

MAHANAY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

## Famed Kaier Grand Opera House

(The most thorough research ever compiled on the Kaier Opera House was accomplished by Joanne Pangonis Kinder, now of Hometown, who completed the project in 1964 as a thesis for her master of arts degree from The Pennsylvania State University Department of Theatre Arts. Lorraine Stanton, assistant librarian at the Penn State Schuylkill Campus, received permission from Mrs. Kinder to publish the work as a contribution to the borough's quasiquicentennial celebration. Today's chronicle is the first of a series devoted to "A History of Kaier's Grand Opera House" by Joanne Pangonis Kinder.

**THE PURPOSE OF** this thesis is to provide an accurate and complete as possible history of the Kaier Grand Opera House of Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania.

No other history of this theatre has ever been written. Even the town history published in the summer of 1963 for the centennial celebration devotes fewer than one hundred words to it. The lack of coverage seems due not to disinterest or unconcern but rather to a lack of readily available source material.

When the theatre was destroyed by fire (Oct. 15, 1913) all of the files were lost and the family which owned the theatre kept few records of its own. The contemporary local newspaper files were also lost in a fire. The only information obtainable from the newspaper is to be found in a series of articles about the theatre run in some 1925 issues.

The coverage of area newspapers during the operation of the theatre was quite sporadic and although some items are available they consist for the most part of announcements or advertisements. The writer used materials from these files where possible and in addition made use of the mementoes and memories of citizens who were associated with the opera house. Information from these widely varying sources, gathered across an extended period of time, reveals such a remarkable number of duplications that the writer feels these sources, although not documentary, are accurate.

**TO PROPERLY** introduce the material in this paper, it is necessary to provide information regarding the background of the area in which the theatre was located.

When Mahanoy City was incorporated as a borough in 1863, Charles D. Kaier was listed on the charter as one of the original petitioners. He was a prominent local businessman, owner and operator of the Kaier Brewing Company, banker, civic leader. He was always interested in the welfare of the community and devoted much time and money to the improvement of the town. It was in this capacity that he built and maintained the theatre known as the Kaier Grand Opera House.

Mahanoy City is located in the heart of the anthracite region and for most of its existence has depended on coal mining for its economy. But the town did have some local industry, the most prominent of which was the Kaier Brewery.

The town's population at the height of the theatre's operation was about 15,000. The people were for the most part coal miners, most of them first or second generation immigrants of European extraction.

However, they were lovers of the theatre and faithful patrons so that Mr. Kaier's theatre was almost always sold out though it seated about 10 per cent of the population. This figure includes the entire population. Of course this would make the adult theatre-going population percentage considerably greater. In addition, evidence of at least four hundred different plays performed there indicated that there must have been more than 20 plays per nine month season.

To support so many productions required the cooperation of both theatre owners and patrons. The writer hopes to show that it was just such cooperation, given willingly by both parties, that helped to make the theatre the success that it was. And so, the story of Kaier's Grand Opera House becomes a story of people as well as a history of a building.

**THE PHYSICAL THEATRE.** The original theatre building was located on the southeast corner of Main and Water streets, one block south from the center of town. It was built about 1870 by Ferdinand Metz, an original



**FAMOUS THEATRE** — This was the celebrated Kaier Grand Opera House which during its 17 years of existence, 1896-1913, was recognized as one of the finest entertainment houses in the state. At the time of this photo, the Williams Business College,

forerunner of the McCann School of Business, was housed in the top floor. In the building adjoining the theatre at right, Jim Quirk conducted his Opera House Hotel. Quirk, until his retirement in 1901, also managed the theatre for Kaier.

of at least 33 different plays performed in the opera house.

**GRAND OPERA HOUSE.** Approximately eight years after Charles D. Kaier became the owner of the theatre he decided to remodel it completely, the decision due in part perhaps to the profits garnered by Manager Quirk as stated before. In any case the remodeling consisted, in effect, of almost rebuilding from the ground up.

