

THE Pence Opera House
and Hennepin Avenue, 1869

Playhouse for Pioneers



The Story of the Pence Opera House

DONALD Z. WOODS

IN THE SPRING of 1952 the old Pence Building was torn down in Minneapolis and with it went the last vestiges of the opera house that formerly drew crowds to this third-floor theater. For eighty-five years the building stood at the corner of Hennepin Avenue and Second Street—a location that was once in the heart of the city, but is now in the outmoded and slightly shabby lower loop.

When the Pence Opera House was opened in 1867 it was the cultural and entertainment center of Minneapolis. There, in the years that followed, Laura Keane performed in "Our American Cousin," Ole Bull played his violin, and Bjornstjerne Bjornson lectured to local Scandinavians on the constitutional struggle in Norway. On the Pence stage, the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare were presented, along

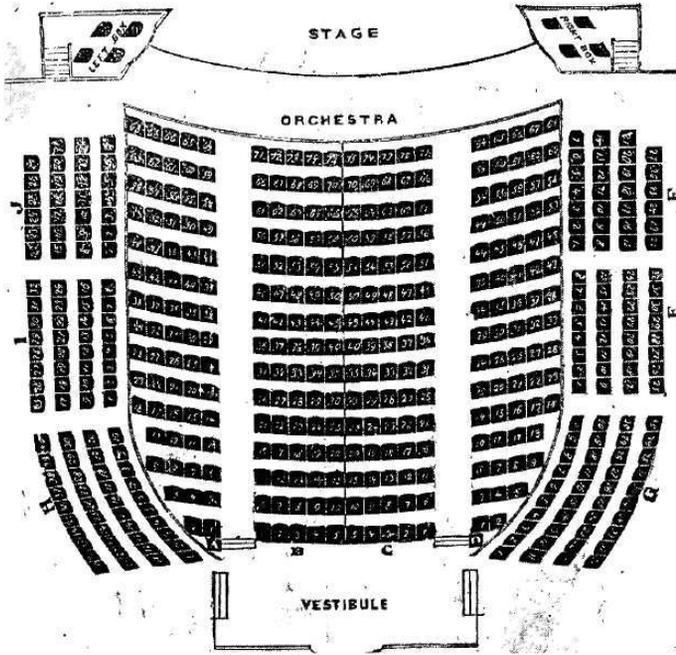
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with the dramatic oddities of the day, including "East Lynne," "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Mazeppa," and "The Black Crook." There such local favorites as Ignatius Donnelly, the singing Hutchinsons, and Ossian Dodge educated and entertained audiences.

In 1866, when the Pence Building was erected, conditions were right for opening an opera house. Youthful Minneapolis was enjoying prosperity—a pleasant state after the stringent years of the Civil War. A building boom was under way, and the halls and churches which had previously served as public gathering places were no longer considered adequate for the needs of the fast-growing community.¹

To John Wesley Pence, the building of an opera house looked like a safe investment. A thirty-six-year-old bachelor, Pence went to Minneapolis in 1865 to recover the health he had lost while accumulating a

¹J. Fletcher Williams, *Outlines of the History of Minnesota*, 157 (Minneapolis, 1881); *St. Paul Pioneer*, April 1, 1866.



FLOOR plan
of the Pence,
from an early
playbill

fortune in his native state of Ohio. But the wealth acquired in milling, distilling, and cattle-fattening enterprises soon led him back into the business world, for in the fast-growing western community he was quick to see "inviting fields for investment." Noting that there was a genuine need for a large hall and that the citizens of Minneapolis apparently desired one, Pence let it be known on April 1, 1866, that he might be able to provide a fine public hall if he received the proper co-operation. He was about to erect "a stone building, three stories high and 66 x 100 feet, on the old post-office corner." According to a newspaper report, Pence agreed to prepare the third floor of his projected building as a public hall if Minneapolitans would raise "a sufficient bonus." Inasmuch as arranging the top floor as a hall would require "the outlay of several thousand dollars more than if it were to be used for ordinary purposes," the newspaper explained that it was "but just" for people who wanted the hall to bear "a portion of the additional expense."²

With the public thus notified of its re-

sponsibility, Pence went ahead with his construction program. By November 22, except for the third floor, the building was ready for occupancy.³ A billiard parlor in the basement, three stores on the ground floor, and eight offices—one or more of which were occupied by the city council—on the second floor were already in use when the hall on the third floor was still only a huge and barren room.

