



THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE WAS ONCE THE COMMUNITY GATHERING PLACE

By H. David Vuckson

In the lengthy Victorian era and the shorter Edwardian one, many towns large and small built a community auditorium that was frequently called “The Grand Opera House”. The title looked even more impressive in print with a letter ‘e’ added onto the word “Grand”. In an era when “play acting” on stage was still associated with immoral behavior (think of the song “Life Upon the Wicked Stage” from Showboat), calling a community theatre an “Opera House” lent it some measure of respectability in the minds of the public. In Collingwood the Opera House was (and still is in Orillia and Meaford) part of a civic building; in Barrie the Grand Opera House was a free-standing building and was owned by one of my great-grandfather’s sisters from 1905 until it was

destroyed by fire in 1926. A wide range of events were held in these facilities including stage plays, travelling vaudeville shows, musical concerts, lectures, public meetings, and, in Collingwood, C.C.I.'s "Commencement Exercises". The congregation of Collingwood's First Presbyterian Church held their services in the Grand Opera House for many months in 1895 while their church building was undergoing a major renovation with the adding of north and south transepts, a gallery, and the installation of the first pipe organ.

In Collingwood the Lindsay Brothers, Charles C. and Sandford H., were the lessees and managers at the time of the 1894 Board of Trade Report on the town's progress. My mother once told me what a sense of wonder and anticipation it was as a child to climb the stairs to the Opera House. The entrance archway into the Arena (since 1948) was not the entrance into the Opera House: vintage photos clearly show that archway to be a large window for a store; one photo does indicate there was a separate side entrance with a staircase that led to the auditorium on the second and third floor levels. An alley containing market stalls ran underneath

the middle of the building (some called it “The Arcade”) and a hoistway above this passage was the means whereby heavy objects like scenery and pianos could be lifted up from a wagon or truck into the theatre with block and tackle attached to a heavy timber or metal frame. The Grand Opera House occupied approximately the western half of the Arena. Its exterior rear (east) wall, bordered on the lane that once ran between Simcoe and Ontario Streets and is visible in the top photo on pg. 173 in the book, *Ordeal By Fire* where the Town Hall clock tower can be seen peeking over the roof of the Opera House. The outline of the elevation of the Opera House roof may still be visible high up on the west wall of the Arena interior. The balance of the space now occupied by the Arena, stretching right out to Ste. Marie St. was the Market Square.

The 1894 Board of Trade report boasted various capacities for the Grand Opera House: seating for 1200, but, under pressure, 1400 could be squeezed in, and “Fifteen or sixteen hundred have been in the Auditorium at one time”. You have to wonder if the extra 400 people were sitting in the aisles and hanging from the

ceiling and whether the Fire Chief was out of town that day. The only known photo of the interior, taken from the stage and looking to the rear of the room shows a formal event. The orchestra pit railing is just visible, the balcony is visible, and the décor is rather plain: grand, not grande. The exterior photo mentioned above shows the one metal fire escape that was required by the 1887 Fire Escape Act. The same photo shows the 1896 bell tower for the Fire Dept. right outside the north wall of the Opera House. Since this bell could ring at any time [until it was taken down in 1936] it would be heard inside the auditorium. By comparison, the Town Hall clock tower had neither clock nor bell and stood empty for over 60 years until 1951 when a private citizen donated the clock and bell to the Town.

Christine Cowley's landmark history book *Butchers, Bakers and Building the Lakers* (pg. 147) reproduces the program for a concert by the 48th Highlanders Band in the Grand Opera House on August 1, 1904. Part way down is the following connection to my ancestors: "International Contest between Englishman, Scotchman, Irishman and Frenchman (5 minutes each) for Silk Hat,

denoted [sic] by R. W. O'Brien & Son, Furriers" (the dyslexic typesetter meant "donated"). My great-grandfather O'Brien and his number one son H. B. O'Brien had, since 1901, their store for Furs, Gentlemen's Furnishings and Millinery at 69 Hurontario St.

The typical orchestra in a community theatre or vaudeville house was often lead by the violinist who could make body motions similar to a conductor's baton with the neck of his violin while playing it to set the tempo and direct the other musicians. Orchestra members would typically be drawn from the best amateur musicians in town. On April 19, 1892, the Collingwood Orpheus Minstrels gave a performance, the price of admission being 25, 35, and 50 cents. They had a 12 piece orchestra lead by W. Leggatt, plus Miss Minnie Martin, piano accompanist. The programme for that evening states, "The Piano used on this occasion is from the factory of the Uxbridge Piano Co. and supplied by H. Lamont, Collingwood" (Lamont was a local music dealer). In a performance by the Grand Opera House Minstrels in April 1893, the orchestra leader was "Professor Spaulding". A musical performance during the First

World War had a 12 piece orchestra plus conductor. In 1940 a public meeting was held in the Opera House to discuss the [Second World] War Situation and had the “Kiltie Band in attendance”.

The demise of the Opera House is not likely attributable to just one circumstance. Competition from radio, movies, automobiles, gramophones, and changing tastes in live entertainment all had their impact on the Box Office. In a time before air conditioning, theatres often could not operate during the summer months due to the combination of oppressive heat and, especially, the many layers of clothing people wore in earlier days. A heat wave could easily render the building unusable for some time, seriously cutting into the revenue. The building may also have become run down due to lack of funds for maintenance during the lean years of the 1930’s Depression and the shortages of World War II. By the 1940’s it likely did not meet building codes for fire and electrical requirements and the cost to upgrade it would have been uneconomical. One person told me the Opera House had become a “fire trap” and this would have sealed its fate for what was to come next. The same man

also told me that there wasn't a piano in the Opera House and that he had personally experienced the job of hoisting a piano up into the theatre from below when one was needed.

As Scotty Carmichael has recorded, there was a move by the sporting element in town to build a new arena and the question was put to the people in a 1947 referendum which passed. After so many years of depression and war there was a pent-up demand for things new. The old Grand Opera House wasn't so grand anymore, so down it came to make way for the Arena which opened in late 1948 boasting an ice surface the same size as that of Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. Fortunately for Collingwood, the Arena roof trusses are of steel and the local arena escaped being condemned like so many other Ontario arenas that, in the 1970's, had laminated roof beams that started to delaminate.

With the Opera House gone, in the 1950's there was no suitable civic-owned venue to stage concerts and plays so for a number of years after the new (1954) Collegiate was built at Cameron St., the "Gymnatorium" was used

for “Community Concerts” and for shows like the musical comedy revue “Spring Thaw”. It is a large, ground level room of easy access but the audience sat either on hard stacking chairs on the flat gym floor, or on the pull-out bleachers intended for watching basketball games--- functional, yes, but far from ideal as a theatre. It is most unfortunate that other uses could not be found for the old (1925) Hume St. Collegiate building after it closed as a school (asbestos notwithstanding, at least two other, much older school buildings in town--King George and Connaught-- are still standing and have been repurposed and, it appears, the Victoria School Annex is to be similarly incorporated into a new residential development). With the addition of an elevator shaft on the north side of the 1925 C.C.I. building and modern washrooms installed in the classroom space immediately opposite, its second floor auditorium could have been used for concerts, lectures, meetings, etc.

Now the reinvented Gayety Theatre serves as a venue for live stage productions, meetings, lectures, movies, talent shows, etc. Collingwood once again has an Opera House

right on the main street, just half a block away from the site of the original. Long may it flourish!

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C .where he works as a piano tuner while maintaining a keen interest in the history of his hometown.