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**THE
CENTRAL CITY
OPERA HOUSE
A 100 YEAR HISTORY**

by
CHARLIE H. JOHNSON, JR.

with an Introduction
by

Miss Lillian Gish

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Stage panel as restored by Allen True.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Mrs. Gertrude A. Johnson, whose interest in the past taught me to love history, and my uncle, Mr. Ingwald Sanders, who taught me the dearness of time.

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CHARLIE H. JOHNSON, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the telephone calls I've ever received, the one I remember most occurred in 1932. At the time I was living with my invalid mother in an apartment overlooking the East River in New York City. Earlier that evening I had dined with George Jean Nathan and Carlotta and Eugene O'Neill. After they had gone, Mrs. Margeret Carrington, Walter Huston's sister and vocal coach to John Barrymore, called.

In a rush came the following: How would I like to go to the second oldest theatre in America, the one that Modjeska had opened in the 1880's, as Camille. Robert Edmond Jones would be in charge. The theatre was two miles above sea level. We would rehearse there for six weeks before opening — three weeks living in one of the beautiful homes in Denver before moving on to higher ground in Central City to play Camille. I would be paid \$1000 a week for rehearsals as well as the run of the play.

Mrs. Carrington added that we would open the night of the full moon and all the governors from the surrounding states would arrive in stagecoaches dressed in the costumes of the same period as our play. The seats would be \$100, but you weren't allowed to buy one if your ancestors had not come west in covered wagons. Bobby Jones would have his choice of the furniture, rugs, and jewels of all the first families of Denver.

When I hung up I said to Mother, "I didn't know Mrs. Carrington drank."

It all came true and *Camille* re-opened the Central City Opera House in 1932. Even my borrowed jewelry became a reality and I will always remember the very large guard with his two six-shooters stationed backstage to protect the gems. One night during my death scene I glanced into the wings and there the guard sat with his guns on his lap with tears rolling down his cheeks.

Oh, the many memories of Central City. Do read on . . .

Lillian Gish
New York City
1980

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The new boom town — Central City in the mid-1860's. Note the small white house in the left center of the picture. Next to it, just up Eureka Street, Pollock's Livery Stable was later built.
COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The boom in full swing! Central City in the early 1870's before the Teller House was built. The long wooden structure just above the center of the picture was probably Pollock's Livery Stable. In front of it and to the right can be seen the back of the white house in the first illustration.
COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

When Gregory found the veins of ore,
From whence the placer gold,
Long lines of struggling, striving men
. . . looking back, we live again . . .

The population and development of the great American West was founded upon two powerful attractions: land and gold — and it was gold which provided the seed from which Central City would eventually spring. By the late 1850's the California Gold Rush had faded into the memory of most Americans as an opportunity missed. It was now only another of the golden legends which had drawn them westward — seeking the myth of unending opportunity as much as the material riches it promised. However, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains just west of the joining of Cherry Creek and the Platte River, yet another golden American legend was about to be born.

There John H. Gregory knelt down beside a cold mountain stream and the glint of gold caught his eye. His historic find developed into the 1859 Colorado Gold Rush. Word of his discovery spread fast and thousands of Americans, thirsty for yet another Golconda to nourish their nation-building instincts, responded immediately. Gold is a magnet that draws men: "From all over the country they rushed to Gregory Gulch to scratch and burrow in the hills."

"The tide swept up the gulches. Fortunes opened to . . . pick, drill and placer pan." Gregory's Gulch, the center of the earliest gold-seeking activity, provided the setting for a small city which soon developed there. Saloons, of course, appeared. They were followed soon by stores, boarding houses, and other businesses sustaining the gold-seeking and mining activity.

But the men who came to Gregory's Gulch were not soulless materialists. In their hearts they longed for more than financial gain. "The gold diggers of 1860 weren't all cultural illiterates." The origins of these men accounted for this: "Thick-thewed men from Cornwall, Ireland, and Germany; men from the North countries . . . came to work in the mines." In addition to talent as hard-rock miners, these men brought with them a strong tradition of folk music. This "explained why folk-singing was so popular in the new mining town. In all their home countries, folk art has flourished for centuries."

Life in Gregory Gulch, Central City as the mining camp came to be called, was not easy: "the hurly-burly of life was lived in segments of incredible

toil, boisterous relaxation and bare-knuckled fighting." While the spring and summer had been warm, the miners came to realize with the onset of winter that they faced some real hardship: "For months . . . the town was virtually snowbound and lashed by mountain winds." Even essential activities were affected by the cruel, cold winter: "Often . . . burial would have to be postponed from winter until spring, so impenetrably hard was the ground frozen."

As early as May, 1860 — only a year after Gregory made his strike — theatre developed in Central City as an important means of relieving the boredom and harshness of life. In Central City's first decade, theatrical and musical entertainment grew and flourished — becoming important in the everyday life of the mining town at the center of what was soon called "The Richest Square Mile on Earth." "The fare it served was marked by wide selection; it was a business venture intended to appeal as broadly as possible to the . . . tastes of the miners." Nevertheless, "The theatre filled a need and was popular . . . As the town became established and society began to take shape, the theatre became even more firmly rooted, reaching its early zenith in the last years of the Civil War."

An important figure in the early Central City theatre was Jack S. Langrishe, called the "father of Colorado Territorial theatre." Langrishe began as an actor in Central City, but soon developed into a theatrical entrepreneur who not only directed plays and musicales, but also produced and arranged for their touring through the rough mining towns of frontier Colorado. His theatrical activities in Central City continued throughout the 1860's and later.

Life in the gold-rush town was always rough and ready, and violence was often not far beneath the surface. The opening of Central City's first important permanent theatre, the Montana, was itself marked by violent emotions and gunplay. The day before it was opened in mid-summer 1862, its owner and operator shot and killed his competitor in a love affair.

Later in the 60's Jack Langrishe produced a locally-written comic opera at the Montana broadly satirizing the personality and character of a well-known Central City man. Rehearsals of such hilarious material could hardly be kept secret, and soon the subject himself got word of it. Opening night promised trouble as "the man being lampooned promised to bust up the show with his bodyguards. Only the intervention of the local militia, placed with fixed bayonets between the dresscircle and the gallery, kept peace." And, in keeping with theatrical tradition, the "show went on."

By the late 60's it became evident that outside influences would affect importantly the financial viability of Central City: short-term depressions and

changes in national monetary policy were bound to have local effects. These temporary setbacks resulted in the departure of many of the gold-rush "fly-by-nighters" and created conditions in which family men had to develop accessory occupations to survive. Therefore, these problems tended to stabilize the population and prepare the residents of Central City for a development of community awareness and pride which was to flower in the next decade.

When times were flush, however, theatrical productions reaped not only capacity audiences, but also financial reward: "Pay was good (the box office obligingly had a scale in hand to weigh out gold dust if coinage was short) and tips — nuggets and gold dust pokes thrown onstage — gave an added perk."

By the end of the 60's Central City's days of infancy were over, and the 70's marked its development as a city with a personality and character all its own: "Central City's cultural growth progressed rapidly after 1870. Those who arrived in the seventies were of a more solid sort than the early adventurers, and more interested in establishing a cultural foundation in the rough mining camp."

The first years of the 70's saw increasing dramatic and musical activity, both professional and amateur. Such important plays of the time as *East Lynne*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Our American Cousin*, and *Rip Van Winkle* were produced along with occasional Shakespearean dramas.

1872 marked the arrival of the railroad from Denver at Black Hawk, a mile from Central City. In expectation of the increase in travelers and visitors, some prominent Central City businessmen had already begun making plans for a fine hotel. Spearheaded by Colorado Senator Henry Moore Teller, work on this hotel began in June, 1871. "Excavation moved at a turtle's pace until July, when a cloudburst accomplished in three hours what otherwise would have been the work of days."

Work on the hotel continued into mid-summer of 1872 as winter weather brought work to a standstill. Native stone was utilized for its construction, and "The furnishings were exquisite — walnut and damask and the finest Brussels carpets were in each of the 150 rooms."

Costing about \$105,000, the new hotel was named the Teller House after the Colorado senator. The structure was four stories high and was supplied with water from its own springs. The Teller House grand opening took place in late June with 100 prominent Central City and Colorado citizens in attendance. Speeches, toasts, dinners and a grand ball marked the occasion.

President Ulysses S. Grant visited Central City in 1873, having come by train to Black Hawk, thence by carriage to Central, and stayed at the Teller

House. In preparation for this important event and to mark Central City in the Great Man's memory, a special walkway was created to lead Grant from his carriage to the main doors of the Teller House. It was constructed of silver ingots valued at \$12,000, each of which was marked either with Grant's name or that of a member of his cabinet. It was said to have been a dazzling sight and duly impressive to the President. (In later years the Teller House was also host to such notable Central City visitors as P.T. Barnum, Mark Twain, and the African explorer, H.M. Stanley.)

That same year Central City residents took pride in local amateur productions of a shortened *Il Trovatore* and a play. These productions furthered a growing sense of pride and community spirit: "Central City had awakened to its own potentialities, and the local editor, feeling 'a deep pride in our little city, perched among the mountains,' warned all outside troupes that it would be difficult to eclipse local talent." Later the newspaper found another way to express the pride residents felt in their artistic achievement: it pointed out there was "really two cultures in America — Boston, of course — and Central City."

... looking back, we live again
And hear the flaming roar,
When fire swept clean the business part
In eighteen seventy four.

As was true of many western mining towns in those days, Central City had a Chinese settlement, and it was at the feet of these Chinese that guilt for the disastrous 1874 fire was placed. It was on May 22, 1874, when Chinese residents, chasing the devil away by burning joss sticks and incense, let their ceremonials get out of control. From the Chinese section, the fire rapidly spread throughout the city. "In six hours Central City lay in ashes with the exceptions of three stone and brick buildings. One of the survivors was the Teller House." Destroyed in this fire was the Montana Theatre. The only "theatre" which escaped the fire was a small auditorium with a Lilliputian six-foot stage.

The spirit of the mountain city was not broken, however, for within a month a troupe of local amateurs was joyously singing in the cantata, "Flower Queen," to encourage residents to rebuild and go on.

In a city theatrically inclined as Central City, makeshift theatre accommodations could only be temporary. In 1875 H.M. Teller sponsored the construction of a new building to house the town armory. The second floor was to be a theatre. It was called the Belvidere. Housed in a brick structure, it measured "40 feet by 55 feet, was equipped with plain oak chairs, a stage, and seven sets of scenery."



Central City before the fire. The just-completed Teller House hotel stands prominently in the upper right of the photo with the front of Pollock's Livery Stable projecting just behind it.
COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The still-smoking ruins of Central City after the fire of 1874. This picture, unfortunately, does not show the area of The Teller House.
COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

It was expected this new theatre would provide a strong stimulus for renewed dramatic and musical activity in Central City, and this was not in error. In the next two years there was a flourishing of such events to equal or better any in the past. Langrishe returned with several plays, amateur productions were regular and well-attended; artists and entertainers of every kind were brought to town. Of one musical group it was written, they "were good enough to bring down the house . . . the audience was drawn largely from the best classes of people, who were highly appreciative of the program."

Especially important to local residents were the amateur productions. The year 1877 was marked by one of the most outstanding of these. That year two Central City residents visited Chicago and saw a production of Michael William Balfe's *Bohemian Girl*. They were so enthralled, they decided to produce it in Central City utilizing local talent. As they put together the production, word of its color and excitement spread throughout the town. "The coming attraction was advertised in neighboring towns, so when the opening night arrived there were people in attendance from Denver, Boulder, and Golden."

Produced by the Central City Choral Union and the Amateur Company, *Bohemian Girl* appeared at the Belvidere Theatre and was an instantaneous success. As a reporter from Denver wrote, "No city in Colorado can compare with Central in the line of musical and dramatic talent." Originally scheduled for a single weekend in April, the audience response and acclaim for *Bohemian Girl* was so great that another weekend of performances had to be scheduled.

"The community was stirred. There must be an opera house worthy of such talent." Because "The *Bohemian Girl*" was produced so successfully the residents felt an opera house necessary to the proper staging of future productions was definitely required." Action was called for, and the theatre-conscious residents of Central City were about to undertake the construction of an opera house which would be considered, even a hundred years later, to be one of the most unique and significant of its kind in the United States.

In vision clear I see again
Those days of long ago.
Where once a livery stable stood,
Now, house for passing show.

It was not long after the popular *Bohemian Girl* that action for the creation of a new and grand opera house for Central City began to take form. Within a couple of weeks a meeting was called to focus community interest in the project and look into means to finance it. With prominent Central

City resident Henry R. Wolcott present, the meeting set up a committee "to solicit subscriptions of twelve or thirteen thousand dollars to build 'an attractive and elegant affair' of brick and stone." Another committee was appointed to look into possible sites for the structure and consider its architecture.

From these meetings grew the Gilpin County Opera House Association. The Association's board of directors consisted of Henry R. Wolcott; William Fullerton, an attorney; Dr. William Edmundson, a physician; Thomas I. Richman, a mine superintendent; and a merchant, Ben Wisbart. Within a short time something over \$12,000 was collected from residents in amounts ranging upwards from \$5.00.

The site and planning committee was also making headway. Early plans for an opera house were drawn up by local artist Charles St. George Stanley. He had already decorated the Teller House bar with murals and was also something of a drama critic. His opera house plan, however, was rejected as certain members of the Association disliked his characteristic imperious attitude. The majority of Association members also felt that professional architectural advice for such a significant project was more suitable.

The May 19th Central City *Weekly Register* reported, "the money for the New Opera House (\$15,000) had been subscribed and at a meeting of the shareholders . . . it was decided to purchase the property now occupied by Thos. Pollock's livery stable . . . Work will begin as soon as suitable plans and specifications shall have been adopted." The selection of the livery stable site caused some consternation as it was considered a landmark itself, having been there since Central's earliest settlement in 1860. However, it was finally decided that the new opera house would be a significant landmark to replace the livery stable.

Shortly afterwards, Denver architect Robert S. Roeschlaub was selected to draw up plans for the opera house. Originally from Bavaria, Roeschlaub had earned a reputation in Denver for his architectural expertise. He had designed the Boston Building, the Equitable Building, one of Denver's most distinctive business blocks, and a number of public school buildings. Thus, it was expected that an original and beautiful opera house would result which would suitably satisfy the culture-hungry residents of the burgeoning Colorado mining town.

A June 9th newspaper reported, "At the last meeting concerning the building of the Opera House . . . the plans and specifications submitted by the architect from Denver were accepted . . . Ground will be broken for the foundation on Monday next." The groundbreaking actually took place June 14, 1877.

Considering the building materials to be utilized in the new opera house, as one writer described it, "These people did not send their minions running to the ends of the earth for materials. They did not order freighters loaded with mahogany from Honduras. They just looked about them." The sights they saw inspired them in several ways: The ugliness of the mines reinforced their desires to create something beautiful, while the materials and textures they saw in the mountains provided them with specific ideas about the character of the building itself. "They saw great bare mountains, pockmarked with prospector's holes, and around them piled high stone hills. They saw fine dry walls holding the sliding earth from their streets, and they saw undreamed of color. Very well — they would build with the materials at hand."

Excitement surrounding the impending construction of the new opera house gained attention throughout the state as it would be a significant contribution to the state-wide cultural scene. The Denver *Rocky Mountain News* kept Denverites regularly informed of construction progress with brief reports. Two of these appeared in the July 13th issue: The first announced "The foundations of the Central City opera house are completed." The second noted, "The new fifteen thousand dollar opera house at Central City is in rapid progress of construction, the granite walls having risen eight or ten feet above the foundation the past week." Mention was also made that the manager, "Mr. Forrester will dedicate it with a new company when finished."

In late July or early August there were some delays in construction, but the September 20th *News* later reported, "The new opera house at Central City is again under progress and will soon be completed." Construction still moved slowly. Nevertheless, "The Opera House at Central is rapidly approaching completion. By Saturday night of this week the mason work will be finished, when the institution will be turned over to the carpenters for finishing."

