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Opera Houses of the Palouse

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PUBLICATION COMMITTEE:

Editor: Ed Garretson
Editorial Consultants:
Lawrence Stark
Suzanne Myklebust
Editorial Ass't: Bob Luedeking
Gordon Bryan
Wendy Blake
Layout: Steven Watson
Subscriptions/Circulation:
Margo Balzarini

SOCIETY ADDRESSES

*Society Business - Articles for
Publication - Current and Back
Issues (\$2.50 per Issue):*
Whitman County Historical Society
P.O. Box 67
Colfax, WA 99111
e-mail: epgjr@wsu.edu
Web Address:
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COVER PHOTO

Oakesdale Opera House
from Alpha Study Club, Oakesdale Memories,
1976, page 126.



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From The Editor

With this issue the *Bunchgrass Historian* is up to date. As our readers may have noticed we recently filled a gap in volume 25 and now publish the third issue of volume 26. At the request of the WCHS Board of Directors, the publication of the Bunchgrass has become the function of a Publication Committee. Our ability to catch up is the result of the efforts of all those volunteers listed on this committee.

We are pleased to welcome as *Bunchgrass Historian* Editor, Suzanne Myklebust, who has agreed to head the Publication Committee in producing three issues of volume 27 in year 2001. We plan to hold to a schedule of three issues per year.

The Whitman County Historical Society and the Bunchgrass staff take this opportunity to thank Larry Stark for his tenure as Editor of our publication. His dedication and commitment of time over the years are greatly appreciated by all of us. Larry will continue to serve as editorial consultant. Thank you, Larry, for your continuing contributions to the *Bunchgrass Historian*.



OPERA HOUSES IN WHITMAN COUNTY

By Robert Luedeking

This issue of the *Bunchgrass Historian* is devoted to opera houses in Whitman County. From the 1880's until the first World War the opera house was a feature of many a town in this area. The opera houses in Colfax, Palouse, and Pullman are described in the pages that follow, but other towns also had buildings which they called "opera houses." These included Colton, Farmington, Oakesdale, Tekoa, Uniontown, and perhaps others.

The craze for opera houses that swept America after the Civil War lasted about fifty years. The town fathers of communities large and small often felt that their town **MUST** have an opera house. Whitman County was not immune from this trend. Why an opera house? First, every town needed a meeting hall and theater. Like good schools and an adequate water supply, the "hall" was something a community needed to attract families and businesses to move to it. But why call it an "opera house"? Probably because the term denoted class and elegance. As historians Naylor and Dillon observed, "these theaters were seen by their builders and their patrons as markers of cultural pride."¹ In the last half of the 19th century opera became more accessible to the masses. Light opera or operettas such as those by Gilbert & Sullivan in England, Offenbach in Paris, and Strauss and Von Suppe in Vienna had become immensely popular, both in Europe and the U.S.A. These were soon followed by the works of Sousa, Victor Herbert, and others in this country.

What is an opera house? One dictionary² gives two definitions. The first is "A theater specially adapted for the performance of operas." The second is "loosely, any theatre." Most, if not all, of the opera houses in Whitman County were in the second category. While some were fairly elaborate and well-appointed, others were simply large shed-like buildings with chairs or benches and a raised platform. Alternatively, they might be the second story of a building where the first floor was devoted to some other purpose. One example of this was in Uniontown where the brewery occupied the ground floor. When Albert Reaney built a large wooden two-story building in Pullman in 1888 with the first floor for the sale of agricultural implements, he named the second story "Reaney's Opera House." The newspaper and townspeople, however, simply called it "Reaney's Hall."³

What kind of events were held in these opera houses? All kinds! In the early days they were mainly plays, concerts, and minstrel and other variety shows. Dances and fancy balls were held in the ones with movable chairs. And, oh yes, a few operas did come to the towns. There were also lectures and medicine shows and much more. The plays were presented by both touring companies and local

dramatic groups. The concerts featured both local bands and musicians as well as touring ones. Community celebrations, graduation exercises, and funerals were also held in the opera houses. For example, the Pullman Opera House was filled to overflowing for the funeral in 1894 of its pioneer doctor, H. J. Webb.

By 1910 opera houses in smaller communities were on their way out. Admission to a movie was 10 cents while the cheapest seat for a play was 50 cents. At many opera houses the usual fare had become Vaudeville acts interspersed with movies. As attendance dwindled, some were converted to motion picture theaters. Others simply ceased to exist. The era of the small town opera house had ended by the time of the first World War.

¹ Naylor, David and Joan Dillon. *American Theaters, Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Preservation Press, 1997.

