

Comedian Crane's Christmas in Omaha



Mr. Crane Goes Driving with Mr. W. H. McCord.

Viewing the City from the Tower of the New York Life Building.

In His Dressing Room at the Boyd, Preparing Peter sinks for the Public.

INCIDENTS OF WILLIAM H. CRANE'S CHRISTMAS IN OMAHA—Photos Made Expressly for the Article by W. A. Pixley.

WILLIAM H. CRANE'S recent visit to Omaha brings to mind the fact that he is one of the very few actors whose experience dates back more than two-score years. Mr. Crane's career on the stage dates back forty-one years, during which time he has, according to his own statement, appeared in more than 16,000 performances, of which it would be hard to tell how many thousands of people he has amused.

He made his professional debut at Utica, N. Y., on July 13, 1853, appearing in the part of a notary in "The Daughter of the Regiment." He continued with this same company for eight years, during which time he played a number of different light comedy parts. Concluding to try his luck as a comic-opera comedian he joined the Alice Oates Opera company in 1871, with whom he remained for four years. At the end of this time he decided to abandon the light opera field and signed with the Hooley stock company in Chicago as leading comedian. In 1876 he joined forces with the late Stuart Robson, and the famous combination of Robson and Crane was formed. Their first appearance together was at the Park theater in New York City in a play called "Our Boarders." It was a great success, and they continued to play it for several seasons. Later they appeared as the two Dromios in "The Comedy of Errors," which also met with more than ordinary success. "The Merry Wives of Windsor" was their next effort, and finally came "The Henrietta," in which they made the greatest hit of their careers. Their partnership continued for thirteen years—the longest of its kind in the history of the dramatic profession. In 1889, after deciding that each could make as much money separate as they both could together, they dissolved partnership. Since that time Mr. Crane has produced a number of successes, among which are "On Probation," "The Senator," "For Money," "The American Minister," "Brother John," "David Harum," and his present piece, "The Spenders."

He spent his Christmas in Omaha, and as Mrs. Crane is, contrary to her usual plans, making the swing around the circuit, as she terms it, with him this year, a newspaper reporter found him in an exceptionally pleasant and talkative mood. It was after the Christmas matinee and Mrs. Crane had just finished dispensing Christmas cheer to each member of the company in the shape of beautiful specimens of the silversmith's art. Mr. Crane came off the stage where, after the cur-

tain went down on the last act, the presentation had been made, his face bearing a smile that clearly indicated his pleased mood.

"This makes me feel like a youngster again," he said. "It takes me back to the days when I used to hang my stocking over the fire place Christmas eve, and bounce out of bed the next morning before the cock crowed to see what Santa had left for me. In those days it wasn't sterling silver, fancy bon bons and such, but a big red apple, a few of mother's doughnuts and maybe a stick of candy, and possibly a few nuts, but I am sure we enjoyed it as much as the children of today, do their fancy toys and candies. How do the player folks spend their Christmas? Well, I can only speak for my company and myself. Mrs. Crane and I always try to arrange a little celebration something like the one you have just witnessed, a present for every member of the company to bring a little good cheer; otherwise it only differs from other days in that it means more work, an extra matinee and of course the usual evening performance. I always have Mrs. Crane join me wherever I am on Christmas, but this year she is making the swing around the circuit with me."

Mr. Crane was in a reminiscent mood, and after relating the history of his career that heads this article he talked of the Christmases Robson and he had spent together and of their years spent as partners. "Our partnership was, I believe, the most remarkable of its kind in history, at least so many of my business friends tell me. You know during all of our thirteen years together there was never a scratch of a pen in the shape of a contract between us. Each year when we closed our season he would say to me, 'Well Billy, will we try it again next season,' and my reply was usually, 'If you think the people will come to see us, Rob.' We were always the very best of friends, even after we separated, and I can't remember of our ever having had a disagreement. I always attended to the finances and he to the other end of the business. We separated only after deciding that we could each make as much money alone as both of us could together. I sold Robson my interest in 'The Henrietta,' and in the fall of '89 we parted. The announcement of his death came to me while I was at a dinner party in San Francisco and it was a great shock to me. It upset me so that I had to be prompted repeatedly in my lines in a part that I had played several hundred times."

