

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 23 • PUBLISHED IN DEC. 1942 • NUMBER 4

Theatrical Personalities of Old St. Paul

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ACCORDING TO veteran troupers of the modern theater, there are three bad weeks in the show business — Christmas week, Holy week, and St. Paul. Whether Minnesota's capital city deserves such a reputation is largely a matter of opinion, for there is evidence that poor and mediocre companies have often played to empty theaters in St. Paul, while productions of outstanding merit draw packed houses. Whatever St. Paul's present reputation may be, this much is certain — skepticism regarding the city's ability to support the theater did not arise until after the 1850's, for during that feverish decade St. Paul was one of the best towns for summer theatricals in the entire nation. The financial boom, the flood of summer immigrants, the territory's reputation as an ideal vacation spot, and the Mississippi, which provided steamboat transportation for theatrical troupes from St. Louis, New Orleans, and Cincinnati, seem to have been primarily responsible for the theatrical prosperity of the period. At the same time the contributions of a few outstanding personalities should not be overlooked, for without them the first chapter in St. Paul's theatrical history would lose much of its color and fascination.

Perhaps the first to deserve mention is none other than the frontier Jack-of-all-trades, Joseph R. Brown. His achievements as a fur trader, lumberman, land speculator, legislator, politician, newspaper editor, inventor, and founder of cities are well known, but his unique place as an actor has been overlooked. Brown seems to hold the dubious distinction of having been Minnesota's first "leading

lady," according to his own account of the performance in a newspaper of 1856.¹ In a review of a production of "Pizarro," which he had recently seen at Market Hall in St. Paul, Brown recalled his own part in a performance some thirty-five years earlier at old Fort Snelling. "The representation of this tragedy," he mused, "caused our mind to wander back to the winters of 1821 and 1822, when a thespian corps used to murder *Rolla* in the barracks at the mouth of the St. Peters. We were one of the performers, and in the play of *Pizarro* we done *Elvira*," the tragic heroine. "From what we can recollect of our manner of representing the character, however," Brown continues, "we are inclined to believe there was some little difference between our performance, and that of Miss Deering," who played the role in St. Paul.

The date given by Brown in this bit of personal reminiscence stands as a landmark in the westward expansion of the American theater. Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Detroit, and St. Louis appear to have been the only other localities west of the Allegheny Mountains where theatrical performances were staged at so early a date.² It is unfortunate that Brown did not reveal more about early dramatic productions at Fort Snelling. Perhaps he was restrained by the unsuppressed glee with which some of his contemporaries seized upon his account.³ One St. Paul journalist remarked that Brown "must permit us to indulge in a 'larf'. . . . He measures nearly six feet in height, and about as much in circumference. . . . We don't think even thirty-five years ago, he was very delicately formed or strikingly handsome. The idea of his representing tragedy, at any time of his life, or in any character, strikes us as being sublimely ridiculous. But to attempt the personation of a female character; to bind himself up in stays and boddices, and shroud himself in petticoats, and other unnameable female gear . . . to try to pass himself off as a woman . . . why, Brown, it was the most gracelessly impu-

¹ *Henderson Democrat*, June 12, 1856. See also Theodore C. Blegen, *Building Minnesota*, 115 (Boston, 1938).

² William G. B. Carson, *The Theatre on the Frontier: The Early Years of the St. Louis Stage*, 2-5 (Chicago, 1932).

³ *Weekly Pioneer and Democrat* (St. Paul), June 26, 1856.

dent imposture ever perpetrated by you in any character you ever assumed."

In passing it might be added that the performance recalled by Brown was only one example of early dramatic activity at old Fort Snelling. The record is very incomplete, but enough evidence has been gathered to indicate that amateur dramatics constituted a major form of recreation at the post. At least one actor of some importance, Harry Watkins, began his career by playing leading ladies in post theatricals while serving as a "fifer boy" with the Fifth United States Infantry in the late 1830's.⁴

Professional drama made its bow in St. Paul with the arrival in the summer of 1851 of George Holland and his troupe from Placide's Varieties of New Orleans. Local historians seem to agree that Holland gave the first professional production of legitimate drama in Minnesota. Even T. M. Newson, an ardent crusader against the evils of the stage, devotes space to the subject. Although Holland was typical of the theatrical tradition that was to develop in St. Paul, he was not an average frontier trouper. As one of the foremost comedians of his day, his regular engagements were confined to New York, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.⁵

