



# Winging It



**The National Society for the Preservation of Tent, Folk and Repertoire Theatre**

THE OLDEST MOVIE THEATRE  
BY DR. MICHAEL KRAMME



The Graham Opera House, now the State Theater, located in Washington, Iowa may be the longest continuous operating movie theater in the nation, perhaps the world. It showed its first motion picture in 1897 and is still in operation.\*

The Graham opened on November 27, 1893, built at a cost of \$ 35,000. The architects were Foster & Libbe of Des Moines. It was 110 feet long, with a frontage of 60 feet. The stage was 28 by 64 feet. It had six dressing rooms.

Seventy five electric lights were in the ceiling, the border lights were gas, footlights were both gas and electric. It had a ground floor seating, a balcony and gallery. In 1894, the first full year of operation it housed twenty-three professional theater productions. In addition, it housed home talent productions, lecturers, concerts, political rallies and the high school commencement.

The opening production was Sardou's *Odette*, starring Clara Morris. The newspapers reported that she was "half dead" with grippe, was in poor voice and attended by a doctor backstage. 1,000 tickets were sold at \$5.00. The chairs had not arrived so playgoers had to sit on folding chairs.

Clara Morris was a prominent actress of her day, probably the most famous to ever appear in Washington, but is almost completely forgotten today. She died in 1910, seventeen years after her performance at the Graham, blind and impoverished.

*The Washington Evening Journal* of May 7, 1897 reported the first showing of a movie in the theatre: "On Thursday eve. May 13 the patrons of the Graham will have the pleasure of seeing the famous Nineteenth Century

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## THE OLDEST MOVIE THEATRE CONTD.



marvel., the famous Edison Projecting machine, or kinetoscope. Showing all the latest films, including the surf scene, artillery drill cavalry charge, New York fast express (70 miles an hour), Niagara Falls, fire engine going to a fire, shooting the chutes, burning building, McKinley inauguration ceremonies and parade and fifty other famous scenes.”

A local man named W.F. (Frank) Brinton began showing his first films on January 15, 1898. This showing included the titles: The Battle of Manila, the Landing of the Troops Near Santiago, the Boys Marching to the Front and the Bombardment of Matanzas, The admission ranged from 10 cents to 20 cents. One-fourth of the receipts went to men in Washington who were in the army.

He continued showing films for the next several years. In 1899, *The Washington Press* reported “He has vastly improved his show, adding many new moving pictures, as the destruction of Cervera’s fleet, the dynamite cruiser “Vesuvius” in action, Spanish artillery ditto, rough riders swimming horses across the river, cavalry charging, street scene in Jerusalem with Arabs, beggars, peddlers passing; beheading of Mary Queen of Scots etc. The sounds of the motions will be given, which make them still more natural. Admission 10, 15 and 25c.”

By 1905 Brinton had given over fifty shows at the Graham. He served as manager of the theater from 1905 until shortly before his death in 1917.

Frank Brinton was also a pioneer aviator. Had it not been for the jealousy of a local hardware merchant, Brinton would have likely had a manned flight four years before the Wright Brothers. But that is another story.

Like in thousands of other towns and cities, Movies were the downfall of live professional theatrical companies at the Graham. As the films became more popular, the opera houses no longer booked live productions which cost much more than a film’s rental. It was all economics.

*Man at the Throttle* first shown on June 12, 1915, was an interesting film. A movie company filmed a party scene in several different towns using local people as actors, and then inserted the locally made scene into the film when it showed there.

The Graham was closed for a short time in the 1920s. In 1928, it reopened as a movie theater and opera house combination,



**Graham Theater.**  
Warren Moore, M'gr.

Thursday, May 13.  
The 19th Century Marvel.  
THE FAMOUS

**Edison Kinetoscope.**

3 NIGHTS 3  
ENTIRE CHANGE EACH EVENING.  
The greatest attraction ever in the  
Graham. Prices,

**10, 20, 30c.**

See this 19th century marvel. All the  
latest views, including McKinley's  
Inauguration.



The interior was remolded in 1931 and reopened as the State Theater, by then there were virtually no professional companies using the opera house. It did however, occasionally house local talent productions until a newer screen and sound system made the stage unusable.

