

## Dodge City Varieties— A Summer Interlude of Entertainment, 1878

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DODGE City, as with so many aspects of Western history, has been the victim of stereotypes, especially such as have been associated with sensationalism—cowboys, saloon keepers, dance hall girls, cattlemen, nesters, homesteaders, law officers, and gunmen, including, of course, Texas. One of the difficulties with a stereotype is that its behavior runs according to a pattern—predictable. In other words it is a sociological abstraction. No one ever met one. They had no existence in real life. Instead, Dodge City was inhabited by people, each one of whom was a unique person, different from every other individual. The best history is that which most effectively identifies by name, differentiates, describes, and explains these individuals, their hopes and performances.

Although the materials are scanty, this essay undertakes to reconstruct a summer interlude of entertainment in 1878. The James A. Lord Dramatic Company affords some background for the personnel engaged in the enterprise, but it must be clearly differentiated from what happened in Dodge City that summer. The personal side of the history of the Lord company has been told in the Autumn issue of *The Kansas Historical Quarterly*, along with some consideration of the artistic and moral standard maintained by Mr. Lord. Also, during the winter of 1877-1878, friction developed within the troupe about publicity and recognition of the talents of the supporting members in performances. The man-and-wife team, Harry and May Seymour, were among those who had been dissatisfied. The theatrical season ended in a two-week run in Dodge City, disbanding May 31. Mr. and Mrs. Lord returned to their Chicago home for the summer.

Just when the plan for a Dodge City Varieties was conceived is not known, but the plans were matured during the two weeks the Lord Company played there. An announcement was made in the *Dodge City Times*, May 25, that the new Variety Theatre was being erected by the new lumber firm of Brinkman Bros. & Webster who were also supplying the material. The contract had called for completion in ten days but the boast was made in the *Times*, June 15,

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that the job had been done in eight—"an evidence of the spirit of western enterprise." The printed story of the occupants of the Varieties Theatre came in the *Globe*, May 28, which reported the disbandment of the Lord Dramatic Company, but explained that the remainder of the troupe would be in Dodge City for the summer: Mr. and Mrs. H. L. Seymour, C. W. Taylor, R. G. Guptill, Rose Ashmead, Montie and Mattie Hernandez, and others.<sup>1</sup>

Although scheduled to open June 10, the Varieties bettered that date by two days. The bills announced "a grand array of talent" and "a variety of pleasure . . . we suppose everybody and the bald headed men will go." The proprietors were listed as Seymour and Taylor, Harry L. Seymour as manager, Dick Brown as stage manager, C. W. Taylor as treasurer, Professor Heidlebergh as orchestra leader, H. T. McCarty as scenic artist, and Harry Boyer as master of properties.<sup>2</sup>

These preparations were none too soon, however, because the cattle drive began early that season. Two large herds of Texas cattle arrived May 9, and during the following week at least 14 more.<sup>3</sup> These facts emphasized that Dodge City had two populations; its resident citizens, and its summer tourists—the cattle drovers. In the matter of entertainment as well as many other matters, these two groups clashed. The resident citizens supported during the winter season such dramatic entertainment as the Lord Dramatic Company and similar troupes. The summer patronage of those who followed the Texas cattle business was quite another problem. Abilene, the first of the notorious range cattle shipping points, had tolerated the cattlemen only about five years. Other similar towns farther west had done likewise. Dodge City was not ready to close out this line of business, but the summer of 1878 marked an attempt in the long campaign on the part of the resident citizens to keep the lawless elements under control. Their ambitions were not merely negative, a desire was manifested to bring to their community some of the institutions and activities of stable society. A German student of philosophy, E. Sonnedbrodt, advertised for pupils at \$1.50 per month, one hour's instruction daily, in any of four languages: German, French, Latin, or Greek. A voluntary fire company had been organized, and purchased a new Brussels carpet for their meeting place, which was being fitted for a public library and reading room. An appeal was made for books, and

1. Rose Ashmead's name did not appear again in connection with the enterprise and she may not have remained.

2. *Dodge City Times*, June 1, 8, 1878.