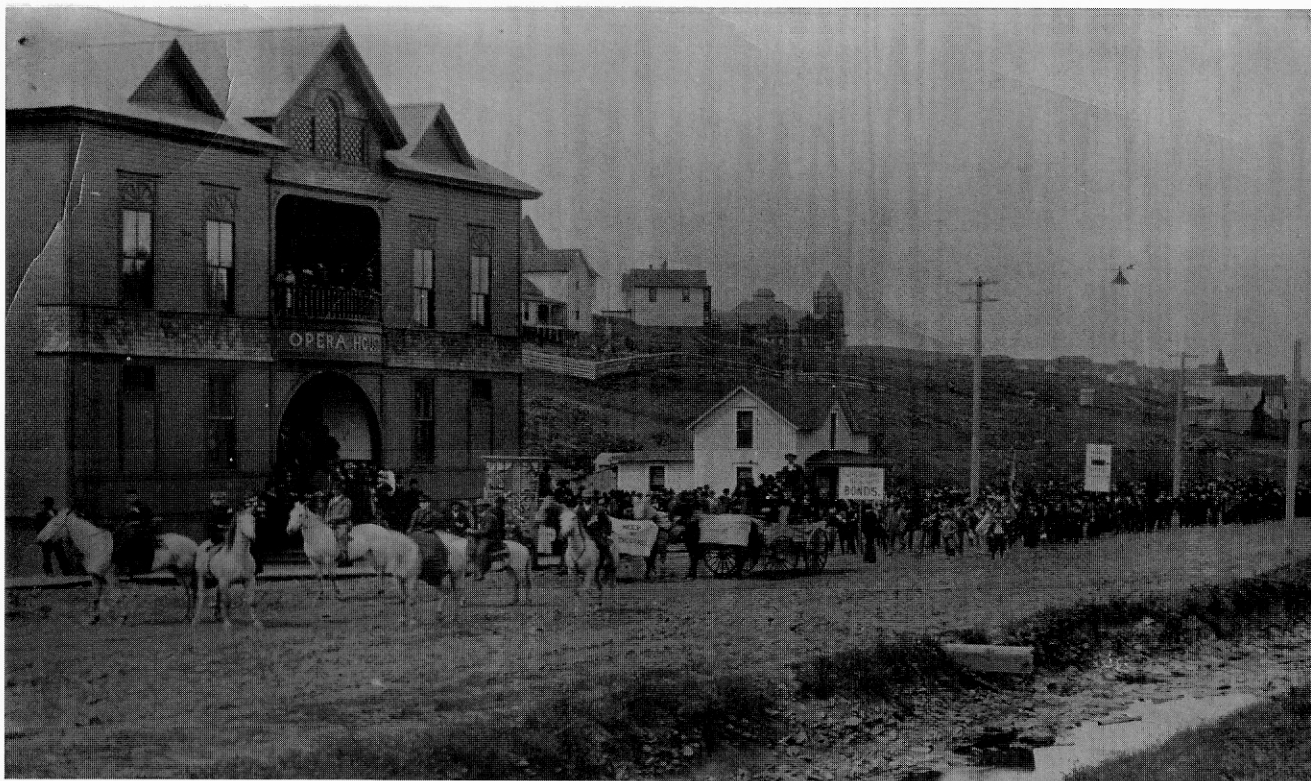
² *Britannica World Language Dictionary*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1955.

³ *Bunchgrass Historian*, Vol. 25, Nos. 2/3, 1999/2000.



Uniontown Opera House was on the second floor of Peter Jacobs' 1893 brick Uniontown Brewery. The Opera House had a stage, commodious seating capacity and a maple dance floor.

WCHS Archive Photo



WCHS Archive, Norm Hatley Collection

The Pullman Opera House, located at 405 South Grand Avenue. The parade in this picture, taken May 25, 1898, shows the Whitman County Veterans Association joined by college cadets and Pullman citizens, who all were about to enter the Auditorium to hear Prof. Barry's lecture on Cuba; the Spanish American War had commenced a month earlier.

THE PULLMAN AUDITORIUM

More Than a Place of Amusement

Written by Miriam Stratton with Dorothy Sevier Matson,
Researcher

In 1890, a newspaper columnist warned the Pullman citizens that they could soon be without a public hall.¹ The next year Staver and Walker took over Reaney Hall, established in 1887-1888 by Albert Reaney, and housed a number of business enterprises. Although entertainments continued to come to Pullman, a group of businessmen wanted a more established opera house.

January 1893 saw the Pullman Auditorium Company formed with H.J. Webb, President; Thomas Neill, Vice President; D.B. Morton, Secretary and H.G. DePledge, Treasurer. The company's Minute Book records that of two location offerings by M.C. True, the officers chose a site on Grand and Blaine Streets "described as lot 1 & 2 in block 44 for \$1,000 payable and \$500 paid by the stock of said Auditorium Company." The officers retained Mr. Herman Preusse as architect.²

That April, the Company awarded a contract to Henderson Brothers, of Moscow, for an 800-seat Pullman Auditorium. The \$6,649 bid (chosen out of nine) did not include the stage settings and other furnishings. The contractors anticipated completion in July. Pullman Electric Light & Power Company (PELP) furnished "an expert to superintend wiring without profit," payment to be made on acceptance of the wiring. PELP provided all other labor "to be paid at the rate of \$3.50 per day and all materials furnished by said Light Co. to be paid within 60 days and furnished at fair prices."³ That summer the organizers offered stocks in the amount of \$9000.

Work proceeded apace both inside and out. In July, the Company instructed the architect to change the floor to an inclined stepped opera floor. In August, the secretary insured the building for \$2,000. F.D. Richardson was authorized to have a sidewalk built in front of the building. Flues were placed to heat the building.

The corporation appointed Larry Lund as manager. Mr. Lund proceeded to engage a number of acts including the Boston Spectator Folly Co., Calhoun Opera Co., the World's Fair Minstrels and others as well as Madeline Marli, proclaimed "one of the grandest successes of the Pacific Coast circuit."⁴ Anticipating a venue for local talent, the Auditorium Dramatic Company formed and an auditorium band organized. The Auditorium Dramatic Company was composed of F.D. Richardson, President; Mrs. Minnie Sargent, Vice President; M. Townsend, Secretary; W.V. Windus, Treasurer and Larry Lund, Manager. Others included Mesdames Henry, Chambers, Rice, Newlin, Wilford Allen, I. V. Irwin, W.H. Pittwood, Misses Elva Lanning, Lulu Neighbor, Nellie Muncie, Hazel Sargent, Messrs Thomas Neill, L.C.

Richardson, Gilbert Robby, W.S. Reiders, S.A. Madge, D.K. Proud, Leon Jones, Joe Wilkinson, H.C. DePledge, Rue Newlin, Harry Chevalier, L. Armstrong, Claude Eastman, Dr. Stearns, W.H. Pittwood, Stewart Small and Jas. Kitchen under the direction of Larry Lund, an actor and stage manager who came to Pullman from Portland. As its first play, the Pullman Auditorium Company offered “Melissa or Waif of the Sierra Nevadas.”⁵

The *Pullman Herald*, 6 October 1893, announced the coming of opera seats and the material for scenery ready for the artist to “commence work.” Mr. Charles Miller, of the Auditorium of Chicago came to Pullman to paint the scenery. The seats actually arrived a month later along with the carpet. The newspaper promised that all would be installed and ready for the scheduled entertainment. When the auditorium formally opened on November 14, its seating capacity had increased to 900.