The effect of Holland's opening performance at Mazourka Hall on August 12, 1851, can be better appreciated if one imagines the

⁴ Some interesting references to experiences at old Fort Snelling are included in a recent book based upon Watkins' diary — Maud and Otis Skinner's *One Man in His Time: The Adventures of H. Watkins, Strolling Player*, 1, 52, 206, 250 (Philadelphia, 1938). Other sources of information about Fort Snelling theatricals include the entries for October 1 and 6, 1836, in Major Lawrence Taliaferro's journal, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society; Bertha L. Heilbron, "The Drama at Old Fort Snelling," *ante*, 7:274; Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling*, 100 (Iowa City, 1918); John H. Bliss, "Reminiscences of Fort Snelling," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 6: 335, 342; and Charlotte Ouisconsin Van Cleve, *Three Score Years and Ten*, 10 (Minneapolis, 1888).

⁵ Newson, who was editor of the *St. Paul Daily Times*, engaged in at least two newspaper wars on the drama. See the issues of his paper for July 18, 20, and 21, 1855, and the *Daily Minnesotian* (St. Paul), July 25 and September 15, 1857. Holland's engagement is mentioned in Newson's *Pen Pictures of St. Paul*, 260 (St. Paul, 1886). For information about Holland, see T. Allston Brown, *History of the American Stage*, 181 (New York, 1870), and Joseph Jefferson, *Autobiography*, 336-340 (New York, 1897). Jefferson was a close friend and an admirer of Holland. Among other things, he relates how the death of the comedian resulted in the naming of the Little Church around the Corner in New York.

sensation that would be created if Eddie Cantor, for example, were to drop in for a personal appearance at some remote town today. On the opening night, when he played in "A Day After the Fair," Holland maintained his reputation for robust comedy and broad versatility by portraying six different characters ranging from a grouchy old man to a French maid! James M. Goodhue, the editor of the *Minnesota Pioneer*, who attended the performance, described Holland as "a wonderful Protean actor, whose versatility is such that he alone amounts to a dramatic company." Although St. Paul numbered but slightly over a thousand inhabitants, houses were crowded for this and the eleven performances that followed.⁶

Brown and Holland were the pioneers who introduced drama, amateur and professional, into the territory, but it was a woman, Sallie St. Clair, who brought the art to its first climax of popularity. Sallie was the glamour girl of the 1850's. She was born in England in 1831, went to America as a child, and shortly thereafter made her first stage appearance at the Park Theater in New York as a child dancer.⁷ During her St. Paul engagements, in 1855 and 1857, she was at the height of her popularity. Young men fell in love with her, critics lauded her, and the public flocked to see her. The extravagance of the praise heaped upon her is well illustrated by a long article in the *Daily Minnesotian* for June 22, 1857. "This accomplished lady," reads the account, "proudly stands upon the very summit of that gorgeous temple of renown, the priestess of its glories, and guardian of its fame. . . . The highborn genius of Miss St. Clair flings a glory upon the drama. . . . To all these she adds a perfect *physique* and charming grace—a fine musical voice, and clear enunciation—which make her the embodiment of that ideal, which only one in a thousand of candidates for histrionic honors can ever attain."

It should be made clear, however, that not everyone in St. Paul held such high opinions of the lady. Another St. Paul editor, Joseph

⁶ For an advertisement of Holland's first performance, see the *Minnesota Democrat* (St. Paul), August 12, 1851. His play is reviewed in the *Minnesota Pioneer* (St. Paul), August 14, 1851.

⁷ Brown, *History of the American Stage*, 323.

Wheelock, challenged the writer for the *Minnesotian* in his paper: "If she has enthusiastic admirers in more appreciative circles, it is not the first time that an enchanting figure and a ravishing ankle have created a sensation among very young men," remarked Wheelock. "She simply capers gracefully. She holds her head well, with a superb arching of the neck, and prances with a splendid curvette through the routine of the Thespian menage. . . . Yet it must be confessed that Sally has some talent. If her powers had been concentrated in a particular line of characters, instead of being squandered in ambitious but shallow displays of versatility it is not impossible that she might have become an artiste."⁸

The truth about Miss St. Clair's talent undoubtedly lies somewhere between the two extremes expressed above. There is ample evidence that she loved to indulge in what Wheelock termed "shallow displays of versatility." In one of her favorite farces, "Actress of All Work," she portrayed six different characters. When she grew tired of such light fare and the usual leading ladies, it was not uncommon for her to don male attire for the portrayal of such dashing heroes as Claude Melnotte, Jack Sheppard, and Pizarro.