There may have been two reasons for the slow pace at which work on the hall went forward. Perhaps Pence was waiting for more definite word from the public-spirited citizens who were expected to raise money. Or he may have decided that there was no need to hurry, since the theatrical season in Minneapolis was still largely a summer one. Except for a few venturesome performers, professional entertainers usually spent their winters in more populous areas where the chance for a profitable

² Isaac Atwater and John H. Stevens, eds., *History of Minneapolis and Hennepin County*, 719 (New York, 1895); *Pioneer*, April 1, 1866.

³ *Minneapolis Chronicle*, November 22, 1866; *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 5, 16, 1867.

season was greater, transportation better, and the climate less rigorous. With the coming of summer, these players would be drifting back into Minnesota again. Though work progressed in a leisurely fashion, it seemed likely that the new hall would be ready in time for their arrival.

By March, 1867, the large third-floor room had been converted into a theater. Following the plans of the architect, A. M. Radcliffe, it had excellent acoustics and sight lines.⁴ For the edification of those who were "unaware of the style of beauty and capacity of this elegant and spacious Music Hall," the *Minneapolis Chronicle* of March 24, provided a complete description. According to this account, the great room measuring sixty-three by ninety-eight feet had been divided into two "apartments." The first was the stage at the front of the building, with windows looking out onto Hennepin Avenue, while the second was the auditorium toward the rear, with stairways leading down to the public entrance on the Second Street side of the structure.

The stage, "63 feet in width and 30½ feet in depth and 4 feet 2 inches in height," had a large apron and a sloping floor which rose "gradually to an elevation of 8 inches in the rear." Dressing rooms had been built on each side of the stage, and a drop curtain, as yet undecorated, had been hung in the proscenium opening. The auditorium measured seventy-seven by sixty-three feet. Stairways led from the main floor to the "spacious gallery" which extended along three walls. Four rows of "fixed, upholstered seats" – the *Chronicle's* euphemistic way of describing padded benches – were already in place in the gallery, but it had not yet been decided whether armchairs or settees would be used on the main floor. For ventilation there would be openings at floor level and in the ceiling,

⁴ *Tribune*, June 19, 1867.

⁵ *Tribune*, June 14, 1867. All information concerning the decorating of the Pence is based on this issue.

where there was a twelve-foot dome. When needed, heat would be provided by "immense stoves."

The *Chronicle* also announced that Pence's pride in his city had so stimulated his generosity that he planned to decorate the hall in a "costly and elegant style," even though it would cost him five or six thousand dollars more than he originally had intended to spend. The citizens, having neglected to respond to the earlier bonus plan, were now urged to attend a benefit that was being arranged for the builder and to "come forward generously and show their appreciation."

Three decorators were imported from Chicago to put the final touches on the theater, and by June 14 their work was complete.⁵ Perhaps not in quality, but undoubtedly in quantity, the artists gave Pence full value for the money he spent in decorating his hall. Around the dome danced eight "angel children holding hands" and the remainder of the ceiling was decorated with life-size and realistically painted female figures representing the seasons and with four emblems of a musical nature.

Over the proscenium arch floated two angels, supporting a bust of Shakespeare between them. One held a pen described as that mightier than the sword, while the other carried a scroll on which was printed "Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth." Two others were stationed nearby, their facial expressions and the masks they carried identifying them as Tragedy and Comedy.

With the Civil War so recently completed, patriotic symbols were in order. Above Shakespeare's head soared a large American eagle from whose mouth rippled a streamer bearing the legend "J. W. Pence. Dedicated June, 1867." Full-length portraits of Washington, Lincoln, and Andrew Jackson were to be seen over the galleries on side and rear walls. The boxes on either side of the stage were richly decorated with paintings "representing a vase filled with flowers" and with gilt stars.