By this time Mr. Crane had changed his

stage costume to that of street attire and after a stroll with him to his hotel he announced that the next morning he would make calls on some of his local friends.

Saturday morning he called on a personal friend and namesake, Thomas D. Crane. Before leaving the New York Life building he expressed a desire to go to the top of it, where he could have a good view of the city. After giving vent to an exclamation of surprise as to the amount of ground the city covered he said: "As I stand here and look about me at your large office buildings, numerous factories and fine residences, my memory goes back to my first trip to Omaha. It was in the fall of '73 and I think this was about the wildest town upon the map at that time. Filled with cowboys and Indians that were the real thing, the scene on the streets, as I remember it, was in striking contrast to that of today. Instead of the stores being filled with women shoppers, rough looking men jostled one another in their efforts to secure the best outfits for a trip across the plains westward. I was with the Alice Oates Opera company then and in comparison to our last night's audience at the Boyd it was a motley mob that greeted us at the old Academy of Music down on Douglas street when the curtain went up that night. I shall never forget it, as it was my first trip to the then wild and woolly west, and I expected to have some cow puncher who didn't happen to like my voice take a shot at me almost any minute, but I am still alive."

"In those days the starting of a Union Pacific train west daily was an event that attracted large crowds, and I must confess that I was among the crowd that wandered down to the depot each day during our engagement here, to see those ponderous engines, with smokestacks almost as large as their boilers, pull a train out of the depot filled with passengers bound west to seek their fortunes. I think of those days whenever I make a trip to Frisco now and wonder if the next thirty years will see as much of an advance in traveling facilities as have the past. It will have to be flying machines then and mighty fast ones, too, if it does. But I am wasting time here talking of things that have been, when I should be calling upon my Omaha friends."

"During my forty years upon the stage I have made many good friends in the different cities where I have played, and to call upon them and renew acquaintances is one of the real pleasures of my yearly trips over the circuit. In Omaha I number the Crane brothers, J. N. H. Patrick, his sons and Hal McCord among my friends.

Of course, a man in the theatrical profession makes many acquaintances, but there are very few that he cares to cultivate, principally because there are so many people who meet us only because of our prominence theatrically. A few, of course, we find congenial and it is with them that we enjoy a close friendship."

Mr. Crane was asked regarding the rumor that he was soon to retire from the stage. "Me retire from the stage! Well, not until I am forced to by the public. Just as long as they will continue to come to see me, just that long will I continue to play. I do not continue to follow the profession merely for financial gain, for I have in my forty years of stage work accumulated enough of this world's goods to keep my wife and myself comfortably for the rest of our days. I make an honest confession when I say that my vanity keeps me from retiring to private life for the rest of my days. The receptions I receive when I appear each night in the different cities are a source of much gratification to my personal vanity, so much so that it makes my work really a pleasure. It makes me feel that in former years when I played before these people I must have given them their money's worth; in other words, must have pleased them, else they would not come again to greet me. I suppose if I were to fail to please my audiences, and instead of being welcomed by a theater full of people, only partly filled houses would greet me, I would be glad to retire; but, as I said before, as long as they will come to see me, just that long will I continue to play."

"Do I read many plays? Well, rather. That is one of my principal occupations while on the train. I have a trunk full of new ones now—all of them worthless, of course; but I read them just the same. In most cases they are really so ridiculous that they are funny. They are sent to me by people in all walks of life, and no matter whether the leading part is for a comedian, tragedian or drawing room gentleman, the authors usually accompany their manuscript with a letter saying that they feel sure that the part will just fit me. In all of the plays that I have received from aspiring dramatists during my career, and there have been hundreds of them, I have not as yet found one that was available for my use. The only way that I have ever been able to get a play worth anything is by going to a reputable dramatist and giving him an order for it, just as you would your tailor for a suit of clothes. If it doesn't fit you don't take it; but it's usually made to fit, and that's the way with the plays that are written to order."