Businessmen in Pullman requested electric light dynamos for the town to run the flour mill in the daytime and the light plant at night. About the same year, Baird and McKenzie built a separate light and power plant west of the mill, housing a large Corliss engine with a fly wheel. Cheatham Baker & Co. bought a half interest in 1893. They sold it to J.F. Baymiller. The flour mill burned shortly after. The power plant was left idle except when a show was put on at the big wooden opera house. Mr. Baird would start up the machinery in the evening to light the hall.⁶

The corporation advanced sums of money to J.D. Urick for work on the stage and preparations for the show, to F.D. Richardson for freight costs of the seats, to G.W. Ford for lights and to Thomas Neill for lamps.⁷

Otho West, a furniture store owner and Justice of the Peace, recalled the Auditorium “was quite an ornate affair. It had an orchestra pit, a ‘dress circle,’ a balcony with board seats at the rear known as ‘nigger heaven.’ It had everything but an asbestos drop curtain.”⁸

Loge boxes were built out from the walls above the audience. E.R.C. Howell sold tickets. Pharmacist Howell worked in Watt’s Pharmacy and later became a druggist for the hospital. The stage crew consisted of “Bottles” Claude Sevier, “Sheep” Eben Eurick and Frenchie Scheirmeir who moved the scenery by ropes and pulleys. Cleanup boys were Mac Roberts, Ernie Skinner and Art Henry.⁹

For the first performance in the new Auditorium, 14 November 1893, manager Lund had booked Madeline Marli, “a touted French actress” to perform in the play, “The Story of a Kiss.” The orchestra from Spokane added to the gala. A dance followed the play. Prices of admission: parquet, \$1.50; dress circle, \$1.25; balcony circle, 75¢ boxes, \$1 according to location.

Patrons of the sold-out house may have been disappointed in part of the evening. The *Pullman Herald* commented afterward that Marli “was positively awkward.” The paper concluded that the Marli Company went on the rocks.

A Christmas dance given by the Pullman Auditorium in the Odd Fellows Hall raised proceeds for music and new uniforms for members of the Auditorium orchestra.

Two versions exist of the events surrounding the December performance of the play, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The *Pullman Herald*, 8 December 1893, reported this dramatic incident. "This forenoon the three bloodhounds which are part of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' show were being paraded on the street being led by three Pullman youngsters to assure them a back seat for the show in the Auditorium. The mammoth canines saw J.D. Layman's little dog and all three made a rush at it. The boys who held hold of one end of the chains were powerless to stop the onslaught and for a few minutes the air was filled with flying mud and the howls of the dogs. Assistance was near at hand, however, and the unequal battle soon ended. After a few minutes, Mr. Layman's dog was dug out of the mud and placed on his pins again."

Otho West in 1965 related it this way: "The Uncle Tom's Cabin troupe had a special car switched off at the depot. On the appointed day, small boys assembled to offer services chaperoning four 'ferocious' bloodhounds in the parade down Main Street. Besides the hounds, there would be Uncle Tom's cabin on wheels, Little Eva and Eliza in a carriage behind the Palace Livery Stable's best. Then came Uncle Tom ahead of Simon Legree with a black snake whip. The bloodhounds had a sleepy look. The play usually drew a capacity house. The dramatic part of the play was 'Liza skipping across the broad Ohio on stage ice followed by the 'baying' hounds. The death of golden haired Little Eva was a real tearjerker."¹⁰

March 3, 1894, Dr. H.J. Webb died. Webb, a founding member and first President of the Pullman Auditorium Company, came to "Three Forks" in 1881. He spearheaded a movement to bring the Washington Agriculture College to Pullman. He campaigned to procure the services of the railroad, opened the first real drug-store with Dr. Thomas Kayler and in many other ways contributed to building up the town. To honor him, fifteen hundred friends and fellow citizens attended a memorial service held in the Pullman Auditorium.¹¹

The Auditorium Dramatic Club filled in between national troupes with a variety of plays. One such play, the "Arctic Sea," was the occasion of too much water. Rising river waters flooded the electric light plant. The dynamos had to be raised to keep them out of the water. This caused a postponement of the play.¹²

Otho West remembered a troupe, "the 'girlie' show of the day, playing 'The Alaskan,' of interest to adults only, [which] featured French can-can dancers, more French than Alaskan. . . [The show] upset the moral fibre of the town. The early morning conversation over the barbed wire fence the next day usually ended up with the old adage, 'The stage is the hot bed of sin and depravity.' All the gossipers had seen of the extravaganza were the billboard advertisements."



Pullman Auditorium Stage ready for an early day production

Photo Courtesy of Dorothy Matson

“‘The Millionaire Tramp’ always arrived annually just as school was dismissed. His ride down Main Street in a hack, throwing out pennies by the handful to screaming scrambling kids, was an event. Pennies weren’t considered much of a coin ‘back when’.”¹³

In October, 1894, The Auditorium Company accepted G.W. Ford’s proposal to lease the Opera House including all seats, scenery, curtains and other personal property belonging to that unit with 10% of the gross amount as the rent for a term of 12 months.¹⁴

“The Heroic Dutchman” drew a crowd in January, 1895. The cast included some gifted actors as the *Pullman Tribune* extolled various ones. The *Tribune* promoted another promising show—Dainty Katie Putnam in her latest success ‘Love Finds a Way’ with a clever comedian who sings parodies. “Buy reserved seats at Jackson Drug Store. Prices 25¢, 75¢ and \$1.” Miss Putnam apparently pleased her audience with her dancing, singing and banjo playing of such songs as “Her Golden Hair was Hanging Down Her Back” and “Little Black Coon.”¹⁵