In the 1970s the exterior was "improved" adding a new brick facade to the lower level, and a tin front to the upper levels. In the early part of this decade, the tin was removed.

\* A fire broke out in the projection room on November 17. The theater is currently closed but the management expects it to reopen after January 1.

## ELECTRONIC MUSINGS BY MARTHA HAYES

Just want to bring all of you up-to-date on various electronic topics dealing with the Theatre Museum and members of the National Society.

It has been fun seeing the reports we can receive about our website. Monthly we can find out how many "hits" there have been and where they came from. During the month between November 9, 2010 and December 8, 2010, people from thirteen different countries or territories visited the theatre's website; there were forty visits—over half of them were from the United States. Other areas coming by were Hong Kong, Russia, United Kingdom, Philippines, Serbia, Nepal, Portugal, France, and Puerto Rico.

Speaking of the website and the number of hits, Grace just discovered that we have printed the wrong web site information on our directories and stationery. The correct address is <http://thetheatremuseum.com>.

I have had my first experience with hackers. Supposedly Dave Wagaman sent a letter asking for a monetary contribution for an emergency trip to London. Just recently a second one showed up. I had not fallen for them either time and had blimped them out. David somehow realized what was developing and has gotten a new email address: [mississippiriver-david@hotmail.com](mailto:mississippiriver-david@hotmail.com). He also prefers that people call him on his cell phone: 319-209-0243. We have also printed Toby Dick Ellis's phone number wrong; it should be 217-223-2818.

Remember to encourage people to visit the website or to send us research questions.

## AD LIBS BY GRACE SWANK-DAVIS

Greetings from beautiful downtown Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

At our October monthly meeting it was decided to lower the fees of the museum's yearly seminar in April. The new fees are: members \$75.00, non-members \$90.00 and troupers \$25.00. In the past performers would have had to have trouped before 1960. That restriction has now been lifted. So, mark your calendar and join us in April!

It was also decided for the museum to join The League of American Historic Theatres – LAHT - in an effort to get our name out. The museum's name and website address will now be in their directory.

We received an e-mail from Chesapeake Bay Floating Theatre, Inc. They are an organization raising money to reconstruct the James Adams Floating Theatre. The showboat traveled the waters of the Chesapeake from Maryland to North Carolina from 1914 until 1941. Edna Ferber visited the James Adams in 1924 to do research for her book, *Showboat*. In addition to money, the organization is seeking artifacts, and oral histories for their interpretive exhibit. We have a DVD of a 20 minute silent film shot on the Hollywood Showboat in the late 1920s that they were happy to buy from us and I told them about Neil Schaffner's book, *The Fabulous Toby and Me*; there he describes his one season on a showboat. There is a very good book written in 1991 about this particular boat, titled (of all things) *The James Adams Floating Theatre* by Society member, C. Richard Gillespie. Mr. Gillespie did some of his research here at the museum. Check out the organization's website: [www.floatingtheatre.org](http://www.floatingtheatre.org).

The Theatre Historical Society of America (not LAHT) has a store on e-Bay. I think they sell mostly books. Check them out at: [www.historictheatres.org](http://www.historictheatres.org).

I had the great fun of going to Quincy, IL this summer to see David Ripper in a production of *Sherlock Holmes, the Last Adventure*, at the Quincy Community Theatre. David did quite well; he even had to keep up a German accent the whole show! Quincy has a long history of community theatre and their standards are quite high. They even rented the costumes from New York and it really showed. After the show David and his wife, Michele and their family took me out to a late lunch. It was a great way to spend an afternoon.

David Wagaman donated several comedy ties that his late brother, Dick Wagaman used on Tilton Comedians in 1958 & 1959. Dick was their Toby at that time. I don't think the museum has anything like them so they are a nice addition to the collection.

