As the twentieth century dawned, the values of the dominant culture in the United States were changing; a restrained, republican, producer society was becoming a consumer society. An increasing number of Americans had disposable income available, and they began to hear voices encouraging them to spend their money rather than save it. Among these voices were those of entrepreneurs who offered new leisure activities. The turn of the century, wrote historian Jesse Steiner, witnessed the "gradual breakdown of traditional prejudices against play and amusements. It was a time of awakening of interest in the possibilities of leisure and of the building up of new patterns in recreational life. . . among the mass of the people."  

During this period of change, legitimate theaters—those that presented traditional forms, such as comedy, serious drama, and farce—competed for amusement dollars against an emerging crop of new attractions: spectator and participatory sports, touring, camping, and outings at amusement parks. The motion-picture houses and chains of vaudeville theaters that sprang up shortly after 1900 posed an even greater threat to theater revenues. To compete with these new leisure attractions, one innovative Twin Cities theater manager, Theodore Lambert Hays, relied on far more than stage offerings. First, he used his public-relations skills to attract patrons. When this strategy no longer worked,
Theodore Hays, 1903

he joined with other managers to control the local theatrical competition.

Theodore Hays was born in Minneapolis in 1867. The second child in a middle-class family, he studied at Curtiss Business College after his tenth grade of public school. He began work for the Minnesota Title Insurance and Trust Company, but in 1887 honored a paternal request to become the treasurer of his father's newly erected People's Theatre on Washington Avenue just north of Hennepin. This building was soon leased by New Yorker Jacob Litt, a nationally rising theatrical producer and agent for inexpensive—or "popularly priced"—dramatic attractions, mostly melodramas and comedy farces.  

A fire destroyed the People's in December 1890, and on the same site Hays's father built the 2,019-seat Bijou Opera House, which Litt promptly leased. It was soon Theo's detailed attention to the new construction, as well as his steadfast performance as the People's treasurer, that prompted Litt to promote the twenty-four-year-old to the position of resident manager of the new Bijou. In 1896 Litt also appointed Hays resident manager of the New Yorker's own 2,200-seat Grand Opera House in St. Paul at Sixth and St. Peter streets. Theo Hays continued in this role for the Litt organization and then for a few other short-term lessees until 1912.

As manager, Hays played each incoming attraction in one theater for a week before transferring it to the other. It was Litt, however, who determined which plays would tour the Bijou, the Grand, and the other twenty-or-so theaters on his circuit. Hays, paid an annual salary of four thousand dollars, supervised all promotional and box-office activities as well as the lucrative publication of programs handed to patrons at each performance. Foremost among Hays's many responsibilities was generating or modifying promotional materials for the coming attractions. In 1893 the Minneapolis Times called him "quite an ingenuous press worker."

By 1890 four Twin Cities theaters—two high priced and two popularly priced—had found consistent local patronage. Thus, throughout his first decade of management Theo Hays faced little direct or sustained theatrical competition. There simply were no other houses continuously booking popularly priced, dramatic attractions. (The most expensive seat in Hays's houses cost seventy-five cents.) The popularly priced Harris (later the Park) and New Olympic theaters in St. Paul, for instance, opened, sputtered, and closed in the early 1890s. And the Pence Opera House in Minneapolis, which debuted in 1867, fell upon hard times and ceased operations in 1892. Each city, however, did have a continuously operating first-class theater—the Metropolitan in St. Paul and the Grand and later Metropolitan in Minneapolis—that presented New York touring attractions at twice the popularly priced ticket scale. (The Minneapolis Lyceum Theatre was opened only infrequently to accommodate overflow, first-class bookings.) Certainly, audiences overlapped, but the extent to which the first-class and popularly priced theaters drew from the same pool of patrons is unclear. In the 1890s there was enough business for all to coexist profitably.

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Newman, "Careers in Contrast," 1: 153-56, 177-80; Minneapolis Times, May 29, 1893, scrapbook clipping, Theodore L. Hays Papers, microfilm edition, roll 12, frame 117, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. Scrapbooks were meticulously compiled by each theater's assistant manager. All published articles, regardless of critical slant or how minor, were clipped, occasionally with the loss of newspaper names, dates, and article titles. References to these scrapbooks, hereinafter, will cite R[oll] and F[frame] numbers; unless otherwise specified, all are in the Hays Papers.