The Association had selected local builders Will and Peter McFarlane to manage opera house construction. They hired the stone-masonry firm of Mullen & Sartori for the masonry work. In line with the desire of the Association, Mullen & Sartori selected native granite for the stone facing on the building. This local stone was not only plentiful, but it was solidly beautiful and gracefully complemented the rough-hewn but culturally-inclined city itself. The walls they constructed on the facade of the building were four feet thick, but fashioned with a style that belied their weight and solidity. The structure's sides were to be completed with brick.

Initial construction work took until late autumn, 1877. As the plans took shape it became evident that the original subscription would not cover the

full opera house construction costs. To discuss this problem, an Association meeting was called in mid-November. Concerning the financial situation, it was pointed out more money would "be required for the completion of the entire enterprise including the cost of building and furniture and of the land." Thus, "It was proposed to raise the required \$6,000 by mortgaging the Opera House for that amount." Some discussion of this ensued, but the proposition finally carried. This mortgage was taken up by Association board member William Fullerton, who was to turn over the necessary \$6,000 forthwith.

This necessary matter taken care of, insuring the completion of the opera house, further report was given regarding its character: "When finished this theatre will be without an equal from the Missouri river to Salt Lake when convenience and excellence of construction are taken into consideration." It was also pointed out that while the costs of the structure were admittedly high, they must, in reality, be assumed to be "remarkably low considering the character and material of the work."

Spurred by the encouragement of additional funding, planning was already under way to initiate the new opera house. The November 29th *News* reported, "The Amateur Singers of Central propose to open the new opera house . . . with the opera of 'Martha.'"

Although construction was progressing, its pace, due to winter weather, was not as rapid as expected. Nevertheless, as the building began to take on something of its final form, anticipation of its beauty was on the rise. The December 15, 1877 *News* announced, "The new opera house at Central City, now approaching completion, is said to be a perfect little gem, both in exterior and interior, architecture and embellishment." Also pointed out was the expectation that "it will stand when finished as one of the handsomest public edifices in the state." And, more importantly, "having the most beautiful auditorium to be found between Chicago and San Francisco."

This same article detailed some of the opera's features: It was to seat approximately 700. The stage was the largest in the state, and the seating area was sloped gently to provide for the most advantageous sight lines. "From the vestibule, which is quite large, two broad winding stairways lead to the gallery, which extends across the building in front, but is not carried along the sides to the proscenium." Further, "the ceiling is to be elaborately frescoed by the celebrated San Francisco artist John C. Massman who painted the interior of the Central Presbyterian church in Denver. Those who have seen the designs say they are very beautiful." Several artistic stage scenes were also to be completed to provide the most exciting backdrops for opera house performances. "All the furnishings of the establishment are to be the best that money can buy."

The grand opening was now expected to take place "about the middle of January." Planning for the opening performances had progressed also: "two entertainments will be given, the first, musical, the second, dramatic, in which all the amateur talent in Central will engage. Both troupes are in active rehearsal for the event, which is expected to eclipse any amateur exhibitions ever given in the state." The Central City opera house opening created a stir throughout Colorado: "Preparations are . . . on a grand scale and it will . . . create a lively interest among the social circles of all adjacent communities, including Denver, so that the seating capacity of Central's . . . finest triumph will be crowded to the utmost."

The January 9th, 1878 *Daily Register* printed another enthusiastic progress report which provided further explanation for the slow progress of construction: "Mr. Roeschlaub, the architect, has given the building his personal supervision, and it having been carefully and slowly erected, has given him an opportunity to see that each detail of his plans was carefully carried out."

Included was some additional information about the opera house: Heat was to be provided by two hot air furnaces. "The size of the building is 55 x 115 feet, with a stage 43 x 52 feet." "The dress circle and parquette will be furnished with patent opera chairs, and will seat about 500 persons. The gallery will seat about 250 persons, and will be furnished very comfortably." Praise was also given McFarlane & Company and Mullen & Sartori for their fine construction work.

Opera House lighting was a matter of premier importance: For stage lighting there were fifty kerosene lamps across the stage front for footlights. The intensity of these footlights was controlled by a complex mechanical interlocking of their individual controls so they could be dimmed or brightened in unison. The centerpiece of the auditorium itself was a massive chandelier containing 100 kerosene lamps. It was mounted on a rope and pulley system so that before performances it could be lowered, the chimneys polished, and the wicks trimmed and lit. When fully lit and raised back to the ceiling it would form a dazzling display of light.

Pride in the soon-to-be-completed Opera House was unmistakable: "We soon will have by far the best and most convenient Opera House in the West . . . with all the modern improvements, thereby making it comfortable and pleasant for our amusement loving public as well as making it possible for dramatic troupes to present their pieces upon the stage in the best of style."

This achievement, however, was not inexpensive: "It is now thought that the building when completed, furnished and lighted . . . will cost at least \$20,000 and perhaps more." Public spirit was high and support, both

psychological and financial, for the Association and its Opera House was not lacking: "the stockholders do not grumble, but are ready to 'plank up' the remainder of the money needed for while the cost is great the building has been carefully constructed, and not a cent of the money paid out but what there has been a full return either in material or labor."

Finally, the opening date was set back again: The Opera House "will be fully completed about the first of March."

As Opera House completion came closer, controversy arose over the production to open it. The earlier-announced *Martha* did not meet with general acceptance. As the February 19th *Register* reported, "We have been informed that a few changes in the programmes of the concert have become necessary, on account of some members of the society; however, we are assured that the compositions substituted . . . are equally as good and classic."

Rather than staging one opera, representative of a single European nationality, the mixed national origins of the Central City residents encouraged a musical program representative of several nationalities. Thus, "The programme is varied in style — the Italian, French, German and English schools are represented thereon." English was their common language, so "All songs, duets, and choruses, however, will be sung in English, in order that the audience may appreciate the relationship of the music to the sentiment." The opening concert as a whole was to be dedicated to a yet higher purpose — one demonstrative of the cultural pretensions and interests found in Central City:

The people of our country should be educated up to a love of art for its own sake. Such concerts as the one which we soon will have the pleasure to listen to, will assist to discern and appreciate the difference between such music which merely tickles the ear and ministers to gratification or amusement, and such lofty compositions in which the souls of the great masters of harmony have found expression.

Final work on the opera house was the subject of two stories in *Denver's News*: The first, on February 26th, began, "A peep into the opera house . . . reveals the fact that it will be ready for occupation in a short time." Of special interest was the gas lighting system: "The gas fixtures are in place, the center chandelier (has) thirty-two lights, twenty beneath a reflector surmounted by twelve glass lights, being the handsomest and most costly article of the kind ever brought to this section. The side brackets contain eighteen lights besides twelve in the gallery." Stage lighting was also important: "The stage will be lit up with sixty burners altogether."

Beyond lighting, other stage elements received attention: "The drop curtain, which is now in place, represents a balcony scene on the Rhine, with

the river and an ancient castle in perspective. It is a magnificent piece of work." Stage settings at that time were generalized scenes utilized over and over in any number of productions. Thus, they were often the occasion for some highly artistic and imaginative work, as they provided practically all of the sense of time and place for the drama. "The stage at present contains seven sets of scenery, parlor, forest, garden, street, papal chamber, prison and kitchen." More specifically, "The garden set is . . . a perspective view with a fountain and summer-house in the distance, and the chamber sets, which will be used for the ducal palace scene, reflect the greatest on the artist."

Also important, of course, were backstage accommodations: "The four dressing rooms, two on each wing, will be furnished in accordance with the rest of the building."

The second story, published February 27th, was the first announcement of the "Inauguration of Central's New Opera House." It began, "The News takes great pleasure in directing the attention of its readers to the announcement . . . of the inauguration exercises in honor of the completion of the new Opera House at Central City."

Because of the dual importance of drama and music to Central City residents, the Opera House was set to have two opening nights, "On Monday evening (March 4th, 1878) there will be given under the auspices of the amateur society a grand vocal and instrumental concert, to be followed on Tuesday evening by the popular drama of 'School' and the famous farce 'Cool As A Cucumber.'"

So important were these events to be that "The Colorado Central railroad will run excursion trains to Black Hawk . . . from Denver and points between for parties wishing to attend."

Elsewhere in the *News* and advertisement appeared for this grand opening. It read, "This recently finished Opera House will be opened and dedicated to the Amateur Society, of Central City, with a GRAND CONCERT of INSTRUMENTAL and VOCAL MUSIC . . . Comprising a selection of OPERATIC CHORUSES, Solos, Duets, Trios, etc., From the works of Weber, Wagner, Verdi, Bellini, Rossini, Schubert, Beriot, etc."

While this opening concert promised to be lengthy, the following night's program was to be even longer. *School* was four acts, and *Cool As A Cucumber* was about as long. The parts in both plays were taken by members of the Amateur Society — their instruments from the night before left behind and now donning greasepaint.

Reserved seats for each evening cost one dollar, and gallery seating was 75 cents. According to the *Evening Call*, "The rush for reserved seats . . . is unprecedented in the history of amusements in Central."

Visitors to Central City for the grand opening began arriving on Saturday for the Monday event!

In seventy eight this OPERA HOUSE,
The finest in the state,
Was imagined, then built, and now
We are here to . . . dedicate.

If ever the people of Central had reason to feel proud of the energy and enterprise of the first city of the mountains, it was last night upon the opening of her magnificent opera house, which today stands the finest temple of the Muses west of the Missouri, and far ahead of anything of the kind ever projected in the Rocky Mountains.

Thus began the March 5th *Evening Call* story heralding the grand opening of the Central City Opera House. Excitement was at a peak, "As the vast audience filed into the beautiful theatre, an audience representing . . . wealth, beauty and intelligence . . . many were the expressions of delight and astonishment which fell from the lips of those who for the first time viewed what may be looked upon as Central's pride and which is a credit to Colorado." Among others in attendance was Baby Doe, later to become the sweetheart of silver millionaire H. A. W. Tabor.

The sight of the Opera House interior itself was breathtaking: "The beautiful fresco work brought out in bold relief by the scintillations of one hundred gas jets, the handsome drop curtain, and the house filled to its utmost capacity, with fair women in rich and costly dresses, and brave men, was a sight seldom seen, and certainly not to be forgotten in these mountain regions."

The evening's performance was introduced by an ode to the Muse of the Arts — but also directed towards the Opera House audience:

When only the wild winds of heaven made
music among these hills . . .
When only the eye of the red man looked on
with a sullen gleam.
Of the scene that is now before us the gods,
and they only, could draw
This bright little home of the Muses which
was only a dream of yore . . .
We invoke the goddess Euterpe, the muse . . .
You, from the beautiful cities that stand in
the plains below,
Who have gazed at us often at sunset when
these mountains were all aglow;
You have climbed up our wonderful canon . . .
So accept us as children of nature, not wonders
of genius or art,
And let your censure be softened by
the glow of a generous heart.



The Grand Opening program, 1878.
DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY WESTERN
HISTORY DEPARTMENT



Central City rebuilds. Eureka Street with the Teller House standing at the left center of the photo. The low-steepled building on the right is the Methodist Church facing the site of the soon-to-be-built Opera House.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Culture's crowning achievement in boom-town Central City — the Opera House in its just-completed Victorian glory! To the left, between the Opera House and the Teller House can be seen the small white house visible in earlier illustrations.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

After this invocation to the new Opera House and the performances to follow, the concert began with "The Poet and Peasant Overture" by Von Suppe. The backdrop for the concert was the parlor scene. According to the *Daily Register*, "When the curtain was raised for the first time . . . the applause was almost deafening, and it was some minutes before the opening overture could begin, and when it *did* begin the harmony was so great that to a person, it sounded almost one instrument."

Denver and Central City newspapers both gave considerable coverage to the grand opening concert and discussed individually each of the performer's efforts. While the overall tone of these reviews were acclamatory, even the excitement of the event did not mar the writers' critical senses. Thus, occasionally there were noted such comments as "Mr. Young has a very charming voice, but in a room the size of the opera house, it is too much of a strain on him, but in a parlor it would be better." And, "I Fear No Foe," a bass solo by Robert Carson, was well sung, but to us there is no music in a bass solo. His voice is good, but would sound better in a quartette." The *News* also pointed out the entire program was "too long."

Generally, however, praise for the musicians, performances, and selections was the order of the day: "The programme was successfully rendered throughout, and there was no lack of enthusiasm from the rise of the curtain until its descent at the conclusion of the closing number." As summed up in the *News*, "Central City can and does boast the best musical society in the state, and last night's performance showed its capabilities to an extent that pleased and surprised even those who were prepared to hear something out of the usual line of amateur performances."

"The final chorus . . . was rendered . . . and at 11:05 the first audience that ever assembled in the new opera house dispersed, feeling perfectly satisfied with the evening's enjoyment."

It was noted, however, that there was one problem: "The only drawback of the evening was the poor working of the gas." The *News* said it "took occasion to grow dim and 'uncanny like' two or three times." Such problems as this were expected in a new building, and it was assumed they would be solved the following evening.

The new Opera House met with general approval and the expectation that many equally satisfying entertainments would follow. "Now that Central has a beautiful palace of music, let the people all unite in making it one of the solid institutions of the state."

As a sidelight, the *News* provided its readers with some additional information about the Opera House construction. Its final cost had come to approximately \$23,000.

The exterior is massive masonry, plain but imposing. Four outer doors, opening direct upon the sidewalks, and level with the street, lead to a vestibule the entire width of the building. From the vestibule two chimneys lead to the large and very comfortable gallery, which is swung across the rear of the auditorium . . . a good arrangement . . . The gallery seats are the best in the house both for seeing and hearing, though there is not a bad seat anywhere.

On its architectural detail, the writer commented, "There is not much 'gingerbread' about the wood work of the interior, which is 'neat not gaudy.' "

The decoration was given special attention:

. . . the frescoing is fine, very fine, as elegant in its line as anything in the country. The centre piece is an 'open dome' and one can almost imagine he is looking through the roof at the sky overhead, with angry clouds hurrying by . . . the side and corner pieces represent symbols of the various arts — music, the drama, etc.

The news concluded, "the most striking feature of the opera house is its generous proportions as compared with most western . . . theatres . . . Taken all in all it is a theatre of which any city might be proud, and it is far superior to anything Denver has or ever had."

The second opening night, that devoted to drama, was also well received. As the *News* reported, "Another large audience filled the opera house . . . to witness the grand dramatic entertainment of the Central amateurs. There were about eight hundred people present in all."

Praise was generous for the entire dramatic company: "Mr. S. has such dramatic ability and is superior to many of the professionals travelling in the west." And, "The 'Lord Beaufoy' of Mr. J. A. Thatcher stamped that gentleman as something of an artist as well as a financier." And so on.

Of the two plays presented, the first, *School*, received the most praise — it being drama, and therefore deserving serious critical consideration. The farce, *Cool As A Cucumber*, was also noted in the *News* as having been "a great success also."

Again, there was great approval of the stage and properties: "The stage was magnificently set, the mountings being of the most costly description and the wardrobe of the amateurs surpassed anything of the kind ever presented in Central. The parlor set of furniture . . . was valued at \$400, and is the property of the opera house company."

It was also indicated the lighting problems had been solved: "The gas was in good condition." Finally, the *News* pointed out "the second night was as if anything a greater success than the first, the receipts being equally as large if

not a little larger." Total receipts for both inaugural performances amounted to nearly \$2,000.

As was later written,

All the courage of the pioneers, the resolution of later settlers, and the indomitable spirit of a community devastated by fire was represented in the edifice that had been built. The culture of the mountain people, their love of theatre, their desire for the best in artistry had now a permanent representation in the form of an Opera House.