The drop curtain and the scenery were the work of William Sterry, a Chicago scenic artist. A scene which he called "Beautiful Venice, Bride of the Sea" decorated the curtain. A reporter for the *Tribune* found the work faultless and pronounced it the best in the West. A writer for a St. Paul paper, carried away by the beauty of Sterry's scene, declared that one could dream over the picture, "little heeding that Venice is thousands of miles away in the old world." For the curtain, J. W. Wilson, the stage carpenter, "invented" an arrangement by which it could be "rolled from the top on an eighteen inch roller . . . a great improvement on the old style of rolling up from the bottom."⁶

Just before the dedication, the final touches were added. For some time the owner had been calling his theater the "Pence Music Hall" and had even had a sign bearing that name placed on the exterior of the building, but on June 18 he had the sign covered over with a new one bearing the words "Pence Opera House." On the level floor of the auditorium were installed upholstered settees, each to accommodate five persons, and in later years described as "about as comfortable as a pine board."⁷ The exact seating capacity of the Pence is somewhat doubtful, and has been variously reported. On June 14, 1867, the *Tribune* announced that fourteen hundred people could be seated in the room "without crowding," but five days later the same paper stated that the hall could seat a thousand people and "by introducing extra seats" could accommodate several hundred more. On the opening night thirteen hundred were reported present, without mentioning whether the hall was over-crowded. A seating diagram of the Pence on an 1889 program shows seating space for 482 people. If the original capacity was about a thousand, a part of the great decrease may have come about in 1878, when the auditorium floor was sloped and new seats were put in.

In preparation for the dedication, the

singers of the Minneapolis Musical Union rehearsed regularly. The musicians of the St. Paul Musical Society accepted an invitation to assist with the opening program. The railroads volunteered to provide free round-trip transportation for people from St. Paul who attended and half-fares from all other points in the state. The People's Store advertised the "Pence Opera Bonnet" as an especially choice bit of millinery for ladies who would be attending the opening. Tickets for the grand opening concert were put on sale at one, two, and five dollars each, with the entire proceeds to go to Pence.⁸

THIRTEEN HUNDRED people, including Governor William R. Marshall, Senator Alexander Ramsey, and Lieutenant Governor T. H. Armstrong, were present for the brilliant opening on the evening of June 21, 1867. W. D. Washburn in his dedicatory address lauded the "generous liberality of our public citizen, Mr. Pence," and declared that the opera house was "a model of perfection." Then he pronounced the dedication sentence: "And now, in the presence of the great company, with the approving smile of the Immortal Bard, with the Father and Savior of our loved Republic looking down upon us, and with the American Eagle, bearing above us the name of 'J. W. Pence,' I dedicate to the good people of Minneapolis this beautiful structure." Governor Marshall next said a few words. A program of concert selections by the St. Paul and Minneapolis musicians followed. Pence was taken out on stage, but he refused to utter a sound. After a long program of choral and orchestral numbers, solos, and duets, the dedication ceremonies were concluded at a late hour.⁹

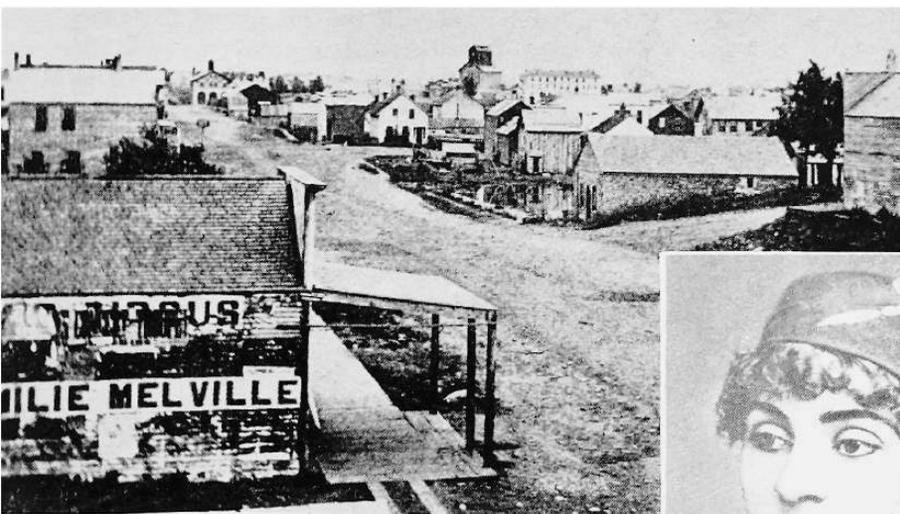
Within the next few days, however, facts

⁶ *St. Paul Daily Press*, May 30, 1867; *Tribune*, June 15, 1867.

