

MEDINA'S HITCHING POST DAYS

May 19, 1954

The night of Oct. 7th, 1863 was one of those quiet evenings until about 10 o'clock when the fire bells rang out. There were two volunteer fire companies in the village at the time. One was the newly organized Albert Hose Company, which had been formed from the Cataract Hose Co. No. 3 and First Hose Co., had become known as Parks Hose Co. No. 1. There was competition between the two companies for speed and both companies turned out on "double quick" to find that the frame building at the corner of Shelby and West Center Street, in front of the Baptist parsonage, was burning.

The building was an eyesore for the townspeople and Myron Newell's comment, "They had no end of trouble getting into action" was quite significant, especially when the firemen admitted that it would be more important to save the parsonage than to waste effort and water on the frame structure.

Several references have been found to this structure indicating that it was a one floor or a floor and a half structure, faced east and was used as a store. One was in Mr. Newell's fire report which stated that Brooks succeeded in removing a portion of merchandise from the burning building. The records show that Don C. Bent acquired the corner on April 12, 1854 and following that date he had leased the property.

Opera House Planned

Mr. Bent, a farmer, was a man of varied interests. He had long appreciated the need of a suitable opera house that would accommodate shows of merit. The leading people of the village agreed with him and he immediately set about making plans for a building which could contain, in addition to stores and offices, an opera house with a capacity that would meet the needs of the village. For this purpose he secured the services and advice of Patrick O'Grady who accompanied him to the nearby cities to look over the opera houses and prepare some plans for Medina. The results of that trip are outlined in the Medina Tribune dated Feb. 9, 1865, one year and four months after the burning of the corner, which stated:

"It is with pleasure that we mention the approaching completion of Mr. Don C. Bent's new block in this village. It is rare that you see outside the limits of a city a building at once so elegant and capacious."

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By RUSSELL J. WALDO



BOLD PIRATES — These stage pirates date from about 1885 B.T. (Before Television) when Bent's Opera House was the center of weekly entertainment fare here. From the operetta, "Pirates of Penzance," these menacing characters are Charles N. Hood (left) and Walter Randolph, both Medina men, now deceased.

The same issue gave the following description of the opera house facilities. “Located on the northwest corner of Shelby and Center Streets, it is of 3 stories 90 by 66 feet 46 feet high. The first floor will be occupied by three stores, two will be 90 by 20 feet 12 feet high. One will be 50 by 20 and the same height. A stairway will be back of the corner store. Back of that will be a store 20 by 30.

“Under the corner store a room will be fitted as a saloon with stairway leading from the street. The second floor will have six rooms to be used for offices. An entrance stairway to the third floor will be located at the west end of the second floor. There will be two of these from one landing.

The Opera House Floor 🌹

“The third floor will be provided with all conveniences essential to a public hall, 2 anterooms and dressing room attached to stage 12 by 20 feet. A small balcony will be provided each side of the stage measuring 3 by 15 feet. The stage will be 35 feet high and 20 feet deep. The room will be ornamented by suitable mouldings and decorative lights with foot and side lights. The stage will be amply large enough to accommodate any concert troupe, theatrical company or any such exhibition that will visit this village.

“The room is calculated to accommodate 2,000 people. Raised seats will be installed in the rear of the main floor. Of most importance there are no obstructing pillars in the room. A balcony will provide added seating in the rear. The hall will be lighted by four large chandeliers. When completed it will be one of the largest halls in Western New York State. It will be larger than the Ringuberg Hall in Lockport, Boardwell's in Albion, and slightly larger than the Corinthian Hall in Rochester.

“There will be two balconies upon the front of the building and one over the stairway entrance on Center St. Plans now report that the hall will be opened on Feb. 25 and the stores on the street about April 1.”

Mr. O'Grady's estimate was very close and on Feb. 28, 1865, in the midst of the Civil War, the hall was opened to the public with a feature address delivered by Lt. H.E. Sickles, of the 17th Battery. Lt. Sickles took as his subject “Our National Duty and Destiny.” Miss Flora Davis sang “The Star Spangled Banner.” Following the program there was dancing and a supper served for the guests, which included the social set of the village.

A first show of the new hall, for revenue purposes, was scheduled for March 2, 1865, but due to the draft, which took place on that day, the crowd which witnessed a home talent play was very small. The entire proceeds of this event were turned over to the women who were knitting sox for the Medina boys.

P.T. Barnum Featured 🌹

The first event of importance, and which attracted a sizable audience, was held on March 21 the same year. P.T. Barnum of Barnum's Museum in New York City came to Medina and spoke on the “Art of Making Money”. This appearance was under the auspices of the Ladies Soldiers Aid Society.