Indeed, Central was the envy of far larger communities. On March 6th, the day after the grand openings, the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* editorialized, "Citizens of Denver who attended the recent 'opening' of the Central City opera house found their admiration tinged with regret that Central should so eclipse Denver in provision for musical and dramatic entertainments." This situation was seen as especially shameful in light of the size of the two cities: "Now combined populations of Central, Black Hawk and Nevada (a neighboring town to the west) is not more than 10,000 . . . while in Denver we have 25,000 citizens and thousands . . . the very best patrons of amusements in the world." Logically, "then, Denver ought to have an opera house to seat fifteen hundred or two thousand people."

Not only was it suggested that the construction of an opera house in Denver would reflect well upon the civic responsibility of those involved, but that Denver's rapid growth would more than adequately support financially such an enterprise. Further, such an opera house could provide the impetus for the formation of an amateur opera company in Denver comparable in excellence to that in Central City.

Thus, the editorial concluded, "The idea is so eminently practicable that it seems strange that some of our enterprising citizens have not carried it into effect." The call for community action was sounded: "A good theatre ought to be 'fought for' . . . Who will make the first move to secure the prize?"

This call was not to be answered immediately, but within a few years Denver's response would have effects which were to be felt in Central City at the Opera House which inspired it. This knowledge, of course, was hidden from the excited Central City residents and Coloradans who were still reveling in the grand opening of Central's new cultural achievement.

Of the achievement of the Central City Opera House it was said later, "It was built . . . by a lavishly generous popular subscription. Not a gesture of vain-glory, but because a whole community loved good music and fine drama and it wanted it fittingly housed. Only the best could satisfy this

'Little Kingdom of Gilpin' — only the best."

In seventy eight this Opera House,
The finest in the state
Though . . . years are past,
Their names we now recall;
Some may escape our memory,
We can't remember all.

After the grand opening of the amateurs, musical and dramatic, held sway in the new Opera House for several weeks. On March 19th the *Evening Call* announced the first professional dramatic company to play the Opera House: "Announcement Extraordinary . . . Miss Fannie Louise Buckingham . . . Thursday Evening, March 21st . . . The performance will consist of Lord Byron's thrilling poem, illustrated in 3 acts and 7 tableaux, with new and gorgeous costumes, new scenery, mechanical effects and appropriate music, entitled MAZEPPA or the Wild Horse of Tartary".

As with the amateur performances, the response to *Mazeppa* was excellent: "The audience was large, very large for Central. The dress circle was comfortably filled, while the gallery was jammed," said the *Evening Call*. *Mazeppa* itself provided something of a novelty as the title role was actually male, but portrayed in this company by a woman. Thus, curiosity-seekers were drawn by the unusual nature of the performance as well as serious theatregoers.

In reviewing the performance, the *Evening Call* noted, "The salient points of the piece were applauded, the costumes were beautiful . . . and as a general thing the . . . presentation of 'Mazeppa' gave satisfaction."

March 25th saw the opening of a series of plays including *Hamlet*. On April 3rd a first again took place, burlesque came to the Opera House: "Fun, Music and Mirth . . . The Celebrated Adah Richmond Burlesque and Comedy Company." (It must be remembered that at that time burlesque was little more than another term for certain vaudeville shows.)

In mid-April another vaudeville troupe — "Madame Rentz's Female Minstrels" — played the Opera House. Judging from the *Evening Call*'s review, it may be assumed the audience that night was not the same "cultured" group commonly seen there: "Many were disappointed in the exhibition . . . (as) it did not come up to their expectations — for broad indelicacy." The reviewer strongly criticized the rougher community element which attended hoping for something more than musical talent from the "Female Minstrels."

In mid-May "The Vokes Family — The California Theatre Combination" opened performances of dramatic adaptations of Jules Verne novels, such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Expecting an even-

ing of quality drama, it seems, the Opera House audience was not entirely satisfied. The *Evening Call* opined, "The above combination drew a full house last night, much . . . in excess of what the merits of the performance deserved. . . . On the whole . . . we put the entertainment down as a flat fraud."

In late May, 1878 the Colorado Central Railroad was extended from Black Hawk to Central City. It had taken 6 years to obtain financing and build the roadbed up the tortuous route from Black Hawk to Central City. The short section of track had cost over \$100,000 to build, and the final joining of Central City to the "main line" was an important event which was celebrated with a parade, firehouse company contests, and a ball which lasted into the night. After the parade everyone crowded into the Opera House for the opening ceremonies.

Late May also brought the Opera House presentation of an accomplished blind musician: "Blind Tom — The Greatest Natural Pianist Living." The *Evening Call* reviewed: "The Blind Tom concert drew the largest and most fashionable audience which has graced the Opera House since the opening night." The audience expectations for musical entertainment were not disappointed. "It is fair to presume that the concert gave general satisfaction . . . The selections were loudly applauded and fully appreciated."

Blind Tom, however, was quickly surpassed a few nights later by a professional production of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. "Last night was the most imposing entertainment in the history of our Opera House. It forms an epoch." The production aroused dramatic expectations and fully satisfied them. "There was a fine audience both below and in the gallery and the superb acting, splendid scenery and tableaux . . . stirred the interest and enthusiasm of the audience from beginning to end." A few days later the *Evening Call* again praised this contribution to Central City culture: They had "drawn three of the largest audiences that ever gathered at the Opera House."

September brought a lecture appearance by America's most notable preacher of the day, Henry Ward Beecher, whose subject was "Hard Times."

1878 was also an election year and heralded the first of many political meetings which took place over the years in the Opera House. There was a torchlight parade through town and speeches by several statewide candidates were given later. "The immense multitude filed into the Opera House and filled the handsome edifice from pit to dome. Fair ladies filled the galleries and . . . the house fairly shook with applause."

And so the Opera House's inaugural year went on, with regular performances of many kinds to attract culture-minded Central City residents as

well as their less-cultured counterparts. The opening of the Opera House had provided Central City with not only the finest theatre in the state, but with an outlet for its cultural pretensions and talents — and in so doing, it gave visible and dramatic proof that the rough and tumble west was not a land apart, but was as cultivated and cultured as other parts of the country. It gave evidence of the community spirit of Central City residents and, at the same time, demonstrated their faith in the future. The Opera House provided a center for community activity which was not directly related to the work-a-day world, and which, therefore, proved that music and theatre were as important to life as were economic endeavors. It demonstrated the unity of Central City as an important cultural center in the frontier west and as a motivating force for the creation of a local culture both allied with and drawn from that of the most cultured cities of the rest of the world.

1879 was marked by, among other Opera House shows, the teaming up of actor Lawrence Barrett and famous westerner Buffalo Bill to present a show which had a short run in July.

Although amateur companies regularly made Opera House appearances, the show that gained the most publicity in 1880 and 1881 was presented by a troupe from Black Hawk. Proceeds from their show, "the Irish drama, 'The Peep O'Day Boys'," were used to buy marble statues of Joseph and Mary for the local Catholic Church.

An important political rally was held at the Opera House in election year 1880: "That spacious edifice was filled with ladies and gentlemen to hear the distinguished speakers." As the *Register Call* reported, Mrs. William McFarlane held forth on the piano and Central City resident and politician Henry O. Wolcott "delivered the most brilliant and argumentative address ever delivered in this section of the state."

A few days later another politician spoke there. "The auditorium of the Opera House . . . was completely filled and the aisles crowded from the proscenium to the vestibule, and the gallery was thronged. The wealth, beauty, fashion and culture of the mountains were assembled."

Vaudeville returned in June, 1881 with "Haverly's Comedy Company of Strategists" which "made a hit at the opera house." A performance of *Richard III* also took place that month along with W. E. Sheridan in the title role of *Louis XI*. "He received several calls before the curtain after each act . . . He is, without doubt, the finest tragedian on the boards here." Thus, the round continued: musicales and plays, both amateur and professional, and vaudeville shows.

Also in 1881, not to be outdone for long by their mountain neighbors, Denver responded to the call for an opera house to match that in Central City. It was answered by no less than H. A. W. Tabor, the legendary

"Silver King" whose name was known throughout the west not only for his mining successes, but for his community largess and personal life as well. Tabor decided to build the most glorious architectural achievement in Denver. So impressive and expensive was this new Denver opera house that it was called the "Tabor Grand Opera House," and it opened in Denver on September 5th.

With the opening of this new and serious rival for its prestige and talent, business at the Central City Opera House began to decline. Slowly at first, the change was soon to become more evident.

By late November the trend had become apparent to all — not the least of which was H. R. Wolcott, now the Opera House owner. The *News* announced on November 23rd, "Senator Wolcott . . . means to sell the Opera House to the county for county purposes." In explanation of this turn of events, it was noted, "For some reason Central has been given the go-by recently by traveling theatrical and amusement troops, though Central possesses a first-class Opera House, and an intelligent, generous, and appreciative public."

Further developments were reported in the December 19th *News*: "Mr. Wolcott asks \$8,000 for the property." The offer to sell had just been presented to the county commissioners. "Should the sale take place the auditorium of the theatre proper will be preserved for amusements. It will be otherwise transformed into county offices."

In spite of these developments, 1881 saw the presentation at the Opera House of 9 Shakespearean plays, of which *Othello* was the most successful, and a continuing, though somewhat sparse, schedule of other theatrical events. Vaudeville was the order of the day in late December, for example, with the appearance of the Alvin Joslin Comedy Co.

In mid-January, 1882 the *News* reported, "The Opera House changed hands Monday, the County Commissioners paying the \$8,000 agreed upon." Along with this announcement came some more disturbing news: "now that the transfer has been made and the county owns the Opera House the commissioners are considering plans for converting the opera house into a court house."

For the culture-conscious Central City residents, previously led to believe the Opera House would remain a public theatre, its possible conversion into a courtroom was considered a "perversion." The majority of the community opposed this plan: "When the opera house is converted into a county court house, Central will be not only without a theatre, but without a public hall or any place wherein public amusement or entertainment can be had."

Community residents were not to allow this to take place without a battle: "Influence is being brought to bear upon the county commissioners to leave

the opera house as it is to serve the purpose for which it was erected and in which the people take a pride." Petitions were circulated to stop the conversion plans. Hopes were the Opera House could be put back on a paying basis: "It is thought that it may be made to pay by putting it under some management which will bring the various traveling and opera companies up from the valley (Denver) when they are in the state."

By January 26th the petition movement was surpassed by another directed towards the formation of an opera house association to purchase the structure from the county and re-dedicate it to its original use. A public meeting was called to organize this, and, as the *News* reported, it was enthusiastic and well-attended: "action was taken . . . to organize an incorporated company with a capital stock of \$10,000 divided into \$1 shares, for the purchase of the opera house." This plan was well received, and many present immediately offered cash for stock in amounts from \$5 to \$100.

Mid-February brought news that stock was selling throughout the community. City council donated \$500 to the cause. By the 16th the fund had reached \$5,280. According to the *News*, "the prime movers of the Company now feel confident of ultimate success." A special program was also announced which, through admission charges, would further add to the growing fund. The remaining shares would be combined to form the grand prize in a drawing, tickets for which were to sell at \$1 apiece.

The amount received, however, from these events was not as much as hoped for, and the grand total only reached \$7,000. Members of the Opera House Association began passing around petitions requesting the county to sell the Opera House to them for \$7,000 even though \$8,000 had been paid for it. It was felt county commissioners would not be adverse to this idea. As the *News* stated, "should the stock company finally purchase it, every lover of drama or music or he who has any public spirit in him will rejoice."

It took some time to work out terms for the sale to the Gilpin County Opera House Association, but the December 22, 1882 *Register Call* reported, "The deeds conveying . . . the Opera House in this city to the ' . . . Association' were drawn up and signed yesterday."

The Association placed the Opera House under the management of major stockholder and Central City school principal H. M. Hale. He took "a lease for five years . . . paying therefor a nominal rental, and agreeing to pay all expenses . . . during the term of the lease." Also announced was a refurbishing of the Opera House to prepare it for the expected increased use: "The association will commence at once to put the premises in good repair. The sum of \$491.50 . . . was raised from rentals" of the Opera House and money contributed from the public schools, also an Association stockholder.

Several weeks later the *News* reported completion of the refurbishing: "This (was) . . . the first renovation . . . the Opera House has had since its completion. The work adds neatness, cleanness, and general improvements to the building."

Under Association management, use of the Opera House by amateur groups was encouraged in addition to professional touring companies. In mid-January, 1883 the amateur "Blue Ribbon Organization" presented *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* at the Opera House. Just the evening before a vaudeville troupe, Leavitt's Minstrels, had played to a full house.

The remainder of 1883 was taken up with a fairly regular stream of Opera House entertainment. Among these were lectures on the Civil War, a professional company playing Shakespearean tragedy, The Leonard Groben Comedy Company, and the "Chicago Church Choir Operatic Company." Late December brought the famous boxer "John L. Sullivan and his grand combination." This show consisted mainly of exhibition boxing bouts, and was met with great enthusiasm: "The best entertainment of the kind ever witnessed by our citizens . . . The show cannot fail to give the utmost satisfaction to all lovers of the art of self-defense."

1884 was much the same: January brought a local amateur production of an opera, *The Doctor of Alcantara*, which was well-attended. In May the *News* reported, "The Nashville Students (Colored) appeared at the Opera House last evening in a concert." In June: "The Madison Square Company now playing 'The Rajah' in Denver will appear at the Opera House."

It became a regular occurrence for regional or national traveling theatrical companies to leave the transcontinental rail line in Cheyenne and set up several days of performances in Denver at the Tabor Grand Opera House. From Denver these troupes would set out into the Rocky Mountains on what came to be known as "The Silver Circuit." They traveled into Georgetown, Central City, Colorado Springs, Cripple Creek, Victor, Pueblo, Leadville, and Grand Junction in Colorado. Thus, through the 1880's and 90's activity on the Silver Circuit provided some regularity in Opera House entertainment for Central City.

Late 1885 brought the Broad Opera Company for several performances of *The Mikado*. "The people of Central and Black Hawk may prepare for a rich treat . . . The company employs some forty members and will have its own elegant scenery and costumes." Special matinee performances were also presented to local school children at reduced rates.

To help these traveling theatrical companies prepare better for the varying circumstances in the theatres at which they might play, *Harry Miner's American Dramatic Directory* was published. This guidebook for 1884-1885 lists the Central City Opera House: "Horace M. Hale, manager. Seating

capacity, 800. Rental one night, \$40; three \$100, share also, license included. Size of stage, 40 by 50 feet; proscenium opening 25 by 25 feet. Height of grooves from stage, 40 deep. Depth under stage, 10 feet. Number of sets of scenery, 8. Leader of orchestra, Albert Lintz."

During the 80's and 90's a number of famous performers came to Central City to "tread the boards" at the Opera House, among them Madame Janauschek and Mrs. Scott Siddons. One not-so-notable performer was George Miln. The occasion of his performance of *Hamlet* at the Opera House provided *Denver Tribune* writer Eugene Field the opportunity for the following brief review: "Rev. George C. Miln played *Hamlet* at the Opera House last night. He played it until eleven o'clock."

It was the 1880's, however, which began a period of decline for both Central City as a whole and the Opera House in particular. The glory of the Opera House's dedication was born in Central City's mining boom days. Fed by gold in seemingly endless quantities, Central City's days of glory seemed to signal a continuing way of life. This was not to be. "Central City's days of boasting lasted for a relatively short time. The glory that came with the Opera House . . . could not soon be repeated."

In 1881 Central City had been overshadowed by a development more serious than the building of Tabor's Opera House in Denver: The increasing importance of the Leadville silver mine output. Fostered by changes in the national economic emphasis on gold, silver's value grew. Also gold cost more to produce and was in limited deposits. The very volume of Leadville silver production was prodigious and it drew the economic focus in Colorado away from Central City gold mining.

Thus, Central City's Opera House was reduced in importance by Denver's Tabor Grand Opera House just as its economic significance was diminished by the burgeoning silver mining town of Leadville. The initial effects of this were seen in the financial problems which had caused the Opera House to pass into county hands and then back to private ownership in 1882.

