Early Theatre at Fort Scott

JAMES C. MALIN

I. THE SETTING

THE setting for the beginning of theatre in Fort Scott and southeastern Kansas was quite different from that of Leavenworth and Atchison. Northeastern Kansas, as well as central and northwestern Missouri, had been served by the river traffic of the Missouri river. Several towns, four of which were of considerable size, Kansas City, Leavenworth, Atchison, and St. Joseph, afforded substantial patronage in their own right, and operated as bases for access to the near-by interior towns. But Fort Scott and southeastern Kansas were far removed from water navigation, and were served only by expensive animal-powered land communications. That is, until the coming of the railroads and associated services. Other factors, of course, contributed to the delay in settlement and development of the area, particularly southern Bourbon and Neosho counties, and those farther south. The Missouri-Kansas border wars, by 1865, had virtually depopulated the border tiers of counties on both sides of the state line. There were also controversies over Indian titles, and over land grants to railroads.

Just prior to the Civil War, the village of Fort Scott was visited by occasional entertainers, but not theatre. Professor Searl, magician and ventriloquist, in May, 1860; the New York Vocalists, in June, 1860; Seguar Ferrello, the "Italian Ole Bull," and Peabody, the banjo performer, at Williams' Hall, December, 1860, March, 1861; the Great Western Minstrels, in April, 1861.

In the latter part of 1862, when Union troops were concentrated at Fort Scott, soldier entertainment attracted attention. During most of August the "Union Opera and Variety Troupe" provided that type of diversion, and again the same organization reopened for the fall season late in September and continued through much or all of October. This was the "Varieties" combination that had become notorious at Leavenworth under the direction of the expansive and irrepressible Irish comedian, Ben Wheeler, at the American Concert Hall—derivatively called the "Moral Show." In August Ben had with him the humorist, Oscar Willis, "the graceful Mlle

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Carolina and LaBelle Louise,” the jig-dancer, Johnny Mitchell, and the violinist, A. G. Cooper. For the later engagement the balladist, Leon DeBerger, was featured in place of LaBelle Louise. As the Bulletin put it: “The Union Varieties are running gay. Ben Wheeler is a whole troupe in himself, and is ‘well supported.’” Another group of entertainers were advertised as “Franklin and Baker’s Amphitheatre.” The components of this company had also appeared at Leavenworth in the “Variety” type of show: Baker, the Red Man of Agar, and his son Willie, Mr. and Mrs. Franklin, and Mr. and Mrs. (Kate) Navo.¹

After the war a limited assortment of miscellaneous entertainment visited Fort Scott by stage. But, allowing for certain kinds of diversions associated traditionally with saloons, gaming rooms, and dance halls, serving particularly the unattached population of a pioneer town, the citizens were thrown back mostly upon their own resources for amusement.²

II. THE NATIONAL THEATRE, 1870

The coming to Fort Scott of the first railroad, the Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf, in December, 1869, was long anticipated and worked a revolution in most all aspects of the activities of this city of about 4,000 population. Commercial entertainment, especially theatre, was a conspicuous beneficiary. Watching the advancing construction work on the railroad in Bourbon county, the Monitor wrote wishfully, May 12, 1869, that if the contractors at the north end did as well “we may expect the cars in Fort Scott by the 4th day of July.” Not altogether by coincidence a few days later the Monitor described the new furnishings of McDonald Hall; new chairs, three chandeliers, eight side lamps—“It is now one of the

¹. Fort Scott Democrat, May 19, June 23, 30, December 15, 1860; March 9, April 13, 20, 1881; Fort Scott Bulletin, August 9, 23, 30, September 27, October 4, 11, 1862.


Mrs. C. H. Haynes, “Early Theatricals in Fort Scott,” Fort Scott Daily Monitor, April 8, 1895. In this article, primarily reminiscences, Mrs. Haynes said:

The first traveling troupe that gave public entertainments in this city was a company from Leavenworth, whose “advance agent” found great difficulty in obtaining a building.