⁷ *Tribune*, June 19, 1867; *Minneapolis and St. Paul Evening Journal*, March 31, 1883.

⁸ *Chronicle*, April 26, 1867; *Tribune*, June 19, 1867.

⁹ *Tribune*, June 21, 23, 1867.



BILLPOSTER on a building
on Second Street near Nicollet
advertising Melville's engagement
at the Pence in 1867



EMILIE Melville

were revealed which somewhat dimmed the luster of the opening ceremonies. Although the crowd had been large, the proceeds from the opening night had fallen a good deal short of the amount a committee on arrangements had pledged to Pence. Even more disconcerting was the revelation that the opening ceremonies had been snubbed by St. Paul—serious effrontery in view of the fact that four months earlier Minneapolis had made up a third of the audience at the dedication of their neighbors' new opera house. When the Minneapolis *Tribune* complained that only eleven tickets had been sold in St. Paul, the newspapers of the latter city replied that the *Tribune* was in error, for actually *twelve* tickets had been sold there; furthermore, according to their papers, St. Paulites could not be expected "to go into the country to witness musical or dramatic entertainments."¹⁰

The wounded feelings of Minneapolitans eventually were soothed, and by July 17 the *Tribune* was able to accept calmly the comment of the *New York Times*, which described the Pence Opera House as a "tiny box of 66 x 100 feet." The *Tribune* replied modestly that it was pleased to think that "the fame of our pretty little gem of a theater . . . reached even to the Empire City."

On June 24, 1867, three nights after the dedication, A. Macfarland and his "consolidation company" presented Sheridan Knowles' "The Hunchback"—the first dramatic performance in the new opera house. A storm on the opening night did not prevent a good audience from gathering to enjoy the play, to judge the qualifications of its star, Rachel Johnson, and to view the new scenery. The play was well

¹⁰ *Chronicle*, February 21, 1867; *Tribune*, June 25, 27, July 2, 1867; *Pioneer*, June 26, 1867.

liked and Miss Johnson was declared an excellent tragedienne.¹¹

The Pence took on a more festive air on July 1, when the “young and beautiful Prima Donna and Comedienne,” Miss Emilie Melville, arrived to replace Miss Johnson.¹² A newspaper reporter, perhaps sensing that the earlier Johnson tragedies had not been completely at home in the highly decorated opera house, now declared that “Nothing is more beautiful than the Opera House, when it is thronged with people, and the beautiful Emilie Melville singing and dancing upon the stage.” When Miss Emilie appeared in such pieces as “Po-ca-hon-tas” and “The Pearl of Savoy,” “showers of bouquets” were thrown upon the stage, gifts of jewelry from admiring males occasionally being included in the floral downpour. As a *Tribune* writer recalled in later years, “Miss Melville took Minneapolis by storm and broke hearts ruthlessly.”¹³

Some of the success of the Melville engagement can be credited to George L. Aiken, who took over the management of the company when Macfarland departed to try his theatrical luck in St. Paul. Not only was Aiken an excellent leading man and an experienced stage manager, but he

was also a dramatist of some note. His acting version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is still well known and his period of service as a dramatist at Barnum’s New York Museum marked him as a theatrical performer of more than ordinary ability. He also must have appreciated the value of advertising, for an early photograph of Minneapolis shows the name of his star actress painted in huge letters on the side of a Second Street building.

During the next five years, from 1869 to 1872, the Pence continued to be the town’s principal gathering place. In addition to being a theater, it also served as a community hall where political rallies, dances, and amateur theatricals were frequently held. Among the wide variety of attractions which appeared at the Pence during these years were minstrel troupes, opera companies, lecturers, the Peak bell ringers, and Charles Plunkett’s dramatic company headed by such “stars” as Mollie Williams and Susan Denin.

It was during this period that two of

¹¹ *Tribune*, June 25, 1867.

¹² *Chronicle*, April 16, 1867.