"The great days of gold discovery were finished. The giant projects and business of . . . the past were no more." Opera House activity in the late 80's and 90's resulted primarily from the success of the Silver Circuit. After the 1883 refurbishment, little further repair or maintenance was undertaken on the Opera House. Its deterioration became increasingly obvious by 1890 — when it began to be rumored around town that the Opera House was no longer safe for public performances.

By this time H. M. Hale's lease on the Opera House had run out, and he had moved to Denver. Still a majority stockholder in the Opera House Association, however, Hale visited the structure to determine its condition.

He found many of the foundation timbers rotting, flood damage in the basement (through which the creek ran), and the entire building in generally poor condition.

Hale asked long-time Central City resident and builder of the Opera House, Peter McFarlane, to take over its management and supervise a repair program to assure its safety for public use. This responsibility McFarlane accepted — to the point that he himself paid for much of the repair and maintenance work.

The Opera House's safety now assured, the Gilpin County Public Schools held high school graduation there in 1891, and this became a regular event. Held each spring through 1918, they "were regarded as the most important event in the educational field" in Gilpin County. They were the occasion for music, speeches, and recitations: "Each graduate . . . contributed an original essay, oration or address upon those eventful occasions, which were attended not only by the respective families of those who were awarded diplomas, but by all the citizens of the county who laid claim to culture."

Of course, along with its theatrical and educational uses, the Opera House continued in election years to be a center of political activity. Such indoor sport was at that time considered valuable both from the standpoint of education and of amusement.

To maintain its usefulness, McFarlane proposed to modernize the Opera House in early 1896 by installing electric lights. This plan met Hale's approval, and in early summer 10 electric lights were burning in the famed gas chandelier and 16 footlights illuminated the stage.

Also in 1896 McFarlane decided he wanted to exert a stronger, more positive control over the destiny of the Opera House. In pursuit of this, he began buying up Gilpin County Opera House Association stock from its owners, now either moved away, disinterested, or their attention diverted to more pressing personal problems. By 1900 he took over full Opera House control. Majority ownership, however, did not come until 1901 when Hale sold his stock to McFarlane for \$900. Desirous of full ownership, McFarlane continued for several years to buy up stock to insure his rights in the property.

In 1902 McFarlane began planning further renovation of the building to assure its continued use in Central City. According to his estimation:

The roof is in bad shape, the ceiling plaster shaky from leaky roof and ready to drop, the walls and ceilings have on them the dust of 25 years, the floors are worn out, furnaces almost unfit for use, scenery in need of entire renewal, all the stage walls ought to be plastered, a new flume put in under the house . . . and a lot of other things ought to be done.



A musical program staged in the Opera House around the turn of the century. Note the electric light bulb above the head of the violinist fourth from the left. Electricity was installed in 1896. Observe also the painted backdrop.

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A Masonic banquet at the Opera House, probably about 1905. Note the hickory chairs instead of the "patent opera seats." They were installed by Peter McFarlane in 1902.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Also in need of replacement was the original "patent" opera seats dating from 1878. In place of these original seats, McFarlane intended to buy new and more sturdy hickory straight chairs. He also had the Victorian raked stage levelled out to adapt the theatre for "modern day" use.

McFarlane estimated these changes and renovations to the Opera House would cost about \$3,000. Without much hesitation he proceeded to undertake the work paying for it personally. The renovation took up most of 1903; when it was finished, he turned his attention to making the Opera House into a paying business.

During the late 1890's and 1900's yearly Opera House operations usually ran into the red. Of course, there were times when rentals paid off well, but there were others, second-rate vaudeville troupes or public service events — such as the high school graduations — which cost in excess of their return. Thus, Opera House profitability was highly undependable, and running it usually called for the contribution of additional money from McFarlane's pocket each year.

A primary objective in McFarlane's plan to return the Opera House to profitability involved a city ordinance against Sunday performances. He finally convinced city fathers of the damage this ordinance caused the Opera House and him personally, and they subsequently changed it in his favor. Sunday evening performances opened up additional bookings into the Opera House, as theatrical troupes played Denver on Friday and Saturday nights and could take the detour to Central City for the Sunday performance without interrupting their regular travel arrangements. The effect of this was to provide a regular and constant income to the Opera House for several years to come — as well as a continuing source of entertainment for local residents. Without this change, it is unlikely the Opera House could have been kept open at all over the early years of this century.

Not allowed, however, probably due to the influence of the Methodist Church facing the Opera House, was a change in the city prohibition against Sunday parades. The parade through town to the theatre was an important feature of many vaudeville and minstrel shows of the day, and without it, their attendance was often marginal.

By 1900 the decline of mining had become an acknowledged fact. Thus, Central City, like many other mining towns, experienced decreasing economic circumstances which adversely affected general theatre attendance in a number of ways. "Parallel to, but only remotely related to the changing economy was a changing American theatre at the turn of the century. The West which had brought the finest theatre with its new money, was greatly altered with the decline of mining."

It must be recognized, then, that Peter McFarlane had other motives in owning and running the Opera House in these lean, unprofitable years. In spite of the fact that he continually lost money, McFarlane kept the Opera House open. His role as builder of the Opera House gave him a strong sense of personal identification with it, and, thus, his keeping it open and protecting it from decay gave him a feeling of satisfaction far beyond monetary income. It also gave him a feeling of community service to his "home town" and its residents, most of whom he had known for many years.

As the early 1900's went on, the theatrical companies McFarlane was able to obtain were of highly varying quality — and some were very poor. To protest this situation he wrote his Denver booking agent requesting better shows for his Opera House and community. In one of these letters he asked the agent to cancel a show which experience had taught him would be damagingly bad: "I wish you would cancel it . . . I would rather my house would stand idle entirely."

Needless to say, as the demise of large-scale gold mining in Central City took hold, the city's population went into decline. "Life flowed out of Central City . . . the population dwindled to a thousand, then to fewer than five hundred." In spite of this, McFarlane tried to provide a least one show a week. Usually these shows were on Sunday evenings. Occasionally, however, he would book a special production during the week. Often as not, he also lost money on these shows, and, as the 1900's went on, he began to doubt that Central City could provide "sufficient patronage to first class . . . theatricals."

By 1907 McFarlane was questioning his wisdom in attempting to keep the Opera House open at all. That year's season resulted in a loss of \$250 — prompting him to write his booking agent:

I write in regard to your contract . . . to say that I am afraid that you can't play to a paying house in this city. Times are so dull here and mining so depressed that nearly all our theatre patrons have moved away and . . . I do not think you will take in enough to meet your expenses if you show here.

Increasing losses finally convinced McFarlane to close his Opera House to regularly-scheduled performances. After the season ending May, 1908 he closed the Opera House. Although community events, political meetings, and high school graduations continued to take place there, it was only occasionally that a professional troupe played the Opera House. Thus, for most of 1908 and 1909 the Opera House stood empty and unused, a lingering relic of the city's boom days which, like the city itself, had fallen onto hard times.

Encouragement for the re-birth of the Opera House came in 1910 when someone rented a storeroom in Central City and began showing the wonder of the age, motion pictures, there. The "theatre" played to full houses regularly, and this development led McFarlane to consider converting the Opera House into a movie house. He made the decision rapidly, ordered the necessary equipment, and began planning for the Opera House re-opening.

On July 4th the Opera House movie theatre had its premiere engagement. Problems immediately developed, however, when the hand-cranked projector broke down. This trouble foretold to a great degree McFarlane's experiences with motion pictures. He found the films too repetitive. Music to accompany many films didn't arrive in time to allow local amateur musicians proper practice, and this was a problem. But, most of all, he decried the low moral tone of many early motion picture comedies which he felt not only could not be shown to children, but often offended the adults in the audience.

As with other movie theatres across the country, the early comedies of Charlie Chaplin were immensely popular in Central City. Popular also with Opera House audiences were romances with love scenes. These, however, *did not* meet with McFarlane's approval. As he wrote his supplier, "The film manufacturers will have to come up with something else besides *love and hugging* all the time."

Shows were presented several times each week, and the Opera House seemed once again to promise to be a profitable operation paying back, at least in part, McFarlane's losses from earlier years.

After the initial novelty of motion pictures wore off, however, attendance at the Opera House began to slack off. Also, Central City's population continued its decline, further reducing the size of the movie audience. Therefore, the initial promise of motion pictures to salvage profitable Opera House operations did not develop as anticipated. Even the introduction of door prizes did not significantly increase attendance, as there were only so many people in the potential audience, and they had only so much money to spend on entertainment. In the years from 1921 to 1926, the latter years of movie house operation, he came out with a profit in only a few years. Low attendance in the mid-1910's forced him to cut back showings from 3 to 2 a week for extended periods of time. A flu epidemic in 1918 forced a 4-month closure — and that year resulted in his largest recorded loss — \$927.90. His losses in other years amounted to approximately \$350 per year — even greater than those incurred in running the Opera House as a live theatre.

Also one of McFarlane's problems in making the motion picture theatre a financial success was the fact that his benevolence towards the community



The Opera House in decay. Photo taken in the late 1920's or very early 1930's. The musician's balcony above the main entrance is almost completely deteriorated, the ornamental ironwork on the rooftop gone. The open windows on the upper story would indicate the building was probably in use at the time. The little white house, however, has vanished.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

often overruled his business sense. His son, Frederick, remembered, "Often he would allow whole droves of youngsters in to see shows free of charge."

Business conditions prompted McFarlane to assess circumstances as follows: "15% of our people died (of the flu), 10% are in mourning, 25% have moved away, 35% are peniless, 15% out of employment, leaving only 10 % to support amusements."

From 1920 to 1929 a local amateur dramatic society regularly rented the Opera House for its productions. But the financial return from this was only minimal.

Certainly these were not advantageous business conditions. Nevertheless, out of community interest and his love for the Opera House — and his fear of what might happen if it closed down permanently — McFarlane ran the movie theatre through January 1, 1927. It was on that date that the movie theatre at the almost 50-year-old Opera House closed its doors for the last time.

By this closing, the Opera House was a faded and dilapidated shadow of its once-proud self. No longer the show place of the Rockies, the Opera House's proud audiences had died, moved away, went broke, or otherwise faded into the fabric of history leaving few traces behind.

The fact that the Opera House still remained as a souvenir of Central City's exciting past, however, was almost solely the result of Peter McFarlane's love for it and community spirit. He could not stand to see the beautiful building he had built be destroyed by time, disuse, and the elements, eventually to be shoveled onto the anonymous rubbish heap of the past. Its spirit and life over the lean and hard years had been nurtured by McFarlane's will and resolve, and the Opera House we see today is living tribute to this dedicated Central City builder and Colorado pioneer.

Peter McFarlane was 78 years old when he finally was forced by personal and economic factors to close the Central City Opera House. Declining health and increasingly tight economic conditions forced upon him the decision which he had postponed for so many years. After closing the Opera House, McFarlane remained in his beloved "home town" of Central City until he could no longer care for himself properly, then he moved to Denver so his children could care for him. He died in Denver in May, 1929

Included in McFarlane's estate passed on to his children, Frederick and George McFarlane and Yetta McFarlane Schroeder of Denver, was the deserted Opera House, now not even used for community events. It was closed up and deteriorating in the elements. Each passing year had taken its toll on the building once the gem of Central City and Colorado.

In the summer of 1929 Frederick McFarlane, executor of his father's estate, was making plans to sell the decayed old structure and distribute the proceeds among the heirs. Meanwhile, however, other events were evolving which would ultimately rescue the Opera House from an obscure fate and not only give it a re-birth, but also project it into national and world-wide prominence.

This dramatic turnabout developed from a visit to Central City by University of Denver Civic Theatre Director Walter Sinclair. Entranced by the beauty of the locked-up Opera House as he and his party drove by, he stopped, inspected it closer, and was fascinated by its presence in the decaying Colorado mining town. Unable to get into the building for a closer look, however, Sinclair and his company retreated to Black Hawk for lunch. While eating, he again began extolling the beauty of the Opera House and was overheard by an elegantly-dressed woman at an adjoining table.

Ida Kruse McFarlane was Frederick McFarlane's wife. She was born in Black Hawk and attended school in Central City at St. Aloysius Academy. She went to college at Vassar and then to Europe for the cultural enrichment she felt necessary for her chosen profession as a teacher. After returning to Colorado, Ida Kruse married Frederick McFarlane. In 1901 they moved to Denver where Mrs. McFarlane's dedicated teaching activities led her eventually to the post of Head of the English Literature Department at the University of Denver.

The McFarlanes maintained a summer home in Central City, and that summer in 1929 they were spending some time there when Ida Kruse McFarlane happened into the same restaurant and sat next to Walter Sinclair.

On overhearing Sinclair express his interest in the Opera House and desire to see its interior, Mrs. McFarlane told him she thought she knew where the Opera House key was and that she could probably let him in.

Mrs. McFarlane with Sinclair and his party in tow then proceeded back to Central City and opened the doors of the deserted Opera House. Their eyes were greeted by both a breathtaking and shocking scene: The interior was cold, damp, and dark, but with the aid of flashlights they could see sodden plaster falling away from the walls, piles of rubbish, and stacks of chairs piled together. The bare floors were littered with refuse and the droppings of invading rats.

But beyond this scene of deterioration and decay, the visitors could also see the grandeur that lay beneath. Taken by the distinctive lines of the auditorium and the unique foyer, Sinclair and Ida Kruse McFarlane were entranced by the dusty splendor surrounding them. The graceful lines of the stage proscenium and the sharp acoustics further increased their excitement.

Sinclair had already mentioned the potential of the theatre as the centerpiece of a summertime dramatic festival, and he begged the McFarlanes to change their plans and not sell the Opera House into second-class subervience as a machine shop or garage — or worse.

The aged beauty of the Opera House, Sinclair's excitement and enthusiasm for its possible future, and her own innate artistic sensibilities began to mold together in Ida Kruse McFarlane's imagination — and a plan began to take shape.

Before the plan could come into reality, however, it was necessary to convince her husband and the other McFarlane heirs of the significance and wisdom of her plan. She set about this immediately, and her eloquence did not go unheeded. The family agreed, first of all, to clear the title of the Opera House. This, in itself, took some time as McFarlane's ownership of the Gilpin County Opera House Association stock did not represent a full, legal title to the structure.

These legal formalities were concluded by early spring, 1931. In the meantime, Mrs. McFarlane had begun negotiations with the University of Denver to clear the way for it to accept the Opera House as a gift from the McFarlane family to be utilized as the focus of an annual dramatic festival in Central City.

The University of Denver delegated the decision of the Opera House acquisition to the board of the Denver Civic Theatre — Anne Evans, Edna James Chappell, and Allen True. They, in turn formed a small party to journey up to Central City to visit the Opera House.

Anne Evans was born in 1871 the daughter of Colorado's second Territorial Governor. Her prominent Colorado family had already contributed considerably to both the economic and cultural life of the state, and Miss Evans herself had a keen interest in art and was responsible for, among other things, creating the Denver Art Museum, and she was an influential member of the Society for the Restoration and Preservation of the New Mexican Missions. Her no-nonsense concept of community service was uncolored by artificial pretense and rejected entirely the influence of politics in the area of civic service.

Edna James Chappell's husband, Delos, was a theatrical producer with New York connections, and Allen True was a distinguished Denver muralist whose work had embellished several important buildings, including (later) the Colorado State Capitol Building.

The trip to Central City itself created skepticism about the project in Anne Evans' mind. When Ida Kruse McFarlane first told her of it, she responded, "How'll you get people up there, Ida? By balloon?" Indeed this

was a consideration in the possible success of the festivals. At that time the main auto road to Central City was the Virginia Canyon road involving a 2,000 foot climb through switchbacks up the mountain from Idaho Springs. One tourist had said of this precarious route, "The only practical way to get to Central is on your hands and knees — and that's not safe!"

The little group nevertheless set out to visit Central City and the Opera House. Their initial skepticism about the project was quickly changed into excitement as they beheld the promise of the Opera House: "There was much enthusiasm over the idea."