In the spring of 1895 the Misses Tittell came to town. Anticipating a prolonged stay, they made their headquarters at the Hotel Pullman. They presented “Drifted Apart” and “Frou Frou” during a four night engagement at the Auditorium. In May, Mrs. M.E. Tittell and daughters, Minnie and Essie, rented the True residence on east Main Street. In June, Miss Essie Tittell played in “That Husband of Mine.” Romance bloomed on the Palouse when Clarence M. Brune of Moscow married Minnie Tittell and they settled in the groom’s hometown. The next month, Miss Essie Tittell performed in “Arabian Nights” and Mr. And Mrs. C.M. Brune (the former Minnie Tittell) presented “The Happy Pair.”¹⁶

Once again, financial problems overtook the entertainment enterprise in Pullman. “J.H.Vogt, representing C.F. Webber & Co., Prop., of the N.W. School Furniture Co., Portland Oregon, paid a visit to Pullman and removed from the auditorium all the opera chairs,” the Auditorium Company being unable to meet payments on them. Late in 1895, the Company unsuccessfully circulated a subscription paper to raise money for the chairs.

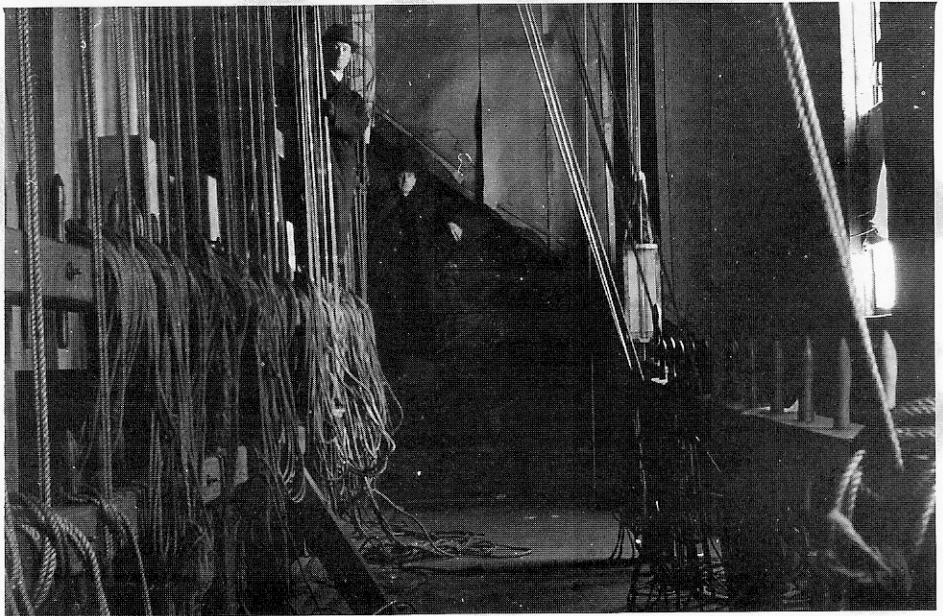
Concerned for their property, the Company hired the Buhmann brothers to move into the Auditorium to oversee and protect the premises, now in the hands of M.J. Chapman, who had paid off the bank claim.¹⁷ Dramas continued to be presented intermittently during 1896. The Georgia University Graduates appeared in February, a comedy troupe in March, “Bristol’s Horse Show” in August. Katie Putnam returned to an enthusiastic audience in “Old Lime Kiln” with the Georgia Minstrels in December. The Ford Stock Company did not favorably impress its audience. The *Pullman Herald*, 20 November 1897, reports in a chiding tone, “The curtain was rung down before the last act was completed. The disturbance raised by some of the spectators in the gallery was the cause of the unfinished show. Nothing was lost although that is not an excuse for the disturbance. If the show was

too rank to look at, these people should have left the house.”

The Columbia Opera Company appeared shortly before the Auditorium was sold at a sheriff’s sale. J.D. Urich bought it for \$333.35—the amount of the carpenter liens and costs amounting to \$5,416. The *Pullman Tribune* reassured, “Of course he will receive his money and relinquish the building.”¹⁸

In 1898, M.J. Chapman purchased the Urich claim of the Auditorium giving Chapman full management responsibilities.¹⁹ Chapman announced coming attractions for 1898 and 1899 to include Shakespearean productions, dramas, minstrel groups and other musical entertainment. A wide variety of offerings ranged from “Romeo and Juliet” and “A Merchant of Venice” to “A Romance of Coon Hollow,” “Ten Nights in A Bar Room” and “Remember the Maine.” Home talent continued to present productions such as “The Irish Duke” and “Queen Esther” to the appreciation of audiences.

Anxious to stay abreast of the times, Chapman engaged the Warograph. The *Pullman Herald*, 28 October 1899, announced “The Edison Warograph Co. under the management of Fleming Brothers will exhibit at the Auditorium. The most wonderful moving picture machine will show the most realistic prize fight between McCoy and Sharkey.” Those attending could also see a naval battle in Santiago Harbor as it destroyed the Spanish fleet and the Rough Riders as they landed in Cuba, plus “one hundred others of marvelous accuracy and beauty. The program



Backstage at the Pullman Opera House

will be assisted by the Edison Mechanical opera the renditions as loud as a brass band and the softness of the human voice.” Ticket prices were reasonable for such an extravaganza: children 25¢, adults 35¢ to 50¢.

In 1901, the Auditorium hosted a memorial service to “our martyred President William McKinley.” The Washington Agricultural College’s drama group presented Arthur Sullivan’s opera “Patience” in May. The next year the senior class presented “David Garrick.” The review commented “The scenery and fittings were replaced and the house was well lighted with electricity.”²⁰ The Auditorium provided a venue for community services on Memorial Day, 1905, plays by the Golden Rule Society of the Congregational Church, and public school productions.