—The only place available being an ice house, which was furnished for the purpose of the soldier shows with benches, a drop curtain, and candles with tin reflectors for footlights. She added:

—“I cannot vouch for the quality of these first theatricals, as the ladies did not patronize them, for the reason, that we were not wanted, the performances being regular “variety shows.”

Mrs. Haynes dated this episode 1868, but it should have been a year earlier; also, this was “entertainment,” but not theatre.

No contemporary verification has been found for the ice-house housing of these shows, but the space was exceedingly short. The school house had been turned into a military hospital during the summer of 1862, and a citizens’ urge to construct a temporary building for the fall opening of school failed.—Fort Scott Bulletin, June 7, 14, July 12, August 2, 9, 1862.

². Charles W. Goodlander, Memoirs and Recollections of C. W. Goodlander of the Early Days of Fort Scott (Fort Scott, 1900). The author gave more attention than is usual in such reminiscences to the devices for amusement.
best halls in the State." But at year's end and the railroad a reality
the owners went a step further; erected "a fine stage" and provided
a "very tolerable scenic property." By this time the facilities were
under contract to the National Theatre. McDonald Hall, named in
honor of a former citizen, then carpet-bag Republican senator from
Arkansas, Alexander McDonald, occupied the second floor of the
annex, Main street side, of the Wilder House, the principal hotel
and saloon, with billiard and pool rooms. This was Fort Scott's
theatre until the Davidson Opera House was opened in January,
1875.4

In Fort Scott during the decade of the 1870's there was no more
unanimity than in the 20th century about the nature of either enter-
tainment or humor. In the public communications field they are
inseparable and equally treacherous:

The individual who left three kittens, and a dog with a tin pan tied to his
narrative, on our office stairs last night, can have them in a transfigured state
by calling at the butcher shop. We would modestly suggest that we have no
further call for such supplies.

Telephones had not yet arrived, but evidently the people made
known their reactions immediately and in no uncertain terms. The
next day a somewhat chastened (?) editor wrote in disillusionment
and bewilderment, real or feigned:

Whenever people learn to walk upon their eye-brows, to balance ladders
on their chins and climb to the tops of them—when fleas shall swallow ele-
phants and elephants traverse space upon mosquitoes—then, and then only,
will an Editor be found whose items give pleasure alike to rich and poor,
honest and false, respectable and low.5

The railroad brought a somewhat greater assortment, but not ne-
cecessarily a uniformly higher quality of entertainment—the railroad
was a common carrier.

On January 17, 1870, the National Theatre opened in McDonald
Hall for about six weeks, and undertook to play daily, except Sun-
day, and a matinee "for the especial accommodation of Ladies and
children," extra on Saturday afternoon. A different piece was pre-
sented each day, allowing numerous repeat performances. Ban-
croft and Fessenden were lessees and proprietors, C. P. DeGroat,
stage manager, O. H. Perry, leader of the orchestra: "This elegant
place of amusement is now open for the regular season, with a First
Class DRAMATIC COMPANY, Selected from the principal the-

4. Fort Scott Monitor, May 19, 1899; Daily Monitor, April 8, 1895.
5. Ibid., March 16, 17, 1870.
atres of the East,” among whom were Mary Preston, Edith Blanche, Emma Stowe, and a male contingent that was headed by DeGroat, with O. H. Barr, etc., “The whole forming an array of talent second to none either east or west. . . .” 6

Lest the 20th century reader be misled into thinking that the National Theatre was a “going concern,” certain discrete facts should be pointed out which the contemporary public may or may not have known at the beginning. Except, possibly, for a small nucleus the company was in prospect only. To be sure, actors had been engaged, but most, apparently, as individuals only. After their arrival rehearsals were necessary to train them into an effective group unity. They were to open Monday evening, January 17, but the Sunday morning Monitor announced that they had arrived on last night’s train which had been delayed by “a heavy load and slippery track.” Competition was announced at the same time: “The can-can opened last night at Rubicam & Dilworth’s, and the Dramatic Troupe from Chicago opens tomorrow night at McDonald Hall.” If the identification “from Chicago” was correct, then again the ubiquitous combination was in evidence: Chicago, railroads, and theatre. After the second performance the Monitor revealed: “We understand that if the management are successful, the hall is to be enlarged, and additions made to their stock company.” Except for the use of the term “stock company” in the news item no other reference was made to the form of organization of this troupe, a resident theatre or a traveling company. The circumstances indicate the former. This was an era of transition, however, from the resident to the traveling company as had been illustrated at Leavenworth and Atchison. 7 In practice, whatever the original intentions may have been, the Nationals soon took to the road as a traveling dramatic troupe.

