

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Famed Kaier Grand Opera House

(This is the second in a series on the Joanne Pagonis Kinder work entitled "A History of Kaier's Grand Opera House." Yesterday's chronicle dealt with the physical aspects of the theatre. Today's will cover the personnel, the operations, the productions and the thespians.

THE MOST important aspect of a theatre is its consistent ability to present excellent productions under the best possible circumstances. In this the Kaier Grand Opera House was an acknowledged success.

This fact is attested to by the special trains which were run from nearby communities when an especially good show was appearing. These excursion trains brought patrons to Mahanoy City, waited and returned them to their homes after the play was over.

The Lehigh Valley and The Philadelphia and Reading Railroads brought people from Mauch Chunk (now Jim Thorpe), 30 miles; Tamaqua, 11 miles; Pottsville, 15 miles; and Shamokin, 25 miles away. Thus, at times the theatre had a drawing population of 50,000 to 60,000 rather than just of the town itself.

However, these trains were not run each night of a performance nor for every different production. It is significant to realize that even with the convenience of train transportation, people would not have been willing to travel up to 30 miles for a few hours in a theatre unless they were reasonably sure that excellent entertainment awaited them.

THIS ENTERTAINMENT with famous stars and shows was many times obtained through the influence of Charles F. Kaier, son of the owners. Mr. Kaier was a member of the New York Friars Club and it was through the friendships he formed there that he was able to persuade various companies to play at the opera house. If he discovered that any of these shows had some free time and their routes took them anywhere near his home town, he hired them for as many performances as they might fit in. In this way he obtained many productions which normally would not have appeared in Mahanoy City in their regular tours.

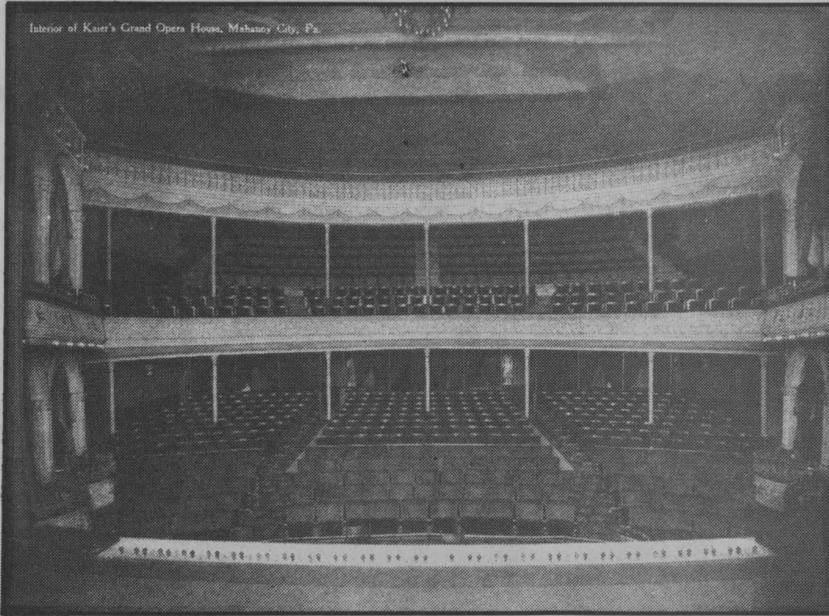
Many of these performers and managers who had agreed to come for only one show were amazed at the facilities and returned several times on other tours. These people were impressed not only by the physical appointments but also by the very competent staff.

Curtain time on matinee days was usually 2:30 but often shows which came strictly because of Kaier's efforts were unable to make good train connections. Sometimes the only train they could get was the one which arrived at the Reading Station at 2:16 p.m. But the large brewery wagons used to transport scenery and baggage were always waiting for them and it was the theatre's proud boast that even having to mount an entire show in fantastic time, the curtain never went up later than 3:30.

To illustrate the lengths to which the staff would go to insure a good performance, the following anecdote is told by Harry Litsch, former theatre employe.