One such, “The Pixie” featured principles Misses Elizabeth Jones, Bessie Darland, Ella Kennell, and Eugenia Staley, who sang solos and duets. “Forty boys in grotesque costumes...appeared as pixies, brownies, goblins, insects and monkeys. Nearly 100 girls appeared as fairies, butterflies, flower girls and pages. Naomi Clark, Pearl Cornelius, Grace Baker, Ruby Gentry, Hazel Reed, Myra Healy, Lula Egge, Effie Duncan, Gladys Waller, Florence Thayer and Irene Davis appeared in a ‘Japanese specialty in rich oriental costumes’.”²¹

In 1903 a new manager, Mr. George W. Ford purchased and installed comfortable folding chairs which had formerly been used in the school house. Mr. Ford asked the city for a reduction of the \$40 license per annum. Ford installed new and improved machinery to produce the latest electrical effects, colors and tints for use at the “Passion Play.” In November that same year, Manager George Ford awarded a contract for putting in a hot air heating plant, but within the following month, Ford closed his business, though retaining ownership of the Auditorium.²²

In 1905, a new manager, Col. Sapp took over, arranging some “excellent attractions for the season.” Madame Gadski came to the Auditorium in 1906. The *Pullman Herald* proclaimed “Special trains are running to accommodate the many neighborhood towns” including Colfax, Moscow, Lewiston and Spokane. Madame Gadski’s husband, a German Army officer, accompanied her. Madame Gadski said “I did not inherit my musical gift but when I was about seven years old, I was sent to a private school in Berlin where we lived for 12 years. I studied for 12 years and made my debut at the Berlin Opera House.” Shortly after Madame Gadski’s appearance, G.W. Ford sold the Pullman Auditorium to P.W. Kimball, who set about making needed repairs to the hall.²³

Famous personages continued to perform in Pullman. William Jennings Bryan, the great orator and debater, and Madame Schumann-Heink, world-famous opera singer, appeared in Pullman at the Armory Building. A Garfield newspaper editor described Madame Schumann Heink as having a “motherly appearance” and being a “prominent person of the world.”²⁴

Fritz Kreisler, violinist, performed in the Washington Agriculture College auditorium and brought out a large audience. Herbert Kimbrough sold tickets at \$1

each, which the newspaper announced to be “less than one-half the price charged in the large cities.” Fritz Kreisler was said to own the second oldest violin in the world. Zeke Killham remembered other famous performers as well: John Philip Sousa and his band and Houdini the Magician.²⁵ However, the end of an era loomed.

The June 17, 1910 issue of the *Pullman Herald* reported the complete destruction by fire of the Pullman Auditorium a week earlier, “one of the best equipped playhouses in the Inland Empire.” As of that issue, the newspaper termed the cause of the tragedy “a mystery.” The fire was not discovered until the interior of the house was so filled with flames that firemen had to concentrate on saving nearby buildings. The fire did destroy the nearby Thompson residence. The newspaper described the scene as “the sky made lurid and the entire city lighted up by the conflagration fed by the immense wooden structure, the sixty-foot loft forming a chimney and creating a draft that made near approach to the building impossible, and within an hour only smouldering embers and the towering furnace stack were left to mark the location of what had been a monument to the energy and public spirit of Pullman’s pioneer citizens.”

The fire started in the basement. Experts could only surmise that it occurred by spontaneous combustion or incendiary origin. “It is known that the theatre has been a rendezvous for a certain class of youngsters for a long time past and it is more than possible that a dropped match or cigar stub was the cause of the fire. It is reported that two men were seen in the building within an hour of the discovery of the fire. The house had been ‘dark’ since June 2nd.”

In recounting the history of the Auditorium, the *Pullman Herald* remarked that “The place of amusement failed to pay from the first and the hard times following found the subscribers to the project unable to make good their subscriptions. The directors were forced to endorse the payment of the notes, but times continued hard and taxes and interest accumulated until suits were commenced on mechanic liens. Soon afterward foreclosure proceedings were instituted and the opera house was sold for taxes.”

Even before the fire, “for lack of patronage, the cost of upkeep of the building and the advent of the 10¢ silent movies sounded the death knell of an historic landmark.”²⁶ Fascinated by moving pictures, audiences couldn’t be solely satisfied with vaudevillian types of entertainment.

Pullman lost a great deal with the fire of 1910 because the Pullman Auditorium was more than just a “place of amusement.” It provided a location for the community to gather together to commemorate great happenings as well as to be entertained by world-class performers. It opened up minds and brought to Pullman citizens a world consciousness through cultural events. The loss of the Auditorium left a gap in the town’s striving to build an image of itself as a refined and sophisticated center in the rolling hills of the Palouse.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Pullman Herald*, 29 Nov 1890.
- ² Minute Book of the Pullman Auditorium Company, 23 and 24 Jan 1893, WSU Archives.
- ³ Minute Book of the Pullman Auditorium Company, WSU Archives
- ⁴ *Pullman Herald*, 6 Oct 1893.
- ⁵ *Pullman Herald*, 18 and 25 Aug 1893; and Minute Book of the Pullman Auditorium District, WSU Archives.
- ⁶ Interview of Joseph C. Baird by James E. Lindsey for 1936 KWSC broadcast, WSU Archives
- ⁷ Minute Book of the Pullman Auditorium Company, 28 Nov 1893, WSU Archives.
- ⁸ *Pullman Herald*, 12 Aug 1965, I Remember by Otho West.
- ⁹ Interview of Leonard “Zeke” Killham by Dorothy Matson, 1964.
- ¹⁰ *Pullman Herald*, 12 Aug 1965, I Remember by Otho West.
- ¹¹ Adair, Richard, “Farr Cemetery ...Pullman’s History”. Paper presented for Anthropology 436, Pullman, Washington, 1983, p. 26.
- ¹² *Pullman Herald*, 19 Dec 1894.
- ¹³ *Pullman Herald*, 12 Aug 1965, I Remember by Otho West.
- ¹⁴ Minute Book of the Pullman Auditorium, 15 Oct 1894, WSU Archives.
- ¹⁵ *Pullman Tribune*, 19 and 23 Jan 1895.
- ¹⁶ *Pullman Herald*, 9 Mar, 18 Apr; 1 June; 6 July; 31 Aug 1895.
- ¹⁷ *Pullman Herald*, 21 Mar 1896.
- ¹⁸ *Pullman Tribune*, 17 April 1897.
- ¹⁹ *Pullman Herald*, 9 April 1898.
- ²⁰ *Pullman Herald*, 14 June 1902.
- ²¹ *Pullman Tribune*, 12 Dec 1907.
- ²² *Pullman Herald*, 21 Nov 1903 – 24 Dec 1904.
- ²³ *Pullman Herald*, 23 Sep 1905; 10 Mar 1906; 24 Mar 1906; 28 Apr 1906.
- ²⁴ *Pullman Herald*, 15 Jan 1907.
- ²⁵ *Pullman Herald*, 19 Nov 1909; 9 Dec 1909; and Interview of Leonard “Zeke” Killham by Dorothy Matson, 1964.
- ²⁶ *Pullman Herald*, 12 Aug 1965, I Remember by Otho West.



