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Contents

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Prime Circuit: The Glory Days of the Stafford Opera House

by Bill Stein

On May 14, 1883, a fire destroyed Charles Crary's livery stable and the old Bond Hotel on the southeast corner of Milam and Spring Streets in Columbus. The lots lay vacant, except for the debris of the fire, for more than two years. Finally, in December, 1885, cattleman Robert Earl "Bob" Stafford bought the lots and, two months later, began clearing them preparatory to building. His plans called for two brick business buildings along Spring Street and a new personal residence facing Milam Street behind the commercial buildings. Reading of his plans in the *Colorado Citizen*, a number of citizens drafted and signed a petition asking Stafford to unite the top floors of the two business buildings into one large hall and open an opera house.

Stafford agreed to the idea and immediately set about redrafting his plans. He decided to build just one brick structure, but to make it longer and to build his home on Spring Street next door. He hired Galveston architect Nicholas J. Clayton to design the opera house. Clayton laid out a two story building with commercial space on the ground floor and a theater upstairs.

By August, 1886 the first floor had been completed and the Senftenberg Brothers Store and the R. E. Stafford & Company Bank moved in. The work on the theater dragged on into 1887 as Stafford took every pain and bore every expense necessary to make the facility a first class one. The entire structure cost $40,000 to build. When it was finished, it contained 800 seats arranged on both the floor and in a balcony and had room for several hundred more. The floor was 90 by 66 feet and the stage 30 by 30 with wings 18 feet wide. It was lighted by gas. As a final touch, Stafford spent an additional $10,000 on a hand

painted curtain. Stafford picked Ed Sandmeyer, a local attorney and employee of the Stafford Bank, to manage the theater, and Sandmeyer began preparing for opening night.

Live theater in rural America reached its zenith in the late nineteenth century. Nearly every town had a theater of some sort. Many of the theaters, even those in small towns, were called "opera houses". These opera houses rarely if ever presented anything akin to opera. Instead, variety shows, melodramas, and light comedies occupied their stages. The designation "opera house" was taken from the names of the theaters where such productions played in bigger cities. These cities in turn, took the name from the concert halls of Europe which were built some years earlier when opera was the popular theater. The elegance and elitism with which opera was becoming associated probably only spurred the spread of the name.

In the early days of the century, each hall or opera house was expected to provide its own scenery. Sets were relatively standard, and the same set was used for many different productions. But an innovation by Clarence Bennett broadened the scope of the productions. Bennett painted scenes on curtains with brilliantly colored diamond dyes. Such curtains could be folded, put in trunks, and transported with the actors. Not only did they provide portable scenery, but their brightness increased the effectiveness of the generally poor stage lighting.

Nonetheless, halls like the Stafford Opera House maintained a supply of scenery and sets to supplement that provided by the touring companies. At the Stafford Opera House, a few common scenes were painted on suspended panels, called "shutters in grooves", which could be hidden in the wings when not needed.[1]

The most popular plays, among them *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Rip Van Winkle, East Lynne,* and *The Two*

1 This system was still in wide use in the late nineteenth century, though scenery supported by stage braces had been introduced in New York in 1869.

Orphans, were much more melodramatic than today's productions. *The Two Orphans,* which was performed in the Stafford Opera House on November 20, 1890, was written by Adolphe D'Ennery and Eugene Cormon and translated from the original French by N. Hart Jackson.

It is the story of two beautiful young girls, Henriette and Louise, who, after being orphaned, journey to Paris and encounter all sorts of misadventures. Henriette becomes separated from Louise, who is blind, through a series of machinations engineered by the Marquis de Presles. She is rescued from the Marquis, whose intentions are purely venereal, by Chevalier Maurice de Vaudrey. De Vaudrey is the nephew of the minister of police, the Count de Linieres. The count's wife, the Countess Diane de Linieres, has for many years kept secret the fact that she had had a child before her marriage. De Vaudrey learned the secret from his mother and because he will not reveal it to the count, de Linieres has him imprisoned. He also arrests Henriette, to whom de Vaudrey has by this time proposed marriage.

Louise meanwhile has been taken in by a family who quite consciously beg for a living. They see Louise's affliction as a real advantage in their profession and she is made to sing on the streets for whatever money passersby will give her. Unable to escape despite the continued good will of a crippled member of the family, she grows increasingly despondent and threatens to starve herself to death. Meanwhile, Henriette is saved from exile by the intervention of another prisoner, Marianne, whom the two orphans talked out of committing suicide in the first act. Marianne takes Henriette's place on the roster of exiles so that she may start a new life outside France.

Picard, the valet to de Vaudrey, who has principally been a figure of comedy up until this point, now arises to lead his master, Henriette, and a band of policemen to the home of the beggars. Together, though not without some further peril for Henriette, they rescue Louise, who has turned out to be the Countess' long lost daughter. The play

ends with a kindly doctor assuring everyone that, although he cannot restore Louise's eyesight, he might be the instrument through which God will.

Other productions of the period relied not on pathos, but on special effects, for their appeal. Advertising frequently cited scenes featuring explosions, fires, floods, gunfire, etc. It was the heyday of the railroad in America and many plays contained scenes that utilized trains. One of the most famous scenes in theatrical history, that of the helpless victim tied to a railroad track while a train approaches, was among the many created by late nineteenth century writers seeking the sensational. The scene appeared almost concurrently in two plays in 1867, Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* and Dion Boucicault's *After Dark*.

