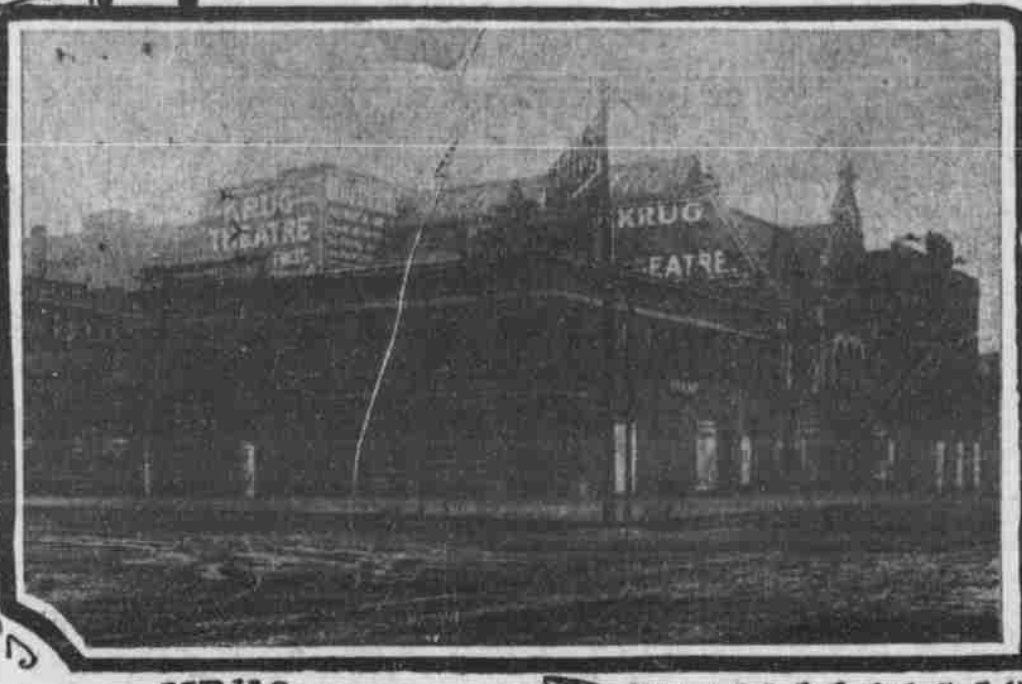
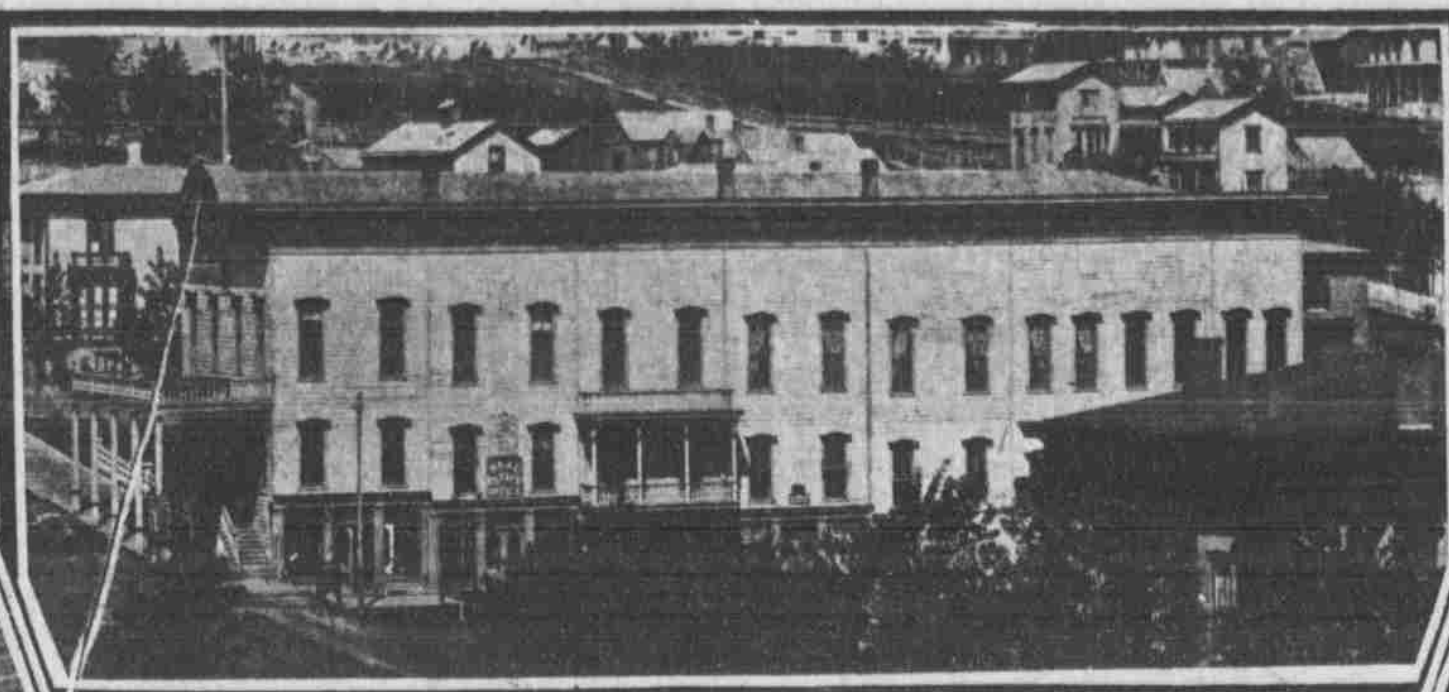


