

Historic Opera House did a bit of everything

Historic Buildings
Watsonville's Opera House, which stood on East Beach Street opposite Union Street, was built in 1871 and designed by James Waters for Peter Folger. He purchased the lot for \$500 and had a wood-frame building constructed that measured 4,000 square feet. An auspicious opening was held on Sept. 8, 1871, and admission was \$3.50 for dinner and the grand promenade and ball that followed.

The place was originally called Folger's Rink in honor of the owner and the fact that it once featured rollerskating. It hosted road companies, vaudeville acts and local stage productions, for which raised seats and a gallery were installed. In 1877, Gen. Tom Thumb and Minnie Warren, the renowned midgets, appeared at the rink. Two years later, the local Butterfly Social Club gave a masquerade ball with half the profits going to the Ladies Relief Society and the other half for a plaza fountain.

The next year, the Edison phonograph, which had been invented in 1876, was on display at the rink — admission was 15 cents for adults and 10 cents for children. Sairs and Hamm opened the skating season in February of 1884 with sessions in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. Wednesday and Saturday mornings were reserved for the ladies and Saturday featured a dance for everyone along with the regular skating, for which admission was 50 cents. At any other time, it was 25 cents, including skates. Skating races were also held; a favorite being the 30-minute race with six participants and a \$6 purse.

Josh Billings gave a lecture at the rink in 1885 before an audience of 300. The Pajaronian noted: "The world famous humorist is a tall, large man, well advanced in years and whose countenance shows but little sign of the humor for which he is famed."

In 1887, Peter Folger offered the Rink for sale at \$6,000 including scenery, grand piano, 100 chairs, benches, etc. The property at that time rented for \$60 a month. Fred Kilburn of the Charles Ford Company bought the rink and leased it to Seitz and Sornberger who also owned the Mansion House Hotel



That Was
Watsonville

Betty Lewis

located up the block. The next year the name was changed from the Rink to the Watsonville Opera House. It was also known as Liberty Hall.

An Olympic-sized skating rink opened in February of 1893, with costumes shipped from San Francisco for local people to wear to the affair. Seitz and Sornberger bought the Opera House in 1895 and did some remodeling, which included a drop curtain painted with advertisements of the leading Watsonville merchants.

The Poet of the Sierras, Joaquin Miller, gave a lecture in January of 1896. The next year, local men went to the Opera House to see pictures of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight held in Reno and shown via Veriscope, a forerunner of motion pictures. In 1904, the building was leased for three years by F.S. Granger of Santa Cruz, who announced the following: "Only refined shows will be presented such as any woman or child can attend without fear of witnessing anything that will shock their sense of modesty."

The Great Western Vaudeville Company appeared once a week during January of 1905. Its shows were reported as sometimes good, but more often rotten. In May, a traveling show called "Miss Frisky from Fresno" appeared. The Pajaronian damned the show with faint praise.

The year 1906 saw the Opera House sold to Beck and King with Fred Burdick being retained as the manager. The San Francisco earthquake in April slowed the activity for a bit. Movies of the San Francisco disaster were shown, but reviewed as "bunk."

In July of that year, "Leopold the Wizard of the Mind" and his hypnosis show drew large audiences. Local man Harold Hewston was put

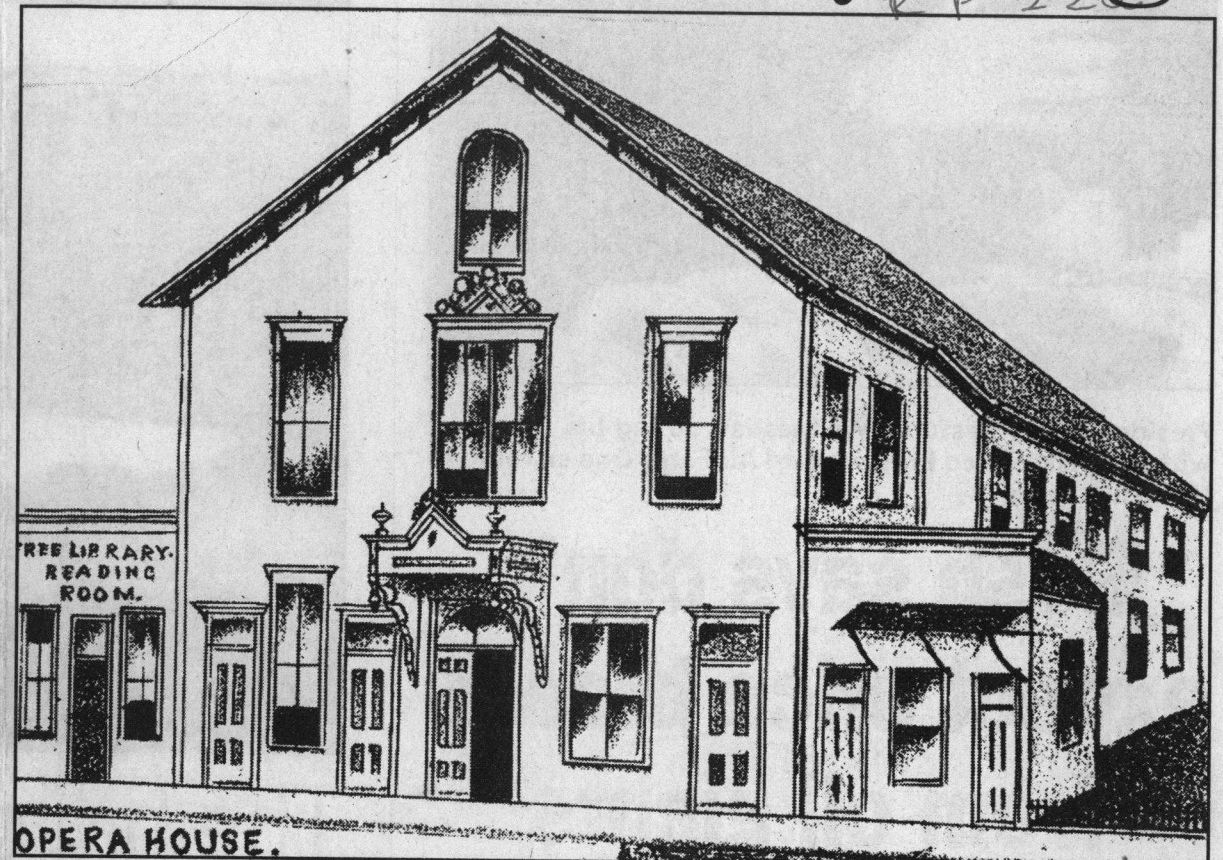
to sleep in a Main Street shop window for 24 hours and drew many spectators. He almost emptied the Opera House one night while under a hypnotic trance when he started to remove his trousers.