There were, of course, forbidden subjects and controversial attempts to broach them. Perhaps most surprisingly, Biblical stories were among those considered taboo. When the actor James O'Neill starred as Jesus Christ in a production of Salmi Morse's play, *The Passion,* in San Francisco in 1879, he and the rest of the cast were arrested and fined. Morse then took his play to New York where it also met with opposition. Despondent over its failure, he later drowned himself in the Hudson River.

The actors in these productions were frequently very well known and very well paid, though they were commonly regarded as socially and morally inferior to the general public. Divorces and extra marital love affairs were even then an accepted practice in the theatrical world.

The greatest star of the American stage at the time was Edwin Booth. Booth and his two brothers, Junius Brutus Booth, Jr. and John Wilkes Booth, were the illegitimate sons of the actor Junius Brutus Booth and his mistress, Mary Ann Holmes. All three followed in their father's footsteps and achieved fame and success on the stage. Had John Wilkes Booth not assassinated Abraham Lincoln, the family would still be remembered today, and in a much better light.

There were other stars of course, among them

Joseph Jefferson, Helena Modjeska, Fanny Davenport, John McCullough, Richard Mansfield, Ada Rehan, Lawrence Barrett, John Gilbert, Rose Coghlan, Clara Morris, and Lillian Russell. When the Stafford Opera House opened, most of these people were already far too celebrated to consider a tour of smaller theaters. Nonetheless, their influence was felt even in "the provinces".

Performers played their roles in a manner which would be regarded as grievous overacting today. The word "emotional" was often used as an adjective to describe the better players, as in "the great emotional actor" or "the young emotional actress". In one of her best known performances, Morris, acting in the play *Miss Multon*, threw herself at the feet of an actor portraying her former husband and delivered her lines with such agonizing passion that her fellow performer was overcome with emotion and unable to deliver his lines. Morris, being the consummate professional, instantly switched out of character and whispered up to him, "I say, what ails you up there? Are you dumb?"[2]

Daly and Boucicault were perhaps the two most influential men of the American theater at the time. Daly was the best known New York producer, and, though he decried the star system, its most successful star maker. He also was a playwright of some merit.

Boucicault had started his career as an actor but became a fabulous success as a writer. His most famous play, *The Octoroon*, was a controversial attack on slavery. It was first produced on December 5, 1859, three days after John Brown had been hanged for his raid on Harper's Ferry. Shortly after *The Octoroon*, Boucicault, who had been born in Ireland, produced the first of his dramas about his native land, *The Colleen Bawn*. The production, with Boucicault, Agnes Robertson, and Laura Keene in starring roles, was an unqualified success in New York. Boucicault wondered though, whether it was his play or the performers who made it so, and came to a landmark decision.

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2 Edmond M. Gagey, *The San Francisco Stage*, (1950), p. 139.

At the time, actors went "on the road" individually. Theaters employed stock companies to support these traveling stars. Boucicault subverted the system by organizing the first road company, a troupe of actors who toured with *The Colleen Bawn* and played the same roles at every performance. After Boucicault's tour local stock companies died out and every star toured with his own company, drawing on a repertoire of two or three plays by which he was identified. It was this system that brought theater to towns like Eagle Lake, Columbus, and Weimar. Ilse's Hall in Columbus, a large room occupying the second story of Ilse's Saloon, had been used for sometime by traveling lecturers and musicians. At some point in the 1870s, and perhaps as early as the late 1860s, it began hosting the theatrical performances of traveling companies modeled after that of Boucicault. In Eagle Lake, the companies played at Davis' Hall. These were the earliest theaters in Colorado County.

In 1884, James Jefferson Holloway, Thomas Monroe Insall, and Otto Goeth brought theater to Weimar. Insall and Goeth as partners, and Holloway alone, erected adjoining buildings and united the second story of each into the Weimar Opera House. The buildings were completed late in 1884, and, with Goeth as manager, the opera house was set to open on December 24 with a performance by Katie Putnam. But Putnam cancelled her appearance, and the only production of that first season seems to have been an amateur one. In January, 1885, Holloway had a skating rink installed on the theater floor. The rink was tremendously successful, setting off a new craze in Weimar. It remained in place for several months.

The first dramatic productions in the new hall may have been those of the Streepers Dramatic Company in October 1885.[3] The theater remained open for several years, but never seems to have been able to draw players from the prime circuit. The *Weimar Mercury*, which began

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3 Mary Hinton, *Weimar, Texas First 100 Years 1873-1973*, (1973), p. 32.

publication in 1889, advertises twelve productions mounted in the Weimar Opera House in the season of 1889-1890. Of the twelve, only one, that of the Stuttz New York Theatre Company in *A Celebrated Case*, had played in either Galveston or Houston that same season. Significantly, the same production had played the Stafford Opera House four days earlier, and all six of the productions known to have played in Columbus that season had also played Galveston or Houston or both.[4]

The Stafford Opera House had its grand opening on October 28, 1887, with Louise Balfe in *The Planter's Wife*. Balfe had opened the season at Pillot's Opera House in Houston in *Dagmar*, a drama in which she starred at the Stafford Opera House on its second night, October 29. The *Colorado Citizen* described Balfe as a woman with a "fine figure, expressive face and graceful carriage".[5] The same newspaper a week later favorably reviewed her performances and reported that nearly seven hundred people, a less than capacity crowd, attended the premiere. *The Planter's Wife* had been presented in Columbus before, probably at Ilse's Hall, a circumstance which may have held down the size of the audience. A smaller audience saw the same play presented at a matinee the next day, but a house "little less numerous" than that of the previous evening saw Dagmar. Bob Stafford himself seems not to have been in attendance. He had embarked on a vacation some weeks before and did not return until after his opera house had opened.