¹³ “Minneapolis Items,” in *St. Paul Daily Press*, July 9, 1867; *Pioneer*, July 12, 14, 1867; *Tribune*, July 2, 1867, January 5, 1879.

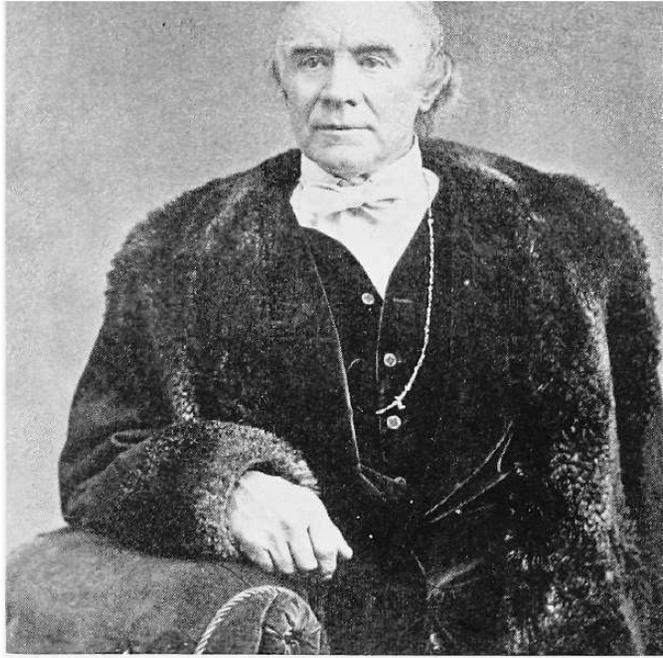


THE Pence building
in 1936

the best-known personalities ever to perform at the Pence made their appearances. On May 3, 1869, Ole Bull arrived for a concert. Several hundred flag-carrying Scandinavians met the violinist at the depot and escorted him to the Nicollet House, where "from one to two thousand people had gathered to see him." Bull made a speech from the balcony, praising both the "stout and healthy" Scandinavians he saw before him and the fine city in which they had chosen to settle. Later in the day, Bull had his photograph taken at Beal's gallery, and for several days thereafter the gallery "was thronged . . . by the friends of the great master, eager to secure one of the beautiful imperial photographs." In the evening, the opera house "was filled to overflowing with one of the most brilliant and appreciative audiences ever assembled there" and "Ole Bull with his violin fairly carried the audience away with delight."¹⁴

The second famous visitor to the Pence was Laura Keane, who appeared between July 11 and 21, 1870. Audiences described as consisting of "the most fastidious and discriminating class of citizens" in Minneapolis found Miss Keane and her supporting company excellent in a repertoire made up of such plays as "The Rivals," "Caste," and "Our American Cousin."¹⁵

The Pence Opera House lost much of its prestige and popularity when the Academy of Music was opened in 1872, a block up Hennepin at the corner of Washington Avenue. Like the Pence, the Academy was a third-floor theater, but its greater size and superior stage arrangements drew most of the first-class attractions away from the older opera house. In the next few seasons, if it had not been for the occasional engagements of the Plunkett family stock company, the Pence might have been declared inactive. Between 1875 and 1878, when the Academy was presenting such stars as Frank Mayo in "Davy Crockett,"



OLE BULL, as photographed in Minneapolis

Lawrence Barrett and E. L. Davenport in "Julius Caesar," and Mary Anderson in "Romeo and Juliet," the Pence was offering Signor Duvalli and his trained canaries, Professor Schaeffner and his stereopticon views of the capture of the Younger brothers, and Tom Thumb "in person."

The fortunes of the Pence were revived, however, when a stock company headed by John Murray and Grace Cartland took over in September, 1878. Before the season had advanced very far, the playhouse was doing the bulk of the theatrical business in Minneapolis and the Academy was dark much of the time. Murray and Cartland's Great Metropolitan Theatre Company was made up of competent actors; its extremely handsome leading man, Frederick Bryton, soon established himself as the town's matinee idol; each production was provided with scenic effects described as "a credit to any theatre in the land"; admission prices were moderate; and the company, which soon became identified as a "home institution," received the approval of the press.¹⁶

Although the Academy eventually regained its status as the city's leading theater, the stock company policy at the Pence

¹⁴ *Tribune*, May 4, 5, 6, 1869.