On Monday night McDonald Hall was crowded, but the name of the play was not mentioned, possibly it was not important. The Monitor conceded that:

We were most agreeably surprised by the character of the entertainment. Knowing our limited population, the small size of our halls, and the utter impossibility of putting proper stage machinery into them, we were disposed to think that no company of any merit whatever could be persuaded to come here. And considering the inevitable drawbacks of an opening night, lack of acquaintance with the stage from short time for rehearsal, creaking machinery and poor entrances, we marvel that the company did so well.

6. Advertisement in ibid., January 19, 1870 6. Mary Preston was usually referred to thereafter as May.
Mrs. Fontifex did not know her part, and the prompting was unartistically done. Miss Mortimer (Preston au billet) swung out too much voice, forgetting the size of the hall, but modulated it with exceeding tact, and was throughout graceful, piquante, and versatile. Not the least interesting part of her performance was the by-play with the foot, hurt by the rough stage, and the deaf way she went through the narrow crack left for an exit, or doubled herself up in a corner, when unable to get out. Of Lieut. Kingston (O. B. Barr) we did not see enough to judge—he appeared worn out.

On Wednesday evening the opening play was repeated and “was much better rendered than at the first attempt . . . and Miss Mortimer (Preston) had donned a sparkle and life that carried her smoothly over poor support. In the sofa scene, Mr. Barr did nicely, and Miss Preston was—well, tantalizing.” The bad name associated with theatre even at its best had to be overcome, if possible, and the Monitor assured the public about the Nationals: “To their credit be it said that they confine themselves strictly within the limits of legitimate drama, and none need stay away through tenderness on that point.”

In any case, the first week in which such a group worked together would be considered a breaking-in period. However, the situation in which the Nationals found themselves was not so simple. New personnel were trickling in during the second week, January 24-29. Edith Blande appeared for the first time on Monday, and Gaston and Frye wired that they would arrive on Tuesday to take their places on the stage the same evening. Thus, the Monitor, January 25 (Tuesday) explained to the public: “The management have labored under peculiar difficulties for the past few days;—coming players have failed to meet their engagements promptly, the best on hand have been sick, and changes in the programes—so provoking to the audience—have been necessary.” Possibly it was out of kindness to the company that no reports on the shows of the latter part of the first week were printed. Also, stage properties were incomplete, and on January 27, Thursday of the second week, the new drop curtain was announced, painted by George Fessenden, artist of the theatrical company.

Miss Blande was billed to make her debut in “Asmodeus” on Monday of the second week, January 24, with the “Little Rebel” as an afterpiece. She was represented as an English girl, late of the Drury Lane Theatre, London, who had made her American debut October 4, 1869, at Baltimore: “We trust her foot and lips have not lost their cunning since she left the fostering care of Lydia

9. Ibid., January 19, 20, 1870.
Thompson.” The Monitor of Tuesday was kindness itself in commentary upon the “Little Rebel”—she “dances as lightly as of yore.” The play “Asmodeus” had not been presented Monday because a new actor, Mr. Gaston, did not arrive, but apparently was offered Tuesday. As reported, the Wednesday production, “Peter White’s Wife” was rendered with more spirit and better effect than ‘Asmodeus,’ Miss Blande’s dancing was especially pleasing. . . .” The “Black Eyed Susan” performance of Thursday “was undoubtedly the best they have yet given us.” Miss Preston was “Su” and “Her fainting was very artistic; so was the last look on her dress—[but] Miss Blande was evidently suffering from severe indisposition.” For the ladies and children “Peter White’s Wife” and “Pas de Fascination” were presented for the Saturday matinee—“chaste and unobjectionable entertainment.” For the evening performances of Friday and Saturday, the bill was “The Ticket-of-Leave Man”—“the most successful and satisfactory performance yet given. . . .” The spirited and effective acting of May Preston several times elicited hearty applause; she is a favorite, and grows in popularity with every appearance.” The Sunday Monitor, January 30, was probably justified in its week-end summary: “The playing of the National company shows decided signs of improvement of late, and they have been rewarded for their efforts by excellent houses for several nights.”

