1993.

Table 3 — Theater Architects

Architect	Place From	Theater	City	Year
Van Osdell	Chicago	People's Theater	Dubuque	1857
Wallace Hume	Chicago	Duncan-Waller Opera Ho.	Dubuque	1877
S.V. Shipman	Chicago	Grand Opera House	Burlington	1882
Oscar Cobb	Chicago	Keokuk Opera House	Keokuk	1883
"	Chicago	Peavey Grand Opera House	Sioux City	1888
W.J. Edbrooke	Chicago	Grand Opera House	Dubuque	1889
P.E. Schafer	Chicago	Carroll Opera Ho. (remodel)	Carroll	1890
Col. E. Young	Chicago	Grand Opera House	Perry	1903
Sidney Lovell	Chicago	Waterloo Theater	Waterloo	1907
Geo. Johnston	St. Louis	Midland Opera House	Fort Dodge	1900
"	St. Louis	Grand Opera House	Muscatine	1903?
Rapp & Rapp	Kansas City	Majestic Theatre	Dubuque	1910
"	Kansas City	Theatre & Apt. Building	Davenport	1913
"	Kansas City	Francis-Orpheum Theatre	Sioux City	1927
Alban & Fisher	St. Paul	Cotton Theatre	Cedar Falls	1910
William Foster	Des Moines	Moore's Opera House	Des Moines	1874
"	Des Moines	Academy of Music	Des Moines	1877
"	Des Moines	Parker Opera House	Mason City	1883
"	Des Moines	Stover's Opera House	Marengo	1886
"	Des Moines	Foster's Opera House	Des Moines	1887
Joseph Blake	Des Moines	Lewis' Opera House	Des Moines	1878
Bell & Hackney	Des Moines	Grand Opera House	Des Moines	1883
H.O. Ball	Sioux City	Academy of Music	Sioux City	1871
E.S. Maxon	Council Bluffs	Dohany's Opera House	Council Bluffs	1884
Young & Brown	Ft. Dodge	Fessler's Market Str. Op. Ho.	Fort Dodge	1883
F. M. Ellis	Marshall-town	Greene's Opera House	Cedar Rapids	1880
James S. Cox	Estherville	Windsor Theatre	Hampton	1913
"	Estherville	Grand Op. Ho. & Hotel Block	Story City	1913
C.F. Driscoll	Omaha	G.C. Calkins Opera House	Corning	1883
Willit L. Carroll	?	Burtis Opera House	Davenport	1867

Registration Requirements

Areas of Significance: Entertainment/Recreation, and Performing Arts
Period of Significance: 1835-1940

Assessing the eligibility of theater structures in Iowa is difficult because of the great variety of structural forms and design elements. Many continue to serve as gathering places or have been converted to retail use, and have incurred extensive "modernization." It is ironic that the properties that have served the community longest and continue to be recognized by the residents for their function as a community entertainment center, are often those that are now least eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Opera houses may be eligible under Criterion A if they are particularly associated with the culture and social history of a town, a specific phase of theater history in Iowa or the region, or an Iowa-based troupe or resident stock company. Opera houses that represent an innovation or a transition period in the development of theater in the state or region are also included in this category. An opera house associated with the culture and social life a town may be one associated with an important fraternal order, or one whose construction marked a turning point in community growth, becoming the leading visible centerpiece of town cultural life by expressing permanence, legitimate entertainment and civic pride. An opera house might also be eligible under this criterion if it were associated with an important event, such as where a famous theatrical performance occurred, or where an important historical figure gave a notable speech, or if it became the scene of a notorious riot. Properties will be considered eligible under Criterion A if they retain their historic location, setting, and enough of their historic appearance to recall the feeling and association of the period in which they served as an opera house. An assessment of historic appearance includes an evaluation of integrity of design, materials and workmanship.

Structures may be eligible under Criterion B if they are associated with significant individuals in Iowa opera house history. These individuals may have been involved with performance, direction, or production aspects of theater in Iowa. Artists like Jesse Cox, for instance, were not usually directly associated with the presentation of drama, but their works were an essential ingredient in it. At the local level, an opera house may be eligible for its association with a prominent citizen, someone who had a singular impact in the development of an opera house or the presentation of drama in a particular town.

Under Criterion C, opera houses may be eligible as the work of a master, such as Oscar Cobb, William Foster or Rapp & Rapp who were all known for their theater designs. There may also have been other architects and local builders who were known for the design and construction of opera houses in the state. Opera houses exhibiting the work of locally significant artisans (stone masons,

wood carvers, frescoers and mural painters) may also be eligible. Additionally, opera houses embodying distinctive characteristics of a period may be eligible. Two possibilities might be a rare survivor from an early period of theater construction, or a theater structure that represents the first or only expression in Iowa of a particular style.