The Twin Cities also supported other venues with live, popularly priced attractions that did not directly compete with Hays's businesses. In Minneapolis the Dewey Theater opened in 1893, but it presented an exclusive program of burlesque, mostly to single men. As Isador H. Herk, the Chicago-based magnate, wrote to the manager of his Minneapolis theater, the Gayety: "Burlesque is burlesque, it has no opposition except itself." And those patrons who sought the unusual or exotic could attend the St. Paul Dime Museum or the Palace Dime Museum in Minneapolis to see animal and human oddities and novelties, as well as specialty troupes that occasionally performed short selections of minstrelsy, burlesque, or melodrama.

Some of the earliest amusements to compete with theaters were sports, which developed popularity in the decades following the Civil War. In 1877 the first Minneapolis and St. Paul baseball enthusiasts formed clubs. During the 1880s and 1890s intercollegiate football, basketball, and wrestling joined the older sports of baseball and track to capture the public's interest.

Noncompetitive athletic activities also flourished during this period. There were one million bicycles in the United States in 1893, ten million in 1900. Scholar Lawrence Hill discovered that at least five new roller-skating rinks were built in Minneapolis in the mid-1880s; furthermore, performers in touring variety troupes took profitable advantage of the blossoming interest in roller skating and bicycling by performing "artistic" routines on various Minneapolis stages.

Americans also enthusiastically embraced the great outdoors in the 1890s. Minnesota instituted its state park system in 1889 and promoted its healthful climate and ten thousand fishing lakes. In the early 1900s, the Twin Cities boasted two trolley parks—Wildwood, on White Bear Lake, and Big Island, on Lake Minnetonka—offering rides, swimming beaches, picnic spots, baseball diamonds, and other attractions. Such recreation, however, generally occupied the summer season, when theaters were either closed or stocked with marginally profitable repertory companies. Thus, the impact of these outdoor activities on theater revenues was reduced.

To meet the ever-increasing competition, Hays kept his ticket prices within his patrons' budgets, something he often publicly acknowledged with pride. His theaters never raised their admission rates. Both the Bijou and Grand charged half (or even less) the admission scale of the first-class theaters; gallery seats at a popularly priced house were twenty-five cents (ten and fifteen cents for matinees) and main-floor seats were fifty and seventy-five cents. Many who sat in the gallery were from the working classes and could afford no more. A St. Paul minister once approached the assistant manager of the Grand Opera House with a plan to allow working-class patrons to sit in reserved seats for twenty-five cents on nights when the main floor was only partially full. It is not known if Hays ever approved the proposal.

Other patrons of the Bijou and the Grand were immigrants. One Swedish-language newspaper reported that the manager of Minneapolis's first-class theater declared that he would not advertise in the Nya
Verlden. When told that the neighboring Bijou had done so, the manager replied that the Bijou was “just for that class of people you belong to.”

The Bijou and Grand, however, did not attract audiences exclusively from the immigrant and working classes. Instead, the papers distinguished Hays’s patrons by their lack of theatrical taste. His houses drew their audiences from those who sought sensational, escapist, and less sophisticated—rather than literary and enlightened—entertainment. An 1893 article in the Minneapolis Tribune identified an unusual problem that the Bijou faced with its summer-stock fare, a problem that reveals much about its patrons’ partialities:

There is one thing too palpably true to be ignored—the artists are too good for their clientele. In some instances they have simply fired over the heads of their audiences, and one cannot but sympathize with their handicap. . . . Taste is a matter of standards; standards are matters of education; the Bijou has erected a standard heretofore that was in keeping with the taste of its patrons but in this stock company has been exceeded.  

Two years later another Minneapolis newspaper, the Penny Press, stated that the Bijou attracted those who could only appreciate nonintellectual attractions and low ticket prices: “The moment any effort is made involving proper acting, higher intellectual work, and dramatic effort, that moment the management of the Bijou feel the results at the box office.”