In mid-May, 1932 public announcement was made of the gift: "The famous Central City Opera House, Colorado's 'cradle of drama,' has been offered to the University of Denver by heirs of the man who built it in the early gold rush days," proclaimed the *News*. "Steeped in tradition, thronging with memories of a romantic era, the Central City Opera House once housed the great immortals of the American dramatic and operatic stage. and in memory of Peter McFarlane, his heirs want those traditions carried on by non-commercial interests."

More specifically, "It is the feeling of the heirs that this building should be in possession of a permanent . . . institution that it may be preserved and used for its original purpose." Thus, Frederick McFarlane explained to the press, it was "planned to recapture some of that grandeur and glory that were rightful possessions of the Central City Opera House of decades ago."

Planning for this objective was already underway, and important in that planning was Walter Sinclair. He had tentatively been chosen to direct the initial organization and productions of the Opera House festival. Some details of his plans were also revealed: "First, it is planned to stage a play festival — a series of the ancient favorites of the American stage of 'East Lynne' flavor. This series will serve as a gala reopening and probably will be followed by various modern productions."

The Denver *Post* prefaced its story of the announcement in more colorful terms: "For almost forty years the ghost of drama has remained undisturbed in Colorado's premier gold mining camp — Central City. Now the drama is to be evoked from its shades, clothed in rich habiliments and set to strutting its little hour upon the stage."

Shortly after this announcement the University of Denver gratefully accepted the McFarlane gift. The Opera House property was to be held in trust by the University — with the Central City Opera House Commission leasing it yearly for a nominal amount.

The original intentions had been to immediately move into the Opera House and begin rehearsing for a Pioneer Revival Festival. Inspection of

the Opera House by expert eyes, however, brought these plans to a halt. Significant restoration work was necessary to make the structure safe for audiences as well as functional for dramatic production.

Recognizing the immediate necessity for action to stem the theatre's deterioration, the University of Denver set about at once on a program of repair, maintenance, and renovation. Initial cleanup work in the Opera House had to be done in gas masks.

An important aspect of the restoration work was the delicate and beautiful murals on the Opera House's walls and ceiling which had faded and become discolored. Allen True undertook this important restorative work, and he was so careful and successful at it that it was virtually impossible to ascertain where the original faded away and his skillful artistry began.

The most dramatic renovation on the building's exterior involved the musicians' balcony above the main entrance. The original had almost completely rotted and fallen away. Denver architect Allen Fisher was called upon to design a duplicate of the graceful original. Fire exits from the theatre were completed also under his supervision.

Regarding the wooden chairs which had provided Opera House seating, some serious thought was devoted to the decision as to whether newer, more modern and comfortable seating should be installed or these "original" chairs be used. The chairs themselves were generally in good repair. Anne Evans solved this problem brilliantly. She proposed a plan which would not only provide for maintaining the "period" seating for the Opera House, but would also provide funds for the restoration program: she "proposed to sell them as memorials to those intrepid pioneers who had first used them. They were to cost \$100 each and were to be carved across the top of the back with the name of the person for whom they were bought, with . . . one date, the year they came to Colorado."

The idea had a certain magic about it. "A few sold at once. Then someone bought five, named one for her father (Colorado's second territorial Governor, John Evans), another for the painter of the frescos (John C. Massmann) and the rest for famous characters of the town who had left no descendants to remember them." The more people thought about it, the more they were charmed by the notion of naming an Opera House chair for a distinguished relative or individual whose spirit may have influenced them. "The idea caught on, with remarkable results. The widow of a great western newspaper owner bought chairs in memory of several of the outstanding newspaper men of the early days. A group of architects subscribed to buy one chair in memory of the architect of the theatre, Robert S. Roeschlaub."



The Opera House during the initial stages of cleaning and restoration in 1932. An unidentified worker may be seen framed in the circular attic ventilator.

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This fund-raising campaign was highly successful: "The money has come in fast enough to put on a new roof, restore the decorations and keep the chair carver busy."

Funds raised in this campaign, in addition to paying for Opera House restoration, also paid for some remodeling (such as the exits noted above). To stabilize the stage a concrete floor was laid beneath it. "Window dressing" and decoration also required attention: "two large lanterns hung in front of the building, a mirror on each side of the entrance . . . and . . . side lights of excellent design, taking the place of kerosene lamps . . . all making a wonderful improvement, and placing the structure in a finer condition than ever before." To this cause several prominent Denverites contributed furniture, finery, and other *objects de arte* — chief of which was a beautiful chandelier to replace the original which had vanished into the mists of time.

This restoration work took four months and had cost \$12,000 when a Denver University Civic Theatre publication in October, 1931 announced its completion. Also detailed were the evolving plans for the Opera House. One important element had been changed: Walter Sinclair was replaced by an even more famous contemporary theatre personality, Robert Edmond Jones, who would direct the festival's first year, 1932.

The first national coverage for the developing Opera House events and planning appeared in *Theatre Arts Monthly* in March, 1932. The writer was especially impressed by the Opera House murals: "I have tried in vain to recall another piece of decoration in America to equal it. There are more elaborate murals, more profound and important ones, but none, it seems to me, that carries to such an ultimate perfection the function for which it is designed."

Also discussed was the consideration by Robert Edmond Jones of the play to be selected for the Opera House's 20th century premiere: "whatever the form the production eventually takes, it is fairly certain to consist of a revival of some play that might have been seen in that same theatre in the 80's, because this production is to be, in a way, a memorial, a salute to a past that has all but vanished, but of which one sturdy, lovely relic remains — a ghost opera house."

Early planning involved the presentation of old-time melodrama for the entertainment of summer visitors to Central City. But, as Jones pointed out, "To revive an old play for the amusement in it seemed to cheapen the theatre, to be unfitting. The building simply stood there and, in spite of its grime and neglect, it imposed an obligation, delivered a challenge either to let it alone or to do something worthy within it."

The possibilities for the Central City Opera House dramatic festival grew under Jones' creative influence:

why should (it) . . . not put the idea of an American Salzburg in our heads? Is that idea more visionary and fantastic than the erection of the theatre in the first place? Why, in the face of the intellectual disintegration of the commercial theatre, should we not aspire to gather the very best in the theatrical world, ancient or modern, American or foreign, for one triumphant production each summer?

With the theatre itself as the focus of this inspired thought, the idea of an American Salzburg seemed to electrify everyone associated with the project. As *Theatre Arts Monthly* put it: the model of the pioneers in building the Opera House itself provided impetus to work to make the dream come true; "And our fathers taught us how to work miracles."

Word had also reached the *New York Times* of Central City activity: "The Little Kingdom of Gilpin County is athrob with new life. Ghosts, haunting the gulches, are disturbed by unfamiliar activity . . . There is a smell of new boards . . . and the pulse of machinery beats an efficient rhythm. Men are rediscovering gold." The gold being discovered was as glamorous as that discovered in the 19th century — but it was cultural, not mineral gold: "The reopening next month of the Central City Opera House, a unique temple in the wilderness, a monument more significant of the quality of the one-time kings and queens of Gilpin kingdom than the fortunes they made or the deeds for which men remember them."

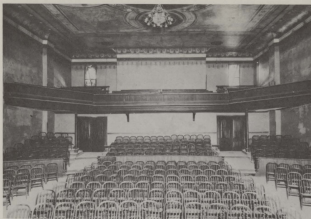
In June it was announced a final step in the restoration called for Opera House carpeting to be obtained from an historic source. "Whispered echoes of the footfalls of famous men will play a ghostly obligatto to the tread of a 1932 theatre audience . . . at the Central City Opera House." It was to come from Denver's historic Windsor hotel, in its heyday the most luxurious and famous hostelry in the Rocky Mountain Region. The carpet was "worn thin by the footsteps of such men as President Grant, the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia, Senator H. A. W. Tabor and by the hob-nailed clodhoppers of Cripple Creek miners who struck it rich." Arrangements for the acquisition of 400 yards of this carpeting were made by Anne Evans, again demonstrating her ingenuity. As the *News* stated, "Thus, two monuments to Colorado pioneers, structures considered the most magnificent in the West" were to be joined.

It was finally decided by Robert Edmond Jones, and agreed to by the Opera House commission to stage *Camille* as the Festival's initial offering. On July 10th the *News* announced, "The cast which will present 'Camille' at the re-opening of the Central City Opera House next Saturday, has begun rehearsals on the stage of the historic theatre." The role of *Camille* was to be taken by the distinguished American film actress, Miss Lillian Gish, and Armand Duval's role was to be played by Raymond Hackett. Excitement had become almost palpable as this news was revealed.



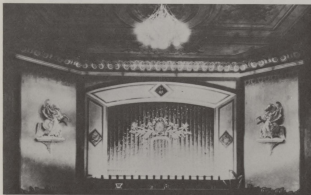
After restoration, looking down Eureka Street in front of the Opera House: the Musician's balcony rebuilt and the theatre awaiting the coming Festival audiences.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, GEORGE GRANT MATUS COLLECTION



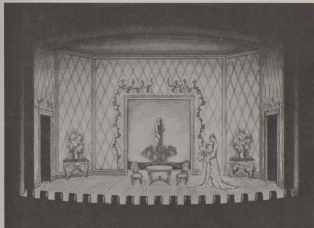
The finished, restored interior of the Opera House in 1932. Note the design and decorating details repaired by Allen True.

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The stage ready for performance in 1932 with front stage curtain painting by Frank (Poncho) Gates and side mural panel restoration by Allen True.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



One of Robert Edmond Jones' scene designs for *Camille*.

THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY



The entrancing Lillian Gish as *Camille*.

THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY

In other quarters planning was underway for the opening festivities. "Official dedication ceremonies marking revival of the Central City Opera House will be held at 8 p.m. Saturday, shortly before the curtain rises on the first performance." Frederick McFarlane was to officially present the Opera House keys over to the Chancellor of Denver University, and the entire proceedings were to be picked up by KOA in Denver and broadcast nationally by NBC.

Revealed also was the cost of this entire undertaking. Denver arts patron Delos Chappell was not only providing inspiration for the play festival — but was also providing funds to finance it.

The cost of the entire 1932 season, actors, technical crews, musicians, lighting equipment, and related expenses would be about \$250,000. "In spite of the encouraging fact that seats for 'Camille' are selling like wildfire, the sponsors haven't the remotest hope of making back . . . the investment." Thus, the festival would go into the red, but the prestige of the event being what it was, there were wealthy patrons willing to underwrite expenses. "The idea is to lay the foundation for an annual play festival in the old opera house, transforming Central City into an 'American Salzburg' to which culture lovers will flock from everywhere."

The July 10th *News* announced, "The famous old playhouse . . . is, after 50 years to be the scene of the most elaborate and grandly conceived dramatic production Central City has yet seen." The *News* also published an entire section devoted to the grand opening of the Opera House festival. Included was a survey of preparations made by Central City residents for the excitement of tourists and opera-goers:

As in European communities when a festival is being held, citizens of Central City are preparing to make the event a pleasant and picturesque memory for visitors.

Housewives will open their homes to visitors who desire to remain over night . . .

A saloon, which will be historically accurate save for its stock in trade, will be operated by the American Legion.

The presence of slot machines (which were then legal in Colorado) also added to this old-time atmosphere. Yet other plans called for residents to dress up as 19th century prospectors, the rehangings of old signs, a demonstration of the antique fire wagon and firemen in costume, a special edition of the *Register Call*, and special art and photo exhibitions.

That same week the *Colorado Greeter's Guide* for tourists heralded the exciting event: "The 1932 Festival is to be the first of an annual series, designed to preserve permanently for the American theatre and for the West this remarkable monument to a people who in the midst of gold, wanted

more than gold and who made a wilderness bloom with the flowers of culture and fine living."

In anticipation of the opening July 16th crowds thronged up the precarious Virginia Canyon road, and the Colorado & Southern narrow gauge railroad ran a special train up to Central filled with festive Denverites. The almost-deserted streets of Central City once again began to teem with life — and the focus of their activity was the Opera House.

The *Register Call*, the day before the opening, printed a brief play program and provided some additional background to the event. "'Camille' with Miss Lillian Gish . . . promises to be as fine a production as would be seen in the leading theatres of Chicago or New York . . . it was chosen for the reopening because its music, dancing and melodrama typify to perfection the things the gay crowds of the early 80's loved in the theatre." Altogether, expectations were great for the future of the Opera House festival: "With a tradition of art for the pure love of art, with an ownership which assures stability and high idealism . . . there seems to be no obstacle to impede the creation here of a very living center of fine drama and of all the allied arts."

As predicted, the impressive opening ceremonies took place at 8 p.m. July 16th in front of the Opera House with the assembled audience arrayed in costumes of the 19th century. The stars of *Camille*, Opera House Association officials, including Anne Evans and Ida Kruse McFarlane, and many city and state dignitaries were present. Present also was William J. (Billy) Hamilton who had been a long-time local "character" in Central City and had worked on and off for several years as the caretaker of the aging Opera House. An important ritual of the opening program was Billy's ceremonious presentation of the Opera House key to Frederick McFarlane who, in turn, presented it to the D. U. Chancellor. (Billy Hamilton's role in the season opening ceremonies continued throughout the 30's, 40's and 50's until he was too infirm to take part.) At 8:30 the performance of *Camille* began. A full dress costume ball was held at the Teller House Ballroom after *Camille* to finish out the evening.

The following day the Denver *Post* reported the scene in Central City: "Not since the opening of the Opera House in 1878 . . . has it been the scene of such an assemblage of youth, beauty and fashion." The Opera House spectacle was opulent: "Before an (elegantly costumed) audience representing smart society, the professions and the arts, a new enchanting Camille made her bow to an acclaim which, from the viewpoint of enthusiasm and sincere appreciation, might have been accorded by Latins rather than American sophisticates."



Ida Kruse McFarlane, savior of the Opera House in the 1930's.

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Anne Evans (in later years). Benefactor of the Opera House.

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Robert Edmond Jones, the creative spirit behind the Festival.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Frank H. Ricketson, Jr., the man responsible for bringing the ideals of the 1930's into the present.

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

The pit orchestra was "wearing military uniforms of scarlet, emblazoned with gold braid With the last note drowned in cheers, the curtain rose on a scene as lovely as the one beyond the footlights, and into it swept a new enchanting figure," Camille. Enthusiasm carried the *Post* reporter on its crest: "The audience gathered . . . wept as unstintingly when Lillian Gish started . . . on her dying away as the . . . French wept at the play's opening in the 19th century."

Another newspaper reported the new life which the second opening of the Opera House had infused into Central City: "This slumbering mining ghost town has awakened to interrupt the mad modern rush of time and to live again the riotous days of the west in its lusty infancy." More specifically, "The life of the town is tuned to the pace of half a century ago and the streets are jammed with men and women costumed in the spirit of the west in the hey day of its mining glory."

It was a scene that would have warmed Peter McFarlane's heart. "If somewhere in the narrow street the shade of Peter McFarlane walked about it would have been gratified by the dedication to the fine and true and beautiful in art and life which was as true as his ability for building something that would stand for all time — like the opera house."

Thus, the grand re-opening of the Central City Opera House through the work of Ida Kruse McFarlane, Anne Evans, and Allen True, along with a number of other people and the Central City Opera House Association was a resounding success which promised a continued importance for the Opera House in the life of Central City and Colorado as well.

Concurrent with the arrangements for the reopening of the Opera House, the University of Denver, under the sponsorship of Anne Evans, Ida Kruse McFarlane, and Allen True, had established the Central City Opera House Association. This non-profit organization was to direct the annual summer festivals for the University and supervise Opera House use.

Regarding the first year Festival's success, the *Rocky Mountain News* noted, "This almost impossibly idealistic project so captivated the imagination of the press and the public of this state and the entire nation that the play festival was a success from the start." On the success of *Camille*, the Association stated, "With all the determining factors unknown and an experiment launched in a year of depression, the eight performances were never-the-less 96.4% sold out."