The appearances of Lizzie Evans, Katie Putnam, McIntyre and Heath's Modern Minstrels, and the Mendelssohn Quartet were the artistic highlights of the first season. Evans was, if anything, more of a success with the Columbus audience than the highly touted Balfe had been. Putnam played to a small audience, but the *Citizen* called her play "the best theatrical performance we've had this sea-

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4 In all, 65 of the 82 known productions that played the Stafford Opera House in the years between 1887 and 1894 also played in either Houston or Galveston in the same season.

5 *Colorado Citizen*, October 27, 1887

son."[6]

James McIntyre and Tom Heath, one of the greatest blackface teams of all time, played the hall on November 24, 1887. They were among the progenitors of the style of parody that produced the very successful 20th century radio and television series *Amos and Andy*. McIntyre and Heath's sketch, "The New Telephone", is remembered as one of the funniest pieces to employ what was then a relatively new instrument. The duo's most famous sketch, "The Ham Bone", featured Heath as Hennery, a blowhard who persuades McIntyre, playing a character called Alexander, to quit his job in a livery stable and join a minstrel show. The two were thrown together in 1874, when McIntyre's original partner skipped out on a booking in San Antonio, and continued to play as a team right through the heyday of vaudeville.

The Mendelssohn Quartet, who closed the theater that season, did not usually play rural halls, but were only persuaded to provide the citizens of Colorado County with a little serious music because they had an open date, they were traveling from Houston to San Antonio, and because they had been guaranteed a minimum by a group of Columbusites.

The appearance of E. T. Stetson that November also deserves mention. Stetson had been a local favorite since he had given a benefit performance for the victims of the 1873 yellow fever epidemic in Columbus. Ironically, some of the actors in his company were ill the night they played the Stafford Opera House, and the performance was not up to par.

Far and away the most talked about show of the first season was that of the Chinese Students on February 23, 1888. The performance, which was sponsored by the ladies of the Methodist Church, was widely advertised for weeks in advance. Patrons were enticed by the promise of the display of artifacts from China and the prospect of being

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6 *Colorado Citizen,* December 8, 1887

served a genuine Chinese meal. But the show was, according to the *Citizen*, "a miserable farce". The audience jeered and hissed throughout, and the manager of the company finally came out on stage and characterized the city and its citizens as "the worst place and the worst people" he had ever seen.[7]

The next day, as the company was boarding the train which was to take them out of town, many of the same people their manager had so wantonly criticized were waiting to reinforce the actors' opinion of them. They pelted the performers with eggs, knocking off their hats and staining their clothes. The egg throwers did make one concession though, which proved that the company might indeed come in contact with worse people. They used fresh rather than rotten eggs.

The 1888-1889 season had no such farcical episode, but it did have several dramatic highlights. The first was an appearance by Thomas W. Keene in the popular play *Richelieu* on the evening of October 18. Edwin Booth had chosen the same play in which to make his Texas debut on January 24, 1882. *Richelieu*, which had been written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839, had also been a featured attraction of such stars as John McCullough and Frederick Warde. Keene, in touring with it, was inviting comparison and drawing generally favorable reviews. The *Citizen* trumpeted Keene's appearance as "the greatest dramatic event in the history of Columbus" and called the star "one of the finest actors in the world".[8] The house, which contained many people from surrounding towns, was very substantial.

In the week after Keene's triumph, the famous Irish comedian, William J. Scanlan played the Stafford Opera House in a period drama, *Shane-na-lawn*. Set in Ireland in 1790, the play nonetheless afforded Scanlan an opportunity to sing the song which made him famous, "Peek A Boo". Newton Beers followed Scanlan to the opera house with a

7 *Colorado Citizen*, March 2, 1888
8 *Colorado Citizen*, October 18, 1888

production of *Lost In London*. Beers played a coal miner. The company featured a man named Harry Gilfoil, who, billed as The Wonderful Human Mocker, performed vocal tricks.

Frank Kilday next brought the Boucicault play, *The Streets of New York*, to Columbus. The play's villain, a banker named Gideon Bloodgood, bilks a man named Fairweather of his fortune. Fairweather confronts the banker, but dies of apoplexy before recovering his money. Bloodgood and his clerk, Badger, dispose of the body. Badger shortly sets about blackmailing the banker. Twenty years later Bloodgood decides to end the affair once and for all by burning down the building in which Badger lives. By a curious coincidence, the now impecunious Fairweather family happens to live in the same building. In the play's most spectacular scene, the tenement burns on stage as Badger and the Fairweathers escape. Badger, who has become a policeman, then arrests Bloodgood. Kilday's production was a success with the Columbus audience. The *Citizen* called it "decidedly the best performance presented at the opera house since that of Keene."[9]

Jane Coombs followed Kilday into the hall with her play *Bleak House*, based on a Dickens novel. But excessively bad weather and muddy streets held down the house and Coombs responded with a substandard performance. Sam and Morris Weston, who appeared two weeks later, were musicians as well as actors, with Morris playing the saxophone, a relatively new instrument. Still, the audience was small. But the hall revived with *Si Perkins From Pughtown*, a roaringly comic play presented on December 4, and, six days later, *Lights and Shadows*, a scenic drama featuring, as the advertising screamed, "The Escape Through the Real Plate Glass Doors! The Overflow of 5000 Gallons of Real Water! The Dazzling Steel Room!".