OMAHA HISTORY TOLD BY THEATERS PAST AND PRESENT

John Templeton's Visit of Fifty Years Ago and Some Stars Who Came After and Twinkled Across the Footlights Under Varying Conditions for Amusement of Local Public



BEFORE an audience composed of Omaha citizens, buffalo hunters and the pioneer folk of Nebraska's early days, John Templeton "heroed" his way through the "Chamber of Death" on an improvised stage erected in the first court house. That was in the later '50s, when Omaha saw its first theatrical performance. Theatricals, by their very rarity, were not in those days events to be missed, and, according to the hazy accounts that history gives, Templeton played to packed houses for three nights in succession. That Omaha's first theatrical performance drew a crowd to "standing room only" way back there more than fifty years ago bespeaks quite a bit of enthusiasm on the part of the pioneers. At any rate there is assurance that the first chapter in the history of Omaha's stage did not begin with a one-night stand.

Viewed in the light of Omaha and the west of today, that visit of the John Templeton company was a striking bit of adventure. The steam whistle had not yet stirred up the echoes in the seven hills of what the early Omaha folk styled "The Gateway City." Stages ran almost all the way from Chicago to Omaha, when the going was good. Facing such conditions as this, the John Templeton company set out to explore and carry their arts into the western plains. They played Davenport, proceeding under difficulties to Iowa City and the then farthest west metropolis, Council Bluffs.

The oldest inhabitant has it that John Templeton, the leader of the company, a lad hardly out of his teens, was attracted to Omaha when he saw the splendor of the brave new tin roof of the old court house flashing in the sun across the river. The members of his company urged the young man that they had seen all that they cared for of the untamed west, but he pushed on across the river to Omaha for his three-night performance. When one reflects that there was not a little of home-grown tragedy hereabouts in those days it took not a little temerity to attempt to interest and amuse with such gloomy scenes as those of the "Chamber of Death."

The parlors of the Hernden house, which long since was obliterated by the erection of the Union Pacific headquarters, were used as a show house occasionally in the early '60s. It was in the earliest performance there that Julia Dean Hayne appeared in the leading role of a production the name of which has not survived the years. That visit of the early day theatrical company was the making of a romance that ended in the marriage of Colonel John Y. Clopper to a sister of Julia Dean Hayne. They lived in Omaha for several years following the close of the civil war.

