

MAHANoy CITY CHRONICLES/Researched by Lorraine Stanton

Hersker's historic old showplace

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HERSKER'S Theatre was the landmark building of Centre street, the one structure identifiable above all others.

At five stories it was the tallest building on the town's main thoroughfare, and its unique architecture made it stand out in the crowd.

Hersker's was a worthy rival for the famed Kaier Grand Opera House, although lacking the atmosphere of grandeur that surrounded the Kaier show palace.

Erected in 1895 at First and Centre streets, current site of the Stop N Go store, the theatre fulfilled a dream for Schone Horskler (John Hersker) who, like his fellow German immigrant, Charles Kaier, was a pioneer resident and one of the signers of the petition for the borough's charter.

ACCORDING to information gleaned from family obituaries published in the Record-American, Mr. Hersker and his wife, Christina, came to Mahanoy City shortly after their marriage in 1858.

The first map of the borough, dated 1863, lists J. Horskler as residing in one of the four homes then located on the north side of in the 400 block of East Mahanoy street. There were no homes on the south side of that block at that time.

Mr. Hersker initially earned his living as a locksmith and shoe repairman. Sometime prior to 1870, he moved the family moved to 23 East Centre street and opened a tavern. Eventually he disposed of the bar and entered the confectionery business. After the opening of the theatre in 1895 he established a hardware store in the corner premises on the ground floor of the theatre building. The borough's census directory for 1890-1900 lists him at that address, 101 E. Centre St.

AT THE TIME of its opening, Hersker listed the theatre as an opera house. Through the years, as various proprietors leased the theatre, the name went through a succession of changes. A photo

from an undated pictorial booklet published by the late J. V. O'Connor shows that the building was no longer identified as an opera house, but as the "Hersker Theatre" which was attached in large letters between the second and third floors on the front of the five-story ornate building, while at the same time the marquee on Centre street identified it as "The Family Theatre."

In the days of vaudeville, Hersker's was a regular stop for the shows traveling the circuit. Because the rear of the building was located along Railroad Street which parallels the railroad tracks, Hersker was able to construct a covered ramp over the street to give the theatre a direct access to the railroad siding. This afforded a convenient arrangement for getting trunks, props and other supplies from the trains to the theatre, eliminating the necessity of placing these items on wagons and hauling them through the streets, as the Kaier Opera House had to do.

DURING THE era that it operated as The Family Theatre, beginning around World War I, it was primarily a motion picture house, although it continued to run occasional stage shows including locally produced minstrels and follies.

The various names attached to the theatre were noted in the obituary of Mrs. Hersker on July 6, 1931. At various times it operated as the Hersker, Family, Hippodrome and New Family. To these may be added The State Theatre as it was known in its swan song era after World War II.

In 1920 the Hersker family moved to Philadelphia, and four years later the theatre building was sold to the Mahanoy City Moose Lodge.

From the 1920s onward, the community was served by three movie houses. In addition to the Moose-owned theatre, which the lodge leased to interested operators, the Elks Lodge operated a theatre in its lodge building at the eastern end of the same block, and the Victoria opened in 1925 on the site where the Kaier Opera House stood until it was leveled by fire in 1913.



Historic showplace — This was Hersker's Theatre building (now the site of the Stop N Go store) around 1920. Lettering on the face of the building identify it as Hersker's Theatre but the marquee indicates that it was then operated under the name of Family Theatre.

JOANNE Pangonis Kinder, now of Hometown, in her 1964 thesis on the Kaier Opera House, touched briefly on the Hersker Theatre.

She noted that the Hersker, during its stint as an opera house, seated 1,250 and was managed by John Hersker Jr., son of the builder. Another son, Harry Hersker, was the bill poster. The electrician was Thomas Mar-

sden; the prop man, H. Knoblauch who married one of the Hersker girls; the stage carpenter, Thomas Pallis.

Mrs. Kinder reported that the first show presented there was the Gonzales Opera Company production of "Giorfle-Girofla." She noted that many outstanding shows were staged during the succeeding two decades, among them "White Cargo" and

deKoven's light opera, "Robin Hood." When the Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's "Emperor Jones" went on its first tour, the third stop on its itinerary was Hersker's. The play featured John Gilpin, the first Negro actor of prominence on Broadway.

One of the theatre's greatest claims to fame, Mrs. Kinder reported, was the appearance of Victor Herbert on Feb. 23, 1921, when he personally conducted his show, "The Girl in the Spotlight."

Tommy Shearer's stock company, one of the prominent road shows of the era, played the Hersker annually but suddenly scratched Mahanoy City from his list. Mrs. Kinder explained the reason:

"Cyrano de Bergerac" was a popular show on Broadway at the time and Shearer decided to duplicate it at Hersker's. He took a risk because the royalties were high, and the worst happened — only 50 people showed up.

Reflecting on the reason for the poor attendance, Mrs. Kinder cited a combination of factors, among which were a heavy rainstorm which struck just before show time, plus an excellent show providing competition at Kaier's Grand Opera House.

Shearer was miffed and he said so in his stage comments after the show. He uttered some disparaging remarks about the town, and vowed he'd never return. He kept his word and, according to the local oldtimers who recalled the episode, it was good for him that he did, for there were some indignant gents in town who were just itching to take the insults out of his hide.

HERSKER'S had the privilege of hosting theatrical debuts of various local entertainment personalities.

The most prominent was Victor Schertzinger who became a noted Hollywood movie writer, director and producer in the 1920s. His first major Schertzinger Studio film, "The Kingdom Within," played at Hersker's in February 1923.

It was also on the stage of Hersker's that Mahanoy's

celebrated tenor, Jim Grady (Haughney) made his local professional debut in May 1924. He went on to a successful career on radio and in vaudeville.

Another historical moment at Hersker's was the broadcast of the first local radio station in September 1926. For one week, all radios in town were tuned to station WKBG, Mahanoy City, Pa., which presented a long list of local singing, instrumental and oratorical talent. The station was sponsored by the Record-American and went off the air after that one-week stint.

THE OBITUARY of Mrs. Hersker revealed the following information about her:

She was born Christina Speidel in Sladelfingen, Germany, on May 24, 1838, and came to America with her parents in 1853, settling at Jeansville, Luzerne County. She married John Hersker in 1857 and came to Mahanoy City where she remained until 1920. In that year she moved to 221 S. 51st St., Philadelphia, where she was residing at the time her death.

In addition to the theatre in Mahanoy City, the family had similar interests in Hazleton.

Mrs. Hersker gave birth to 12 children, nine of whom survived her: Christina Knoblauch, Tillie, Emily, John, William and Louis Hersker, Philadelphia; Mary Klinger and Harry Hersker, Hazleton; Philadelphia; Annie Lloyd, Mahanoy City.

She, her husband and some other members of the family are buried in the family plot in the special fenced-off section of the little cemetery beside Saint Peter's Church in Locust Valley.

THE LAST years of the Hersker building saw it occupied as a furniture store by Morton Fogel. Like the Kaier Opera House some 60 years earlier, the last vestiges of the Hersker show place were wiped off Mahanoy City's map in a spectacular fire.

Today, the many people who patronize the Stop N Go store probably have little or no inkling of the history behind the ground on which they tread.