3. *Ibid.*, May 11, 18, 1878.

other contributions to the enterprise. Union church services had been held, and special preaching from time to time by visiting ministers, but during the summer of 1878 a Presbyterian and a Methodist church were organized. The Town Company gave notice that no interments were to be made on company property, and announced that the burying ground west of the city, "Boot Hill," had been sold for subdivision as residential property. About 20 graves, mostly of men who had met violent deaths, were located there.

As the newspapers of the city were weeklies, daily developments in the history of the Dodge City Varieties cannot be reconstructed. At the end of the first week of performances, the *Times*, June 15, gave the enterprise a reasonable proportion of its space:

This troupe is meeting with gratifying success and beyond the most sanguine expectations of its managers. The performances give satisfaction and we should judge were appreciated. The character of the entertainment is up to the standard of the burlesque comedy and minstrelsy oddity and variety, and is first class in that respect; but of course the fastidious and refined taste would be offended at the coarse and vulgar sayings. The patronage . . . is an evidence of the estimation of the appreciation of the performances.

The cowboys did not present the only problems, and the evidence is found in this paragraph:

The bald headed man sits with elegant composure and listens with rapturous delight the sweet refrains as warbled by the songstress and danseuse. Returning from the green room the bald headed wretch, who promised his family he would return by 10 o'clock, caught his passionate warbler lamenting before the stage lights in this affrighted refrain:

"See what the force of example hath,  
She cried with arms akimbo,  
I sport in tights and now at last,  
My baggage is in limb, oh."

A conundrum was put and answered: "What's the difference between a cow boy and a tumble bug? One rounds up to cut and the other cuts to round up. And then all the bald headed men in the front seats laughed." A second conundrum revealed the difficulties of the party of the third part in entertainment, the performers: "What makes your stage manager blush when he sings those vulgar songs?" No answer was supplied.

According to the *Times*, July 6, the Varieties "became lax," and the customers restless and fewer. Thus, "to meet popular demand and curiosity" the managers spread a "great spectacular extravaganza on the boards." As of July 6 therefore: "For two nights the Dodge City Varieties . . . presented the extravagant Can-Can to large and appreciative audiences. . . . Instead of dreamy

tireless spectators the house was crowded with a large, vigorous and wide-awake people." The editor then discoursed at large upon this peculiar species of showmanship—that should be feminine gender: "The Can-Can was new to many, though jardin mobilization has become indigenous to American soil." To reassure the newspaper reading portion of the Dodge City residents, the editor concluded by a suggestion of a certain mutual relationship between the moral standards of the performers and the audience:

The Can-Can does not deprave the moral taste of the average Dodgeites or rangers—the ordinary life is presented in a condensed form on the stage. We cannot particularize the performers—we can-not do it. Everyone acted well his or her part. The Varieties will be crowded to-night. Take a front seat, baldly, or you can-not see it—so well.

Of course, the editor's efforts were not as hilariously funny as he intended them to be, but as a historical record they were quite revealing about a number of things, including the editor.

In the next issue, July 13, the *Times* gave alleged biographical sketches of two "Burnt Corks" of the Varieties:

Bobby Gaylor . . . is a genuine character in negro minstrelsy and Irish burlesque. Bobby has delighted European audiences and potentates. . . . He came to this border for health, the fumes of a rag factory having impaired the use of his lungs. Bobby lost two front teeth chewing rags for a paper mill.

Johnny Smith is another fine delineator of negro character at the Varieties. This burnt cork minstrel was born on the river Nile, hence he early partook of negro oddity. His early education was on the trombone. Johnny has delighted European theatres. He was shot in the eye when quite young, and has never since displayed much cheek, though his right optic has the lustre of the American eagle.

