



GAYETY THEATRE TOOK ITS NAME FROM A TORONTO BURLESQUE THEATRE IN 1928

H. David Vuckson

Collingwood's historic Gayety Theatre, now a performing arts centre and modern version of the Victorian era Grand Opera House takes its name from a burlesque theatre in Toronto and for at least twenty years from 1928 to the late 1940's, the building sported an enormous vertical sign and a beautiful curving marquee with a total of 1500 light bulbs all transplanted from the Toronto theatre. It was the biggest blaze of light on the main street of Collingwood and must have given the theatre's electric meter a good workout every time it was turned on, delighting the Public Utilities Commission.

The Toronto Gayety Theatre operated from 1909 to 1927. It was advertised in its day as "The Best Show In Town". It was one of two principal burlesque theatres in Toronto in the early 20th Century, the other being the Star at 23 Temperance St. A map entitled "Purveyors of Amusement 1910-1920" shows the Gayety at 78-84 Richmond St. West (north side just west of Bay St.). Ironically, the Toronto Gayety closed in 1927 the same year that movies learned to "talk", bringing a major change in taste in public entertainment. When Jolson said, "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" the Toronto Gayety was doomed.

With the closure of the Toronto theatre, the owners of what was then called the "Rex" Theatre at the corner of Hurontario and Ontario Streets purchased the vertical sign and the marquee and brought them to Collingwood where they were installed in 1928. The inauguration of this light show was a major public event in town with the switch being thrown for the first time by the mayor and the famed Kiltie Band on hand to liven-up the proceedings. It must have outshone the Regent Theatre in the next block but in those days with television not even on the horizon, there were plenty of people going out for entertainment to keep both theatres prosperous for another thirty years.

The vertical sign spelling G-A-Y-E-T-Y was held in place by a massive steel structure on the roof. This can be seen on page 147 in *Butchers, Bakers & Building the Lakers*. The steel structure itself required a number of guy wires to keep it secure because the vertical sign it supported looked so massive and heavy that it appeared it could pull the whole front of the building out into the street. Adding to the strain on the front of the building was the curving marquee which was supported by heavy steel cables anchored to the building's original brick façade from when it was a hotel.

Isabel Griffin has recorded that by the late 1940's the sign required repair; in fact, it may well have been beyond repair. This is not surprising considering it was made at least in the 1920's, or possibly even earlier, and had survived multiple seasons of rain, snow, cold and heat. Perhaps it had become unsafe due to rust or metal fatigue or deterioration of the electric wiring. In any case, the vertical sign was the first to go. A view of Hurontario St. on page 104 in *Butchers, Bakers...* shows the vertical sign gone while the supporting steel framework on the roof and the curving marquee are still in place. In this view the rooftop steel frame appears to be supporting a radio antenna (perhaps for "Brown's Radio Cabs" across the street). When all the old signage and supports were finally removed, the Hurontario St. façade and a portion around the corner on Ontario St. received an additional layer of new bricks and the present vertical sign and frosted glass marquee, familiar to all who pass by, were erected.

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