

VAUDEVILLE TO PAY HONORS TO KEITH

Founder's 30th Anniversary to
be Celebrated for a Week by
"Big Time" Theatres.

HIS FIRST SHOW IN STORE

Exhibited Baby Alice, "Child Wonder," on Dec. 1, 1883, and Now Owns Thirty Theatres.

Every "big time" vaudeville theatre in the United States will commence tomorrow a week's celebration of the founding of vaudeville by B. F. Keith thirty years ago, when he began his career as a showman in Boston with just one act, Baby Alice, a "child wonder."

That was on Dec. 1, 1883, and from that beginning the present modern idea of vaudeville has grown until Mr. Keith himself owns thirty theatres in the United States, and the United Booking Office, the clearing house for all "big time" vaudeville acts, supplies the attractions for many times that number of pieces of amusement. Mr. Keith is President of the United Booking Office.

Benjamin Franklin Keith was born at Hillsboro Bridge, N. H., being the youngest of a family of eight, whose father was of Scotch descent, while the mother's ancestors were of French extraction. It was at the early age of 7 that he left home, and soon after began his struggle with the world on a Western Massachusetts farm, where he remained until he was 18.

During this time he acquired his education in the district school and village academy. It was at this period that Mr. Keith saw his first show of any kind, when he was 17 years old, and coming to it, as he did, from the farm, it may well be imagined that he was greatly impressed. The show was a circus, given at an adjoining town to his country home, under the then famous Van Amburgh management.

A few years later he found employment with Bunnell's Museum in New York for two seasons, next with Barnum, and later with Doris and Forepaugh. During this time, in the winter season, Mr. Keith amused himself by taking small shows on the road, coming home "dead broke" on three consecutive occasions.

In the latter part of 1883 Mr. Keith went to Boston with no definite purpose, though with a general idea of continuing in some manner or other along the lines which he had recently followed. All through his life thus far he had held well aloof from dissipation in any of its forms, and without being grasping or penurious had practiced economy.

While walking along Washington Street one day, not long after his arrival, his eye fell upon a vacant store, which has since been removed to make room for a portion of the present Adams House. At that time one-half of the lower part of the building was occupied as a confectionery store, and it was the southerly half which was open for rental.

Begins Career as Showman.

It was in this contracted spot that Mr. Keith's career as a showman began, in company with Col. William Austin, formerly of Austin & Stone. The first attraction was a little child, called Baby Alice, whose principal claim to distinction lay in the fact that at the age of 3 months she weighed only one and one-half pounds. The admission fee to gaze upon this tiny morsel of humanity was 10 cents, and for two weeks the little one held the boards alone. The partnership with Col. Austin lasted only two weeks.

A few weeks later Mr. Keith obtained a lease of the entire property except the candy store, which, however, occupied one-half of the front and all of the rear floor, so that all the room available for show purposes for some time was comprised in the original store. His partner in this second venture was one Gardner, with whom business relations were retained for thirteen months.

For attractions he exhibited, in addition to Bay Alice, several curiosities of the ordinary type. These objects of interest were of necessity displayed upon a small stage on one side of the room, while in one end, on a stage, resting upon two dry-goods boxes, the performance proper was presented.

In May, 1885, an upstairs room, previously occupied by a piano dealer, was rented by Mr. Keith, and in it he put 123 chairs and a stage 2½ feet high.

It is worthy of note that in the limited space then at Mr. Keith's command he succeeded in introducing many of the foremost vaudeville artists of the day. Mrs. Gen Tom Thumb also held her daily levees in these contracted quarters for many weeks.

It was in this hall that Fred Kyle, known for his dog, cat, baby, and bird shows in Horticulture Hall duplicated his successes while connected with Mr. Keith for about one year, adding to them the beauty show, which was the most successful of all.

During the period referred to the establishment bore a number of names. At the start it was called the Hub Museum, which was later changed to the New York Museum, and still later, at Mr. Kyle's suggestion, to Gaiety Hall, and afterward to Gaiety Museum, which was retained until the premises were vacated at the expiration of the lease.

Some time prior to this, Mr. Keith had bought the Gardner interest in the establishment, and in May, 1884, was joined by George H. Batcheller of Providence. It was, also, at this time that the lower hall, above referred to, was secured by taking in the rear portion of the candy store, and two months later it was opened.

Continuous Performances.

The advent of continuous performances on July 6, 1885, marked a new era in the amusement world. It was a great day in the career of Mr. Keith and all his attaches, being purely experimental, original, and without anybody's sympathy.

The curtain rose at 10:30 o'clock A. M. and did not fall until 10:30 P. M. Everybody was anxious and nervous except Mr. Keith. Though Mr. Keith was firmly convinced of the value of his new idea, he did not advertise it, as he wished to be certain of its approval by the public through actual trial. A close watch of the box office receipts was kept, and it was immediately demonstrated beyond doubt that success was sure.

As the number of attractions was limited, it was necessary at that time to have six performances daily, each of two hours' duration. The participants on the first day of the continuous performance were the Durville family, the youngest of which was a clever prodigy; an illusion, called "Roula;" Olympian Quintet, (colored,) who have since met with great success abroad; the "Artic Moon," which was lectured upon by S. R. Hodgdon; Marion Fisk, vocalist; Murray and Monarch, Ainsley Brothers, Hughes and West, with John Barker, the bone soloist, and Mr. Hodgdon in an amusing sketch.

The continuous performance scheme of Mr. Keith was a success. The uncertainty of being able to obtain a renewal of the lease of the property then occupied began to present itself, and after much skillful engineering on Mr. Keith's part, Keith and Batcheller obtained a lease on Aug. 1, 1886, of the Bijou Theatre, original enterprise.

The firm opened the Bijou on Sept. 1, 1886, with Lillian Lewis and her company in "The Creole," giving two performances daily at popular prices. During the following year the Bijou gave standard dramatic attractions, including "The Banker's Daughter," "Little Emily," and "Sam'l of Posen."

On Monday, Aug. 1, 1887, the Bijou Theatre in Boston was opened with a "continuous performance" with Mr. Keith as sole proprietor. So identified had the word "Gaiety" become with Mr. Keith's enterprises at this time that, despite the fact that the old Gaiety Musée was no more, he decided to continue the name in connection with the new playhouse, which was called the Gaiety and Bijou.

E. F. Albee, now Mr. Keith's manager in all his various enterprises, became identified with his fortunes in the winter of 1883. Mr. Albee came as an assistant, with no particular salary and no particular duties, but soon became indispensable.