¹⁵ *Tribune*, July 12, 14, 15, 17, 22, 1870.

¹⁶ *Tribune*, October 29, 31, 1878.

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PENCE OPERA HOUSE,
DIRECTOR,
 FREDERIC BOCK.

FOURTH DRAMATIC SEASON.

Grand Shakspearean production of the
 ©World-renowned Masterplay.

King Richard III,

WEDNESDAY AND SATURDAY MATINEES.

Prices as Usual.

COMMENCING

Saturday Evening, August 17th, 1889.

STAGE MANAGER,
 JAMES HARRISON.

continued with considerable success. The Murray-Cartland players remained until May, 1880, and the next fall the house reopened under the management of Bryton. In January, 1881, Phosa McAllister, the leading lady whom Bryton had brought to town to co-star with him, assumed the role of manager. As both leading lady and business woman, Miss McAllister operated her Pence stock company from January, 1881, to May, 1883, closing only when it became clear that with the opening of the new Grand Opera House, on Sixth Street just off Nicollet Avenue, the Pence would be in for some frugal times. The Grand was farther uptown; it was on the ground floor; and it was equipped to take care of the largest of traveling productions. In less than a month after the Grand opened its doors, McAllister and company departed for Winnipeg.¹⁷

FOR THE NEXT three years, the Pence experienced hard times which neither a

change of managers nor of policy seemed to alter. Grant and Wood tried vaudeville and stock; Fleming and Wood tried melodramas interspersed with such traveling shows as Madame Stanley's Female Mastodons; Cort and Murphy, Edwin Barbour, John Slensby—each abandoned the house after failing to find the combination for success.

Among the failures, two were particularly noisy. In 1884, when an unpaid actor attached a drop curtain to satisfy his salary claims, a "female burlesque" company was prevented from performing. Members of the audience, mostly male, who had already gathered, were so enraged at the cancellation that there were "curses, a shot into the box-office and a threatened mob-riot." In 1886 the Andrews Opera Company promised to present twelve weeks of light opera, but four weeks later, following a performance of "The Mikado," the venture came to a halt amid a flurry of law suits over salary claims.¹⁸

In April, 1886, prosperity returned to the Pence when a good stock company, headed by William Sterling and Marie Wellesley, took over the house. Their carefully presented performances of such time-tested pieces as "Rosedale" and "Ticket-of-Leave Man" drew faithful audiences up the stairs to the top floor of the old Pence business block. When the company was later taken over by Frederick Bock and Jessaline Rogers, a husband-and-wife acting team, the continued prosperity caused the *Tribune* to remark that "the Pence is growing in favor and the crowds remind one of the good old days when it was the principal theater in the city."¹⁹ Except for a few short interruptions, the Bock-Rogers engagement continued until October, 1889.

In the spring of 1890 a Scandinavian stock company leased the opera house, but the experiment with a foreign-language

¹⁷ *Evening Journal*, May 1, 1883.

¹⁸ *Saturday Evening Spectator* (Minneapolis), November 1, 1884, February 27, 1886; *Tribune*, February 22, 24, May 29, 1886.

¹⁹ *Tribune*, December 13, 1886.

theater collapsed in a very short time. The last service the Pence saw as a theater was under the guidance of E. P. Hilton, manager of several variety houses in the Midwest. Hilton's vaudeville policy was inaugurated on August 25, 1890, with Weber and Fields, the German dialect comedians, as his stars.²⁰ But in the spring of 1892 booking problems forced Hilton to relinquish control of the Pence, after which the old opera house sank out of sight as a place of amusement, its career of twenty-five years coming to an unnoticed close.

Accompanying the many changes of managers and policies, the Pence underwent a number of physical changes. Many of them were initiated and paid for by the lessees, J. W. Pence being very adept at getting his renters to finance any changes they requested. To the front of the building overlooking Hennepin Avenue, however, the owner added a "musicians' balcony," where players could be stationed to announce to the passing public that a drama or a minstrel show was about to be performed within. The installation of gas lighting and electric lighting in 1870 and 1887 respectively, and the sloping of the auditorium floor in 1878 also were financed by the owner.