During the third week the Nationals appeared to have been somewhat stabilized. Monday’s plays, “Caste” and “Nan, the Good-for-Nothing,” were repeated Tuesday. DeGroat, the comedy man, made a hit, and Miss Preston appeared “in her customary animated and engaging manner.” The lighter feminine lead was evidently gaining favor: “The blonde is generally acknowledged a very engaging style of beauty, but when the blonde is united with the Blande, the effect is absolutely irresistible.” The “Serious Family” was coupled with “Pas de Fascination” on Wednesday and “Black Eyed Susan” with “Toodles” on Thursday night. Management was commended particularly

in the selection of pieces suited to the tastes of the people, as well as adapted to the special ability and talent of their troupe. The “Serious Family” and “Toodles,” two as rich and laughable farces as the language affords, and entirely within the capacity of the company, we regard as among the best selections yet made. DeGroat, as “Aminidab Sleek,” and “Timothy Toodles,” is scarcely to be surpassed by any comedian now on the stage.

On Thursday “Black Eyed Susan” was coupled with “Toodles”—“The crowning attraction of the evening—DeGroat’s incomparable

“Toodles” . . . must be seen to be appreciated.” On Friday “Toodles” was again paired with the feature play, the “Marble Heart.” In the latter:

Mr. Barr’s “Rafael Duchaelet” surpassed in true histrionic inspiration all his former characters. May Preston, as “Marco, the marble hearted” was truly artistic and effective. Miss Blinde, as “Marie” surpassed herself. She has never appeared before with such grace and naturalness. Divested of a certain degree of affectation, which almost makes the spectator nervous, she has both the beauty and ability to become a charming actress. We were pleased to notice her improvement in this respect last evening.

Saturday’s matinee pieces were the “Serious Family” and the “Little Rebel,” repeating the “Marble Heart” and the “Little Rebel” in the evening: Miss Blinde’s “rope-skipping dance, in the second piece, is a truly delightful exhibition of grace and skill. . . .”

The National’s fourth week was disheartening. DeGroat became seriously ill and “All That Glitters Is Not Gold” gave way to “Asmodeus,” but without one of the principal characters: “The entertainment closed with ‘The Little Rebel,’ but the previous mishaps of the evening has so thoroughly demoralized the esprit of the company that they did not do as well as usual. Miss Blinde in great measure retrieved the misfortunes of the night by her excellent dancing.” Performances for Tuesday and Wednesday were cancelled, and the Monitor explained: “It is but justice to the management to say that this unfortunate state of affairs was entirely beyond their control. Several actors with whom they have made engagements have failed to arrive.” The hope was expressed that the new players, and DeGroat’s recovery would enable the Nationals to offer “a better class of pieces than have heretofore been attempted.”

Upon resumption of production Thursday, some reorganization had been effected in the orchestra, and D. K. Russell, a popular comedian made his first appearance. The following evening a new leading lady, Olive Kneass, was introduced. DeGroat was not back, and the Monitor had nothing to say about the Saturday performances.

If the fourth week was disheartening, the fifth week was disastrous to the Nationals. Monday’s bill was the “Lady of Lyons,” but internal differences erupted in open rebellion and both sides told the public their stories. The Monitor presented the管理模式 side:

The performance last night was sadly interfered with by an internecine strife among the subordinates of the company, evidently engendered for the

11. Ibid., February 1-6, 1870.
12. Ibid., February 8, 10, 11, 1870.
purpose of involving the management in so much difficulty as to render the production of the piece advertised for the evening an impossibility. According to Mr. Bancroft's statement, Mr. Barr, the leading man, since the illness of Mr. DeGroat, has taken advantage of the situation to make demands upon the management not warranted by their contract, and to which the management could not, in justice to themselves, accede. One of the other principal members of the company, Mr. Frye, so far espoused the cause of Mr. Barr as to refuse to appear unless his demands were complied with. Mr. Frye became so demonstrative as to make his arrest by the police necessary during the performance.