THE POWERS BLOCK

By Bob West

In 1893 W. L. Powers built a large two-story brick building in a block that was to be the busiest one in town. Although he owned only the one large building, it became known as "The Powers Block." W.L. and his brother owned the first mercantile store in Palouse City, located at the old site of the city, on the steep hill south of the river. Presently the only occupant of the Powers Building is the Palouse Community Center.

On the ground floor of his building, W.L. Powers built the Palouse Opera House, described in an 1893 article as the finest Opera House in the area. It stated that the stage was 22 feet long, 14 feet high, with several background drop curtains, each showing a different setting. E.H. Orcutt, one time Palouse teacher and first publisher of *The Boomerang*, did the paintings on these backdrops.

There were enough chairs and benches to seat 200 people. It was claimed there was enough space for 500 seats. It was lighted with electricity, well heated, and for safety's sake, there was both a front and rear door.

For many years the opera house was the only building in town large enough to have big meetings. Dances, school plays and commencement exercises were held there. A great many road shows were booked and usually played to a full house.

Victor McLaughlin, who became a well-known movie actor [Academy Award for Best Actor, 1935, "The Informer"], arrived in town with a carnival. He was a boxer and one could see bruises and cuts he received from Jack Johnson, the world heavyweight boxing champion at the time. When the carnival left town, McLaughlin stayed and gave boxing lessons to the locals and promoted boxing matches for a time.

Dad told me many times about the medicine show that he attended while he was of high school age. It was in town almost two weeks playing to a near capacity crowd every night. Not only was the entertainment enjoyable, but people had an opportunity to buy tonics, ointments and medicines, which claimed to cure almost any ailment known to man or animal. They had cure-alls for horses, cows, sheep, goats, all domestic pets and any fowl in existence.

Another well-known personality to visit the Opera House was Carrie Nation. Carrie had been married to an alcoholic husband and she believed that God had directed her to see that all saloons and taverns were destroyed. She traveled around all over the U.S. and Europe giving lectures against the evils of drinking. At first she broke bottles and beer kegs, but later she took a hatchet and chopped up furniture and broke windows. She was arrested many times because of these activities. How-

ever she didn't have her hatchet with her when she visited Palouse. Coincidentally (?) the following year Palouse voted itself a "dry" community.

Before the turn of the century, the Opera House was moved to the old second floor of the building and the first floor was made into three rooms. The two rooms on the east side were occupied by David, Dudley and Ely, a department store. The third room was the home of Mecklem's "We Never Sleep" Pharmacy. The word "DRUGS" is still embedded in the sidewalk in front of the building. J.B. Dudley was the manager of the department store and was the only owner living in the city. "David" was the same David that owned "David's" – a popular department store in Moscow for many years. The name Ely was dropped, and later the store consolidated to the east room and the name changed to "Dudley's."

In 1914 Fred and Alma Anderson purchased the building. The Opera House was cut in size and the remainder of the upstairs was made into a hotel. Plumbing, hot and cold running water, was installed in every room. Dad lived in the hotel while he was working in the Security National Bank and said the smaller Opera House Hall was still large enough to have dances and large meetings, but it was also eventually made into smaller rooms for the hotel.

The first movie house in Palouse was located in one of the buildings east of the Powers Block. The Anderson's purchased it and moved the theater into the building Dudley's had vacated and named it the Bell Theater. I have some advertisements taken from a 1921 Palouse Republic newspaper showing coming attractions. I didn't recognize any movies but the names I had heard of were western stars Tom Mix and Buck Jones. I don't recall if I saw either of these actors in movies. My favorites were George O'Brian, Hoot Gibson and Hop Along Cassidy. The price of admission to the Bell Theater was 10 and 20 cents.

When I arrived in town in 1930, the Dudley Store was gone, replaced by a J.C. Penney store. The theater was renamed the Congress Theater and the

PALOUSE OPERA HOUSE

ONE NIGHT ONLY

WEDNESDAY, JULY 31



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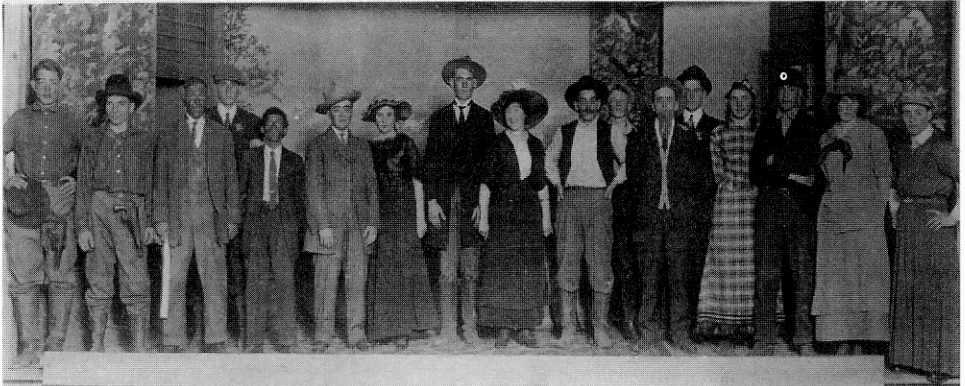
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hotel became the Congress Hotel, both owned by a family named McMillon. Paul Beyer said he had just recently learned that McMillon had showed the first talking movie in Whitman County in 1929. Sometime in the mid 30s I saw my first Technicolor movie, "Trail of the Lonesome Pine."