Sources on the dates of remodeling have been found which would seem to conflict. Two of these sources state that the opera house was rebuilt in 1893. Nevertheless, advertisements in area newspapers list performances up to and including Feb. 14, 1894. Whether this date indicates the final production before closure or merely the last play advertised in that particular newspaper is not certain. However, based upon the custom of the Mahanoy City theatregoer at that time — a custom which considered the operation of the theatre as a seasonal one, the season beginning in early fall and ending in late spring — it is possible to assume that the 1893 dates given by some refer to the 1893 season which would have ended in the spring of 1894.

In any case the renovations or remodeling were very extensive as the new theatre's official opening as The Kaier Grand Opera House was not until Sept. 10, 1896. The lavish decor, both inside and out, as well as the then excellent stage facilities, evoked praise not only from the citizenry of the town itself but from surrounding areas as well. One newspaper writer (Shenandoah Evening Herald) was quoted as saying, "Our sister borough can boast of the finest opera house in the interior of the state...."

It was also about this time that the Mahanoy Creek, which passed as the Water street, was covered over for a distance of several blocks. However it was not until nearly 20 years later that the street received its present name of Market street.

**THE NEW THEATRE,** while in the same location as before, now occupied more area. Estimates based on partial interior measurements would lead one to believe that the theatre building must have been about 75 feet

still used gas light.

The entrance to the theatre consisted of massive ornate double doors which were a full story high. They led to a small foyer which could be used by patrons before the box office opened. At the end of the foyer were two more extravagantly carved doors, again the full height of the first story.

**NEXT WAS THE** grand entrance hall, approximately 50 feet long and inclined slightly like a ramp. It had a tile floor, and the walls for its entire length were covered with mirrors. At the end of the ramp were three steps the width of the hall, carpeted in red as was the remainder of the lobby.

At the top of the steps immediately to the left was the box office and directly opposite to the right, the cloak room. The main lobby and audience seating were directly ahead, occupying the full 75 feet width of the theatre building.

The lobby was separated from the seats by a waist-high partition topped with tie-back curtains which could be closed when a performance was in progress. Two statues, apparently in the lobby, are barely discernible in an old photograph of the house as seen from the stage.

On each side of the main lobby were large stairways leading to the balcony which was also provided with its own lobby and an access door to the sitting porch as stated previously.

The gallery, known to most as "the peanut," was almost directly over the balcony seats. The area on the third floor over the cafe and balcony lobby was occupied by a dance hall used for weekly dances, dancing school instruction bazaars and even as a school room or church when the usual accommodations were temporarily unavailable.

The decor of the theatre proper was as lavish as the lobby and exterior. The walls were cream color, decorated with a great deal of gold leaf in a seemingly raised design. According to one observer, it looked, from a distance, like brocade.

The ceiling over the audience was domed and highly decorated with gold leaf in the same manner as were the walls. It also boasted an enormous crystal chandelier with several hundred lights and as many cut glass prisms suspended from the center of the dome. The combined effect of the lights reflecting from the prisms and from the gold ceiling was spectacular and made this sight one of the principal attractions of the theatre.

The rows of theatre seats were curved toward the stage as most theatre seating is today. In addition, the balcony and gallery were supported by only seven pillars each so that there were few bad seats and little sense of separation. These two qualities combined with the considerable width of the theatre provided a cozy, intimate feeling which could be enjoyed by spectator and performer alike.

**IN ALL** the theatre seated 1,200 people, about 400 in the main floor, 400 in the balcony and the remainder in the gallery. Seating arrangements were nearly the same on all three floors.

The main floor seats were divided into three sections: a large center section and two others to the right and left each nearly as large as the center. Wide aisles separated the center and side sections, and two others, slightly narrower, separated each side section from the walls, a total of four aisles.

The seating in the balcony was the same as that of the main floor, and the gallery differed only in that the two aisles next to the walls were eliminated.