Periodically, Pence threatened to make more sweeping changes—to drop the theater to the second floor, to install several galleries, to enlarge the building and rename it "Pence's Parlor Theater." No such changes were made, however. Before work could get under way, Pence would announce that the times were not quite right for large-scale spending, or that remodeling would have to wait until he returned

from a trip to California. As a member of "the Syndicate," a group of wealthy businessmen who owned the Syndicate Building and the Grand Opera House, Pence was in a good position to know whether or not it would be profitable to remodel his old opera house.²¹

Other changes were recorded by the press from time to time. In 1871 the "Venice drop curtain" was replaced with an "advertising drop," a reporter noting regretfully that Shakespeare, from his perch above the stage, could no longer look down upon "that beautiful Venetian scene," but must thereafter gaze at signs which would tell him where he could buy cheap clothing, find a livery stable, or acquire a sewing machine.

For the fall opening of the Murray-Cartland company in 1878 the interior was repainted, the old patriotic and allegorical murals being covered over with white and gold decorations and mirror panels. In 1879 Murray added "all the improved traps and stage appliances" and two new drop curtains. One of the drops was painted to represent a "massive drapery of green and gold" and bore in its center "the familiar seal of the city of Minneapolis"; the other, an act drop, depicted "a beautiful design representing 'The Harvest Festival,' with the city of Athens in the background." The latter, known also as "The Vintage Festival," remained in use until the end of the Pence's career as a theater, after which, according to one account, it was sold and sent to Winnipeg.²²

In 1950 Charles A. Parker, who was closely associated with the early theaters of Minneapolis, told the writer that in 1903 or 1904 he visited the shuttered Pence Opera House and observed that whoever had acquired the "Festival" curtain had removed only the center pictorial portion, leaving the rest to hang like a giant, but empty, picture frame. Germain Quinn, property boy at the Pence during the 1880's, told the writer that a very fine curtain displaying a view of the Falls of

²⁰ *Tribune*, April 11, August 26, 1890.

²¹ *Minneapolis Evening Times and News*, July 22, 1873; *Tribune*, December 16, 17, 1870, December 28, 1875, September 14, 1878, May 18, 1888, August 14, 17, 1890.

²² *Tribune*, June 2, 1871, October 1, 7, 1878, July 19, August 22, 26, 1879; *Evening Journal*, August 22, 1879; Randolph Edgar, "Early Minneapolis Theaters," in *Minnesota History*, 9:33 (March, 1928).

St. Anthony was in use for a time. The drop curtains were the work of Peter Clausen, a scene painter who went to Minneapolis from Chicago with the original decorators of the Pence and remained to become one of the city's best-known artists. Although theater scenery was Clausen's specialty, he also painted many murals and landscapes. Some of his paintings, including several views of the Falls of St. Anthony, are now in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Several changes of name marked the history of the Pence. It was known as the Metropolitan while the Murray-Cartland stock company leased it, as the Criterion when Bryton presented his stock company, as Slensby's Theater when John Slensby used it for a vaudeville house, and as the Norden when the Scandinavian acting group leased it in 1890.

After 1892, without benefit of an active theater on the top floor, the building, which Pence had erected at a cost estimated at somewhere between twenty-five

and fifty thousand dollars, decreased sharply in value as rental property. Shortly after 1900 the building was converted into a rooming house. In 1915 it was acquired by the Union Mission to become a shelter for indigent men. The opera house itself, with the stage and the boxes removed and the floor again made level, was turned into a giant dormitory. But until the building was razed in 1952 the gallery, unused for sixty years, remained intact. It was the last vestige of the opera house which W. D. Washburn, in his dedicatory address of 1867, had described as "one of the largest, most commodious and tastefully decorated audience rooms west of Chicago."²³

²³ *Minneapolis Journal*, May 5, 1923; *Tribune*, June 22, 1867.

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Emilie Melville reproduced on page 173 is in the theatrical collection of the Museum of the City of New York; that of Ole Bull on page 175 is from the Beal portrait album owned by the Minnesota Historical Society. The view below, taken while the old Pence building was being demolished, is reproduced through the courtesy of the *Minneapolis Star*.

THE Pence Opera House balcony during razing operations in April, 1952





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