At this point in the story a diversion is desirable, in order to introduce one of the participants in the evening's bizarre activities. A local of the day reported that: "Gen. Darr, the genial host of the Wilder House, returned last evening from a Northern tour." He would scarcely have been in a position to know anything of the current status of the theatre. There would have been time for dinner and a drink or two at the bar "to swell the receipts" before the curtain rose. But to resume the Monitor's narrative:

When the cause of the difficulty became known the sympathies of the audience were warmly enlisted in behalf of the management. General Darr came promptly forward and volunteered to take the place of Mr. Frye, and although he was obliged to read the part, he acquitted himself right nobly; in fact, we think the audience derived more real pleasure from the novelty of the affair than they would have done had the original programme been carried out.

Mr. J. D. Thompson, of Leavenworth, kindly helped to rescue the management from their complications by taking Mr. Barr's place.

The play proceeded, in spite of all drawbacks—and they seemed at one time nearly insurmountable—and the audience retired entirely satisfied with the performance, and warm in their determination to support the management.

Mr. Barr is a meritorious actor, and was making many friends here; we should regret to do him any injustice, but it would seem from a candid statement of the facts, that he was endeavoring to take undue advantage of the circumstances which had already involved the very gentlemanly managers of the company in considerable trouble and expense. The conduct of Mr. Frye would appear entirely unjustifiable.

Barr's card challenged the accuracy of the Monitor's version: "It does me injustice by placing me in a false light before the public of Fort Scott." He insisted that he had "not only labored ardent and faithfully to discharge all duties," but had even "played various parts which were entirely uncalled for by the terms of my engagement." He maintained that the management had violated the contract and refused to pay the week's salary due: "My connection with them is severed because I would lend no further aid to imposition upon the public, by placing pieces upon the stage without
proper rehearsals—which proceeding can only end, as has been demonstrated on two or three occasions, in disgraceful performances."

Monday's play was repeated Tuesday and: "Notwithstanding the difficulties under which the Company have labored, the rendering of 'The Lady of Lyons' last night was excellent. . . . We hope that the Company will not be disheartened by their many misfortunes, but hope for better times in the future." Theatre was scarcely reported the remainder of the week, but on Saturday the Monitor reporter responded to the Nationals' persistence: "It is with much pleasure that we notice marked improvement in the work of the theatre, and the presentation of a bill that we can honestly commend." The names of plays thus approved were not given. On Sunday, whether in the nature of a prod to the management, or a reality accurately reported, the Monitor said: "It is rumored that Miss Preston is to have a complimentary benefit. We hope that it may be soon, and that the hall may be crowded." 13

Relatively, and justly, the sixth week of the National's run was May Preston's. "Honey Moon" was Monday's play: "The management have good reason to congratulate themselves upon the possession of Miss Preston. Throughout their many troubles she has never failed them, but alike in good and poor support, has filled her varied parts to the best of her ability, and that ability is far above the average." On the day this was written, Tuesday, February 22, the reporter announced, with regret, that this was the last week of the National Theatre in Fort Scott. DeGroat returned to his place on Wednesday, recovered from his illness, but Miss Preston was ill and absent for the first time: "The play last evening showed powerfully the absence of its leading attraction—Miss Preston"—in "Under the Gaslight." In keeping with the irony of this comedy of errors, the confirmation of the rumored benefit for Miss Preston revealed the probable cause of her illness:

Since her debut, which was highly successful, she has surely and steadily won her way in admiration and regard of all habitues of the theatre, until she has come to be the reigning favorite. Untiring in her efforts to administer to the amusement and entertainment of the public, she has nightly retired from the stage to assume the equally arduous duties of the sick room, and that she has been able to fill both duties so ably is as much a matter of surprise as of credit.