When the play "Isle of Spice" was mounting its set a few hours before the show, it was discovered that the great amount of sand required by the plot had, through a mixup, not been provided. Litsch, as property man for the theatre, was ordered to obtain some. It was Saturday evening and there was no place open where he might possibly get it. Fortunately, the Reading Railroad Company station was nearby and it had some construction work in progress. Litsch "appropriated" several loads of sand, enough for the show. Unfortunately he had been seen, reported and was summarily arrested. The manager of the opera house had to bail him out of jail and pay his fine in order to get him back to the theatre in time for the performance. Mr. Litsch says that in those days they took the theatrical tradition of the show having to go on rather seriously.

ALTHOUGH THE personnel of the theatre changed many times over the years, names of certain of the staff are remembered. The original manager for Kaier was James J. Quirk who held the post for many years (1885-1901). At the



VIEW FROM STAGE — This is the view of the audience sector from the stage of the Kaier Grand Opera House. The design was such that all seats were good and the

audience felt close to the actors on stage and vice-versa. The seating include the main floor, the balcony and the gallery.

of the fire (Oct. 15, 1913) Glenn Jackson was listed by the newspapers as the manager.

Rube Burley was the stage carpenter and worked as stage manager for the shows. Cahn's theatrical guide book lists W. Haldeman as electrician.

Charles Welsh was bill poster and general handyman. Harry Litsch served as property man, occasional actor, ticket taker and stage hand with Charles Martin.

The cloak room captain was James Miles who also played roles when needed. He remembers that the first role he ever had was that of an altar boy. He says it was common for a boy to get a job in the theatre in one of the lowest positions and gradually work up from one job to another. He also reports that ushers, ticket men, attendants, etc., in fact anyone who was in contact with the public at a performance, wore uniforms which were provided by the theatre.

As cloak room captain, Mr. Miles recalls, he was forbidden to accept tips, as were any other attendants. The cloak room was to be operated free of charge for the convenience of the patrons. But with the typical ingenuity of teenagers in the matter of money, he and his fellow ushers and attendants devised a plan whereby the attention of the manager, ticket takers or patrons was diverted when any patron offered a tip. Therefore, the attendant could pocket the money while protesting in a loud voice that he could not accept it. Afterward, all cohorts in crime divided equally the profits.

THE TICKET TAKER on the main floor was James P. "Pix" Foley, while the gallery was in charge of Esau Reese, a man about whom many stories are told, including the following:

Reese was supposed to be a rather stern, gruff man whose main problem on a Saturday matinee day was to keep children from sneaking into the gallery without a ticket. However, when a show particularly appealing to children was playing and there were children who did not have the admission price peering in at the entrance, it became part of a well-known routine for Reese to pretend to go to sleep at his post. He would tip his chair back against the wall and snore audibly until the children could tiptoe past and find a seat. Then he would awake and take up his vigil as before. This practice was known to the manager and owners of the theatre but nothing was ever said.

THE ORCHESTRA of the theatre was a competent one and famous in its own right, sometimes providing the music for the third floor hall weekly dances as well as their regular duty in the theatre.

The orchestra was under the direction of Professor John Jones who also played the violin. His brother, Evan Jones, played the piano in the orchestra at one time, as did Elwood Wright. Perhaps the best known pianist was Charles

Domson who performed for five years from 1904 to 1909. In 1909 he became conductor and remained in that post until the end of the theatre in 1913. Later Mr. Domson worked for the Kaier Company, eventually becoming president.

The first saxophone in the town was played in the theatre orchestra by Harry Harris, and this writer's grandfather, Joseph Capone, performed occasionally as clarinetist.

ALTHOUGH TICKETS for performances were available at the box office just prior to each curtain time, the advance ticket agent until 1901 was J. W. Snyder, assisted by his son, Phaon Snyder. The older Snyder was a local druggist and used his store (site of the present Morris Drug Store) as the ticket agency. Advance tickets were also sold out-of-town. The theatre kept track of reserved seat sales by using an elaborate peg board diagram system much like those used in Broadway theatres.

Ticket prices varied across the years from a listing of 15, 20 and 35 cents in 1889, through 25, 35, 50, 75 cents and \$1 in 1905, to the top prices in 1910 of \$4 for orchestra, \$3 for orchestra circle, \$2.50 for balcony and \$1 for gallery.