The residents of Dodge City had among them persons interested in being theatrical participants, as well as spectators. They organized a dramatic association at the home of R. M. Wright. Mrs. Seymour was engaged as directress, and the first play selected for presentation was "Ernestine." Later, Montie Hernandez undertook to organize a dancing class.<sup>4</sup>

Toward the end of July, the Varieties gave benefit performances for some of the leading performers: one for Bobby Gaylor and Johnny Smith, who had not been members of the Lord troupe, and one for May Seymour, and one for C. W. Taylor.<sup>5</sup>

The Can-Can story of July 6 indicated that all had not been well with the Varieties. That extravaganza had opened July 4. On the same night a new show was launched, Ben Springer's Theatre Comique, in Lady Gay Hall. Associated with Springer as proprie-

4. *Ford County Globe*, Dodge City, June 25, 1878; *Dodge City Times*, July 20, 1878.

5. *Dodge City Times*, July 20, 27, 1878.

tors was Dick Brown, who had been announced as stage manager of the Varieties.<sup>6</sup> At the end of July announcement was made that "the varieties met with adverse luck and were compelled to suspend." Springer had rented the hall, renovated it, providing for the first time in Dodge City an opera house with stage and scenery. This story deviated from the earlier explanation of the origin of the Varieties house, alleging that it had been built by G. M. Hoover, a leading liquor dealer. During the last winter theatre season, the allegation went, Dodge City had lost good theatrical talent because of the lack of a proper theatre. This house, Hoover Hall, would be "used only for entertainments and exhibitions of a first-class order." Possibly this Hoover Hall was a more permanent structure than the eight-day wonder built originally for the Varieties by the new lumber firm. At any rate, Springer and Brown were serving one public with the Theatre Comique of the Lady Gay, and another at Hoover Hall. That dual role was emphasized by the matinee story of the *Times*, July 27:

Messrs. Springer and Brown propose giving matinees every Wednesday and Saturday at Hoover's Hall, commencing at 2 p. m. It has been requested by a number of leading citizens of this city that we should do so. Ladies will please give us their aid, as there will be nothing said or done that will in any way offend the most fastidious.

The admission price was 50 cents, and reservations could be made at James Conner's store without extra charge. On the basis of the first week's experience the *Times*, August 3, announced optimistically, probably at the inspiration of the interested parties as a disguised advertisement: "The matinees . . . bid fair to be successful, and are highly enjoyed by those who attend."

No mistake should be made about a moral crusade being led by a leading liquor dealer and the proprietor of the Lady Gay Theatre Comique. Either the cattle season of 1878 was unusually violent, or the sensibilities of the regular residents of Dodge City were more tangibly focused than earlier. At any rate, a card appeared in the *Times*, July 20, signed "Many Citizens," appealing to both the county and the city officers to act—how long, the citizens asked, would crime be permitted to continue. The law officers were Earp and Masterson, and they appeared either unwilling or incapable in the matter of stemming the crimes of violence. The residents were acting at this particular time apparently because late summer was a relatively quiet interval between the arrival of the southern herds and the exploiters of the cowboys, and the return of the cowboys

6. *Ibid.*, July 6, 1878.

from the range for the fall market. Clearly the *Times*, August 10, revealed by its ridicule that the editor was not in sympathy with the attempted purification of Dodge City:

A hen convention was held this week to discuss the "ordinance relating to houses of ill-fame." Attorneys Gryden and Morphy were employed to defend the "girls" against the collections of fines for prostitution. Their voices are for war.

The papers recorded in part the dispersal of the personnel of the disrupted Varieties: "Bobby Gaylor has folded his wings and silently stole away to Colorado. Mrs. Gaylor still remains to delight the rude gazers at the 'Comique' with her light fantastic jig and clog. Unsophisticated cattlemen, beware!" This is the same woman, professionally known as Miss Gaylor, who supposedly lost her pocket book containing \$260 on July 17. Whether or not the cattlemen could or did read, they were forewarned, but took their chances. The story of Montie and Mattie Hernandez, regular members of the Lord Dramatic Company, was of a quite different order. With Johnny and Hattie Smith and Fannie Keenan, they formed the Hernandez Comedy Company and gave performances at Kinsley and Larned on the Santa Fe route to the east. When the Lord company opened in September, Montie and Mattie were again with them.<sup>7</sup>