The sustained patronage of the two popularly priced theaters, despite the increasing popularity of even less expensive alternatives, testifies to Theo Hays’s and Jacob Litt’s abilities to meet their patrons’ desires for attractions with high entertainment value. Certainly their seasonal presentation of bookings—the mixture of sensational melodramas, older Broadway dramas, and light comedy farces, along with magicians, vaudeville, musicals, and extravaganzas—kept “unsophisticated” patrons lining up at the ticket booths. Hays even pioneered in showing early moving pictures. An Animatograph played at the Bijou in September 1896, only a few months after the first publicly projected moving pictures had been exhibited in the United States. A Biograph “motion photograph” machine followed a few months later. And Hays has also been credited with the first Minnesota showing of the earliest feature film, The Great Train Robbery, at the Bijou in 1898. Even so, the types of productions booked for the Bijou’s and Grand’s first seasons were remarkably similar to those scheduled for their last seasons and all those in between, which speaks for the steadfast tastes of their patrons.

Theo Hays never apologized for the preferences of his audiences nor, in all of his correspondence, did he ever refer to theatergoers with condescension. In a June 1895 press release that appeared in many newspapers, the Bijou was identified as “essentially a theatre for the masses. Its patrons delight mostly in witnessing entertainments of the lighter and merrier class.”

During his first decade of management, Hays did more to attract and keep his patrons than simply meet their incomes and tastes. Although he had little control over what productions Litt booked, he appeared to believe that it made good business sense to create and foster genial, benevolent, and community-minded images of himself and his theaters. The master publicist created these images through press releases, benefit performances, and civic activities.

Advertisement clipped from the Minneapolis Tribune, October 29, 1892

1Nya Verlden, Jan. 12, 1893, clipping, R12 F61.
2Minneapolis Tribune, July 1, 1893, clipping, R12 F129.
3Penny Press, June 29, 1895, clipping, R12 F482.
5The Progress (Minneapolis), n.d., clipping, R12 F476.
Press releases originated with a production's advance press agents and then were modified by Hays and his resident advertising agent, for many years J. J. Whitehead. Those releases routinely announced coming attractions, oftentimes providing detailed plot synopses, character sketches, and actor biographies or features. The articles were generally shorter than those for productions at first-class theaters: there were fewer and less interesting leading actors to promote. Hays occasionally managed to see that his own name was printed in the newspapers, even though he did not actually book the productions. Articles about Theo Hays reflected his genial, public personality—good neighbor to the community—and, through association, projected a warm and inviting image for his theaters. Early in his career, Hays arranged events and released press material that played to this image. On September 17, 1892, for instance, the Minneapolis Journal reported: “By special arrangement, with the Minneapolis Park Board, Manager Hays announces that, as a special feature of the Haverly (Minstrels) engagement, a free and open air concert [will be given] on Monday and Tuesday afternoons at 3 o'clock at Central Park.”

Hays also projected an image of concord among his workers. For instance, an article on the Thanksgiving dinner that he offered his employees (as well as members of the local press) reported a short speech in which he stated that 1892 had been the most profitable year in the history of the house: “The Bijou is the most successful theater in the northwest. This fact is not due to the efforts of any one man, but to the combined and harmonious work of all.”

Press releases also told the public that “Manager Hays never forgets the employees [sic] of the house.” For Christmas 1892 he presented toiletry cases to his female workers and cigars and neckties to the males—as well as to newspapermen. For Christmas 1896 readers learned that the Bijou employees gave Hays a cut-glass wine-and-water set.

Other displays of affection for Hays were reported to the public as well. Verifying that a testimonial benefit not only for the families of one fireman killed and another injured, but also for the production company.
pany that lost its sets and props. The event netted $4,200.\textsuperscript{11}

For these occasions, Hays usually organized different acts from the various companies performing in the community. Most often, a group would sell the tickets and receive a portion of the receipts. At other times, however, the sellers themselves gained nothing, as when firemen and policemen sold tickets to a benefit that Hays produced for San Francisco earthquake victims. The theater manager also served on citywide relief committees. In September 1908, for instance, he cochaired an effort that raised nearly $1,300 through a benefit performance held for survivors of a northern Minnesota forest fire.\textsuperscript{12}