Yet another memorable evening was that of December 20, on which Lillian Lewis gave a performance of

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9 *Colorado Citizen,* November 15, 1888

Daly's adaptation of Adolphe Belot's melodrama, *L'Article 47*. Set in France, the play told the story of a woman, Cora, who had been shot and so terribly disfigured by her lover that she went mad. More than a decade before, the great actress Clara Morris had played the role wearing a veil, which when torn off by her former lover, revealed her scar and her insanity in a dramatically intense manner. Morris was such a triumph that Lewis certainly played the scene the same way. In any case, she was a tremendous success in Columbus and would make two more appearances in the Stafford Opera House over the next few years.

Fanny Janauschek was nearly sixty when she played Columbus that season and, needless to say, was a well established star. In fact she had been a star in her native Europe for twenty years before starting her American career in 1870. In advance of her appearance, the *Citizen* called her "the greatest star that has ever visited our city",[10] but the play did not live up to its billing.[11]

The appearance of Creston Clarke on January 16, 1889 was another eagerly anticipated event. Clarke was the nephew of Edwin Booth and as such brought that family's luster to Columbus. His choice of *Hamlet* as his vehicle in a time when even big city audiences were less interested in the great poetic dramas than in the newer melodramas, reflects both his classicism and the drawing power of the Booth name. The *Citizen* at least, was very pleased with the performance, commenting "the drama was exceedingly well presented, Mr. Creston Clarke ... fully sustaining his splendid reputation."

Toward the end of the season, the MacCollin Opera Company presented the only genuine operas ever heard in the Stafford Opera House. On March 8, 1889 the company performed Edmond Audran's *La Mascotte*, a three act opera first produced in 1881. The following day they

10 *Colorado Citizen*, January 3,1889

11 Janauschek's company contained a teenage actor named Frederick Tyrone Power, better known now as the father of the famous film star, Tyrone Power.

12 *Colorado Citizen*, January 17, 1889

presented William Schwenk Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *The Mikado*, a delightful operetta concerning an administrative official in Japan who is called upon to execute someone before the month is out or lose his exalted position. *The Mikado* was newer even than *La Mascotte*, having premiered March 14, 1885. The tremendous popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan led many companies to present pirated versions of their works. It is possible, one might even say likely, that the MacCollin Opera Company's production fit into that category.

Because the issues of the *Colorado Citizen* from March 1889 to February 1890 are lost, less is known of the 1889- 1890 season than of any other of the Stafford Opera House's glory years. Still, the six known performances contain at least one genuine major theatrical event, that being the performance on March 4, 1890 of Lewis Morrison in *Faust.* The play was not a translation of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's drama, but an adaptation. Morrison made the role of Mephistopheles his own, playing it thousands of times to great acclaim across the country.

Lillian Lewis made a return to Columbus on October 28, 1889, presenting the play *As In A Looking Glass*. The same play had served as a vehicle for the famous English performer, Lillie Langtry, on her tour of Texas the year before. Another highlight was a production of *Brutus, or the Fall of Tarquin,* featuring R. D. MacLean and Marie Prescott.

James H. Wallick opened the 1890-1891 season with his historical drama, *Sam Houston*. Wallick had had a major success with his play *The Bandit King*, a forerunner of the modern western. The actor had used trained horses in presenting the drama, which featured plenty of blood and gun fire. But, despite the presence of the now famous horses, *Sam Houston* was not as successful. The critics especially disliked it for its historical inaccuracies. The play put Houston in command of the forces at the Alamo and allowed him to utter the already famous vow of William Barrett Travis, "I shall never surrender or retreat." This line

was made especially ironic for its Texas audiences by the well known fact that the real Houston had expressly ordered Travis to retreat. Nevertheless, the play's climactic moment, a sword fight on horseback between Houston and General Cos, had plenty of appeal to the ordinary theater patron.

A new production of *Lights and Shadows*, which promised "new scenery, new mechanical effects, new situations" and, in its famous flood scene, "thousands of gallons of water flowing directly upon the stage",[13] followed Wallick to the hall. Lillian Lewis, recently returned from a tour of Europe, made her third and final appearance in Columbus in a production of *Credit Lorraine* the following week.

Robert McWade brought *Rip Van Winkle* to Columbus on the last day of January. The character of Rip Van Winkle, with his signature line "live long and prosper", had been a staple of the theater since Joseph Jefferson had first played him in a version of the story written by Boucicault some twenty years earlier. The character was so firmly associated with Jefferson that it was considered something of a risk for anyone else to play it. Though McWade did not perform the Boucicault version, and by all accounts he was a credible performer, he suffered in comparison to Jefferson.