Charles Blaxall was the owner of these two businesses for a number of years. He had unique ways of attracting patrons to his theater: "bank night" – giving cash to a lucky ticket holder; "amateur night" – with local talent performing before the show; and "dish night" when on certain nights he would give away a dish to help complete a set. He loved to fish and admission for kids on some Saturday matinees was 50 angleworms. A large wooden barrel was filled with dirt and placed in front of the theater door, into which we would drop our worms. My wife told me she would carefully count and recount the worms several times to be sure it was the exact amount. On the other hand, a friend of mine told me that he got away with a half a dozen or so placed on top of the container of dirt.

The J.C. Penney store left town. Tom Henderson and his wife operated a hardware store in this location for a few years. When they closed, Kenneth Johnson bought the building and moved his pharmacy business to this location. Upon his retirement the building was bought by local citizens and made into a Community Center. The theater and hotel must have had a dozen or more owners before they were closed for good.

The hotel and theater were both a credit to the town and were highly successful for a long period of history of our town. But their success was doomed by better roads, better cars and the advent of motels and television.



Powers Opera House - 1911 or 1912

Photo Courtesy of Bob West

This article is an excerpt from the book The Hills of Home, published by Bob West, Copyright 2000.



THE OPERA HOUSES OF COLFAX

By Robert Luedeking

As Whitman County's largest town and county seat, Colfax very early became the cultural center of the area. Many theatrical troupes began including Colfax in their tours, and by 1879 a local group, the Colfax Dramatic Society, was giving presentations in the "Colfax Hall." Dramatic presentations were frequent events in the town during the next three decades.

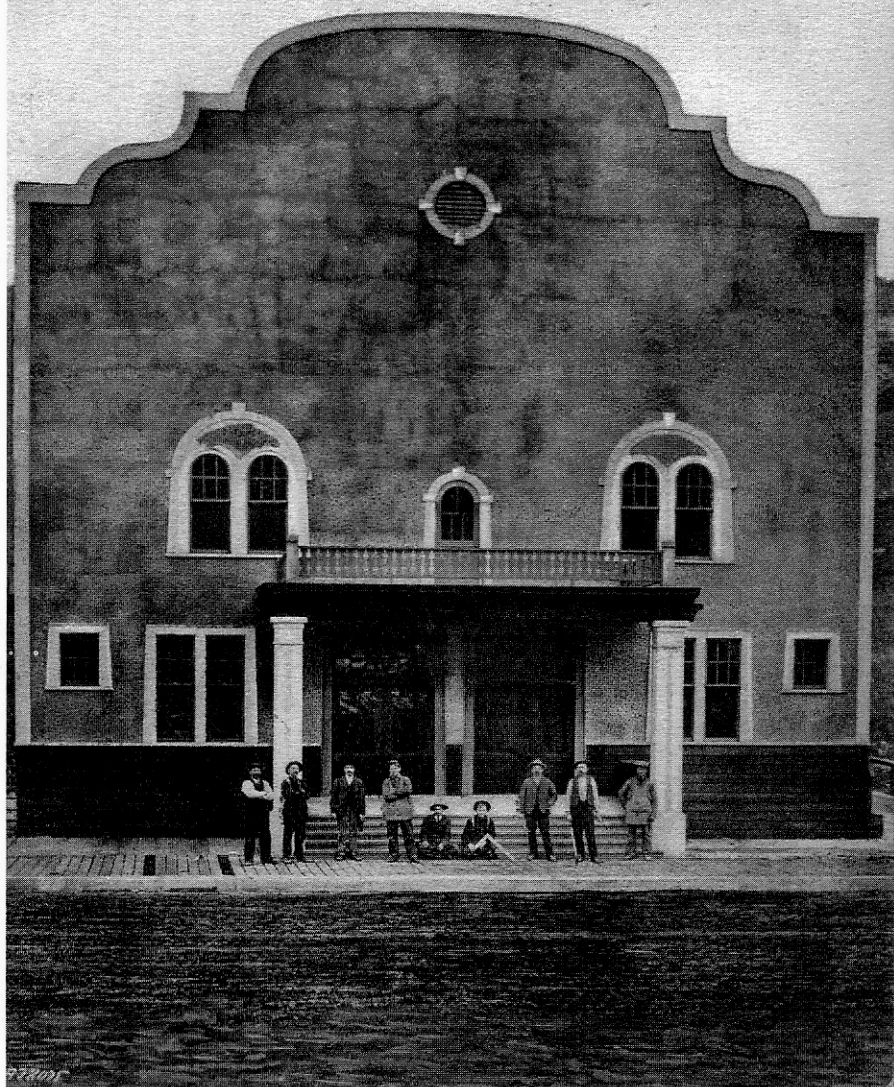
One notable theatrical event occurred in February 1887 when one of the traveling troupes, the Stutz Dramatic Company of New York, was billed for two performances in "City Hall." Business was so good that they stayed for a third evening, but, unfortunately, that caused them to become snowbound when the railroad line to Farmington was blocked. While forced to stay in Colfax for the next



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Ridgeway Opera House - Colfax Auditorium Company, 1902 to 1908

New Ridgeway Theatre, Colfax, Wash.