The Association gave tribute for this success: "The very high quality of the performances of 'Camille' was due to the intelligent capacity and high idealism of Mr. Robert Edmond Jones. His reputation and prestige established immediately the importance of the venture and assured it recognition throughout the country."

Publicity regarding the first Festival had reached newspapers in 37 states, London, Berlin, Dublin, Moscow, Leningrad, and Mexico City, and the opening ceremonies had been filmed by Movietone News — and all this had been accomplished on an advertising budget of \$250!

Almost overnight the little Colorado mining town had become nationally famous and the focus of creative thought of dramatists and musicians alike who were interested in contributing to the glamour and success of "The American Salzburg." Even that first year the injection of new life into Central City seemed to portend re-birth and a revitalization. The audiences "left the theatre . . . to join the thousands of merry-makers who choked the steep and narrow streets of the tiny town in the mountains. For those who could not crowd into the theatre or gain entree to exclusive summer homes which had sprung up overnight on the pockmarked hillsides, it was carnival time."

As indicated, transportation had been a significant worry, but the Association noted, "This year's festival has removed all doubts about the seeming inaccessibility of Central City . . . with the improvement of roads in the near future, the location will become ideal." To insure the safety of the existing roads through Golden Gate and Virginia Canyons, Anne Evans and Mrs. McFarlane personally appealed to the Colorado State Patrol for additional assistance — assistance which was regularly provided, however, not at taxpayer expense, as Miss Evans and the Association paid the costs incurred.

(As a sidelight, one of the young contributors to the backstage activities for *Camille* was Frank (Poncho) Gates. Among other things, he painted the front stage curtain. Gates was no novice to the theatre, as his father had been a key theatrical technician at several important Denver theatres, including the Tabor Grand. Gates cut his artistic teeth at the famous Elitch's Summer Theatre in Denver, and had oil paintings and water colors exhibited locally.)

Planning for the next year was even more ambitious. Robert Edmond Jones was to direct *The Merry Widow*. The cast included Gladys Swarthout and Richard Bonnell along with other members of the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York. (This year Frank Gates was in charge of backstage production operations.) Public response in 1933 was more impressive than the year before as, "thousands of tourists again traveled the Virginia Canon road to join the festival."

In preparation for the expected rush of opera-goers and tourists drawn by the festival, the Central City Opera House Association took over the Teller House. "The old hotel was carefully refurbished and redecorated in the spirit of its original glory." Also acquired by the Association was the lot

separating the Opera House and the Teller House which was converted into an "old fashioned garden."

(For a full list of each season's productions and stars at the Opera House see the Appendix.)

After the 1934 season it was noted that "During the last three years the Central City play festival has been reported and commented upon by publications in every state of the Union and even in metropolitan publications in Europe."

The 1935 production, called *Central City Nights*, was "a review including some twenty-one scenes loosely tied together by the suggestion that they are embellished samples of the theatrical fare of Central City miners of early days."

(Shortly after the 1935 season Frank Gates left Central City to work with Robert Edmond Jones on movies in Hollywood, as his artistic skill and abilities had impressed Jones considerably. At his departure, however, he promised Anne Evans he would return to Central City and continue his contribution to the success of the festivals. Gates kept his promise and was back in Central City in time to design and build the stage settings for the festival's 1936 season.)

An important part of these early festivals were the Opera House ushers. They were dressed in long tailcoats and old-fashioned carriage boots, a costume that has become a tradition down to the present day.

By the 1937 season it had become expected that the celebrities would make an appearance in Central City for the Opera House season. This year those who gained recognition were New York newspaperman Lucius Beebe and famed heiress Mrs. Evelyn Walsh Mclean who dazzled everyone present by wearing the Hope Diamond to the performance.

1938 brought Robert Edmond Jones back to Central City after a short absence. That year's festival "smashed all box office records . . . Residents of thirty states . . . purchased tickets for the play and in addition theatre lovers from Canada . . . London . . . (and) South Africa have been among the audiences."

1940 brought a record 24 performances which played to a total audience of 20,250 people — one of whom was Presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie.

The 1940 Central City Festival, however, was not as joyous an occasion as were the earlier festivals. Ida Kruse McFarlane, the spirit behind the creation of the festivals, had passed away in mid-June just before the season began. As eulogized by the University of Denver, "Only the imagination of



A gala matinee audience re-enters the Opera House for the final scenes of 1934's *Othello*. Note the uniformed state patrolman just to the left and below the "Othello" sign and the fashionable couple on the right.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION.



The Opera House in splendor in the late 1930's or early 40's — set off by the garden and Spanish arrastras which replaced the little white house between the Teller House and the Opera House. Observe the small pine tree near the street between the telephone pole and the brick edge descending from the peak of the downward slanting roof on the Opera House front. It now reaches nearly to the top of the building.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Ida Kruse McFarlane could vision the possibility of the sleeping Central City Opera House . . . From her great character and learning, from her vision and her imagination has come to this state a lasting concept of culture as the fruition of those values which are rooted in the life of this region." The *Denver Post* concluded that Ida Kruse McFarlane was "possessed of superb courage in meeting the challenges of life."

Ida Kruse McFarlane's legacy to music lovers may be best stated in her own words taken from her essay on "Music": "To watch the mysterious change come over the faces of people at a concert, the particular displacement of the objective in their minds by the musician self, gives the same feeling that one set of people has disappeared and another set, a different kind of human beings, has taken their place."

Death also took its toll in January, 1941 of the other "prime mover" in the Central City Opera House renovation and festival: Anne Evans. For many years the president of the Opera House Association, Anne Evans had contributed significantly to the project's overall success in innumerable ways, and her spirit inspired important achievement. Speaking of the reality of the festival's success, she had said, "There is talent as well as gold in our Colorado hills."

The *Denver Post* paid Anne Evans tribute:

Hers was the objective, impersonal attitude. It was the job that counted, it was the other person who was worthy of help and support and a chance . . . The spirit of Anne Evans was one of pure altruism. Hers was a splendid heritage administered with wisdom for her own honor and the common good . . .

After her death, the Colorado State Legislature passed a memorial resolution honoring both Anne Evans and Ida Kruse McFarlane:

That in the deaths of Anne Evans and Ida Kruse McFarlane the people of Colorado have lost citizens of the highest ability and usefulness; that this body recognizes the value of the services rendered to this state by these citizens, and that the members hereof express their sincere regret and sorrow upon their passage from us.

In February the Opera House Association felt it important to assure the public that the festival would be continued in spite of the deaths of its guiding spirits: "the board of directors affirmed its belief that the annual play festival . . . is a Colorado institution and must be continued on a permanent basis." Note was also made of the significance of the festival in the face of the worsening European war: "Continuation of the festival is especially important in these days when famed European festivals . . . are being abandoned . . . the Central City festival "must remain as one of the institutions thru which the culture of the world is preserved."

1941, the last year of the festival before the direct American involvement in World War II, saw an expansion of the festival season to include

two operas instead of the traditional one. That season also marked the last in which Robert Edmond Jones participated directly.

Well-known newspaper columnist Ernie Pyle also visited the 1941 festival and wrote several nationally syndicated columns about the experience. In one of these he speculated as to "the two dozen most impressive annual spectacles in America." He decided that "the Central City Play Festival will come within my first half-dozen." In estimating its mid-summer national importance, he wrote of Central City, "It becomes, in fact, and for a little while, one of the most important places between New York and Los Angeles."

The year 1941, also, marked the 10th anniversary of the Central City Opera House Festival. This important anniversary led a Denver *Rocky Mountain Herald* writer to speculate on the character the Festival had taken on in its life span. The productions over the years had resulted in an impressive achievement. He did, however, voice some positive criticism of the Festival and its makers: "This has all led to a perfectionist philosophy. It can be said of the theatre of Central, as of probably no other commercial theatre in America, that its worst faults arise from the pursuit of excellence for its own sake . . . an extraordinarily high standard has been established and maintained." Such "criticism" could only have pleased Ida Kruse McFarlane, Anne Evans, and Robert Edmond Jones.

The United States was precipitated into war, of course, in December, 1941. Shortly afterwards, foreseeing the need of concentrating national resources in the direction of winning the war, the U.S. government instituted a wide-ranging program of rationing of strategic commodities. A March, 1942 meeting of the Opera House Association resulted in the following statement: "Plans which had been completed for the eleventh annual festival scheduled for July, 1942 are being cancelled because of developments in the rationing of tires and gasoline." Reassurance, however, was given that the festival would not fade from the scene forever:

The Central City Opera House association will, at the earliest possible time, present in the old stone opera house perched on Central City's Eureka Street, productions equaling those that have won the attention and the admiration of visitors from every corner of the globe . . .

Late June brought word the Opera House itself *would* be opened to tours throughout the summer for Central City visitors. In mid-August it was announced "Residents of Central City . . . will meet in the ballroom of the historic old Teller House . . . for a review of the 10 play seasons which brought world fame to the old mining camp." The program involved the showing of motion pictures of Opera House seasons and events over the years and the playing of recordings made at several of the original Opera House performances.

1943 was a quiet year in Central City. The Opera House Association announced in June, "It has been gratifying to know that so many people remember . . . Central City and want to visit the historic opera house . . . but the transportation situation and our efforts to comply with government wishes to decrease automobile travel necessitate its closure . . . this season." However, that year the Opera House was re-roofed at a cost of \$700.

Also in 1943 Frank H. Ricketson, Jr. became President of the Association. Coming from a distinguished background in movie promotion and theatre management, Mr. Ricketson was introduced to the Central City Opera House Festival in its first year. It was not long until he began working for the Opera House Association. In 1937 his efforts caught the eye of Anne Evans, and he had worked closely with her for the remaining years of her life.

There was one occasion suitable for Opera House use that September. It was a fund-raising radio broadcast in support of the Third War Loan drive. The governors of 18 southern and western states had come to Colorado's famous Opera House to give impetus to the raising of money to support the war effort. Each governor spoke in turn of the activities within his own state in support of the fund drive, and made note of the historic circumstances of the broadcast. As the radio announcer said, "American history was made in Central City nearly a century ago . . . and tonight . . . history is in the making."

1944 also involved Opera House use in support of the national war effort. The Association provided the Opera House for a widely-publicized broadcast of the popular "Take It or Leave It" radio show. The show's purpose was to "launch the National War Fund Campaign and the United War Chest drive in Colorado." The Opera House audience for this nation-wide broadcast was combat casualties from Fitzsimmons Hospital in Aurora and Fort Logan (near Denver).

By July, 1945 Germany had already surrendered and Japan was soon to follow. In anticipation of re-starting the annual Central City Opera House Festival, "Stars of former Central City Play Festival productions will appear on the stage of the celebrated Opera House . . . in a program designed to remind America that the gold camp will be the summer capital of the theatre as soon . . . as possible." Present for the nationwide NBC broadcast were Anna Kaskas, Josephine Antoine, Robert Edmond Jones, and several prominent members of the Opera House Association. The audience once again was made up of combat casualties and soldiers from the Denver area.

In his remarks, Robert Edmond Jones predicted the resumption of the festivals:

When that day comes . . . when gas and tires are again readily obtainable, then cars from all over the nation will again stream up the twisting canyon road . . . Then again will the opera house be filled with such throngs as . . . in the past, to sit enthralled by the magic of art unsurpassed.

The future of the Opera House and its festivals were forseen as meeting only the highest specifications:

A powerful impulse has been set in motion. This theatre, which once existed in rich splendor, is alive again. It is part of America now. It belongs to every American . . . We feel free here and as we stand on the stage of the old opera house, still vibrating with the life and energy of the great artists that are gone, we can hear them saying to us — "Do as we did. Never be satisfied with anything that is merely expedient. Bring life to this theatre, life at its fullest and truest and highest."

In a *Rocky Mountain News* interview Jones reiterated his hopes for the coming festivals: "Whatever we do, we will have to make it the best . . . It is a perfect theatre and must never have anything but perfect production — one of the great classics, either of drama or opera."

Anticipation in early 1946 was high as the Opera House Festivals were about to reawaken after their four-year slumber. This was increased when Opera House Association president Frank H. Ricketson, Jr. announced the opening of the festival later in July: "It will be as gay and picturesque as the event that opened the old opera house in 1878 or the one that marked the restoration of the theatre in 1932." One of the operas selected for this re-opening season was Verdi's *La Traviata*, an operatic version of the *Camille* story.

When the July opening date approached, and "with the return of peace and of time for pleasure, the little town . . . awakened once more." And awaken it did, in grand style. The opening night performance was attended by a New York critic who called the performances "superlative" and praised all aspects of the productions highly. "The Central City Opera House is a particularly felicitous spot for this type of musical work. It is an intimate fairy tale which plays with particularly effective charm in a house which seats fewer than 750 people."

In 1944 the Opera House Association had commissioned design and then construction work to begin on a memorial to Ida Kruse McFarland in Central City. Jack-of-all-trades Billy Hamilton was put in charge of the stonework, and, it was noted, "With each stone that he has laid there has been placed his measure of devotion to his friend Ida Kruse McFarlane." July 7th, 1946 marked the moving occasion of the dedication of this

memorial on the hillside above Central City where St. Aloysius Catholic Academy once sat. A stately cross salvaged from the since-burned academy attended by Ida Kruse was placed within a square brick retaining wall. The inscription read simply "Ida Kruse McFarlane" and contained a quote from Spanish poet Antonio Machado: "He who leaves work well done is with us still, and he who truly lives, lives on forever."

To meet the tremendous response to the Festival, the 1947 season was expanded to include three full-scale productions — two operas and a play, and the season's opening ceremonies were broadcast nationally by NBC.

Anne Evans was memorialized in August with a plaque on the Teller House bearing the inscription by Robert Edmond Jones: "This historic building has been restored as a memorial to Anne Evans whose spirit is an inseparable part of Central City and its festivals." In the dedication speech Denver Librarian Malcolm Wyrer stated: "The problems of holding the festivals in the old mining town . . . when transportation was primarily by way of Virginia Canon, would have been insuperable to most people . . . But the energy and devotion of Anne Evans, who often made up the deficits in the early days from her own funds, carried the festival idea through the difficult period before the war."

The 1947 season was the best-attended ever, and the Festival growth had made it apparent certain alterations had to be made to the Opera House to suit it better for its prominence. Late in the year Denver architect Burnham Hoyt, who had taken part in the 1932 restoration, was commissioned by the Association to plan some additional remodeling work to be completed before the 1948 season began.

News of these plans created an immediate stir. Indeed, as Hoyt's plans were revealed to the public the first time in the December 1st *Rocky Mountain News*, they sounded revolutionary. Most importantly, they involved:

- 1 . A remodeling of the foyer and lobby to remove the balcony stairs and placing them in a different position, and an expansion of the dress circle into their place.
- 2 . The replacement of the wooden balcony by a concrete balcony with external fire exits.
- 3 . The replacement of the wooden auditorium floor with concrete.
- 4 . The bolting of the hickory chairs to the floor.

Among other less dramatic changes proposed was the addition of more exits, the replacement of the dress circle steps with a ramp, and a change in the placement and size of aisles.

This announcement set off a wave of controversy. " 'Desecration' was the war cry," which went up from those opposed to the changes. An important figure in the anti-remodeling group was Colorado historian Caroline Bancroft. She pointed out that, while, "no one in his right mind objects to

safety precautions for fire-proofing the opera house," these proposed plans went far beyond that and would profoundly affect the "period" charm of the building.

Further, the anti-remodeling group stated,

The Central City Opera House . . . symbolizes our glorious past in exactly the same the same way as Mount Vernon and Monticello stand for something intangible, but fine . . . we do have Central City — the opera house and Eureka Street — preserved for us with but few changes and those entirely in keeping with the Victorian tradition.

The pro-remodeling group, led by Burnham Hoyt and the Opera House Association, posed their own views. Hoyt said, "he did not think the plans would damage the charm of the building in any way and that he was interested only in providing greater safety for audiences." Opera House Association President, Frank Ricketson, took a somewhat milder point of view: "He said he was not sure that the remodeling could be financed but considered it absolutely necessary."