The Seymour story is rather special. The *Globe*, August 6, reported their departure from Dodge City: "Like the Arab, 'they folded their tent and silently stole away.'" The situation, with its full range of possibilities, however, required more than ordinary talents, and the editor of the *Times*, August 3, with his pretentious but ponderous brand of humor, undertook bravely to rise to the possibilities of the occasion under the title, "An Exodus":

We are told in the Good Book that the Lord commanded Moses to lead the children of Israel out of the wilderness of Egypt. The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king; that he might follow after them. "And it was told the king of Egypt that the people fled; and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned against the people, and they said, why have we done this that we have let Israel go from serving us?" Pharaoh rigged his traps and followed after these children. He was swallowed up in the Red Sea as the same history informs us.

Dodge City has furnished an exodus, but the heart of the king was not hardened; he remembered the cloud stood between the children of Israel and the pursuing Egyptians,—the one saved the other drowned. He was not going to take any risks, so the wayward children departed in peace with the pillar of fire to guide them in their midnight exodus from off the north banks of the turbid Arkansas.

The king of Dodge City directed the Moses thereof to show the show case and confidence men the way out of the city at the hour when graveyards yawn.

7. *Ibid.*, July 20, August 3, 24, 1878.

Lesser lights in nefarious practices left their shadows in the starlight. There are more to follow—as soon as the king's heart becomes hardened.

Business is poorly. A few legitimate branches have succumbed to a superior force of circumstances—dullness—and have gone where the woodbine twineth. A bootblack remains to bear the market of an overstocked army of bootblacks. He shines on credit, and blacks the city attorney's immense pedestal wrappings by the week, giving an extraordinary shine on Sundays.

The cowboy follows his herds to fields new and pastures green. But few of him remain on the immediate range. He will return for the fall market, and again drive us mad with the rattling of his spurs.

The pimp and his bird of prey are not so numerous. They, too, have been led out of the wilderness, to ply their stocking-leg operations elsewhere.

In the calamity that befell the city, which struck like a clap of thunder from a clear sky, was the collapse of the Dodge City Varieties. It died a cruel death and its like we'll never see more. The sundry debts left by the management of H. L. Seymour are sweet morsels that a trusting public can roll in the retreating footsteps of an unscrupulous variety manager. Seymour left Tuesday night on the eastern bound train. His numerous creditors suffered him to go without hindrance. They without hesitation pronounce him an unmitigated scoundrel, and brand him with the stamp of sneak, liar and fraud.

The James A. Lord Dramatic Company must have started out from Chicago in August on their theatrical season of 1878-1879, because the company was billed for El Dorado and Peabody, September 2 and following, and Manhattan later in the month. The *Manhattan Enterprise*, September 27, praised the acting of Harry and May Seymour and C. W. Taylor, who were with the Lords again in their accustomed places. But the Seymours had not yet learned their lesson—the power to fascinate upon the stage has no necessary relation to managerial ability. In October and November they tried and failed again to operate their own company, this time in the legitimate theatre. The story is told briefly elsewhere. This much of the Seymours' relations with the Lords after the Dodge City summer interlude seems necessary in order to keep things in perspective. There is no doubt about Mr. Lord's jealousy of any rival to his wife Louie, and about his slanting publicity accordingly. But at the same time, the Seymours, in their frustration, refused to recognize their own deficiencies.

The Dodge City Varieties was indeed a wild gamble in any case, and its failure was almost a foregone conclusion. In a very real sense, nevertheless, that failure was a vindication, not only personal, but of the whole contingent of the Lord company who participated. However badly some people thought of actors and of theatre, here was a group of players who tried, but proved that they could not degrade their own human dignity and their performances to the level necessary to "success" with the Dodge City summer trade.