The new Ridgeway Theater - December 1908

WCHS Archive Photo

week, they presented a different play each night and “played to good houses throughout.”¹ Among the plays they performed were “Rip Van Winkle,” “East Lynne,” “Ten Nights in a Bar Room,” and “Lady Audley’s Secret.” Two of the presentations were given as “benefits” with the fire department and the Colfax Brass Band each being enriched about \$40.²

Demand for an “opera house” was growing. One attempt in 1885 to build an opera house by subscription failed, but apparently a hall was built in 1887 that was called the “opera house.” In May 1888 it was reported that the “manager of the Colfax Opera House has a telegram . . . stating that the Juvenile Opera Company will play here two nights next week.”³

By 1890 there were new demands for an opera house with one editorial stating “Colfax does need an opera house and needs it bad, too!”⁴ The call was soon heeded, and in 1891 the Gazette reported “Oliver Hall and Ben Burgunder have purchased the Bleeker Block up on Mill Street and have commenced improving it with a view of converting the second story into a first class opera house.”⁵ The hall, 40x88 feet, was equipped with 252 “opera chairs” in the main section and a gallery with 100 more seats. The curtains, scenery, and decorations were all ordered from Chicago. It was entirely lit by electricity.⁶ It was opened Nov 17th and 18th by a touring drama company with the plays “The Burglar” and “Beacon Light.”⁷

This new opera house lasted less than two years. After it burned on April 22, 1893, the newspaper mourned “Of the elegant Colfax opera house, one of the prettiest in the northwest, only the broken side-walls remain.”⁸

According to Edith Erickson in her history of Colfax, “The town could not be beat. In 1894 local talent was appearing in the Pioneer Hall. In 1895 the Pioneer Hall was remodeled into a better opera house. It seated two hundred fifty on the main floor and one hundred fifty on the balcony. It was done by subscription. It was all right but not what the town wanted. Nevertheless, that old hall was kept busy. Many different types of entertainment appeared on the stage. They ran from a children’s presentation of “Cinderella” to trained horses, the Metropolitan Opera Company, wrestling matches, and famous Arctic explorer, Lt. Robert E. Perry. The list could go on and on.”⁹

In 1896 the newspaper reported “Kate Hogan To Appear at Colfax Opera House on October 16. Miss Katherine Hogan, more familiarly known as “Kate,” will give one recital at the Colfax opera house on Friday, October 16, assisted by the Colfax Military Band, who will render several choice selections. Miss Hogan, whose professional name is Ridgeway, comes home with the endorsement of the leading papers of the country, as an elocutionist, having traveled all last season with the Temple Quartette of Boston.”¹⁰ Kate Ridgeway, who grew up between Palouse and Colfax, was to make several appearances in the next opera house to be built in Colfax, one that was to be named the Ridgeway to honor her.

That next opera house was six years in coming. In January 1902, the newspaper reported that “The much-talked opera house project is assuming definite shape...”. Five leading citizens of the town had organized the “Colfax Auditorium Company” which proceeded to purchase lots on the west side of Main Street between Rock and Stevens Streets. The cost of the building and lots was projected to be \$6,500, and the citizens of Colfax were required to subscribe \$1,500 of that amount.¹¹ The final cost exceeded \$9,000.

This new theater was elegant indeed. Its features included a stage 30 feet deep by 50 feet wide, seven dressing rooms, as well as a ladies cloak room and scenery and property rooms. The main floor was sloped from the foyer to the orchestra pit and was fitted with “large and comfortable opera chairs” plus carpeted aisles. The balcony was fitted with two loges on each side. Named the Ridgeway, it was dedicated August 28, 1902, with the “dedication address made by Judge S. J. Chadwick, and Miss Katherine Ridgeway Hogan, ‘our own Kate,’ rendering several of her choice readings and delineations, assisted by the best of local talent.”¹²

After this theatre burned June 20th, 1908, citizens soon formed a stock company to build a new theater “far better than the old one.” The plans called for “a stage 10 feet wider and 10 feet deeper than that of the former Ridgeway.” Although it was to have “about the same seating capacity as before, the arrangements and appointments would be far superior.” The building was to have a mission front and an oval roof.¹³

The new Ridgeway’s opening performance Dec. 16, 1908 was a resounding success. It featured the Victor Herbert operetta, “Babes in Toyland.” Total receipts were \$1245 of which \$600 were paid to the touring company.¹⁴

With the advent of motion pictures and attendance falling off, the new Ridgeway soon ran into financial difficulties. Even though it moved to vaudeville acts and part time movies on nights when no theatrical productions were being staged, by 1915 the debt totaled about \$7000. In August of that year the ground floor was turned into a garage with the show house and dance hall on the second. A new stage was erected in the west end and a maple floor was laid.¹⁵

By 1920 the building was regarded as a serious fire risk because the floors of the garage and shop “were saturated with gasoline and oils,”¹⁶ and the city council “condemned the hall for entertainments requiring chairs and seats.”¹⁷ The end for Whitman County’s last opera house came on April 30, 1921 when it was destroyed by a fierce fire.

¹ *Palouse Gazette*, Feb 25, 1887

² *Colfax Commoner*, Feb 25, 1887

³ *Palouse Gazette*, May 4, 1888

⁴ *Palouse Gazette*, May 16, 1890

⁵ *Palouse Gazette*, Aug 7, 1891

- ⁶ Palouse Gazette, Oct 9, 1891
- ⁷ Colfax Commoner, Nov 13 1891
- ⁸ Palouse Gazette, May 3, 1893
- ⁹ Erickson, Edith, *Colfax 100 Plus*, 1981
- ¹⁰ Palouse Gazette, Oct 9, 1896
- ¹¹ Colfax Gazette, Jan 24, 1902
- ¹² Colfax Gazette, Aug 15, 1902
- ¹³ Colfax Gazette, Aug 7, 1908
- ¹⁴ Colfax Gazette, Dec 18, 1908
- ¹⁵ Erickson, Edith, *Colfax 100 Plus*, 1981
- ¹⁶ Colfax Gazette, May 6, 1921
- ¹⁷ Colfax Commoner, May 6, 1921

For additional information on the Colfax theaters see: Edith E. Erickson. *Colfax 100 Plus*. 1981, pages 117-121.



Uniontown Opera House curtain.

WCBS Archive, Viola Weis Collection

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