Properties may be eligible under Criterion C if they exhibit an innovative feature in theater design. The use of overlapping "stair-step" boxes in the Keokuk Grand Opera House is an example, one that happened to have been instigated by a master architect, but another might be the unique proscenium arch in Brown's Opera House in Riceville. Those opera houses with a high degree of well-executed and extant interior or exterior ornamentation (moldings, bas-relief, frescoes, gilt, or decorative panelling) may be eligible for their artistic value. Opera houses with far simpler interiors may also be eligible because of the artistic value of the folk art on their walls. The Chelsea Z.C.B.J. Hall, mentioned above, may be a candidate. Exterior integrity cannot be overlooked however, and the building's exterior should retain its basic historic appearance, with the exception of the retail facade (if it had one).

A few opera houses may be eligible under Criterion D for their potential to yield significant information about Iowa theater history, especially the impact of changes in technology. Structures with extant stages may impart knowlege about evolving stage effects, set design, scene and lighting mechanisms or safety features. Even those structures lacking key interior features may be significant for their evidence of the building's structural systems, such as balcony support, stage design or safety features. Such evidence may be archaeological.

Integrity Considerations

Because the properties under consideration are opera houses, the degree of interior integrity is weighted more heavily than it might be for other commercial structures. The criteria of feeling and association are particularly important, and may be achieved by a number of physical characteristics, outlined below for each type. In all three the key features are those that relate to the performance function of the structure. For example, a building that housed a hall, opera hall or theater may not be eligible as such unless elements associated with that particular function remain in some form. A building with a remarkable degree of exterior integrity, but with no visible remains of the interior spatial organization, decoration or structural elements of the theater-structure it once was should not be considered eligible under this context document.

General Hall

Because of the utilitarian nature of these structures the integrity requirements for general halls are less numerous than those of the other two types. The key features of this type are: stage, auditorium, and ticket window and dressing rooms (if it had them). The location of the historic

entrance to the hall (and stairway if it had one) should be present; the auditorium must at least be visible in plan; and if not present, the location of the stage and proscenium wall should be visible in plan. If a hall had a ticket window or dressing rooms their remains should be detectable if they are no longer present, although their absence may be balanced by the relatively high integrity of another feature.

Opera Hall

These spaces were often less simple in design and decoration than general halls, and accordingly more of their features would need be present to impart the feeling of an historic theater structure. At the same time, because a wider variety of features are expected under this property type, there is slightly more latitude among integrity requirements for this type than for the general hall. The key features (ranked in order of importance) an opera hall might have possessed include: stage, balcony, raked or tiered floor, ticket window or booth, lobby, dressing rooms, and box seats. As the most important feature in the hall, the stage should be present but if it is not, at least its footprint and the outline of the proscenium wall or arch should be visible. Like the general utility hall, the historic entrance (including stairway if it had one) to that part of the building occupied by the opera hall should be present, and the auditorium should be visible in plan.

In structures where some of the more important theatrical features have been removed or impacted, however, their lost integrity may be counter-balanced by a combination of well-preserved but less important features. For instance, an opera hall that no longer has a stage or dressing rooms may still be eligible if it still has its historic entrance stairway, lobby, ticket window and auditorium floor, or if the auditorium retains a balcony, some original decoration and seating. Similarly, the integrity of an opera hall lacking its balcony, lobby, or ticket window, or one in which the auditorium dimensions have been altered, may be retained by the presence of an intact stage and backstage rooms. The feeling of an historic theater can be achieved by a combination of factors.

Grand Opera House

The key features of the this type (ranked by importance) generally include: stage; raked floor; balcony, gallery or both; lobby areas and stairways; orchestra pit; dressing rooms and prop rooms; box seats; restrooms, lounges or parlors; theater office; ticket booths; and coat check rooms. Again, the stage should be present or its remains visible, the entrance to the theater should be in its historic location, and enough of its theatrical features retained so as to impart the feeling of an historic theater. As for opera halls, the overall integrity assessment for theaters does not depend upon the presence of all features. The loss of a raked floor and orchestra pit, or changes to the stage or balcony may be offset by other features. Each property should be considered individually. Some may be splendid examples of specific characteristics, and a deficiency in another area should not disqualify the building from eligibility entirely. The test of integrity under Criterion A or B will be

whether and to what degree the building's spatial arrangements or design remain as they were when the person existed or the event occurred.

