

Washburn's Grand Opera Hall

In the post-Civil War years opera houses were constructed in many Wisconsin cities, while smaller communities boasted opera halls, which usually occupied the second floor of a building, with stores on the ground floor, and were used for a variety of purposes. The term "opera" was intended to imply a higher level of sophistication than theaters with their actors and entertainment fare of questionable repute, but these opera houses and opera halls were merely theaters by another name. Washburn's opera hall was on the second floor of the opera block, a large brick building with a sandstone façade, constructed in 1884, located on the southwest corner of First Avenue East and Bayfield Street, with Corning's Pioneer Store and a saloon on the ground floor. It had a level floor, removable seats, a simple stage at the north end, and a capacity of five hundred people.

The new opera hall was opened with a "grand ball" in December of 1884, followed later that month by two productions by a local dramatic company, "Saved at Last," a "thrilling drama," and "Irish Assurance," a "laughable farce," so described by the Washburn Itemizer. The opera hall soon became the social and entertainment center of the community with a continuing round of plays, dances, "grand" and "fancy

CJ 2/18/10
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dress" balls, lectures, and exhibitions. This first opera block was destroyed by the great fire in September 1888, but was immediately rebuilt. As in the first building, the opera hall was on the second floor with Corning's Pioneer Store and a saloon on the grand level. The new hall opened with a "grand opening dance" on Christmas Eve of 1886, followed by a New Year's ball sponsored by the "fire boys" for the benefit of the newly organized fire department.

The program of entertainment and social events was quickly resumed. In November 1889 or "Merchants Carnival" was presented. As described by the Washburn Itemizer "Forty young ladies and sixteen little girls," all dressed in different costumes, some of which represented the more prominent businesses in the village, performed military and marching drills, "which brought forth hearty rounds of applause from the large audience." In December 1893 the High School Literary Society presented a program

featuring reading, recitations, and music. These were performed in English as well as in German, French, Irish, Swedish, and Norwegian, reflecting, not only the accomplishments of the students, but also the ethnic diversity of the community. Events of an entirely different sort included an exhibition by the then famous "pugilist," John L. Sullivan, and his sparring partner, and an exhibition of "mesmerism and hypnotism" by "Professor Shepard" from Ashland.

Despite the reduced circumstances in which the people of Washburn found themselves as the great lumbering boom ended, they managed to enjoy themselves at frequent entertainment events put on by outside groups or home talent at the opera hall. Outside entertainment included the Georgia Minstrels, an African-American "rag time band," which the Times referred to as the "sons of Ham;" "A solid week of amusement" by a stock company, which put on plays such as "The Last Round Up," "A Village Vagabond," and "The Queen of Queen Street;" and a "high class company of musicians," named the Southland Sextette. Plays and concerts by "home talent" included "Two Mothers," a play by the choir girls of the St. Louis Catholic Church that "was well received by a large audience;" "Charley's Aunt," a play

"rendered by members of the High School;" band concerts by the Washburn City Band; "a home talent musical and literary program," consisting of a "musical treat . . . followed by the side splitting breach of promise trial," praised by the Times as "perhaps one of the best entertainments of the kind that has been put on at the Opera House."

But while the opera hall continued to serve as one of the centers of social and entertainment events in the community, its days were numbered. It was old with inadequate stage and audience facilities, and despite the installation of electric lights and a fire escape, remained a fire trap, while "unholy noises" from the ground floor saloon punctuated performances and solemn ceremonies. During the Great War the hall was reduced to providing sleep quarters for men employed at the Du Pont explosives plant. After the war the new Du Pont club building became the center for social and entertainment events in the community. The hall continued to be used for basketball games and other high school events until these too were transformed to the Du Pont club. Today only a shell of the bottom part of the old opera block remains, a sad remnant of the place where people enjoyed so many happy times in Washburn's glory days.