On Friday, after two days of illness, the Monitor announced: "Miss Preston, we are pleased to say, returns to the boards to-night,

13. Ibid., February 15, 16, 19, 20, 1870.
as ‘Juliana’ in the comedy of ‘The Honey-Moon’. . . . It will contrast well with her tragic role at her benefit Saturday night. . . .”

On Saturday morning the Monitor insisted: “Miss Preston has recovered from her illness and will appear in full force as ‘Juliet’ to-night.” The play she had chosen for her benefit was Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.”

Although the Monitor did not make an issue of it, the probabilities are that this was really the first presentation of a Shakespeare play in Fort Scott. In any case the rarity of such an event focuses attention upon the manner of local reaction:

Shakespeare’s sublime tragedy, will be produced at the theatre to-night, on the occasion of the benefit of Miss May Preston. Of the beauties of the play, it is almost unnecessary to speak. Our readers are, most of them, as well acquainted with it as school boys with their readers—but comparatively few have had the pleasure of witnessing it upon the stage, and as it may never be reproduced in this city, all should avail themselves of the opportunity. We shall see Miss Preston depart from us with regret, and have willingly given a large part of our space for the past few days in calling the attention of the public to the last tribute they can pay to her worth.

The next morning, February 27, the Daily Monitor reported:

An extremely crowded house at the theatre last night betokened that Miss Preston has made many friends in her short stay amongst us, and that her absence will not be unregretted.—Despite the drawbacks which attend Shakespeare’s dramas upon any stage, and more particularly upon the provincial one, the play passed off easily and with sustained interest. Many parts of Miss Preston’s acting were excellent—her tableau work was faultless, and the “potion scene”—one of the most difficult—was charmingly rendered. [Thompson, as Romeo, received only passing comment, but the nurse,] rarely well played, redounds more to Miss Stowe’s credit than any representation she has yet given us.14

The next in the closing round of benefit performances was one for Miss Blande, Monday, February 28. She appeared as “Claude, the love-lorn hero” in “Claude Melnotte,” a burlesque on the “Lady of Lyons.” The Sunday Monitor explained the situation thus:

The roles in which she has been obliged to appear have been of a different character from those in which she has been accustomed to, and almost entirely foreign to the department of dramatic representation in which she has been schooled. For this reason she has not always appeared to that advantage which her merit should ensure her. The play selected for her benefit, however, is one of the class to which she is adapted both by nature and training, and one in which she is entirely at home.

In spite of the careful build-up, however, the Blande performance was a disappointment: “The fault lay not with Miss Blande” ac-

cording to the drama critic—"that Miss Blande carried herself through as well is more to her credit than success under other circumstances."

Three more performances by the company were scheduled. On Tuesday "Under the Gaslight" was pronounced good, and was to have been repeated on Wednesday, but Miss Preston was again too ill to appear, and, that the show might go on, farces were substituted. On Thursday, the closing night of the season for the Nationals in Fort Scott, Barr returned to the company and to his former position of leading man, the event being celebrated by a benefit performance for him—the play, "Under the Gaslight." The attendance was not large for a farewell occasion, but there was unusual competition, and "The play . . . did not go off with the same spirit as on Tuesday evening, the zest with which it was rendered previously not seeming to animate scarcely one of the performers." In spite of this reservation about the success of the evening, the critic continued that: "The re-union of Mr. Barr with the company adds very greatly to its character and force, furnishing just what the company has lacked since he left it." Of course, Miss Preston played "despite her indisposition" and her recovery seemed assured so that she could "give her almost indispensable support to the company . . . an artiste and true woman." Miss Blande was credited with "a more favorable impression . . . than almost any character she has previously undertaken."

On Friday, March 4, the Nationals went on tour, playing "Lady of Lyons" in Kansas City on Saturday. The chapter was not quite closed at Fort Scott, however, as announcement had been made Sunday, February 27, that:

On Friday evening, a select grand masquerade and fancy dress ball will take place at McDonald's Hall, for the benefit of the National Theatrical Company. The gentlemanly proprietors of the theatre have suffered considerable pecuniary loss in favoring our city with the first respectable dramatic entertainment we have had, and on this occasion our citizens should show their gratitude for their labors by making at least partial restitution of their pecuniary losses.