Watsonville High School students presented Byron's play "Our Boys" in 1907 to sellout crowds. In the cast were Fred Hudson, Otto Schuchard, Albert Dolenmayer, Clifford Palmtag, Hiram Bowen and Misses Louise and Marian Rider. That same month, a fifth-rate traveling company presented an old play, "An Arabian Night" under the title of "A Race for a Widow." It turned out to be a total disaster — the patrons quit the house in the middle of the performance and demanded their money returned. The next road show "Zeke the Country Boy," didn't fare much better, as the Pajaronian said the performance was "utterly beneath criticism."

Minstrels were a favorite, and in November of 1907, the Richards and Pringle's Georgia Minstrels were coming to town and the show's advance man, Lou Elliot, was fined \$5 for placing placards on light poles on Main Street. From then on, Elliot referred to Watsonville as just a "tank" town!

In 1907, La Petite Theater opened in the Hildreth block on Main Street — the area's first moving picture showhouse. The Opera House followed suit and began showing one-reelers along with road shows. In 1908, an outfit headed by T.B. Ryan promptly covered the interior walls with beer and whisky ads when it rented the building. The resulting indignation of the local temperance people was fierce and strong and the new renters did not last long.

Henry Miller, the noted actor, appeared in February of 1910 and presented "The Great Divide," and in April, Antoninette Le Brun and Company appeared in scenes from various operas. This production was hailed as one of the finest local shows ever witnessed. There were only six people in the company, but they were evidently talented actors and singers. Hiram Johnson spoke at the Opera House as a candidate for the Republican nomination for governor. Accompanying him was



Courtesy of Betty Lewis

The Opera House is shown circa 1900 in a postcard illustration.

Allison Ware, who was seeking election for the post of state superintendent of public instruction. The party also included a fife and drum corps, composed of old veterans who made things hum during their part of the program.

Mrs. Mary Piratsky assumed management of the Opera House in 1910. Her husband, Jim, was the crusading editor of the Evening Pajaronian and a fine actor in his own right. He supplied the dialogue for those early flicks. People came from far and near to see and hear Jim — it was said that he made the talkies anti-climatic!

In November of 1911 the building was packed to the rafters when Mayo & Row, along with local talent, presented "Under Two Flags." It was a rousing success for three nights. The Buster Brown Kiddies Show, in 1912, was touted as the best juvenile shows ever seen and local talent included Fern Tuttle, Norine Kane, Lorraine Murphy and Mildred Kulitz. Between 1911 and 1915, Mrs. Eva Murphy, a daughter

of the Piratsky's, was the driving force behind the amateur theatricals that offered the many talents of local men, women and children. She also conducted a dancing school where she taught many local children and adults the waltz, buck and wing, the cakewalk and ballet.

The death knoll sounded for the Opera House in 1915, when the new T&D Theater was opened. It was also to be called the Appleton and State Theater. In 1917, the T&D leased the Opera House for five years and promptly closed it down. When the building was leased in 1921 by the Metropolitan Cash market, it was remodeled by Willis Smith with space for eight concession stands including Bake Rite Bakery, Cavanagh's Creamery, a meat market, lunch counter, Singer Sewing Machine stand, coffee and tea store and NuWay grocers. Purchases over \$2 were delivered to homes free of charge.

In 1925, the building was leased to the California Furniture Compa-

ny. In 1937, it was a temporary post office while a new one was being built. From 1937-1940, it housed the Morning Sun newspaper and then the building was converted into Watsonville's first modern bowling alley plus the Lunch Bowl Café, a jewelry and gift shop and a TV and radio repair. On the morning of July 30, 1963, the old Opera House building went up in flames. A reporter for the Register-Pajaronian commented:

"The ghost of Billy Sheridan, greatest Shakespearean actor of his day, may have looked down last night on the smoke and flames which ate up the boards he trod 79 years ago. And the old building even had a bit of nefarious history. Residents here in the late 20s and 30s recall one of the city's peripatetic speakeasies of that era was located in the upstairs rooms."

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Betty Lewis, a local historian and Watsonville resident, is a regular columnist for the Register-Pajaronian.