There were some unusual events that season. Hanlon's *Fantasma*, booked on December 26, seems to have been more of a gymnastics exhibition than a drama. Charles W. Goodyear, John Elitch, and Charles E. Schilling's minstrel company featured a shadowgraphist and juggler, a troupe of acrobats, and a quartet that imitated church organs, calliopes, and other instruments. D. J. Sprague's company traveled with the Black Hussar Band, and at noon on the day of the company's performance in Columbus, the band led a parade from the Kulow Hotel to the opera house. The season closed with a lecture by Henry Watterston, a well known newspaper editor who was to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1917 for his pro war editorials.

13 *Colorado Citizen*, October 23, 1890

Perhaps the most popular performances with the Columbus audience were those of Annie Burton in *Dad's Girl* on December 2 and of Katie Putnam in *Love Finds a Way* on April 4. It was Putnam's second performance in the Stafford Opera House, and her second triumph. She was to return, but not until theater had all but died in Columbus. It was she who gave the last known professional dramatic performance in the history of the opera house. Her production of *The Little Maverick*, on January 10, 1894, was apparently the only attraction of the 1893-1894 theatrical season.

The opera house's fifth season brought the great actor Frederick Warde to town. Warde had started his American career with Booth at the Booth Theater in New York City. A few years later, he had toured with John McCullough, and in 1888 he had been Lillie Langtry's leading man in California. Decidedly in the front rank, many regarded him as the foremost actor in America immediately after Booth's retirement.

In his autobiography he related a story which indicates how convincing an actor he could be. Once in Austin, with Warde playing Iago to McCullough's Othello, a member of the audience became so distraught over his villainy that he drew a pistol and threatened to kill the actor onstage. Thankfully, another audience member restrained the man, no doubt convincing him with some difficulty that Warde was only playing a role.

R. D. MacLean and Marie Prescott made their second appearance in Columbus on November 2, 1891 in *Ingomar*, with MacLean as the title character, a barbarian, and Prescott as Parthenia, a Greek maiden. Also appearing for a second time were the minstrel team of Bobby Beach and Otis Bowers. Two other minstrel shows graced the hall that year, McCabe and Young's and Al G. Fields'. The performance of McCabe and Young's Minstrels was unusual in that it drew an audience that was predominantly black. Field, whose real name was Alfred Griffith Hatfield and who was a member of the Hatfield family that feuded with the McCoys

in West Virginia, provided one of the largest troupes in the country.

For a spectacular, the season offered *The Pay Train,* which featured a train wreck on stage, a boiler explosion, the uncoupling of two cars running at full speed across the stage, and a lynching. The play, though, was a failure in Columbus. Evidently, the company could not figure out a way to put a train on the small Stafford Opera House stage for the *Citizen* reported that many of the expected scenes had been left out and commented "When one pays money to see a play, he expects what is on the program or he feels that his money has been obtained by fraud."[14]

A Barrel of Money, in which a young girl is about to be killed by the churning machinery of an iron mill when it suddenly is stopped, and *Paul Kauvar,* scored major successes. The latter play is a story of the French revolution, complete with a guillotine scene, and features a cast of more than one hundred.

The play was so successful that a different company brought it to Columbus the following season. But it was eclipsed by two other spectacular productions featuring trains, *The Fast Mail* and *A Royal Pass,* and the appearance of James O'Neill in his new play, *Fontenelle.*

Somehow, the production of *The Fast Mail,* mounted on October 28, 1892, contained a scene in which a train whizzed by a station and grabbed a mail bag. Even more incredibly, *A Royal Pass,* given two weeks later, featured a chase across the stage with escaping prisoners on one train and pursuing officers on another. The *Citizen* reported that the presentation was very realistic, saying that "steam comes from the whistles, bells clang, headlights glow, [and] wheels whirl and rumble."[15]

O'Neill had been a genuinely ambitious and talented actor in his youth. He had made his name in Chicago in 1874, acting with Booth in *Othello.* The city's critics had been raving about the performance of Italian actor Tommaso

14 *Colorado Citizen,* October 1, 1891
15 *Colorado Citizen,* November 24, 1892

Salvini as Othello, and Booth, perceiving a challenge, decided to follow Salvini into the city in the same play. Booth played the role in a much different way than Salvini had, but to no less acclaim. Booth then decided to top Salvini further by playing Iago. The twenty-seven year old O'Neill, who had played Iago to Booth's Othello, was thereby handed the unenviable task of following both Salvini and Booth as Othello. But, ignoring a piece of advice from Booth, he found a fresh approach and brought down the house. Booth was later quoted as having said, "That young man plays Othello better than I ever did!"

But, since his debut in the role in 1883, O'Neill had been forced by audience pressure and his own cupidity to continually reprise his enormously successful role as Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.[16] Like Jefferson's Rip Van Winkle and Morrison's Mephistopheles, O'Neill's Count had become a theater classic and he had performed it thousands of times. In fact, twenty years after his Columbus appearance, the new Famous Players Film Company signed him to play the leading role on film. But, on February 7, 1893, he played the Stafford Opera House in a different play, *Fontenelle*, a period drama set in France during the reign of Louis XV. In advance of his appearance, the *Colorado Citizen* ran a two column lithograph of his profile and a brief comparison of his new play with his famous *Monte Cristo*. Though the Columbus audience would no doubt have preferred to see the more celebrated play, his performance in *Fontenelle* was much the highlight of the season.