Mr. Bancroft remained behind to represent the Nationals at the ball on Friday night. The next day the Monitor reported that the receipts were "quite gratifying." 15

The major competition with which the Nationals had to contend on their closing night in Fort Scott was a special excursion train carrying the Fort Scott delegation to "The Grand Celebration" of the coming of the Gulf railroad to Girard, the county seat of the

15. Ibid., February 27, March 1-5, 1870.
county adjoining Bourbon on the south. Fort Scott had been the "end of the line" only about ten weeks. The coming of the railroad to Fort Scott had really brought the Nationals to the city, so the celebration of its extension, competing with their closing show, was a part of the "price of progress," which so often was two-edged. But as the Monitor pointed out, such railroad celebrations "are coming to be of almost weekly occurrence in Kansas. Towns in the interior are being connected with the balance of the world with such rapidity that we can scarcely keep tract of them." 16

Although technically Fort Scott had now lost its position on the Gulf railroad as a dead-end town, nevertheless it and other towns on the road remained substantially in that condition so long as their one railroad ran no where in particular and had no connections with other roads at its southern end. Not until at least a second railroad came, and only when rails ran through Fort Scott to large towns to the south, to the east, and to the west could traveling troupes work out itineraries for continuous tours; going out on one line and returning to home base on another. Prior to the winter of 1875-1876 not much of that was possible.

III. THE SPRING INTERLUDE WITHOUT THEATRE, 1870

"The departure of the theatre has left our amusement seekers at a loss," complained the Monitor, March 6, 1870. "Some lectures from men of acknowledged eminence, would fill the gaps." A volunteer theatrical troupe was attempted under General Darr, who was like an old fire horse who responded to every alarm. The performance was reported poorly attended, 26 tickets including comps. 17 A month later, with an ironical enthusiasm, the Monitor reviewed the prospects:

Fort Scott just now has a varied and liberal variety in her amusement line. The "Opera House" presents its peculiar attractions nightly; the Wizard Oil [patent medicine] men hold forth daily and nightly at the street corners—and their performances are by no means the least pleasing of the catalogue; the Stereopticon is setting the children wild with delight at McDonald Hall; Orton's Circus pitch their pavilion here on Friday; the Nationals will revisit us next week, and we shall have the fascinating and eloquent Olive Logan with her "Girls" on the 25th. 18

The so-called "Opera House" received some unwelcome publicity, which nevertheless possesses historical importance as revealing aspects of competition in the amusement field and sidelights on the social scene: "Behind the scenes of the Opera House is a

16. Ibid., March 3, 1870.
17. Ibid., March 6, 13, 16, 1870.
18. Ibid., April 21, 1870.
little apartment called the wine-room, where some of the privileged
do nightly congregate, for a glass of wine and a closer acquaintance
with the ballet dancers." This setting introduced the story of a
man who visited the wine room drunk and woke up the next morn-
ing at home minus $150. The aid of the police was solicited, a
trap laid, and one of the "frail sisters" caught, and the unspent half
of the money restored. Immediately the proprietor of the Opera
House replied by "card" denying that the incident occurred in the
wine room, but in the supper room of another establishment, the
Magnolia. Furthermore, an entirely different version of the story
was told, alleging that the money was given expressly for the pur-
chase of a watch, the donor "being smitten," and that he admired
the watch after the purchase. Only two or three days afterwards,
they charged, did he, coward like, invent the story about losing the
money, and obtained the co-operation of the police. The card
closed with a defense of the "Opera House," good order being kept
in every department and the place kept "respectable" in every
sense of the word." But unsavory tales continued to be associated
with the institution: "A young farmer from the country sold grain
yesterday for a handsome roll of bills; celebrated the 15th amend-
ment; went to the Opera House, and came out delighted; visited
the keno rooms,—and borrowed fifty cents for his night's lodging.
Sic transit gloria!" 19

