

MAHANOY CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

End of Kaier Grand Opera House

(This is the third and last segment of Joanne Pangonis Kinder's "A History of Kaier's Grand Opera House." Previous installments described the theatre's physical aspects, operations, productions, staff personnel and the thespians. Today's chapter recounts the fiery end to the region's No. 1 showplace.

OCT. 14, 1913 was a gala Tuesday night in the Kaier Grand Opera House. Movies of the 1908 World Series between Pittsburgh and Detroit had been shown in the theatre and the newly remodeled third floor dance hall had had its grand opening. The polished hardwood floor and gay decorations were in keeping with the grandeur of the rest of the building.

Theatre lovers might have been discussing the two productions due to play at the opera house that week: "Sins of the Father" and "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm." The events of the following day were to change all that forever.

Early on the morning of Oct. 15, just a little over 17 years after its grand opening, the Kaier Grand Opera House burned to the ground, never to be rebuilt.

AT ABOUT 25 minutes past seven that morning, Rube Burley, the stage carpenter, entered the building to do some repair work. He smelled smoke and almost immediately there was a tremendous explosion which was heard a block away and scattered debris within the theatre in all directions.

Burley fled from the building and ran to the Kelly Cafe to summon aid. Burley and Michael McInerney, the man in charge of the cafe, saw flames shooting from the northeast corner of the building above the stage.

Kelly, the cafe owner, and Burley ran into the theatre and found the stage in flames. The scenery had ignited; the flames lit the curtains and went up to the roof. When the burning curtains fell into the plush seats the interior became a mass of flames.

The town's volunteer firemen had been summoned but at that time, nearly 7:30, most of them had begun to work the morning shift at nearby collieries. By the time they could return it was too late.

Within 25 minutes after the fire started, the west wall collapsed. Within 45 minutes the south wall went. In little more than an hour the whole building was gone. The only thing standing was the back or east wall which would later have to be dynamited when it proved a hazard.

SAVING ANY part of the theatre building was hopeless, but the firemen found themselves faced with a greater problem. A wind of 20 miles per hour was blowing sparks and embers onto

roofs as far as seven blocks away and the fire in the area of the theatre was spreading. For a time it was feared the entire town might be set afire.

Four fire companies from Mahanoy City and five from nearby communities fought the blaze for several hours. Employees saved the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad building by throwing wet canvas on the roof. This idea was copied by citizens who wet carpets, quilts, etc. and covered their roofs, thereby saving their homes.

A moment of panic occurred when the two-year-old child of a Damara family, whose home was burned, was declared missing and believed to have perished in the flames. However, it was discovered that he had been removed from the house by a neighbor who had neglected to inform anyone. Happily, no lives were lost as a result of the fire.

THE OPERA HOUSE building, containing the theatre, A. J. Kelly's Cafe, stock room, lumber room, dining room and dance hall, was a total loss. In the nearby vicinity many buildings were destroyed including 25 homes and various offices, stores and bars.

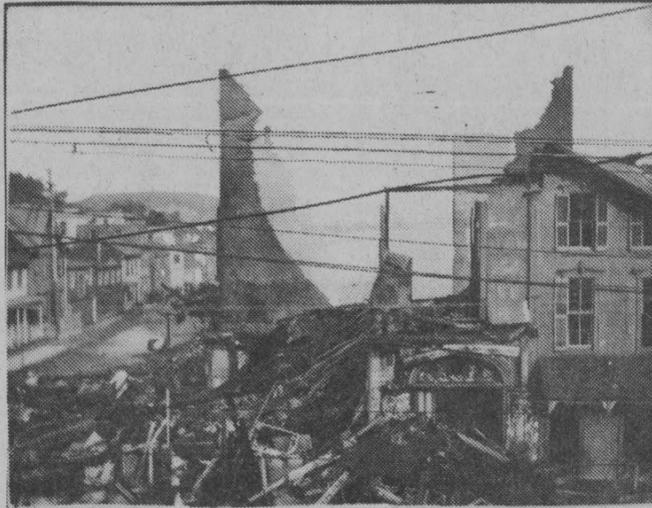
As spectators viewed the smoking ruins, many photographers, amateur and professional, took pictures. The rails and seats of the theatre were twisted into grotesque shapes by the heat and the splintered mirrors of the cafe and theatre reflected the bright sunlight, looking like another fire in the midst of the debris.

Small children had to be deterred from scrambling in the ruins in search of the coins which had been part of the famed "gold piece floor" of the Kelly Cafe.

THE ORIGIN of the fire was a mystery but it seemed to have started in the fly lot or the storage area above. There was speculation that it might have been smouldering all night. Clenn Jackson, manager of the opera house, stated that there were no clues but his opinion was that the explosion had been caused by an accumulation of gases.

The value of the total property destroyed was estimated at \$200,000, perhaps as much as \$350,000. A. J. Kelly, owner of the cafe, estimated his loss at \$3,500. Approximately \$5,000 worth of scenery owned by J. Jerome Nolan, local playwright and producer, had been stored in the loft above the stage and was lost. The Kaier family owned most of the property in the fire zone and sustained the greatest loss. The opera house alone was valued at \$75,000 but insured for only \$28,000.