Though Sallie St. Clair may not have been an actress of the first rank, she still was a glamorous stage personality. Her companies prospered. At the close of her first season, in 1855, the prominent citizens of St. Paul, headed by Governor Willis A. Gorman, gave her a great farewell benefit. At Muscatine in 1856 a gentleman offered to fight a duel on her behalf. In 1857 her power over young men became a choice topic of local gossip. A youthful St. Paul belle remarked, in a letter to her sister, that Joe Rolette was suffering from "Sonny Dayton's disease," a malady the nature of which may be surmised when one learns that "Sonny" followed Sallie St. Clair as far as Galena before being persuaded to turn back. Clara Morris spoke of her as "the lovely blond star," saying, "I adored Miss St. Clair, as everyone else did."⁹ Many people believed that her husband's

⁸ *St. Paul Financial, Real Estate and Railroad Advertiser*, June 27, 1857.

⁹ For advertisements of some of Sallie St. Clair's St. Paul performances, see the *Minnesotian*, July 6, 16, 1856, May 20, July 23, 1857. See also *Pioneer*, July 14, 1855; *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 15, 1856; George C. D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, 7: 41 (New York, 1931); Clara Morris, *Life on the Stage*, 140-154 (New

death, which followed closely upon her own, was not an accident but the deliberate suicide of a grief-stricken man.

In 1857 the attractions of the St. Louis Varieties, the company with which Miss St. Clair appeared, were enhanced by adding to the programs music by the Old Gent's Band. This was a local organization consisting of W. H. Munger, violinist, R. C. Munger, cornettist, R. S. Munger, cellist, and D. W. Ainsworth, flutist. If a second violin was needed, Dan Emmett or George Siebert was called in. For years the Munger brothers ran a music store in St. Paul, where they were highly respected for their musical talent. Emmett became famous as the composer of "Dixie" and he had long been known as a performer in minstrel shows. Siebert organized one of the earliest orchestras in the Northwest.¹⁰

There were several good actors in the troupe. Outstanding was C. W. Couldock, who was a guest star for part of the 1857 season.¹¹ He is best remembered for his brilliant performance as Dunstan in "Hazel Kirke," Steele Mackaye's record-breaking success of the 1880's. But even a quarter of a century earlier, when he first went to St. Paul, he enjoyed a national reputation as a tragedian and the city had reason to be proud of his visit. According to Clara Morris: "The strong point of his acting was in the expression of intense emotion — particularly grief or frenzied rage. He was utterly lacking in dignity, courtliness, or subtlety. He was best as a rustic and he was the only creature I ever saw who could snuffle without being absurd or offensive."¹² His one weakness was an ungovernable temper, but this trait probably gave fire and conviction to such roles as Dunstan Kirke, Macbeth, Petruccio, and Lear. Manton H. Luther, dramatic critic of the *Pioneer Press* in the late 1880's, relates the following incident: "One night while the company was giving a heavy Shakespearean play the stage manager took occasion to cut out a small

York, 1901); Lizzie Fuller to Abby Fuller, September 4, 1857, Fuller Papers, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

¹⁰ Manton H. Luther, "Theatres of Old St. Paul," in *Daily Pioneer Press* (St. Paul and Minneapolis), April 8, 1888; "The Old and the New," in *Pioneer Press*, January 22, 1889; *Minnesotian*, July 1, 30, 1857.

¹¹ This was not Couldock's first visit to St. Paul, for he played a season with the Hough and Meyer Company at Market Hall in 1856. *Minnesotian*, July 10, 1856.