Hays's largess was not limited to benefit performances. In 1893 he received good press for inviting fifty boys from a Catholic orphanage to see a performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Two years later he arranged a Saturday matinee to accommodate the great number of children who wished to see Mrs. General Tom Thumb's Company. Although the newspapers made no mention of what difficulties, if any, were encountered in scheduling the performance, the Tribune hailed the action as occurring for the "first time in the theatrical history of the city." In another instance, the manager invited the newsboys who hawked the papers to be his gallery guests for a performance of Three Twins. And in October 1912 Hays issued free passes to all of the central telephone operators who had been scheduled to work the switchboards during the telephone company's employee picnic. Beginning in 1899 Hays, a member of the Elks club, annually contributed either his stage or, more often, his skills as an entertainment organizer for lodge benefits and Christmastime children's shows, which sometimes included orphans.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12}Clippings: Minneapolis Tribune, Apr. 21, 1906, Sept. 18, 19, 1908, Minneapolis Metropolitan Opera House scrapbooks, 1905–06, and 1908–09, University of Minnesota Performing Arts Archives.


Hays also promoted his theaters as civic gathering places. Such use was not unprecedented. Early settlers and then immigrants and their descendents held political rallies, dances, and amateur theatricals at Minnesota performing halls during earlier decades. Hays, with his lifelong interests in politics (he was later a successful state lobbyist for the entertainment business), expanded the social and entertainment mission of the Bijou and Grand to include civic functions as well.\textsuperscript{15}

After the Republican party held its national convention in Minneapolis in 1892, local interest in politics...
Hays's civic-mindedness proved an effective means of promoting his theaters. In creating this niche for his business, he was most certainly trading on the exploding popularity of sports in the 1890s. After all, posting updated subtotals of election returns had not been a part of voting rituals. This innovation, instead, contained elements of scoreboard or tote-board watching.

It did not take an election for Hays to promote his theaters as places of civic necessity. He was personally interested in the Spanish-American crisis because his brother Joe was serving with the Thirteenth Regiment of Minnesota Volunteers. This interest may partially account for his decision, duly recounted in an 1898 article in the *Minneapolis Tribune*: "Manager Hays of the Bijou makes the announcement that in the event of the Cuban situation assuming any definite shape and [in] view of the possible declaration of war[,] bulletins in regard to the Spanish situation will be read between the acts of 'Gayest Manhattan.'""20

Hays's ability to trade on the popularity of spectator sports was not confined to political events. His theaters were the first and the most persistent in the Twin Cities to ride on the increasingly popular coattails of athletics. Hays regularly invited competing teams to his theaters for an evening performance. The athletes' status as celebrities and the special bits of comic stage business that the actors incorporated into their performances were calculated to draw theatergoers more than to honor the teams.

For example, when Hays invited the Kansas City and Minneapolis baseball teams to attend an 1897 vaudeville performance, the box seats were festooned and the comedians improvised routines with baseball jokes. In December 1900 the *Tribune* reported that the University of Minnesota football team, returned home victorious from a game against Nebraska, was invited to see *The Man From Mexico*. George C. Boniface, Jr., the lead actor, was expected to deviate from the script to include a number of football bits, and Minnesota fans and football enthusiasts in general were urged to attend. In 1911 the Minnesota and Nebraska teams as well as the University of Minnesota band were to attend the showing of *Three Twins*, a musical comedy. In this ad for the Bijou and one the following year, Hays even printed the two teams' lineups."30

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21*Minneapolis Tribune*, Nov. 3, 1900, clipping, R13 F266.
22*Minneapolis Tribune*, clipping, R13 F607.
Not until the turn of the century did Theo Hays’s theaters face direct rivalry for patrons. In 1902 the Minneapolis Lyceum (rechristened the Lyric in 1908) sporadically presented programs of popularly priced vaudeville and repertory stock theater. More significantly, the Unique and Orpheum theaters opened in Minneapolis in 1904, offering clean, top-quality vaudeville at competitive ticket prices. The Miles joined them in 1909. In St. Paul, Hays’s Grand faced the Orpheum organization’s new house in 1905.

Competing against all the venues presenting live attractions were the motion-picture theaters, many of which were conveniently located in their audiences’ neighborhoods rather than downtown. By 1911, only a few years after the development of the storefront nickelodeon, Minneapolis boasted forty-eight motion-picture houses operating or soon to open, only twelve of which were in the central business district. In 1917 St. Paul had thirty-five movie theaters, only five down-town. All of these new amusements also offered entertainment at popular prices.