MRS. MARGARET KAIER, widow of the builder and the current owner of the opera house, was in Philadelphia at the time of the fire and when she was told the extent of it, according to the Shenandoah Herald, "she



END OF A SHOWPLACE — This was the scene at the corner of Main and Market streets on the afternoon of Oct. 15, 1913. The famed Kaier Grand Opera House, proud showplace of the region, lay in ruins, never to be rebuilt. The fire, which began in the theatre, spread to 25 homes and several business places in the block. The photos are from the Elwood Young/George Barlow collection.

collapsed and remained in a swoon for several hours."

Later she announced that a new and better theatre would be constructed on the spot and the construction will begin that coming spring so that the new theatre could open for the 1914 season.

Charles F. Kaier, son of the owner, was in New York and when he returned to Mahanoy City on the afternoon of the fire he supported his mother's statement that the theatre would be replaced.

Sadly enough, the promise was never to come true, for Mrs. Kaier died two months later, in December 1913, still planning to rebuild. Representatives of the family have said the family always meant to replace the building. At one time it was

Quirk, the former manager of the opera house, was a member of the executive staff of the new theatre.

Although designed primarily as a movie house, the theatre occasionally rerepresented stage shows, one of the first being "The Magic Ring" with Jeannette MacDonald, Mitzi and Sidney Greenstreet.

An article printed on the day the Victoria opened said: "It is coincident that the new Victoria stands as a permanent monument upon the site of Mahanoy City's earliest theatrical institution, the former Kaier Grand Opera House...."

Permanent it may be but as a monument to the Kaier Grand Opera House it is sadly lacking. For the past several years it has been closed and virtually abandoned. As of this writing there is no operating theatre of any kind in the town.

SUMMARY and conclusions: The opera house had a life span of 28 years. The first eight years were under the name of Kaier's Opera House, then three years were spent in renovation, and the remaining 17 years were the zenith years of operation as the Kaier Grand Opera House.

Throughout its existence the theatre was owned and operated by the Kaier family, first by the founder, Charles D. Kaier, and later by his widow and son, Margaret C. and Charles F. Kaier.

The technical facilities of the physical theatre were at first limited but under sponsorship of the owners the facilities were expanded to include a stage and house area which were on par proportionally with those of the best equipped theatres of the day. The backstage workings included fine electrical lighting, a stage of ample proportions, fly loft, rigging and other technical equipment for the production of even the most complicated sets or effects.

The house area was furnished lavishly with upholstered seats and highly decorative accessories. The layout of the audience area was such that a great number of people could be seated with each possessing an almost equally good view of the stage and excellent acoustical position.

In addition, patrons were able to avail themselves of other comforts or diversions in the presence of a restaurant and a bar right on the premises and a dance hall on the floor immediately above.

Theatrical productions afforded patrons a wide variety of subject matter and the opportunity to view famous stars and plays. Great acting names of theatre were common sights on the marquee and plays of well-known authors were featured with almost the same degree of admiration as the stars. Local

productions which made use of local talent were acceptable and often quite popular.

DURING IS ZENITH years the theatre afforded its patrons the opportunity to become critics as well as fans when many professional shows used the theatre as a testing ground before opening a show on Broadway. By that time the audience had become cosmopolitan enough to provide an accurate judgment for producers and directors.

The theatre was unique in that its prices were never compatible with the evident costs of production. Ticket prices were usually one-half what would have seemed reasonable and sometimes were even lower. The theatre always lost money even though it usually played to capacity houses. Thus it was not possible to pay the original building costs, much less make a profit.

The discrepancy would have made the theatre inoperable had it not been for the benevolence of the owners who refused to raise prices lest the townspeople be unable to afford to pay to see as many shows as they might wish. The debts were absorbed by the Kaier family who paid them from their own personal funds. They preferred community profit to financial profit.

ALTHOUGH A rival theatre, Hersker's Opera House, did exist, it never enjoyed the popularity and position of Kaier's Grand. This was due perhaps to the feeling within the community that Kaier's theatre was peculiarly their own. It was this feeling that made the Kaier Opera House almost a community "institution."

From the day that the Kaier Grand Opera House opened its shiny new doors to the day it fell in flames, only 17 years had passed. Yet during those short years the people of Mahanoy City were able to view some of the finest and most talented performers and many of the best and most respected plays available on the United States.

They saw drama, comedy, tragedy, farce, musicals and Shakespeare. They liked it and came back again and again. The theatre was a part of their town and a part of their lives. Their children appeared on stage, worked in the theatre and seemed to grow up in it. They ate in the restaurants, drank in the cafe and sat spellbound in the theatre. It was "theirs."

Why the Kaier family chose to sponsor such a project could be debatable. Profit has been eliminated as well as most other practical reasons. A possible explanation could be community spirit and responsibility of the Kaier family.

What might have been the fate of the theatre had it not burned is unknown. But one thing is certain, while it existed it was a remarkably magic world.