Everyone here at the museum would like to wish you all a very Happy Holiday and the best of everything in 2011!!! And don't forget you are always welcome on the lot

Grace



### CONTACT US!

**The Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana**

**405 E. Threshers Road**

**Mt. Pleasant, IA 52641**

**Museum's phone number: 319-385-9432**

**Museum's email address:**

[theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net](mailto:theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net)

**Our New Web-site: [www.thetheatremuseum.com](http://www.thetheatremuseum.com)**



## TOBY'S BACK IN TOWN BY MARK TUBBS

The tent is raised, the stage is set, the chairs are in place, the lights are positioned, the popcorn is popped...this could only mean one thing; Toby's back in town. The Rivertime Players once again entertained audiences with two performances of "How Now White Cow", written by Dr. Dawn Larsen, the third week of September in Parsons, TN.

The show was directed by Shane Bridges, who also played the role of Toby. The cast included Elicia Spain, Dottie Hill, David Taylor, Carol Shaw, Clayton Quinn, and Mark Tubbs. Musical accompaniment by Patricia Stanford on the piano and Jeff Stout joined the show as percussionist and sound effects. Saturday night Adam Stanford, a former cast mate visiting from college, performed a specialty song during the first act.

Saturday night's show was attended by special guests Cherita Beehn and her husband David, and Welby Choate and his wife Pat. Cherita and Welby are the children of Billy Choate who performed with and eventually owned Bisbee's Comedians. Bisbee's Comedians presented ten shows for 42 years and Parsons was the second stop on their route each year until 1965.

The cast proudly presented this year's shows under a brand new tent. Although, the smell of the new vinyl just didn't provide the same atmosphere as the old canvas. The new tent is much lighter and the sections fold smaller than the old canvas. The show played to a receptive house each night with beautiful stary skies overhead and a constant battle with fire ants under-foot.

Prior to intermission the candy pitch was made to entice the audience to buy a box of Toby's Tastee Treats. Of course, with the purchase of each box there was a chance of winning a prize, including a diamond ring. Toby advised the audience to get their magnifying glass out to see the diamond.



***Winging It* will now be available by e-mail. If you wish to receive your next copy via e-mail, please advise us at: [theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net](mailto:theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net)**



# Registration For Annual Theatre History Conference MUSEUM OF REPERTOIRE AMERICANA



Museum (319)385-9432 · Main Office (319)385-8937 ·  
405 East Threshers Road, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa 52641 ·  
[theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net](mailto:theatremuseum@iowatelecom.net)  
[www.thetheatremuseum.com](http://www.thetheatremuseum.com)  
Fax (319)385-0563

## April 15, 16, and 17, 2011

\_\_\_\_\_ I plan to attend the annual Theatre History Conference. Fee: Members, \$75.00  
Non-members, \$95.00. Troupers, \$25.00

\_\_\_\_\_ I/we will attend the casual dinner on Friday, April 15. (Circle I or We)

\_\_\_\_\_ I/we will attend evening banquet on Saturday, April 16. (Circle I or We)  
Price included in seminar.

**PRE-ACTIVITIES:** Theatre Museum Library / Friday, April 15, 12:30-4:00pm  
Social Hour / TBA (Hosted by Roberta Wilkes) 4:30  
Dinner / TBA 6:00pm - Dutch Treat  
After Dinner Social Hour / Theatre Museum (Hosted by Roberta Wilkes)

**CONFERENCE FEE INCLUDES:** Conference program, continental breakfast, Saturday lunch and dinner, and entertainment.  
Members, \$75.00 - Non-members, \$95.00. Troupers, \$25.00

**National Theatre Society dues:**

Student \$15	Individual \$20	Family \$30	Actor's Circle \$50	Business Supporter \$100	Director's Circle \$150
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***Reservations for Seminar/Dinners (April 15 and 16) are needed by Friday, April 1, 2011.***

**MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO: National Theatre Society**

Seminar \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
Dues \$ \_\_\_\_\_  
TOTAL \$ \_\_\_\_\_

**Mt. Pleasant Motels:**  
(Grand Avenue - Frontage Road)

Brazelton Hotel 319-385-0571 FAX 319-385-3464	Rodeway Inn 319-385-2004 FAX 319-385-8324
Mt. Pleasant Inn 319-385-2102 FAX 319-385-3223	Super 8 Motel 319-385-8888 FAX 319-385-8888

**OTHER INFORMATION DESIRED**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_