In addition to the structures themselves, other material culture associated with theater in Iowa may be used to assess the integrity of historic theater structures. Theater artifacts, especially scenery, were important elements of opera house presentations and the presence of scenery, props, etc. may add substantially to the integrity of a theater structure, although they are not requirements for eligibility. Graffiti and playbills posted on backstage walls, while not necessary, may also bolster the integrity of a given theater.

Geographical Data

The geographic area encompassed by this multiple property listing is the entire State of Iowa.

Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

This multiple property document is the result of a long attempt by the Historic Preservation Bureau to record the opera houses in Iowa. In 1978 the Iowa SHPO sent questionnaires to most towns and local historical societies in the state, seeking information about the existence, location, age and condition of theatrical structures. The results were disappointing and the project was shelved.

At about the same time the State sent out its questionnaires, Professor George D. Glenn (Theater Dept., University of Northern Iowa) and Professor Richard L. Poole (Theater Dept., Briar Cliff College) began their own survey of theater structures in Iowa. Their objective was to identify all known historic theater structures in the state by consulting remaining 19th and early 20th century theater directories (see bibliography), and to search nearly every community in the state for extant theater buildings. Oral informants, local histories, and occasionally old newspaper articles supplemented the information they gleaned from the theater directories and standing structures. Their survey was completed in late 1986-early 1987, and the results will appear in book form (currently in press).

As Glenn and Poole are professors of theater, their survey tended to focus on the stage area and theater artifacts, such as roll drops and advertisement curtains. The kind of information their survey yielded varies in consistency, probably due to problems inherent in any kind of historic architectural survey: inability to view building interiors, structural deterioration, physical obstructions that impede photographing and measuring buildings, inability to visually identify former theater structures (especially utility and opera halls), and most commonly, simple lack of information on a building. In many communities, especially the smaller ones, the only information Glenn and Poole were able to collect was the fact that the town had once had something it called an "opera house." Even where structural information was available, Glenn and Poole often could not record the age of the building, which limits the pool of buildings from which an architectural typology may be created. Unfortunately Glenn and Poole did not supplement their survey with information from Sanborn maps.

The work of Professors Glenn and Poole came to the attention of the Historic Preservation Bureau in 1987, when it was preparing, in-house, a historic context document for Iowa opera houses based primarily on documentary evidence.[1] Entitled "Iowa Opera Halls and Opera Houses: The Evolution of Stage-Focused Structures In Iowa, 1850-1925," the context clearly reflected the works of R.K. Allen and Ned Donohoe. Glenn and Poole's survey information, however, revealed that there was much more overlap among opera house types in Iowa. Structures might display all the characteristics of a full-blown "opera house" except for one or two significant "opera hall"-like characteristics (a flat

1 Tracy A. Cunning, then an undergraduate student intern at the Historic Preservation Bureau prepared the initial context document for Iowa opera houses.

floor and second-story location, for instance). Thus, the idea of an evolution of types of stage-focused structures that formed the backbone of the context required revision.

This context document is an accumulation of information collected by the Historic Preservation Bureau both in its initial "letter" survey and incidentally over the last fifteen years; the roughly ten-year-long field survey conducted by Dr. George Glenn and Dr. Richard Poole; and the efforts of this consultant. The physical characteristics of opera houses presented in this document are based on a selective sample of counties with information drawn from the Glenn and Poole survey, R.K. Allen's study (see bibliography), and Sanborn maps. Twenty-two (22) of Iowa's ninety-nine (99) counties were selected, half of which are "urban" and half "rural." Urban counties are defined as those which have been historically and still are major centers of population as well as railroad hubs in the state. Designation as an "urban" county was determined impressionistically from census data and railroad maps. Information about all known theater structures in those counties was collected and organized in a database.

Because the number of structures with verifiable construction dates was low, and given the nature of the source material, the existence of opera houses rather than the construction of opera houses was catalogued. Characteristics noted for each structure were: county, date of existence, building material (brick, frame, stone or other), location of auditorium within the building (first, second or third floor), town name, theater name, building dimensions, auditorium dimensions, presence and/or number of dressing rooms, presence of a balcony or gallery, presence and/or number of boxes, association with fraternal order, architect/builder, and other features such as lighting or heating method or any unusual item (see Appendix). The sample data was sorted and trends noted. These trends, supplemented with information from the remainder of Glenn and Poole's survey and other sources, form the basis of the opera house typology. The property types are organized according to primary function, auditorium location, and number and kind of interior features. Registration requirements were determined mainly by knowlege of existing properties identified by Glenn and Poole and information provided by Allen.