After 1893, the Stafford Opera House all but went dark. Only one performance is known to have taken place the next season and none the year after that. In 1895,

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16 James O'Neill was the father of the great playwright, Eugene O'Neill. Eugene, who was four years old in 1893, usually went along on his father's tours, but in all likelihood, was not with his father in Columbus. He, his mother, Ellen, and brother Jamie lived in a house in El Paso for the duration of the tour. O'Neill's autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, depicts his father's love of money and his frustration over his reluctant status as a one role actor in a most unflattering manner.

Ed Sandmeyer died. Bob Stafford had been killed in 1890. Stafford's widow was bitter since, though her husband's assassin was well known, no punishment had ever been accorded him. The theater had never made money and had been kept open by the backing of the Stafford family. When that backing was withdrawn, the theater could not operate. For a few years traveling lecturers and entertainments of various sorts sporadically brought the stage back to life, but the glory days of the Stafford Opera House had ended.

There were two more opera houses in Colorado County, the Frazar Opera House in Eagle Lake and the Lone Star Opera House, on the second floor of the Brunson Building, in Columbus. The latter, which opened on December 31, 1896, attempted to take up where the Stafford Opera House had left off, but it could not lure prime circuit attractions and shortly failed, finally closing forever in August, 1908. The Frazar Opera House evidently suffered from the same malady, and by the time it burned on February 19, 1925, it had long since been obsolete, a relic of the theater that was as dead then as vaudeville is now.

Appendix A
Prime Circuit Performers and Shows During the Glory Days of the Stafford Opera House

(The names of two shows separated by a slash [/] means that two performances were given by the company on the same day. The first of the two shows named in such cases was usually a matinee. An asterisk [*] indicates a performer or show which played in a Galveston or Houston opera house in the same season.)

1887-1888 Season

FRI	OCT 28	Louise Balfe: *The Planter's Wife* *
SAT	OCT 29	Louise Balfe: *The Planter's Wife / Dagmar* *
TUE	NOV 1	Famous Georgia Minstrels *
TUE	NOV 8	Lizzie Evans: *Our Angel* *
THU	NOV 10	Lizzie Evans: *Fogg's Ferry* *
MON	NOV 21	E. T. Stetson: *Neck and Neck* *

THU NOV 24 McIntyre & Heath's Modern Minstrels *
TUE DEC 6 Katie Putnam: *Erma the Elf* *
FRI DEC 16 Baird Minstrels *
MON JAN 30 Bell Royal Marionettes *
THU FEB 23 The Chinese Students
FRI FEB 24 Bartley Campbell: *My Geraldine*
THU MAR 1 Smith's Swiss Bell Ringers
MON MAR 5 Mendelssohn Quartet

1888-1889 Season

MON OCT 8 Carrie Tutein: *Struck Gas* *
THU OCT 18 Thomas W. Keene: *Richelieu* *
SAT OCT 27 William J. Scanlan: *Shane-na-lawn* *
WED NOV 7 Newton Beers: *Lost in London* *
TUE NOV 13 Frank Kilday: *Streets of New York* *
TUE NOV 20 Jane Coombs: *Bleak House* *
MON DEC 3 Weston Brothers: *Way of the World* *
TUE DEC 4 Frank Jones: *Si Perkins From Pughtown* *
MON DEC 10 Harry Kennedy: *Lights and Shadows*
THU DEC 20 Lillian Lewis: *L'Article 47* *
MON DEC 24 W. J. Fleming: *Around the World in Eighty Days* *
SAT DEC 29 John Thompson: *A Huge Joke*
WED JAN 9 Fanny Janauschek: *Meg Merrilies* *
WED JAN 16 Creston Clarke: *Hamlet* *
MON JAN 21 Belle Gilbert & J.H. Huntley: *May Blossom* *
TUE JAN 22 Belle Gilbert and J.H. Huntley: *Young Mrs. Winthrop / Queena* *
FRI MAR 8 MacCollin Opera Company: *La Mascotte*
SAT MAR 9 MacCollin Opera Company: *The Mikado / King's Musketeers*
??? MAR ? E. Brown & Company: *Storm Beaten* *

(Note: Martin Golden's company was scheduled to present the play *Little Duchess* on Thursday, January 31, 1889, but did not show up.)

1889-1890 Season

WED SEP 18 Goodyear, Cook, and Dillon's Minstrels *
MON OCT 28 Lillian Lewis: *As In A Looking Glass* *

MON DEC 2 R. D. MacLean and Marie Prescott: *Brutus, or the Fall of Tarquin* *
TUE MAR 4 Lewis Morrison: *Faust* *
TUE MAR 18 Charlotte Thompson: *Jane Eyre* *
THU MAY 15 Stuttz New York Theatre Company: *A Celebrated Case* *

1890-1891 Season

SAT SEP 20 James H. Wallick: *Sam Houston* *
FRI OCT 24 *Lights and Shadows* *
FRI OCT 31 Lillian Lewis: *Credit Lorraine* *
THU NOV 20 Lizzie Montgomery: *The Two Orphans*
TUE DEC 2 Annie Burton: *Dad's Girl*
MON DEC 8 Verona Jarbeau: *Starlight* *
MON DEC 15 Edwin Arden: *Raglan's Way* *
FRI DEC 26 Hanlon's Company: *Fantasma* *
THU JAN 8 Beach & Bowers' Famous Minstrels
SAT JAN 10 Hettie Bernard Chase: *Uncle's Darling* *
SAT JAN 31 Robert McWade: *Rip Van Winkle* *
FRI FEB 6 D. J. Sprague's Comedians: *A Social Session* *
TUE FEB 10 Charles L. Davis: *Alvin Joslin* *
MON MAR 9 Oliver's Comedy Company
TUE MAR 10 Oliver's Comedy Company
MON MAR 16 Goodyear, Elitch, and Schilling's Minstrels *
SAT APR 4 Katie Putnam: *Love Finds A Way*
FRI APR 24 Henry Watterston: *The Money Devil* (a lecture) *