¹² Morris, *Life on the Stage*, 130.

scene from the last act without consulting him. This completely broke the actor up. In a broad-sword scene, closing the play, he went for his innocent stage antagonist so savagely and viciously that the audience feared there would be blood spilled, and the innocent actor had to actually defend himself with his best skill to avoid being run through. When the curtain went down Couldock, still frantic, tore off the elegant costume he was wearing and rent it into shreds, apparently oblivious of all around him. A member of the orchestra was looking on, with eyes starting from their sockets in holy horror. Couldock suddenly looked up, and, seeing the young man's affrighted look, became instantly calm. 'My young friend,' he said to the musician, 'you have done your part very well; good evening.' Then he gravely rolled up his tattered costume and walked off with it."¹³

Couldock's visit not only meant good acting but also good plays. Previous companies had dabbled in an occasional scene or two from Shakespeare, but it was not until the arrival of Couldock that St. Paul had an opportunity to see such plays as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and the *Merchant of Venice* reasonably well performed.¹⁴

One factor that undoubtedly retarded St. Paul's dramatic development during the early 1850's was the lack of an adequate playhouse. Prior to 1857 the only available theaters were crude frontier amusement halls. Some of the difficulties encountered when such halls were used for theatrical purposes may be surmised from a letter of Sara Fuller, a member of a pioneer St. Paul family, in which she tells of attending a performance in the Empire Block. "There were no windows," she writes, "excepting in front, and the staging took those off, and all the air there was for the audience were the skylights overhead. We had been there about ten minutes when it commenced raining and they closed the skylights, and it was an oppressive warm night and they had been closed about five minutes when I began to grow faint and Sam [Abbe] went out with me to the door, and went for a tumbler of water for me and when he came

¹³ Luther, in *Pioneer Press*, April 8, 1888.

¹⁴ For reviews of earlier Shakespearean productions, see the *Minnesota Pioneer*, July 24, 27, 1854. Couldock gave such productions on July 12, 14, 17, and 18, 1856.

back I had fainted and fell upon the doorstep. . . . My bonnet was completely covered with mud, lamed one side of my face and had to wear a patch for more than a week. I did not attend any more theatre parties.”¹⁵

The first man actually to do something toward improving theatrical conditions in St. Paul was Henry Van Liew. Unlike most of the theatrical managers who preceded him, Van Liew went to St. Paul for the purpose of making the city his home and providing it with a permanent theatrical company. When he arrived, in the spring of 1857, the city was nearing the climax of an extravagant financial boom. Van Liew immediately set to work on the construction of a temporary playhouse, which was intended to serve only until arrangements could be completed for a really first-class theater, but financial panic, fire, and civil war combined to defeat his plans. His temporary structure, the People's Theater, consequently holds the distinction of being the only building in St. Paul constructed primarily for theatrical purposes before the completion of the Opera House in 1867.¹⁶

According to one description, Van Liew's theater “cost the modest sum of \$750. The sides were of rough boards, the roof of canvas. . . . The interior of the theater was as primitive as the days. There were no galleries. The floor raised gradually toward the rear, was seated with benches. The stage was cramped and small, and there was little attempt at decoration.” A photograph of the exterior, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, seems to bear out this description. The statement that it had no galleries, however, appears to be an error, since daily advertisements listed admission to the “colored gallery” at twenty-five cents. Nothing is known of the lighting except that there were footlights, a fact deduced from an ac-

¹⁵ Sara Fuller's letter, which is undated, is near the end of a group for 1852 in the typewritten copies of letters among the Fuller Papers. For an account of early amusement halls, see Frank Moore, *Reminiscences of Pioneer Days in St. Paul*, 68-83 (St. Paul, 1908).

¹⁶ *Pioneer and Democrat*, August 6, 1857, February 24, 1867; Luther, in *Pioneer Press*, April 8, 1888. The manager of the St. Louis Varieties, Lionel Bernard, made plans in 1857 to stay in St. Paul, but changed his mind before the season was over. See the *Minnesotian*, May 18, 1857. For an account of the dedication of the Opera House, see the *Pioneer*, February 24, 1867.

count of how a Chippewa Indian walked to the footlights and presented the star, Miss Henrietta Irving, with a diamond ring valued at seventy-five dollars. Van Liew brought an extensive wardrobe, good properties, and stage settings from Dubuque, Iowa, where he had been associated earlier with the Julien Theater.¹⁷