Several festivals were held by the Ladies Soldiers Aid Society. Admission price was: card of admission \$2.00 and supper after the dancing 50 cents.

There is no record of a saloon being opened in the basement of the Bent's Block. However, as early as 1870 mention was frequently made in Tribune copies of Dick Hawker, who conducted a dining room in the basement. Dick was portly and bedecked in his fish and tails and with a large pan and stick he would climb

the stone steps to the sidewalk and sound the signal for the serving of dinner. Often he used a three or four line ad announcing to the public that dinners cost only 25 cents and all you could eat. A second dessert five cents extra.

Herbert Kilner often told of eating in this dining room, adding that it was one of the events in a boy's life which he never forgot. Hawker was fond of children and when they ate in his dining room he would make certain that they had a little extra treat such as cookies or cake.

Some Improvements Made

A paragraph in the Tribune during Nov. 1873 told of the opening of the season after extensive refinishing had been done during the summer months. Of course, summer did not mean the Opera House was closed. Election years found many election speeches made from the stage of this hall. Those rallies meant an hilarious time for those who attended which often included fights in the hall and everything that went with an early rally.

These rallies always meant extra work for the police magistrate John Graves the next day. At least one fight resulted in a rough customer being pushed down the stairway by those who disliked his part in disturbing the speaker. Jerry Borgan, who was listening to a political speaker, stopped smoking and dropped his cigar in his hat which was on the floor. The usual happened and flames not only made his topper useless but he left the hall less part of a trouser leg and a burned shin. For a considerable time after that no smoking was allowed in the hall. This is the first recorded instance where smoking was prohibited in a public place in Medina.

On election nights, as early as 1880 at least, stage shows were in order. Doors opened at 7:15 and admission to all parts of the hall was only 25 cents. The show held on election night in 1880 was Derwent Vaudeville Co. featuring Gotleib Miller and Al Meanwell. There were fifteen artists in the company, who participated in a four-hour long performance.

The show was interrupted often with election bulletins. The handbill read: "Honest News. A fake bulletin has never been read in this house." To make the event most complete Western Union wires were installed back of the stage and bulletins from all parts of the nation were read as fast as received until 7 in the morning.

Linus Beecher managed the Opera House in 1882. He was succeeded by F.H. Hurd and P.J. Wilson. It was 1885 that the first tar and gravel roof was put on in Medina. It was on Bent's Block. The year 1887 found Charles N. Hood and Stanley Brainard ushers for the shows. The same year an Uncle Tom's Cabin show came to Bent's. The show opened Monday night and Tuesday afternoon Little Eva came down with measles. She was staying at the Hart House. In rapid succession three others of the company were likewise affected, holding the show up until they could return to their parts.

Bent's Opera House was the scene of many a graduating class of Medina Academy students. One graduation, held on June 22, 1886, lists many a well known person of the period. Among the students and their oration were: Miss Nettie Hibbard. Her subject was "Self Culture." George Albone delivered an oration on privilege from Lord Mansfield. Hannah Tuohey took as her oration subject "Customs of the nations."

William F. Hill took as his subject "Indictment of the Traffic". This was a forceful denunciation of the liquor traffic. Miss Cecelia Cook gave a recitation "Through Death to Life". Fred O. Bates used as his subject "Irish Emancipation".

Miss Marian Brace read an essay "Life's Battle Fields." James Whitwell's declamation was entitled "Our Battle Flags." Miss May Carpenter took as her subject "Kalstrom's Wife". "Currency" was the subject selected by John L'Hommedieu. Miss Harriett Skinner took as her part Mrs. Browning's poem "Mother and Poet."

"The Criminality of Dueling" was selected by Louis Brace. Miss Grace Pitts recited Whittier's poem "The Wreck of Rivermoth." Neil Posson delivered a forceful declamation "A Plea for Birds." Georgia Nichol recited "The Last Redoubt." Miss Matie Pells essay was entitled "The Mystic Seven."

Harry Davis took as his subject "Education's Political Necessity." John M. Baker delivered an oration "The New Era." F. Corine Gaylord recited Mrs. Southey's poem "The Young Gray Head." John Ford took as his subject "The Tariff."

On the program also were Prof. C.E. Pease and Edmund L. Pitts. Bent's Opera House was packed to the doors that hot and sultry night in June and was made the more uncomfortable by the necessity of those present appearing in their very best, starched shirts and all. There were 21 graduates.



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