That performance at the Hernden house must have been staged with as little attention to precision in scenic effect as on the stage of the early Elizabethan period some centuries before. A historian's account remarks that the leading lady manufactured the curtains and drops from a bolt of muslin borrowed at Tootle & Jackson's store, the great dry goods emporium of early Omaha.

It was probably ten years after the visit of John Templeton that Omaha's first playhouse, the Academy of Music, was erected. This first "temple of the knights of the buskin," as the writers of the day insisted that it should be designated, was built on the south side of Douglas street between Thirteenth and Fourteenth streets. It was opened in the winter of 1866-7. The Academy of Music was then the property of Colonel J. G. Clopper and S. S. Caldwell. Accounts found in musty piles of old papers aver that this building was the last word in architectural magnificence. The writer of those praising paragraphs in the free and easy days of the middle '60s little imagined that twenty-five years later the house would become the headquarters of the prohibition party organization in Omaha.

The Academy of Music opened under the management of Henri Corri, an English actor, who himself headed what was then declared the best stock company in the west. It is to be surmised that the west was not particularly overworked by stock companies in those days. Henri Corri's management was followed by the transformation of the Academy of Music into a variety house, during the ownership of John I. Redick. Corri went back to the east and for a time appeared under the management of one Ben DeBans. Corri died at a home for aged actors in Philadelphia in 1883, after a prosperous career which had netted him but little of ultimate profit.

The one theatrical joke of the early days was the opening of the Redick theater at the northwest corner of Sixteenth and Farnam streets in 1870, by Mary A. Livermore. It seems to have been a real frosty first night. Mrs. Livermore's train was two hours late, so the audience sat in a darkened room, with the gas lights turned economically low, waiting her arrival. When that lady of lecture fame strode onto the stage the lights refused to come up. The footlights were finally lighted, while the rest of the house remained dark, with no big and useless tin reflectors swinging from the roof.

Whether it was Mrs. Livermore's theme or the gloomy house that depressed the crowd on that first night history does not record, but, anyway, it was an ill omen and the Redick theater was useful mostly to give "tone" to the surrounding real estate territory. The title to the building was passed to J. M. Pattee of lottery fame. He soon after rented the structure to the city, which established there a council chamber and several city offices. In 1889 the somewhat unpopular old playhouse was torn down to give space to the Commercial National bank and F. L. Ames buildings and the hoodoo of Mary A. Livermore's opening night was drowned in business prosperity.

The Redick theater, however, saw the visits of some real celebrities to Omaha. For instance, as a bit of variation from Mrs. Livermore's plea for woman's suffrage was the exhibition of Jem Mace, the English prize fighter, who, with bare fists, disdaining gloves, held forth against six of the most lusty and brawny amateurs of the vicinity. On this occasion Pooley Mace, a cousin of the famous fighter, his trainer, and Billy Edwards, who was the real American

Bat Nelson of those days, appeared at the Redick. The audience was highly delighted, according to newspaper notices of the day, and most of the local participants of the exhibition recovered.

Potter's theater opened in the J. J. Brown building at the southeast corner of Fourteenth and Douglas streets in 1865 and was prominent among the earliest of the Omaha playhouses. "The Lady of the Lyons" was presented there on that opening night so long ago. The audience was seated on ordinary chairs set on an inclined platform of boards. The luxurious opera chair of today had not yet come to Omaha. Walter Bray was the leading man in the stock company which played at the Potter theater. He has long since disappeared and, like Manager Potter, there is no account of what became of him. At the Potter theater Omaha saw its very first strike.

"Pay in advance or no music" was the declaration of the leader of the orchestra to Manager Potter. The house was filled to the utmost of its tiny capacity of 500 and the time for the opening of the show was at hand. Potter wasn't going to be bluffed, or maybe he couldn't pay in advance, but, anyway, he shocked the waiting company behind the scenes by leaping in front of the footlights to declare:

"On account of the sudden illness of the leader of our orchestra there will be no music tonight. Fortunately the play to be presented does not require it."

There was a large argument between Potter and one angry Mr. Bray, who insisted that "Pocahontas" could not be produced without music, but it was, nevertheless.