The People's Theater was completed and ready to open on June 27, 1857. Van Liew had assembled a capable company, which included William S. Forrest, brother of the great Edwin Forrest, as stage manager, and R. E. J. Miles, later a producer of national importance, as prompter. For the first six weeks Van Liew encountered keen competition. Sallie St. Clair and her Varieties were at the height of their popularity, a third theater was opened by D. L. Scott, and variety entertainment was abundant.¹⁸ Then early in August the financial panic struck the town. All other forms of entertainment quickly melted away, but Van Liew continued, keeping his doors open in spite of hard times and empty seats. Finally, on October 19, 1857, even Van Liew had to give up, but not permanently. With the return of warm weather he was ready for the opening of a new season. Most of his original players returned, and to these Van Liew added the Old Gent's Band. Dion Boucicault's new drama, "The Poor of New York," which had the timely subtitle "or, the Panic of 1857," was one of the important productions of the season. Another highlight was "Mazeppa," which reached a sensational climax when a trained horse with Miles strapped to its back dashed wildly across the stage. The feat won the plaudits of both audiences and critics and it was soon to make the name of Bob Miles famous throughout the nation.¹⁹

On September 27, 1858, the season came to a close, but on April

¹⁷ *Minnesotian*, September 17, 1857; *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 19, 1858; *Pioneer Press*, April 8, 1888, January 22, 1889.

¹⁸ Brown, *History of the American Stage*, 236, 248; *Pioneer and Democrat*, July 29, 1857. Luther, in the *Pioneer Press*, April 8, 1888, quotes an "old-timer" as saying: "I remember going the rounds of the amusements on the Fourth of July in 1857 . . . and I can tell you I had to be mighty spry so as not to miss any of the shows. There were three theaters, a negro minstrel show, a big circus and an acrobatic tent show — all running full blast on that national anniversary."

¹⁹ *Pioneer and Democrat*, May 26, August 20, 1858; Brown, *History of the American Stage*, 248.

23 of the following year the People's Theater was reopened for its third season. Apparently Van Liew planned to make this a banner year. From May 9 to June 2 he featured Mr. and Mrs. James W. Wallack in the best season of drama and tragedy the city had yet seen. But as soon as the Wallacks left, attendance dropped off. General business conditions seem to have entered that darkest phase just before the dawn. Newspapers often printed extra pages to take care of foreclosures. Toward the end of July the company ceased to give regular performances, although special benefits continued into August.²⁰

The final blow came on September 8, 1859. A Republican political rally was in progress, with Schuyler Colfax and Galusha A. Grow as the speakers, when flames were discovered under the stage. The cause of the blaze was never determined. Some believed that sparks from a lamp or a lighted cigar had fallen through the rickety stage floor onto the combustible material beneath; others openly accused the Democrats of having fired the building in order to break up the rally. In any event a heavy wind soon swept the flames through the building and, although the audience escaped, nothing else could be saved. Van Liew lost everything—properties, costumes, scenery, and effects.²¹

During the following winter he and his foster daughter, the beautiful Azlene Allen, danced, sang, and entertained whenever and wherever possible in an effort to make a living. At last Van Liew gathered up his few remaining belongings and started down the river on a barge loaded with Minnesota sand. Somewhere along the way the barge sank, leaving Van Liew penniless, but in spite of everything he went to Memphis and started over again. It is little wonder that, upon learning that he had become a proprietor of the Memphis Burlesque Opera House, a writer for a St. Paul paper lauded Van Liew as a man of irrepressible "courage and enterprise." Many years later "a St. Paul gentleman ran across him at Deadwood,

²⁰ *Minnesotian*, May 11, June 2, 14, 30, 1859; *Pioneer and Democrat*, June 30, 1859. The last performance of the season seems to have been a benefit for the Radcliffe sisters. *Pioneer and Democrat*, August 7, 1859.

²¹ *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 10, 1859; *Minnesotian*, September 9, 1859.

gray and grizzled but almost as cheery as in the days when he catered to the elite of St. Paul in the amusement line.”²²

With the passing of Van Liew, the first period in the history of the St. Paul theater came to a close. Civil war soon intervened and cut short all thoughts of stage entertainment. It was not until 1864 that a regular theatrical company was again seen in St. Paul, and by that time the old plays, the old players, and the old playhouses that had stirred audiences with excitement, laughter, and tears during the 1850's had disappeared.

²² *Pioneer and Democrat*, September 23, October 7, 29, December 31, 1859, September 13, 1860; *Pioneer Press*, January 22, 1889.



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