Although the old theatre made money based upon the above prices, one can estimate that in 1905 the gross receipts for a sold-out house would have been about \$2,500. Yet some shows were guaranteed \$1,000 and the play "Divorce" in 1910 was guaranteed \$2,800 for one performance.

Add the other operating expenses and quite obviously the theatre did not make money. According to one former employe (Harry Litsch), the theatre almost always lost money even when playing to a capacity house. These deficits were underwritten by the Kaier family. In reality they supported and sponsored the theatre, instead of being moneymaking owners.

It was even stated the Mrs. Margaret Kaier, widow of the founder, vetoed raising the prices of tickets because she wanted people to be able to afford to see the show. She claimed that she and her son, Charles F., would pay all necessary bills out of their private funds.

THE OPENING of the new theatre was held Sept. 10, 1896, with the Charles Frohman production, "Sowing the Wind." The play was presented under the sponsorship of Severn Post 110 of the Grand Army of the Republic—Charles D. Kaier having been a member of the First Defenders, the group which first answered Lincoln's call for volunteers.

That the opening was a success was proved by the comments in the Shenandoah Evening Herald: "The opening of Kaier's grand new opera house last evening attracted a large number of people from this town. The audience was large and a select one. Our sister borough can boast of the finest opera houses in the interior of the state and this in itself will attract a better class of plays. Everything has been done for the convenience of the patrons. Lawyer Dolphin in behalf of the citizens of Mahanoy

DeWolf Hopper, a handsome leading man, liked the opera house and came several times. One appearance was in the musical "Wang" with Della Fox. He co-starred with Marguerite Clark in "The Happyland" which was performed at Kaier's even before it opened on Broadway. The show had been rehearsing in Atlantic City but was persuaded to play at the Opera House the Saturday before the New York opening.

SOME STARS were temperamental as well as colorful. When Grace George starred in "Under Southern Skies" produced by her husband, William A. Brady, she made many demands on the staff of Kaier's. She carried with her her own curtains embroidered with her name and insisted that they be hung in place of those belonging to the theatre. She also insisted that the enormous set of a southern mansion be equipped with running water for the fountains. In addition she had her own perfume with which the flowers on the set had to be sprayed for each performance. She was remembered less than fondly by the prop men and stage hands.

The names of Madame Helen Modjeska, Madame Januscheck, Daniel Sully, Ada Dwyer, McKay Rankin and Chauncey Olcott were familiar to Kaier theatre patrons.

One of the most famous evenings in the history of the opera house was Feb. 8, 1911, when the Kaiers entertained the world champion Philadelphia Athletics. Jack Boley of Mahanoy City was a member of the team together with Rube Waddell, Chief Bender and others. They attended a banquet in the Kaier Hotel and then were entertained by the Broadway production of "Madame Sherry" starring Gypsy Dale. Kaier's had imported the entire New York production for one night at tremendous expense. The songs "Chiribiribin" and "Every Little Movement" were from "Madame Sherry."

Plays authored by George M. Cohan, George Broadhurst, Clyde Fitch and Charles Hoyte were popular and usually well-attended. Another popular writer was Daniel Hart of Wilkes-Barre who wrote plays about the coal region. His most famous show was "The Parish Priest" which he wrote especially for actor Daniel Sully. Sully played the opera house several times in this show and others.

For a time, plays starring prize fighters were popular, and Kaier's welcomed John L. Sullivan, Tom Sharkey, Terry McGovern and James C. Corbett.

In about 1904 when old west plays were in vogue, Frank James, brother of Jesse and a reformed outlaw, was seen in "The James Boys in Missouri." He was remembered as rather a rough character.

SOME SHOWS were so well-liked that they were presented yearly. Among these were "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Custer's Last Stand" and "Way Down East."

In the same way, many actors appeared regularly over the years. One of these favorites was Lillian Kennedy who usually did stark melodrama. In one show she screamed so loudly that gentlemen passing by thought it was really a damsel in distress and burst into the performance to rescue her.