Five specific points were made by the anti-remodeling group: First, auditorium acoustics might be ruined. Second, "The opera house will no longer be unique. It becomes just one more summer theatre . . . and its inaccessibility will be against its drawing power." Third, modernized, the opera house would be in competition with Denver's Elitch's summer theatre. Fourth, "The focal point of the festival has been . . . the artistry of the opera house . . . Destroy this . . . and we will lose a major part of our national publicity." Finally, "Aspen, with its strict Victorian building code, will supplant Central City as a better-class tourist attraction."

On December 3rd the Denver *Past* reported Carl Bieler, "Denver architect and Central City enthusiast," had joined the forces with the anti-remodeling group. "Bieler contended that the necessary fireproofing of the aged theatre . . . could be accomplished without structural or design changes which would destroy the building's architectural integrity."

He was particularly incensed at the significant change planned for the dress circle and foyer: "It is just those . . . things . . . and the ticket office — which, more than anything else, give the interior of the opera house its character." He pointed out the historical value of the dress circle as it was held in awe by the old-time theatre-goers, and "The foyer is important in its character. The fact that there are a few inconveniences does not . . . justify the altering of the foyer to suit modern situations." He saw the other alterations, however, less offensive. Bieler stated, "The important thing is to keep the opera house as it was and everyone should be extremely careful in making changes."

On the 7th Burnham Hoyt countered these objections. "The Opera House is a unique and beautiful — but dangerous building . . . It can be made safe, however, and still retain its Victorian charm, and I would be the last to destroy it."

He pointed out the alterations would be done in such a manner that they would be irrecognizable, and the Victorian style would be maintained. "We are not changing the line of the building in any way . . . and except in the use of concrete instead of wood, we are not changing materials. I am sure the proposed alterations will have no effect upon the acoustics of the Opera House."

Further, "Mr. Hoyt went on to say that he thoroughly understands the viewpoint of persons who feel the Opera House must be protected from changes which might completely alter its character. But he reiterated that the plans he suggests will have no effect whatever upon the building's historic quality."

That same day Denver University Theatre Department Head Campton Bell joined the controversy: "arguments are often based upon fallacious assumptions as these: if it is old it is good, if it was satisfactory for its time, it is still satisfactory." Thus, he pointed out, "It is not the rickety balcony nor the creaky wooden floors, narrow aisles, and uncomfortable seats that give character to the Central City Opera House. Rather it is the nicely-proportioned auditorium, the chaste proscenium arch and the beautifully designed frescoes that caused Robert Edmond Jones to call it one of the most beautiful opera houses in the world."

Bell stated, "We are most fortunate in having a governing board . . . faithful to . . . obtaining the best artistic and professional assistance available . . . the validity and integrity of their basic . . . policies are unquestioned." In conclusion, Bell pointed out, the Opera House would "retain its original charm and at the same time be a safe, comfortable building."

The anti-remodeling group also gained ammunition that same day when Allen True spoke out: "I know from working with the building for two years that it can be made fireproof with minor changes . . . But to destroy its lines is to destroy its beauty."

Another anti-remodeling partisan added, "The opera house is the one example we have which proves that the west was not all raw and crude, but that our miners had the taste to build that lovely and beautiful building."

Two days later Lucius Beebe joined the anti-remodeling group with a telegram: "May I most respectfully . . . suggest this talk of streamlining, modernizing and improving Central City Opera House is most unfortunate

and unfavorable . . . for Central City . . . What Central City needs is every bit of Victorian atmosphere possible."

On the 13th a former Central City usher added his opinion: "The lack of exits, the unfastened chairs, the narrow aisles, the hazardous small balcony staircase, and the large crowd would spell disaster and the famous Opera House might not open its doors again."

1947 closed without a final resolution being reached, and 1948 opened with further developments: On January 25th Central City Mayor John Jenkins stated, "opposition to the remodeling program has 'cooled considerably' and that opera followers are realizing that 'it's necessary to sacrifice a little sentiment for needed changes.'" Concurrently, he announced Central City councilmen had "informally approved" the remodeling program as proposed by Hoyt. This was not final authorization however.

In mid-February Lucius Beebe expanded upon his opposition: "Colorado generally has done itself no good by letting the relics of its spacious youth disappear," and urged that this not happen to the Opera House.

The next day Opera Association president Frank Ricketson spoke to cool the controversy: "the association was faced with the problem of making the building absolutely safe and had to do that without cutting the seating capacity to a point where the Central City festival could no longer be an enterprise of national importance." In support of the proposed alterations, he said, "I feel that this work has to be done if Central City is to continue to be a living festival and not a dead museum. And I fervently hope that differences of opinion . . . will not continue to a point where they will do damage to the future of the festival."

That same day The Denver *Post* announced, "By a margin of one vote . . . the city council voted . . . to grant a building permit for a \$35,000 remodeling project on the historic Central City Opera house." In explaining the council's action, Mayor Jenkins pointed out, "there comes a time when we must sacrifice a few things to gain lasting benefits . . . The majority of the city council was convinced that there was no other way of achieving the necessary protection and comfort for patrons of the opera house without losing too many seats . . . a grave responsibility rested on the city council . . . to make it absolutely certain that festival visitors could attend shows in the opera house in absolute safety."

A few days later Frank Ricketson further justified the council's action: "When the changes are made, the opera house will be a safe place in which to seat some 700 . . . human beings, yet even the oldtimers will have to look twice to be sure that changes have been made." In a *Post* editorial, Ricket-



The beautiful Miss Mae West as Diamond Lil in 1949.

LARRY CANTWELL, THE NOSTALGIA SHOP



Billy Hamilton, wearing his badge of dignity and office, presiding in the early 1950's. Observe the growth of the tree over his right shoulder.

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

son added, "If there have been differences of opinion over the planned safety measures for the opera house, the debate has been conscientious, healthy and constructive . . . the interest evoked is a positive sign that the festivals are assured of ever-growing success. People simply do not concern themselves actively with unworthwhile projects." The article concluded with the assurance, "no desecration of this shrine is to take place."

Last word in the controversy, however, was given by Central City artist Angelo di Benedetto: "Heritage is important to all people. We all save things of the past carefully. The opera house is no different; it is a heirloom and we must protect its authenticity."

Alterations finally made to the Opera House were substantially those proposed by the Opera House Association and Burnham Hoyt. Funds for these alterations were provided by Association member Mrs. Spencer Penrose.

In the Opera House Association President's Address, Frank H. Ricketson, Jr. outlined a program of further work on the Opera House to be completed in 1949: "the construction of a large work and storage shop and more adequate dressing rooms for the artists and modernization of the stage facilities." As Ricketson pointed out, "A stage that was constructed seventy years ago to provide for small dramatic productions will not adequately accommodate musicals or stage plays which are in prospect for tomorrow." Mrs. Spencer Penrose donated the \$60,000 to cover the cost of these alterations and additions which were, in fact, completed in 1949.

The sensation of the 1949 season was the appearance of the legendary Mae West in her play *Diamond Lil*. While the selection of the notorious Mae West may have startled some of the more staid members of the community, Frank Ricketson provided suitable explanation: "the association felt the need to stage a show which would interpret the exuberance and zest for life characterized by early-day Central City and commemorated each year by the festivals." General public approval for Miss West was voiced by the rapid ticket sales and a *News* columnist: "She has zest, daring and a most decided talent. 'Diamond Lil' ought to be a sure attraction for those who . . . like to forget their troubles and have a good time."

Some idea of the growth of the Central City Opera House Festival may be gained from the 1949 statistics: over 300,000 people visited Central City in the summer season, 42,000 of which actually attended Opera House performances. Since 1932 the festivals had made a dynamic change in economic activity in Central City. From a sleepy mining camp dreaming of yesterday's glory, the town had become a primary Colorado tourist attraction filled with thousands of visitors seeking amusement and spending money.

The presentation of grand opera had not always been felt to be the most suitable use of the old Opera House, and over the years there was occasionally heard some criticism. This most predictably came from *News* columnist Lee Casey. In 1950 Lucius Beebe added his opinion (probably reflecting on Mae West's 1949 sensation): "The carriage trade . . . are entrepreneurs of the bawdy. They don't have fun at operas. They regale with stuff like 'The Black Crook,' 'The Drunkard,' and 'The Fireman's Flame.'"

Lucius Beebe and Lee Casey notwithstanding, 1950's *Don Pasquale* was accorded the honor of being selected to be broadcast into 27 foreign countries by the Voice of America.

Completed also in 1950 were some further Opera House alterations. The dressing rooms were painted and decorated, the workshop completed, the overhead stage light slot installed, the dress circle walls and ceiling were replastered and redecorated, the external musicians' balcony was repaired, and new carpeting was also installed in the Opera House. Significant work was also done on the Constance Crook Memorial Garden beside the Opera House.

Further recognition of Festival founder Anne Evans' memory was given when "The sun broke through mountain clouds at Central City today (July 4th, 1950) and spotlighted Mount Evans in the distance as a group of pioneer Coloradans and friends of the late Anne Evans dedicated a mountain clearing as the 'Anne Evans Observation Point.'"

In anticipation of the coming season, the Opera House Association did some additional work on the Opera House. The *News* reported in mid-April, 1951: "A new scientifically designed orchestra pit was completed yesterday in the old Opera House at Central City . . . The pit has been enlarged, lowered, and designed to provide the utmost in musical and tonal efficiency. It has been designed by experts as 'an acoustical marvel.'"

To quell the fears of those skeptical of Opera House alterations, it was pointed out: "Despite the vast improvement, however, the classic lines of the old opera structure . . . have been wholly unimpaired. Central City audiences will see no change in the theatre, but the better blending of singer's tones with the orchestra will be immediately apparent to music lovers."

The opera season opening in 1951 was marked as "Fourteen of the nation's leading critics have accepted an invitation from Colorado Governor Thornton to attend the gala . . . events of the Central City Festival." Among the fourteen were Olin Downes, Virgil Thompson, Lucius Beebe, and Hedda Hopper.

With the added momentum of the 1952 season, the 1953 season was a banner year as there were presented a total of 69 performances, and a total of 400,000 tourists passed through Central City. 1953 also brought some touching up and restorative work on the Opera House frescoes by Denver artist Hans Buenger.

1954 brought the announcement in the Denver *Post* of the "Construction of a 57-foot grid to improve the stage facilities in the historic Central City Opera House." When Denver's famous Broadway Theatre was razed earlier, Tom Lee, manager of the Cosmopolitan Hotel, salvaged the scenery hoist and donated it to be installed in the Central City Opera House. The installation necessitated the raising of the Opera House roof over the stage some 25 feet so that the full scenery, drop mechanism, and storage area could be accommodated. These new facilities, Opera House Association President Frank Ricketson announced, would permit the most elaborate of settings which were never before possible at Central City.

To demonstrate this new capability, the Association booked the world-famous D'Oyly Carte Opera Company to do Gilbert and Sullivan with their very complex stage settings for the summer festival of 1955. A total of over 500,000 visited Central City that season.

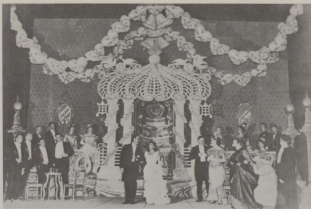
Also revealed in 1955 was the Association's commission of an original opera on Colorado "Silver King" H. A. W. Tabor and his romance with Baby Doe. Early in 1956 it was announced the upcoming season would be a banner year. It was to open with the world premiere of this new opera by Douglas Moore and John LaTouche entitled *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

The opening performance drew 25 music and drama critics from the United States and beyond, including John Chapman, Howard Taubman, and Lucius Beebe.

The premiere of *Baby Doe* was an immense success. The ever-present Lucius Beebe's gave some insight into the opera as well as its reception: The audience itself was striking; "For the story's unveiling there was assembled an audience of critics, social and political notables and names that make news ranging from Lily Pons to Kim Novak."

The opera dealt with subject matter familiar to Coloradoans: "The romance of Horace Tabor, richest of the carbonate kings of Leadville, Lieutenant governor of Colorado and briefly United States senator, with a blond . . . who was to become immortal as Baby Doe" — found frozen many years after Tabor's death "in a shack by the hoist of the long disused Matchless mine in Leadville, her wealth and reason long gone."

Baby Doe and Tabor had both been residents of Central City, and "Here, in a playhouse where they themselves had been participants in departed



The wedding scene of H.A.W. Tabor and Baby Doe from the premiere of *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, 1956. COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION



Festival Opening Day ceremonies in the early 1950's with the mounds of the Roundup Riders horseback contingent patiently waiting on Eureka Street in front of the Opera House.

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

dramas, in a setting which had been the factual background for their own lives and hopes and frustrations, amidst the wreckage of the mining years that might well symbolize the wreckage of their own fortunes, the characters of Tabor, Augusta and Baby Doe came to life behind the footlights in a manner intensely startling."

In concluding his review, Beebe noted the opening "was a date marked with a star in the annals of Central City." A recording of the opera, it was announced in August by the U. S. Information Agency, was to be broadcast world-wide over the Voice of America.

Also in 1956 each of the hardwood hickory chairs in the Opera House was fitted with a red velvet cushion filled with foam rubber to assure the comfort of opera-goers in coming years.

1956 marked the 25th anniversary of the Central City Opera Festival, and it was dedicated to Mrs. Spencer Penrose, a key festival patron. Of the total 550,000 visitors to Central City that season, 55,500 actually attended a performance at the Opera House.

1957 continued Festival growth, but 1958 was again an especially important year. The play presented that year resulted from a contest by the *Denver Post* and the Opera House Association to find an original work on the subject of Colorado's gold rush. Its winner, noted Colorado poet and historian Thomas Hornsby Ferrill, took his title from an early guidebook to the Pike's Peak gold region: "Here . . . there will be a . . . steadily increasing community, that will gradually build up a mighty mineral empire, abounding in people, wealth, and, perhaps, happiness." Called . . . *And Perhaps Happiness*, Ferrill's play presented a pageant of Colorado history seen through characters in three generations of the same family. Included was the famous legend of Silverheels, the dance hall girl who gallantly acted as nurse to scores of miners stricken by an epidemic. The production was greeted with enthusiastic audiences.

In 1959 the Denver Botanic Gardens donated a wide variety of plants to further beautify the Opera House's two gardens.

1961 marked the 30th anniversary of the Opera House Festivals, and the occasion was commemorated by a production of *La Traviata*.

In 1964 another entry in the series of important original works premiered at the Opera House. Through Frank Ricketson, the Association had commissioned Robert Ward and Bernard Stambler to write an opera based on *The Lady From Colorado*, about an early Colorado personality. Although the resulting work, also called *The Lady From Colorado*, did not gain the strong critical approval given *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, it was engagingly performed, well produced, and played to capacity houses.

1964 also marked the retirement of Association President Frank H. Ricketson. In his 21 years he had not only exerted a very personal and successful control of Opera House activities, but was also active in community, charitable, and civic causes. He had been a key figure in the commissioning and presentation of original works on Colorado themes at the Opera House. He maintained a position on the Association as Chairman of the Board, and, thereby, continued his active interest and role in the Central City Opera House Festival.

Rising production costs in the late 60's developed as a serious problem for the Opera House Association and their festival activities. For a while there was some cutback in the number of yearly productions or a change in their character, both of which responses did not deal effectively with recurring financial problems.

To solve these problems the Association proposed two alternatives. The first involved enlarging seating capacity in the Opera House itself: Association directors investigated this to the point of having an architect draw up plans for an expansion. However, in the end, this alternative was untenable as "Alteration of the building . . . would destroy its authenticity."

The other alternative involved turning Central City into the "Williamsburg of the West" by having Gilpin County declared an historical preserve and appealing to the state and Denver City governments for the project's necessary financing (In 1962 Central City had already been declared a national historic landmark). "Failing this . . . we will either have to completely change the . . . festival or it will be a dark opera house."

