

World-class talent graced GJ stage in 1892 opera house



Park Opera house circa 1928. Museum of Western Colorado collection

By Kathy Jordan

On Oct. 17, 1891, the Grand Junction News jubilantly reported that big-time theater was soon to be available to the town.

“ Our people have long felt the want for a first-class play house and every evidence now points to the early consummation of a project that will give Grand Junction theatrical advantages enjoyed only by the larger cities of the state,” a News reporter wrote.

The stage had been set when the Park Building Company purchased the Albert F. Paff livery stable in the middle of the block between Fourth and Fifth Streets on Ute Avenue across the street from Cottonwood Park (now Whitman Park). Within a short period of time all but \$1,500 in stock remained to be sold, and as soon as that occurred the contractors, Hunt, McDonald & Co., were scheduled to begin work.

Upon completion of the structure, The News claimed bragging rights for the community when it reported, “The Opera House is magnificent – a surprise, in beauty and arrangement, both to show people and to our own citizens. There is only one house on the Western Slope that has cost more money – the Wheeler Opera House in Aspen – and with all due respect to Aspen, it is far inferior to ours in beauty and the perfect thoroughness of equipment.”

The company had estimated that the transformation of the barn into “one of the convenient and palatial opera houses in Colorado” would be \$15,000. In the end the cost was \$25,000.

The Park Opera House opened on June 16, 1892 and was a source of great pride to the community.

The News described the former livery stable as being transformed into three-story “splendid brick structure 70 by 120 feet in dimensions with auditorium and gallery”. It was the tallest building in town at the time with a seating capacity of 750 people--500 in the auditorium and 250 in the gallery.

No doubt the more than 600 people who attended the opening night were impressed with the interior designed by architect J.J. Huddart.

Partygoers stepped into an attractively decorated foyer that opened to the two-level auditorium featuring the parquet and dress circle below with the balcony and gallery above. First-class opera chairs were in all sections except the gallery. Electric lighting completed the décor.

The stage was 36 by 70 feet, set behind an arch that was 30 feet wide and 20 feet high. The curtain, painted by Sosman and Landis of Chicago, featured “The Bay of Naples”.

Located on the main floor were six dressing rooms. A ladies’ room was located on one side of the main floor, with the gentlemen’s room on the other side.

The Harverly Minstrel Company kicked off the opening. The News reported that Mr. Kayne, the leader of the Haverly troop “expressed the great surprise and pleasure of his entire company at finding here so perfect a house when they alighted from the (train) cars.”

Since Grand Junction was halfway between Denver and Salt Lake City, Utah, it was perfect for touring companies and stars to book performances here rather than miss a night while en route from one city to the other. The logistics also made it easy for Edwin A. Haskell, the Opera House manager, to book these acts bargain prices. Attending a performance cost from 50 cents to \$1.00

Some of the performers were Robert Mantell and Helena Modjeska performing Shakespeare; Rose Doghlan, Frederick Warde, George M. Cohan in “Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway;” and the Barrymores--in short most of the great touring stars of that period.

When not booked with out-of-town performers Grand Junction were entertain by local talent such as:

The Park Opera House operated for nearly 20 years. It is possible that the closure occurred because the Park was not equipped to show motion pictures and touring theatrical troupes were disappearing. Around 1912 the building was condemned and closed, then sold to the school district. The opera house was torn down in 1934 and is now the parking lot for the Museum of Western Colorado.