The varying fortunes of the Potter theater saw it through several years of existence. At the Potter appeared many of the best actors of the day, who ventured into the rather doubtful western country. On this stage appeared C. N. Coudock and Mrs. Seiden Irwin, who was accompanied by Harry Rainforth as leading man.

A mighty boom for a high-class opera house was started in Omaha in 1878, but it subsided only to eventually bear fruit many years later. It was in the course of this general wave of enthusiasm that James E. Boyd offered to sell a lot at the northeast corner of Fifteenth and Farnam streets for the site of a theater for \$20,000, proposing to subscribe this amount in stock, providing that a house to cost not less than \$40,000 be erected. This proposition was followed by a number of others, which, when compared with the present day valuation of the same lots, show something of the growth of the city.

The scheme for a big opera house grew until a committee was appointed from the membership of the Board of Trade to select a site on which was to be erected a combined playhouse and a Chamber of Commerce. The committee failed to make the necessary negotiations and at last, after several months of "booming," the project fell through entirely. Three years later, October 24, 1881, the old Boyd theater, erected by James E. Boyd, was opened on this same spot. The Boyd theater stood there through several changes of management, until it burned on October 3, sixteen years ago.

The opening of the old Boyd theater brought John Templeton and his troupe again to Omaha. Twenty-five years before he had appeared in the leading role in "The Chamber of Death" in an improvised auditorium at the court house. He opened the Boyd, a \$80,000 structure of architecture quite imposing for that period, with "Mascotte." In the quarter of a century which saw this change in the theatrical life of Omaha had been kind to Templeton, too, and he was known as "Lucky John." Miss Fay Templeton appeared in the roles of Bettina, countess of Panada and a soldier in Prince Frederick's army.

The occasion of the opening of the Boyd was an important affair of the day and accounts to the generous length of three and four columns appeared in the daily papers. Incidentally the critics were

very kind, or maybe only very appreciative, of Miss Fay Templeton. General Charles Manderson and Ezra Millard spoke in commendation of the theater project and, following the performance, there was a dinner at the Withnell house in honor of James E. Boyd, when he was presented with a silver service, the gift of a number of business men. A ticket speculator got in on the big opening night and made a handsome deal in reserved seats.

Soon after the opening the Boyd was taken over to the management of Thomas Boyd, who conducted the business until the close of the season of 1891. The house had been sold in 1889 to a syndicate headed by O. M. Carter, by whom it was leased to Thomas Boyd and D. W. Haynes for two years. In 1891 the house was leased to L. M. Crawford of Topeka, Kan., who opened it as a popular-priced house. A controversy arose between Mr. Crawford and Governor Boyd in regard to the use of the name "Boyd Opera House," and after losing the injunction suit in the courts Mr. Crawford named his house the "Farnam Street Theater." W. J. Burgess, now a member of Woodard & Burgess, became manager for Mr. Crawford.

Many famous stage folk appeared at the old Boyd theater. One notable event was the concert by Clara Louisa Kellogg, who came to

the Boyd shortly after the opening in the fall of 1881. The following year there appeared at the Boyd Mme. Nilson, Emma Abbott, Lawrence Barrett and Haverly's Mastadons.

The Exposition building, which is well remembered by many Omaha people now, was erected in 1885 between Fourteenth and Fifteenth streets, on Capitol avenue, at a cost of \$50,000. At the formal opening in 1886 A. J. Poppleton in his address referred to the time twenty-five years before when he had built his home on the same ground to be far away from the hum of the business district. During the time that the building was held by the Exposition company Patti sang there to an \$11,000 audience. The Exposition building was the scene of numerous charity balls. Sam Jones held meetings there and John L. Sullivan there displayed his brawn and skill. The west half of the Exposition building was later converted into what was known as the Grand theater, while the east end was continued as a convention hall.

Famous among the old amusement houses was the Eden Musee, established by William Lawler and J. E. Sackett, at the northwest corner of Eleventh and Farnam streets, in a building that had

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