In 1908 Hays had written to A. W. “Sandy” Dingwall, head of the Litt organization after Litt’s death, that he wanted to use motion pictures to compete against the vaudeville houses. Dingwall, however, never booked motion pictures into the Bijou. Why Hays did not take a risk, lease the theater to himself, and show movies is difficult to answer. He was characteristically hesitant to take personal financial risks, and the Bijou, at 2,019 seats, was extremely large for early silent films. The Lyric and the New Grand in Minneapolis, two capacious theaters, were already showing the films; quite possibly, Hays decided that Minneapolis could not sustain another large movie house.

Unable to stop or join these new amusements, Hays looked beyond his continuing efforts to boost his theaters’ community images. To control the costs that accompanied escalating competition, he and his longtime colleague, first-class theater manager L. N. Scott, founded the Minnesota Amusement Association (soon renamed the Theatrical Managers Association of the Twin Cities) in 1902. Scott was elected president, Hays, vice-president and then executive secretary; the original slate also included two managers of burlesque houses. Even as the organization grew, Hays and Scott remained the most powerful members, serving as a two-man executive committee. The association primarily endeavored to control competitive advertising practices among member managers, to join forces against rising newspaper advertising rates, and to present united responses to contract negotiations with stage workers. By 1911 the association represented twenty theaters.

The alliance worked smoothly for its first three years. Newspapers were denied advertising until they reduced or withdrew rate increases. All managers followed restrictions or prohibitions on banners, window showcards, card tacking, and bill posting—considered less effective expenditures. Members also agreed to work toward a single contract that would cover all stage workers.

Complications arose when new members, especially those who represented the national circuits such as the Orpheum and later the Shubert brothers, were constrained to obey their home offices. These managers often sought exemptions from the association’s restrictive advertising rules; thus, the organization’s business was frequently taken up by amendments to regulations. Theaters in Minneapolis, for instance, would be allowed to display window showcards for two weeks while those in St. Paul were only allowed one.

Labor negotiations also became complicated. At first, the Orpheum organization refused to enter into the association’s contract talks with the stagehands,
preferring to bargain alone. Hays and Scott eventually persuaded the Orpheum to join them, but the new contracts were complex. Wages became stratified by position and scaled to the size and the status of the theater. The first-class and popularly priced houses paid their backstage workers one scale; the combination theaters and vaudeville houses each paid by lesser rates. Regardless of these difficulties, association members, by consensus, strove to maximize profits through efficient handling of expenses and to regulate conditions within the local amusement economy. Each manager was satisfied with his slice of the economic pie as long as the slice did not shrink.

But neither Hays's leadership in the Theatrical Managers Association nor its attempts to control economic conditions could ultimately secure him a profitable place among amusement caterers in the Twin Cities. The competition, especially from the vaudeville and motion-picture houses, caused a steady decline in his theaters' revenues. By 1912 the Litt organization had dissolved and, without a steady supply of popularly priced, quality attractions, Hays soon closed the doors on both the Bijou and the Grand. In just a few years he would find himself happily working for the Finkelstein and Ruben chain of motion-picture theaters, first as an exhibitor, then as a general manager, and finally as an agent in charge of the chain's real estate, insurance, and public and labor relations. He died in 1945 after a fifty-four-year career in the entertainment business.57

At the turn of the century, amusement caterers of all sorts worked within the narrow limits circumscribed by middle-class values, constrained to amusements that would solidify genteel mores.58 As the paying public's definition of acceptable leisure pursuits began to widen, legitimate theaters competed against the newest forms of commercialized entertainment with a distinct advantage: for several decades the theaters had been among the few morally proper activities on which to spend money. Theo Hays's consistent promotion of himself as a good neighbor and of his theaters as benevolent and civic-minded institutions fit within these narrow, nineteenth-century limits. Hays understood the financial benefits generated by public goodwill. After the turn of the century, however, the range of acceptable leisure pursuits expanded even further to include vaudeville and motion pictures. Generating goodwill alone was not enough to sustain Hays's enterprise. Despite his theaters' eventual demise, his efforts gave the Twin Cities community more than just buildings in which to see plays.

All illustrations are in the MHS collections, including p. 241, 243, and 245 from the Hays scrapbooks.