The rows averaged 32 seats, perhaps 12 in the center section and 10 in each side. The theatre widened as it progressed to the rear of the audience area. There were 13 rows on the main floor, about 10 in the balcony and six in the gallery.

On the main floor the first five rows back from the stage were designated the orchestra and the remaining eight rows were the orchestra circle. These two sections were separated by a polished brass rail running between the rows of seats.

Within the main floor seating was incorporated an innovation called sofa seats, or as they were more popularly known, love seats. These consisted of two seats which had the intervening arm rest removed so that they held two people. They were quite popular with the local swains who preferred to take young ladies

whom they were courting to a mantinee, preserving decorum by substituting a box of chocolates for the absent arm rests.

An old photograph shows that these love seats were in the orchestra section and were the third and fourth seats in from each aisle in the center section. It also shows that the center aisle seats in each side section also were love seats.

**IN ADDITION TO** the regular seating there were two boxes near the stage on either side of the theatre both on the main floor and the balcony. The first box on the left side of the balcony as one entered was the Kaier family box, always reserved exclusively for their use.

The lavish accommodations of the theatre were further carried out in the seats themselves. All seats on the main floor were upholstered, back and seat, in brown plush with wooden arm rests. The seats in the orchestra section were even more lavish. The first three rows of the balcony were also upholstered and these seats, together with those on the main floor, were always reserved.

The remaining seats in the balcony and those in the gallery were hardwood with backs and arm rests. When a special show was presented, the remaining balcony seats and the first row of the gallery were also reserved.

**THE STAGE AND** its facilities were also considered remarkable for their time. The proscenium opening was 36 feet wide and 36 feet high. The stage was 35 feet deep and had 17 feet of wing space on each side. The fly loft was almost 70 feet high, allowing the use of drops rather than roll curtains or the like and there was a storage area directly above. There was 10 feet of room beneath the stage, and trapdoors were available for dramatic or scenic effects. There was also an orchestra pit just in front of the stage.

The lighting was gas and electric with power for the electric lights provided by generators in Kaier's brewery about three blocks north of the theatre. This was in the time when the town had no power plant of its own. Later when the town lighting became completely electric the theatre also changed over so that all of the light was electric.

The dressing rooms were located beneath the stage and were open to visitors except during a performance.

The stage was equipped with a standard drop act curtain. In reality the theatre possessed three such curtains, red, blue and purple velvet, and changed them periodically.

The asbestos drop was painted with a typically Victorian scene. The picture was of an idyllic English woodland glen with a stream running through it. However, the boat could easily be recognized as a gondola.

The preceding evidence seems to support the statement that the opera house was constructed on a most elaborate scale. A newspaper at the time of the fire valued the Kaier Grand Opera House at \$75,000.

**ALTHOUGH OWNED** and operated independently of the theatre, the Kelly Cafe became so associated and identified with the opera house that many referred to it as the opera house cafe. The owner was A. J. Kelly, known to patrons as King Kelly. When the cafe first opened it was managed for Kelly by Howard Burchill. Later Kelly himself took over the management until the fire.

The cafe was one of the showplaces of the region, famed for its mirrored walls and lavish decorations. Most especially it was known for its famous gold-piece floor. The floor was made of tile but at intervals of about three feet, at the corners of each block of tile, there was cemented into the floor a five dollar gold piece. Well over \$500 was sunk into the floor (according to Joseph Martin, theatre patron, interviewed in 1963).

People in town are fond of reminiscing that occasionally a patron who had imbibed one too many would amuse the rest of the group with his valiant efforts to separate the gold from the floor. As popular as the Kelly cafe was, it catered, unfortunately, only to men, women being strictly forbidden. However, gentlemen who wished to entertain ladies could take them to the beautifully decorated restaurant in the opposite side of the building. This restaurant became as much of a favorite with the ladies as the cafe did with the men.

(TO BE CONTINUED)