Among the road show companies which performed numerous times at Kaier's were the Charles K. Champlain Stock Company, Frankie Carpenter Stock Company, Thomas Shea Stock Company, Aborn Opera Company, Baldwin-Melville Stock Company, Elroy Stock Company, Elmer Vance Repertory Company, Hillman Drama Company and the Cameron Clemens Repertory Company which was managed by Bert Koenig, a native of Mahanoy City. Koenig had much trouble with Clemens, the star and owner, who was both temperamental and jealous. Finally Koenig resigned and formed the King Dramatic Company which played at Kaier's just after the turn of the century.

Dialect plays were enjoyed although the actors had to be wary lest they offended some member or the audience who might wait after the performance to punish the offender. Irish and German plays were the most popular, but Swedish and English ones were also done.

Keith Vaudeville was a favorite as well as minstrel shows. Lou

Dockstader's, George Cleveland's and other minstrels appeared but the most popular were the Charles Evans Honey Boy Minstrels, known as Honey Boy Evans Minstrels. They featured Vaughn Comfort, a tenor. Some said the reason they played the opera house so often was that Mrs. Margaret Kaier particularly enjoyed Comfort's singing and at each performance he sang her favorite song, "When You And I Were Young Maggie," directly to her. (Note: This song was composed by Captain George W. Johnson, co-owner of the Turkey Run Colliery and founder of the Shenandoah Primitive Methodist Church.)

THEATRE-GOERS of town enjoyed seeing famous stars and shows but none could deny the appeal of an actor from the coal region, one of their own. Captain Jack Crawford was one such actor. He was an Indian authority, worked (as a scout) for the government and averted several clashes with the Indians. (Note: Crawford, widely known as The Poet Scout, lived at various times in Mahanoy City, Shenandoah and Girardville.)

Other area actors were Tom Tempest of Shenandoah and Gus Haas of Shamokin who later starred under the name of Will A. Robins in the London production of "So This is London" by George M. Cohan.

Mahanoy also possessed a playwright, J. Jerome Nolan, whose plays were produced at Kaier's opera house. He was a prolific writer who owned his own traveling stock company as well as an acting school in New York. He wrote material for Gracie Moore and had readied a play for a New York opening when the Equity Strike forced it to close.

The first play he ever wrote was presented at Kaier's Grand Opera House and was entitled "The Great Coal Strike." This play, like others he wrote about mining, was known for elaborate, realistic scenery of the mines, including real mules. His "Where the Shamrocks Grow" was performed on Sept. 20, 1913. In all he wrote about 95 plays, about 10 to 15 of which were done in the opera house.

It is therefore evident to the people of Mahanoy City were exposed to a great variety of types of theatre. Because they proved themselves to be both an appreciative and a critical audience they found favor among the various players. This is evidenced by the fact that many shows tried out at Kaier's before going to Broadway, among them "The Happyland" with DeWolf Hopper and Marguerite Clark, and George Broadhurst's "The Man of the Hour," a political play.

THE PEOPLE may have been fairly typical of any small town but they became sophisticated, an almost cosmopolitan audience who dressed formally for the theatre and, most importantly, provided a measurement by which a Broadway-bound director could judge his show.

About a year after DeWolf Hopper had appeared in a show at Kaier's, William Rauche, a railroad engineer from his area, saw him in a show in Pittsburgh. After the curtain call, Hopper spoke to the audience to compliment them on their appreciativeness, and he mentioned that the most appreciative audience he had ever played before was at the Kaier Grand Opera House in Mahanoy City, Pa.

Of course, they may have been momentary lapses in the decorum displayed in the theatre, as evidenced by the following anecdote:

Boys in the community had found that by climbing to the roof of the building back of the theatre, climbing the drainage pipe to the theatre roof and crawling in through the skylight they could sneak into the gallery. If there were no seats available, some of them would crawl out along the rafters to watch. One evening a boy who had a pocket full of marbles found a perch on a rafter over the stage. As he shifted his position, the marbles spilled from his pocket and began to shower like hailstones on the actors, driving them to the wings.

On the whole, the audiences were composed, critical and above all appreciative. They enjoyed the theatre and came back again and again to be part of it.

(NEXT: THE END OF THE THEATRE)