1891-1892 Season

THU SEP 17 E. B. Fitz: *A Breezy Time* *
MON SEP 21 McCabe and Young Minstrels
FRI SEP 25 Florence Bindley: *The Pay Train* *
MON SEP 28 George W. Lederer's Comic Players: *U & I* *
WED OCT 7 Beach and Bowers' Famous Minstrels
MON OCT 19 E. D. Stair: *A Barrel Of Money* *
MON NOV 2 R. D. MacLean & Marie Prescott: *Ingomar* *
MON NOV 9 Ada Melrose: *The Southern Rose* *

SAT NOV 21 Eugene Robinson: *Paul Kauvar* *
WED JAN 13 Fredericke Warde: *The Lion's Mouth* *
THU JAN 14 Al G. Field & Company Famous Minstrels *
THU JAN 28 Denman Thompson: *The Two Sisters* *
FRI FEB 12 Milton & Dollie Nobles: *From Sire to Son* *
SAT FEB 13 Charles A. Gardner: *Captain Karl* *
TUE FEB 23 Hoyt's Company: *A Hole in the Ground* *

1892-1893 Season

WED OCT 26 Donnelly and Miller: *A Ship Ahoy* *
FRI OCT 28 Lincoln J. Carter: *The Fast Mail* *
FRI NOV 4 Hettie Bernard Chase: *Uncle's Darling* *
THU NOV 17 George C. Staley: *Royal Pass* *
FRI NOV 18 Porter J. White: *Paul Kauvar* *
TUE DEC 20 Frank Maeder's Comedy Company: *The Kid*
TUE JAN 24 Jeffries Lewis: *La Belle Russe* *
TUE FEB 7 James O'Neill: *Fontenelle* *
MON MAR 13 Mexican Typical Orchestra *

Appendix B
Opera House Legends

According to legend and the historical marker on the Stafford Opera House, Lillian Russell gave the first performance at the theater in 1886 in a play called *As In A Looking Glass*. Unhappily, the legend is not true. In fact, as we have seen, Louise Balfe opened the opera house in the play *The Planter's Wife* on the night of October 28, 1887. Russell apparently never set foot in the hall, either in 1886 or any later date. Had she done so, her appearance would certainly been trumpeted, for she was unquestionably the biggest star of the time. But neither the contemporary issues of the *Colorado Citizen* or the *Weimar Mercury* mention her in regard to any performance in Columbus. In addition, Russell did not appear in any Galveston or Houston theater before the Stafford Opera House closed, and it is difficult to imagine that she would have booked an engagement in Columbus while ignoring those two much larger cities.

Russell, whose real name was Helen Louise Leonard, began her career as a singer at Tony Pastor's Theater in New York in 1880. When she was offered the job, she was afraid that her mother would forbid her to take it, and so decided to adopt a stage name. She chose the name "Lillian Russell" from a list provided by the theater. From Tony Pastor's, which was one of the top theaters in the country, she rapidly rose in fame and prestige until she was drawing the largest salary in the history of the theater, $3150 per week. Her salary is not only an indication of her "superstar" status, but is also strong evidence that she would not be booked into a rural theater with just 800 seats.

The story that Lillian Russell performed in Columbus apparently originated as a publicity stunt sometime in the early 1930s. It first appeared in print in Oscar Zumwalt's "Brief History of Columbus". In 1917, when the opera house was sold for the first time, the *Eagle Lake Headlight* gave a synopsis of its history. The paper reported that Lillian Lewis had opened the hall in *Credit Lorraine*. Lewis actually had appeared in the Stafford Opera House three times and did perform there in *Credit Lorraine*, but not on opening night. By 1935, when Zumwalt wrote his history, the play had been changed to another one in which Lewis actually appeared, *As In A Looking Glass*, but the actress had been changed from one Lillian to another, Lewis to Russell. This erroneous information was dutifully reported in the April 4, 1957 centennial edition of the *Colorado County Citizen* and thereby passed down to the present day.

Of similar status is another legend passed down by Zumwalt, that the great magician and escape artist Harry Houdini once played the Stafford Opera House. Houdini did not emerge as a star until around 1900, well after the opera house had closed. But, before that he worked any theater that would book him. Still, it is unlikely that such a struggling performer would arrange a booking in far off Texas, and when you consider that Houdini was still a teenager when the opera house closed, it seems very unlikely that he ever played in Columbus.

Zumwalt also states that Joseph Jefferson trod the boards in Columbus. Though he is now unknown to the general populace, Jefferson's fame was enormous in his day and his name was probably well known to both Zumwalt and his readership. His inclusion on the list of performers would certainly have added to the glory of the theater in their minds. But, unfortunately, his performance at the Stafford Opera House is a myth.