This gloomy outlook stimulated some increased financial support, although nothing on the level from the state or city as hoped for. The 1969 season, on a somewhat limited basis, was financially given the go-ahead.

Financing was still a problem in the 1970 season; nevertheless, a new opera was premiered at the Opera House. It was Carlisle Floyd's *Of Mice and Men*, after the John Steinbeck novel of the same name.

After the end of the 1976 Festival the significantly increased costs again threatened to darken the old Opera House for good. In an attempt to solve this problem, the management of the festivals was turned over to Carl Dahlgren of Dahlgren Arts theatrical organization.

In order, however, to pursue the Opera Association's original plans for making Gilpin Co. a national historic preserve, the Association organized its "Little Kingdom Council." With a membership including Central City and Black Hawk municipal government, associated historical, arts, and businessmen's organizations, Colorado State officials, representatives from Denver University, and the American Institute of Architects, this Council's objectives were:

To put into being a permanent council to secure funds for, to plan, oversee, administer and direct . . . those activities which best will serve to protect, preserve and restore the historical attributes of the Central City and Black Hawk communities (And) To honor their meaningful participation in framing the mining, cultural, commercial and governmental development of Colorado and its territorial beginnings.

More specifically, "the greatest possible efforts should be made to achieve as much restoration and renovation as is practicable by the year 1976" — America's bicentennial and Colorado's centennial year.

In March, 1971 the Association announced the coming season was to be something of a nostalgic one with the return to the Opera House stage of Lillian Gish.

As announced, the season opened with *Lillian Gish and the Movies*, featuring the famous film star who opened the Opera House Festivals in 1932. "The show consisted of excerpts of representative films dating from 1900 to 1928. The veteran actress accompanied the showing of these silent films with her own intelligent, informative, and often humorous commentary on them." Lillian Gish marked the occasion of her second appearance on the Opera House stage by wearing a soft white gown as Camille had in 1932, and she was greeted with a standing ovation.

Although the 1971 season did not involve an opera production, it did produce significant revenues while not diminishing the Association Treasury disproportionately. In recognition of this, in November, Association President Myron Neusteter announced, "Central City will return to a presentation of opera in 1972."

Opera did return to the Opera House in 1972, and that season it was also the scene of a chamber music recital, drawing praise from the *Denver Post*: "The Opera House makes a first-rate chamber music hall, with the stage focusing the sound warmly and projecting the parts with rare fidelity." In a different story, the *Denver Post* surveyed the history and development of the Central City Opera House Festival and also compared it favorably with the Festival of Two Worlds held in Spoleto, Italy each year.

In August the *Saturday Review* praised the return of opera to the Central City Festival and indicated the quality of the production promised a highly successful future for the Opera Festival in coming years.

As part of its continuing search for funding, the Association applied for national foundation support for its activities. A requirement of such funding, however, was the institution of a year-round season — which meant presenting productions in Denver. Opera House Association President John F. Kelly pointed out, however, "If . . . (we) can find support for

year-round productions, the Central City Opera festival will remain an essential part of its program We will never abandon our activities in Central City.

The summer of 1973 brought an unforeseen problem for the Opera House Festival: the gasoline shortage. Nevertheless, the season went on as planned although it incurred heavy losses.

In mid-season 1973 Opera House Association President Emeritus Frank H. Ricketson, Jr. was awarded with special recognition at a ceremony at the Opera House for his many years of hard work for the Association.

The 45th anniversary of the Central City Opera House Festival in 1976 featured again *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, now a regular attraction at the festivals — and a popular one.

In commemoration of the centennial year of the Opera House in 1978, the Opera House Association presented a production of Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, which was greeted with an enthusiasm to equal that of the original amateur production which took place at the Belvidere in 1877: Said the *Denver Post*, the "opera is a splendid romp all around and a Central City Legend . . . it is a bright, brash and breezy affair that had cheers, whistles and hearty applause at its conclusion."

One might imagine that these "cheers, whistles, and hearty applause" echoed accurately that of just over one hundred years ago when the idea to build a grand Opera House in Central City budded, bloomed, and flowered like a delicate mountain blossom on a rocky hillside.

The Central City Opera House exists today as a vital part of the American cultural scene fully satisfying the hopes and dreams of Ida Kruse McFarlane, Anne Evans, Allen True, and Robert Edmond Jones, as well as thousands of others who contributed thought, effort, and capital to its rebirth fulfilling in every respect the wish of Frank Ricketson: "My joy in Central City . . . is the hope that it has a permanent future as a living memorial to the Colorado pioneers."

CENTRAL CITY

The dead shall rise again

From graves beneath the pines,
And wraith of men shall marshal them
Into their ragged lines —
With none to know of where they go:
Ghosts of the ravished mines.

They will pause where the ore dumps stain,
Stalwart and unafraid,
But filled with the ache of memories
That were old when their bones were laid —
When they drove their drills in the wounded hills
And squandered the gold they paid.

Killer and killed will be
Brothers in wonderment
When the roaring streets grow grave again
With a thousand signals sent:
And the years shall wheel to all they feel
As they move with a firm intent.

Their ghostly ranks will fade
Into the swirling din:
The weathered doors of the opera house
Will open to let them in —
And no man's hand shall halt the band
As the ranks pass, cold and thin.

To joy in golden words
They knew once long ago,
Hearing again the treasured lines
Of a play they used to know:
The play was theirs — in the serried chairs
They'll drink it, row on row.

Then to the gleaming halls
Where midnight revel whirls —
Wraiths of men in a noisy waltz
With the ghosts of dancing girls:
But none shall know when they turn to go
To their graves, as the dawn smoke curls.

Morris Cleavenger



The Opera House today. Compare the tree on the left with earlier pictures.

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

APPENDIX

CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE PRODUCTIONS AND STARS (This list contains only those productions which were held in the Opera House itself):

YEAR	PRODUCTION	STARS
1932	<i>Camille</i>	Lillian Gish, Raymond Hackett
1933	<i>The Merry Widow</i>	Glady's Swarthout, Richard Bonell
1934	<i>Orhelo</i>	Walter Houston, Kenneth McKenna, Nan Sunderland
1935	<i>Central City Nights</i>	Nan Sunderland, Perry Ivins
1936	<i>The Gondoliers</i>	Louise Bernhart, Raymond Middleton
1937	<i>A Doll's House</i>	Ruth Gordon, Dennis King, Sam Jaffe
1938	<i>Ray Blas</i>	Bramwell Fletcher, Helen Chandler
1939	<i>Yeoman of the Guard</i>	Anna Kaskas, Charles Kulman
1940	<i>The Bartered Bride</i>	Josephine Antoine, John Carter
1941	<i>The Barber of Seville</i> <i>Orfeo et Euridice</i>	John Brownlee, Stella Androva Anna Kaskas, Margit Bokor
1942-45	No Festivals Presented	
1946	<i>The Abduction from the Seraglio</i> <i>La Traviata</i>	Eleanor Steber, Jerome Hines Brooks McCormack, Inge Manski, Fiorenza Quaratarar
1947	<i>Marrha</i> <i>Fidelio</i> <i>Harvey</i>	Frances Greer, Leopold Semoneau, James Pease Regina Resnik, Brian Sullivan, Lorenzo Alvary Frank Fay
1948	<i>Così Fan Tutte</i> <i>The Tales of Hoffman</i> <i>The Play's the Thing</i>	Jane Hobson, Clifford Harvout, Anne Bollinger Igor Gorin, Inge Manski, Jerome Hines Louis Calhern, Fay Emerson
1949	<i>Die Fladermas</i> <i>Diamond Lil</i>	Regina Resnik, Adelaide Bishop, Clifford Harvout, Davis Cunningham Mae West
1950	<i>Madame Butterfly</i> <i>Don Pasquale</i> <i>The Devil's Disciple</i>	Paula Lencher, Davis Cunningham, Thelma Altman, Brenda Lewis Adelaide Bishop, Clifford Harvout, Davis Cunningham Maurice Evans, Helen Bonfils
1951	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Davis Cunningham, Adelaide Bishop, Virginia Haskins, David Garen

Don Pasquale

Amelia Goes to the Ball
The Beautiful Galatea
The Constant Wife

1952

La Boheme

The Marriage of Figaro

Mrs. McThing

1953

Carmen

Merry Wives of Windsor
Time of the Cuckoo

1954

Faust

Ariadne

The Caine Mutiny Court Martial

1955

Mikado, Yeoman of the Guard,
Iolanthe, Trial By Jury, H.M.S.
Pinafore

1956

La Tosca

The Ballad of Baby Doe

1957

Rigoletto

The Gypsy Baron

Separate Tables

1958

Cavallera Rusticana

I Paggiacci

La Pericole

... And Perhaps Happiness

1959

Die Fladermas

The Ballad of Baby Doe

1960

Aida

Lucia di Lammermoor

Adelaide Bishop, Carlton Gould

Eleanor Steber, Virginia Haskins
Eleanor Steber, Virginia Haskins
Katherine Cornell, Brian Aherne,
Grace George

Ann Ayars, Davis Cunningham,
Jeanna Gibbons

James Pease, Ann Bollinger,
Virginia MacWatters, Francisco
Valentine

Helen Hayes

Davis Cunningham, Edith Evans
Virginia MacWatters, Hugh Tompson
Shirley Booth

Mimi Benzell, Brian Sullivan
Adelaide Bishop, Virginia
MacWatters, Thomas Hayward

Paul Douglas, Wendell Corey,
Steve Brodie

The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company

Lucine Amara, Mariquita Moll,
Laurence Davidson, Jon Crain

Dolores Wilson, Frances Bible

Virginia MacWatters, Margaret
Rogerro, Jon Crain, Frank
Guarerra, Joshua Hecht

Irene Jordan, Maria di Oerlando,
Davis Cunningham

Eric Portman, Geraldine Page

Gloris Lind, John Alexander,
John Druary

Emilia Cundari, Hugh Thompson
Cyril Ritchard, Lois Hunt,
Theodore Uppman

K. T. Stevens, Hugh Marlowe

Sarah Fleming, Eva Likova,
Clifford Harvout, John Alexander

Laurel Hurley, Martha Lipton,
Frank Guarerra,

John Alexander, Rosilind Elias
Marguerite Gignac, Joann Grillo,
Joshua Hecht, Frank Guarerra,
Chester Ludgin, Beverly Sills

	<i>A Thurbur Carnival</i>	Peggy Cass, Paul Ford, Eddie Mayhoff, John McGiver, Alice Ghostly		<i>This Land Is Your Land</i> <i>I Do! I Do!</i> <i>Harvey</i>	John Wolfe Patrice Munsel, Stephen Douglas Gig Young, Shirley Booth
1961	<i>La Traviata</i> <i>The Elixir of Love</i>	Dorothy Warendkjold, Jon Crain Clifford Harvout, Mildred Allen, John Alexander, Chester Ludgin	1972	<i>The Marriage of Figaro</i> <i>Falstaff</i> <i>Private Lives</i> <i>Helly, Dolly!</i> <i>Last of the Red Hot Lovers</i> <i>1776</i> <i>Gianni Schicchi</i> <i>The Human Voice</i>	John Seabury, Patricia Brooks Frank Guarerra Marsha Mason
1962	<i>The Miracle Worker</i> <i>La Boheme</i> <i>The Girl of the Golden West</i> <i>Mary, Mary</i>	Eileen Brennan, Donne Zimmermann John Alexander, Arlene Saunders Clifford Harvout, Beverly Bower Lee Bowman		<i>Falstaff</i> <i>The Barber of Seville</i> <i>The Hollow Crown</i>	George Gobel, Peter Stone Jack Harrold Apprentice Program Apprentice Program
1963	<i>Il Trovatore</i> <i>Don Giovanni</i> <i>Never Too Late</i>	Joann Grillo Richard Cross, Eileen Shauler William Bendix, Nancy Carroll, Will Hutchins	1973	<i>The Irregular Verb to Love</i> <i>The Gershwin Years</i> <i>Rigoletto</i> <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> <i>Sister Angelica</i> <i>Dialogues of the Carmelites</i>	Frank Guarerra Malcolm Smith Sir Michael Redgrave, Dame Peggy Ashcroft Celeste Holm, Wesley Addy Nancy Dussault, Barbara Cook Chester Ludgin
1964	<i>The Lady From Colorado</i> <i>Madame Butterfly</i> <i>Barefoot in the Park</i>	Myrna Loy, Richard Benjamin, Joan Van Ark	1974	<i>Don Giovanni</i> <i>Scipio Africanus</i> <i>The Four Ruffians or School for Fathers</i>	Apprentice Program Apprentice Program
1965	<i>Manon</i> <i>The Barber of Seville</i> <i>Lakme</i> <i>Any Wednesday</i>	Elaine Malbin William Beck Patricia Brooks, June Card	1975	<i>The Ballad of Baby Doe</i> <i>The Midsummer Night's Dream</i> <i>The Bartered Bride</i> <i>Jazz Festival</i>	
1966	<i>Carmen</i> <i>The Italian Girl in Algiers</i> <i>The Ballad of Baby Doe</i>	Joann Grillo, Thomas Hayward Herbert Beattie, Marcia Baldwin Nadja Witkowska, Chester Ludgin, Eunice Roberts	1976	<i>The Bohemian Girl</i>	Marianna Christos, Leigh Munro, Will Roy, Norman Andersson, Vinson Cole, Alan Kays, Alice Garrot
	<i>The Odd Couple</i>	Phil Foster, George Gobel	1977	<i>Don Pasquale</i>	Spiro Malas, Domenic Cossa, Susan Smith
1967	<i>The Merry Widow</i> <i>Don Pasquale</i> <i>A Masked Ball</i> <i>Cactus Flower</i>	Mary Jennings, Elizabeth Cole Herbert Beattie Eileen Schauler Hugh O'Brien	1978	<i>Jazz Festival</i> <i>The Merry Widow</i>	Mary Costa, Pamela Myers, Howard Hensel, Gimi Beni, Jack Harrold, Evelyn Petros, Maryanne Telese
1968	<i>The Mikado, Yeoman of the Guard,</i> <i>H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of</i> <i>Penzance</i> <i>There's a Girl in My Soup</i>	The D'Oy Carte Opera Company	1979	<i>The Barber of Seville</i>	Thomas Woodman, David Hall, Domenic Cossa, Peter Harrower
1969	<i>Tosca</i> <i>Die Fladermaus</i> <i>Plaza Suite</i>	Don Ameche, Betsy Von Furstenberg Benjamin Rayson, Eileen Schauler Nico Castel Howard Keel, Betty Garrett			
1970	<i>Of Mice and Men</i> <i>La Boheme</i> <i>Forty Carats</i>	Robert Moulson, Robert Trehay Patricia Craig Barbara Rush, Scott McCay			
1971	<i>Lillian Gish and the Movies</i> <i>The Medium</i>	Lillian Gish			

The Medium

Soyazhe

The Circle

A Month in the Country

Jazz Festival

Bella Lewitzky Dance Company

The Marriage of Figaro

Carolyn James, Joyce Guyer-Hiller,
Barry S. Carl

Joy Davidson, John Sandor
American Conservatory Theatre
American Conservatory Theatre
With Alberta Hunter

Apprentice Program

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Special Collections Department, Penrose Library, University of Denver
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The bellringer summoning the intermission audience back to the Opera House for the performance's conclusion.

COLORADO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, CENTRAL CITY OPERA HOUSE ASSOCIATION

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Born in Denver, Charlie H. Johnson, Jr., is a freelance writer who has also taught English and theatre. An interest in history developed in 1977 in the writing of his history of Denver's Daniels & Fisher Tower. Colorado history, pioneer culture, and early mining-town architecture come together in his writing the history of the Central City Opera House. Mr. Johnson has also written a history of the Tabor Opera House in Leadville, Colorado, and is currently at work researching and writing on Colorado muralist Allen Tupper True.

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