The historic context for these properties was compiled from historical information in Glenn and Poole's survey and from a wide variety of secondary literature on general American theater history, theater history in Iowa and the Midwest, and general Iowa history. Much of the literature focuses on theatrical activity in the nation's midsection; a few sources focus on Iowa specifically. Those discussing theatrical activity emphasize the drama performed and the performing units rather than the structures which housed them, however. These sources provided the backbone of theatrical development in Iowa. A handful of other sources highlighted sub-themes, such as: the role of the opera house in local social life, staging, scenery and scene painting, the association of fraternal orders with opera houses, and theater companies based in Iowa. The period of time covered by the historic context (1835-1940) was determined by evidence that dramatic performances first occurred in Iowa shortly after its opening as a territory in 1832, and by evidence that opera house use for live stage

performances effectively ended in the 1930s. The beginning and ending dates are approximate, but designed to include the majority of individual structure histories.

Historiography

In the last two decades theater history appears to have been undergoing a transformation similar to that experienced in the field of American history as a whole during the 1960s and early 1970s. Theater historians are beginning to shift their focus from the drama and grand theaters of large east and west coast cities (and their inland satellites) to theater phenomena in the hinterlands surrounding the large cities. The supremacy of New York in American theater history is well understood, but the hundreds of small travelling repertory companies are significantly underrepresented in the literature. Similarly, there is much more information about the big theater structures of the East and West, even those in midwestern cities, than the thousands of smaller theaters across the upper Midwest.

Studies produced by scholars of theater history have, until only a few years ago, tended to focus almost exclusively on drama and actors, without placing them in the broader contexts of American economic and transportation history, and settlement patterns. Allen emphasizes the importance of rail transportation in his study of theater structures in Iowa and Nebraska, albeit in a rather limited way. Benjamin McArthur and Bruce McConachie are two scholars who have successfully linked their subjects to American social history. Michael Kramme's article is valuable for illuminating some of the nuts and bolts of theater in Iowa, as well as conveying the "feeling" of small town dramatic productions. Poggi discusses the economics of the theater business but the scale of his study is national, with emphasis on the combination system and the role of New York. The economics of the theater business at the regional, state and local level have yet to be investigated. For example, How did New York producers and the New York-based Theatrical Syndicate (which controlled strings of theaters across the country c. 1900) affect the entertainment business at lower levels? In Iowa?

Further Research Needs

The role of certain ethnic groups in Iowa theater history needs more comprehensive treatment. How many structures were erected by German and Czech organizations? What other ethnic groups besides the Germans, Czechs and Danes were involved with the development of theater and entertainment facilities in Iowa towns? What was the role of African-Americans in Iowa opera house history? Were they regular performers in small town Iowa? Did they own or operate theaters?[2] Were Iowa audiences segregated? By law or by custom? How many theaters in the state were architect-designed, and what is the architectural relationship between Iowa opera houses and those in Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Minneapolis-St. Paul?

2 A "Negro Hall" in Evans (a town in Mahaska County no longer listed among Iowa towns) was the only structure in the sample to be specifically identified with African-Americans. The two story frame building was depicted on the 1895 insurance map with a stage and outside stairway. It was gone by 1900, but a "Negro Dance Hall," a one story frame structure at another location was shown. Whether either building was owned or operated by African-Americans is unknown. Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, Evans, 1895 and 1900.

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Appendix — Sample Data

Sample data was collected for opera houses in the following counties; the county number precedes the county name:

02—Adams	57—Linn
07—Black Hawk	60—Lyon
14—Carroll	62—Mahaska
17—Cerro Gordo	77—Polk
21—Clay	78—Pottawattamie
25—Dallas	82—Scott
27—Decatur	86—Tama
29—Des Moines	89—Van Buren
31—Dubuque	94—Webster
35—Franklin	96—Winneshiek
52—Johnson	97—Woodbury

Key to Abbreviations

Flr.....	floor on which the auditorium was located
Material.....	material of which the building was constructed, or the exterior covering
Dimsns.....	the exterior dimensions of the building
Auditrm.....	the dimensions of the auditorium
Dr Rms.....	presence or number of dressing rooms in the opera house
Balc/Bxs.....	presence or number of balconies, galleries, and box seats
Association.....	current or historic association with a fraternal order, bank, city offices, etc.
Architect.....	architect or builder, where known

BR	Brick
Fr	Frame
St	Stone
Con Blk	Concrete Block

Buildings for which no exact date of construction or existence is currently known:
A dash following a date indicates that the building was built after that year;
A dash preceding a date indicates that the building was built prior to that year.