Another opera house legend surrounds the fate of the original curtain. Zumwalt says that the curtain was one of two "painted at the same time by a nationally known artist" with the other being used in the Hancock Opera House in Austin. But, in fact, the Hancock Opera House did not open until a few years[17] after the Stafford Opera House had. Zumwalt goes on to say that the curtain was destroyed before 1920, when E. C. Guilmartin, who owned the building between 1917 and 1919, became so enraged when someone in Columbus killed his bird dog, that, as an act of revenge against the community, he ripped down the curtain and used it to cover his hog pens. If the story is true, then Guilmartin's action would be one of the most extraordinarily extravagant in the county's history. The curtain cost $10,000, or about one fifth of the total cost of the opera house. It is difficult to imagine how Guilmartin could have felt that discarding it would have hurt anyone except himself.

A more likely explanation of the fate of the curtain presents itself some five years after Guilmartin's supposed action. In 1922, when Frank Troxell purchased the opera house, he began cleaning out the debris that had accumulated in the second story over the years. In February, 1923, an insurance inspector notified him that the stage and scenery posed too great a fire hazard and invalidated his fire policy. He was ordered to have them made fireproof or

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17 Joe Edgar Manry, in his book *Curtain Call, the History of the Theatre in Austin, Texas, 1839 to 1905,* says that the Hancock Opera House opened in 1898 on page 3, but later contradicts himself, saying on page 55 that it opened in the fall of 1894.

removed from the building. Faced with the prospect of sinking a large amount of money into a theater which had always been unprofitable, he made an appeal to the community for funds. But his appeal was not answered, and Troxell cleaned up the problem on his own. There is no list of the items that Troxell removed, but it is possible if not probable that the curtain was among them.

Still, there is no documentation of the fate of the curtain, and either or neither explanation herein offered may be true. All that is known for certain is that the curtain was gone by 1935, when Zumwalt wrote of its fate.

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The author made extensive use of the advertisements and reviews of the productions at the Stafford Opera House and the Weimar Opera House that appeared in the *Colorado Citizen* and the *Weimar Mercury.* Background information has been obtained from these publications:

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New At The Nesbitt

Ilse Miller, the library's most dedicated and dependable volunteer, is rapidly approaching completion of a project that she and other volunteers have been engaged in for nearly two years, an alphabetical index of the 1880 federal census of Colorado County. The index, which is handwritten onto 3x5 cards, lists all members of each household in the county and includes their race, gender, age, and relationship to the head of the household. For persons who have a different surname than the head of the household under which they are listed, separate cards directing the researcher to the proper household are created. Miss Miller has been assisted in her endeavor by a pair of Mormon missionary couples, Jay and LaRue Sutton and Robert and Virginia Wood.

Myrah Jane Draper, the granddaughter of George McCormick, pointed out two errors in the issue of this magazine that contained his letters (Volume 1, Number 2, December 1989). The introduction stated that he was Assistant State Attorney General from 1876-1880, when in fact, he became Attorney General on November 5, 1878 and served in that office until November 2, 1880. Secondly, the photograph on page 50 is captioned "George McCormick before the war, or as the caption written on the back of the original photograph says, 'on his first leg'". Originally, I had interpreted this as a wryly humorous comment on the fact that he lost a leg during the war. Mrs. Draper stated that she believed the legend referred to the first artificial limb he acquired after the war, and showed me a tintype of a clean shaven and clearly younger McCormick made before the war to support her contention.

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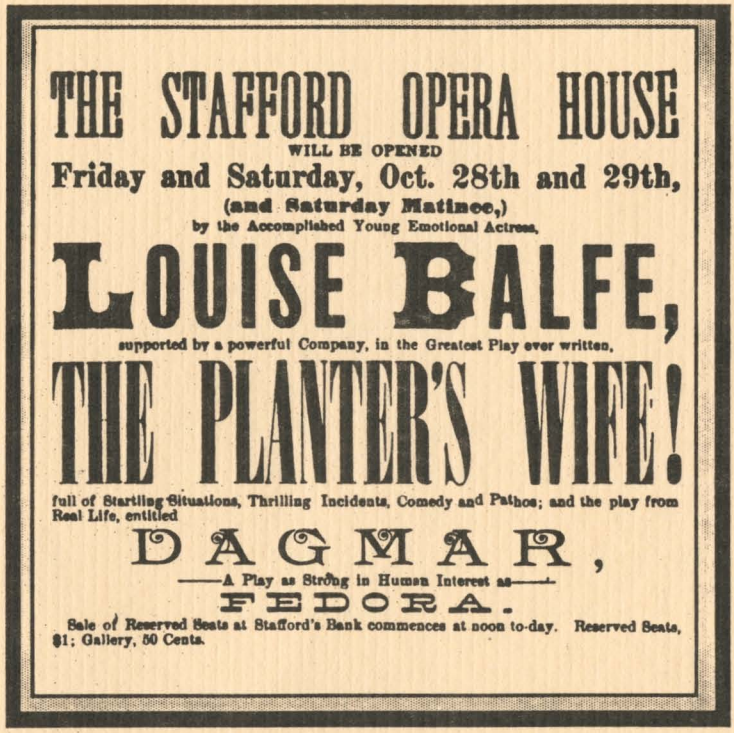

Advertisement for opening night at the Stafford Opera House from the *Colorado Citizen* of October 27, 1887.