

## Early Theatres had Orchestras, live Shows

*Tales of Earlier Days*

By Bob Dewel

The previous story revealed the plethora of small theatres in Baraboo in the early 1900's. Perhaps we are using the term theatre loosely, for some could hardly seat 200 persons, probably with folding chairs and perhaps a sheet or painted wall for a movie screen.

In addition to the grandiose names which we listed in the previous story (Bijou, Orpheum, Lyceum etc.) it develops that several of them actually had a tiny stage just forward of the screen. We may have sold those early theatres short, for it turns out they occasionally presented live performers along with a silent movie.

Thanks to the lifelong fascination for the movies by Baraboo businessman Clark Wilkinson, we have a number of clippings from newspapers of the day, chronicling such appearances. Wilkinson, it will be remembered had the "Hollywood Museum of the Movies" in Baraboo, a collection rivaling similar collections around the country.

He was even featured in a national magazine, LIFE, which showed his possession of a genuine King Kong, plus Bella Lugosi memorabilia. There was a dress

worn by Marilyn Monroe, plus hundreds of other items. Clark even attended the Oscar dinners in Hollywood.

Life Magazine showed a picture of the museum and the Lugosi wooden coffin, a black strangely decorated wooden box in which the deceased Clark was later viewed and buried here in Baraboo.

His family generously contributed his many papers and compositions to this author, and we in turn donated them to the County Historical Society, as referred to in earlier articles. Among them were the newspaper clippings about the happenings in the small silent film theatres in Baraboo.

The newly invented motion pictures that actually moved, though silent, were considered astounding then. For example, the newspaper reported on Nov. 13, 1897, that "The entertainment last night at the Grande consisted of a projecteroscope (really short movie scenes), gramophone, and piano. The motion pictures are clear, distinct, as near to reality as they can be. Musical selections were from the Gramophone,"

People often ask if there ever were elephants on the Ringling stage. Incredibly, the first known elephants on stage in Baraboo were the Lockheed elephants and Vaudeville Co, theatre location unnamed, on Dec. 11, 1897, long before the Ringling was built. The elephants were followed on Dec, 14 by the "High School Lecture Course".

Apparently things got quite elegant at the Orpheum, for it sometimes featured its own orchestra, with Rollo Tabler on

drums, piano by Mrs. John Vanderveer, Art Jensvold on Clarinet, and Mrs. Mark Case, vocalist.

In 1911, the Gem featured singers Harry Clark and Earl Morse, before they left on a vaudeville tour of the East. Even the Bijou featured "3 acts refined vaudeville" at one time.

Actually, on May 27, 1898 at an unnamed theatre, the Cherry Sisters from Iowa were featured. The ad stated "Beautiful and refined novel specialties, \$10,000 worth of costumes, the finest on the American stage". All did not always go well. For example, on Wed. June 18, year not given, we find "Mahara's Colored Minstrel last night—all dissatisfied after second act can have their money back."

Theater operators were innovative. Since these were silent films, the pianist could be augmented, when galloping horses were shown, by manager Aaronson by clapping two empty coconut shells together. Westerns were popular well into the time of the Ringling theatre during the depression, with serialized shows every Saturday afternoon.

Wilkinson can be considered an authority on the

early theatre history. Not only did he scour the early newspapers, but at about the age of 16 he operated the Gem Theatre on Third Street, often alone, as do high school boys today at the Al Ringling Theatre. He once said he was also the bouncer if patrons got raucous.

Beginning in those years, Clark kept a scrapbook, actually some 30 scrapbooks, on all stage events at the Al. Ringling, often including what was on the screen. A few years ago Inez Stewart spent nearly a week in Madison at the State Historical Society, cataloging the scrapbook information.

As a result, nearly every stage presentation of any significance at the Al. Ringling can be dated and verified. For example, Lionel Barrymore played the Ringling twice, along with major actors and actresses of the twenties and thirties.

Most notable of more recent years was Van Cliborn who, within a year and a half after a Baraboo appearance, performed in Moscow, in a performance credited with beginning the end of the Russian Iron Curtain. This fall the Moscow Chamber Orchestra will be on stage at the Ringling.

Though Wilkinson never lost his enthusiasm for things Hollywood, he spent his business career in the insurance business. He was a leading advocate and promoter of the Circus World and Museum from its inception on.

Not mentioned so far in the article is the Grande Opera House, located on the NW corner of Fifth and Oak Streets. This venue was used for political and other speakers, as well as stage and screen. Its history demands an article of its own at some future date. It probably had removable folding chairs, as it is said to have also operated as a roller rink.

When fire destroyed it in 1905, the city was left without an auditorium of any size. A citizen committee was formed and actually raised money as a purse to anyone they could entice to build a large theater. Al Ringling did not accept the money, going it alone.

It was this thirst for culture that prompted Al. Ringling to have his nationally significant theatre constructed in 1915. Though badly in need of restorative redecoration, it still attracts national attention. In its dual role as a civic auditorium and playhouse, it has saved local taxpayers millions. But those tiny early theatres paved the way.

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