The year 1870, the first under the railroad regime, introduced
intense competition among hotels, saloons, billiard halls, and asso-
ciated amusement facilities for entertaining the influx of traveling
population as well as residents. Gunn's Domino Billiard Hall and
Saloon was rearranged, and the Crystal Palace imported a new
steward. The new hotel, the Gulf House, was opened to challenge
the Wilder House. General Darr, wholesale liquors, with new
business connections in Kansas City, was one of the proprietors of
the Wilder House, and its Saloon and Billiard Hall. He was sure
that with his new Kansas City connections "the 'receipts' will be
'swelled' enormously." The phrase "swell the receipts" had become
a byword in Fort Scott and was peculiarly identified with General
Darr, who supposedly, after each new guest had registered, sug-
gested: "Let's go to the bar and swell the receipts." 20

Only a few fragments of biographical data have been available
about Darr. The federal census enumeration of Fort Scott listed
him as Joseph Darr, Jr., 40 years of age, single, born in Ohio of

19. Ibid., March 5, 6, 10, 1870.
20. Memoirs and Recollections of C. W. Goodlander of the Early Days of Fort Scott
(Fort Scott, 1900) p. 77.
foreign-born parents. He had a younger brother, George, 17 years of age, associated with him in the hotel as clerk. In 1867 Darr opened a music store in Leavenworth.21 Nobody appeared to question his right to use the title of “General,” or to explain how he acquired such rank. No information was forthcoming either, about how he became a “veteran” theatrical manager. In pioneer communities it was sometimes best not to be too inquisitive about origins. In the case of Joseph Darr, his character was being gradually exposed to public view.

General Darr was determined to meet all competition in the spring of 1870, so “The Wilder House is undergoing a general purification by soap and water, paint, whitewash and new wall paper.” Also, “The ‘Delmonico’ billiard hall is being repainted, newly papered, and generally burnished up for the summer campaign.” 22

Another sign of spring was the dog notice announcing that after May 15 “all dogs found running at large” on which taxes had not been paid would be dealt with according to law. General Darr had a sense of humor comparable to that of the editor of the Monitor. He did not mix kittens with dogs, but the day following the city dog notice he did inaugurate the “Dog Lunch”: “Gen. Darr yesterday regaled the habitues of the Wilder with a lunch of splendid, highly flavored Bologna sausage. The General calls it ‘Dog Lunch,’ and says it will be served regularly, every day at 10 A.M. All are invited.” That was only one of his innovations. The next item on the list: “Darr’s elegant piano in the Delmonico is being nightly punished by ambitious amateurs: it draws a big crowd.” But that was only a by-product. An announcement headed: “Darr’s Opera House” was explained in some detail:

General Darr is introducing some very seductive attractions at the Delmonico. A splendid piano, presided over by a first-class musician, is now operated daily and nightly, and a splendid violinist will soon be added. The General also informs us that he has engaged the professional services of a leading prima donna of one of the Eastern Opera troupes, who will shortly make her debut in Fort Scott. These attractions together with the “Dog Lunch,” the General thinks will “swell the receipts” enormously.23

Entertainment and improvement of young men had been the principal argument used in the library association discussions, but the Monitor reading room descriptions had credited George A. Crawford, the owner of the Monitor, with interest in provision for women as well. A Monitor editorial, November 24, 1869, on the

22. Daily Monitor, April 12, 13, 17, 22-24, 29, 1870.
23. Ibid., April 29, May 5-7, 1870.
theme of "Long Evenings" asked what could and should be done with the long evenings between supper and bedtime; gambling, drinking, etc.? What else was there to do for those without homes and family associations? When saloons, gambling houses, dance halls, etc., were the only recreation available, the fair sex should not be intolerant if young men pursued their pleasures there. An examination of the manuscript census rolls for 1870 and 1875 is a vivid reminder of how many young men and women lived in Fort Scott without the family associations of a home.

It was only natural however that some should resent too much emphasis upon the wickedness of Fort Scott (a city with the reputation of more saloons than any other type of business), and among them was the editor of the Monitor, February 3, 1870: "Our city has acquired the reputation abroad of being a 'hard town,' and expressions of like import are not infrequent even at home." But he insisted that this reputation was both undeserved and undesirable; especially if Fort Scott was compared with towns along the Union Pacific and Kansas Pacific railroads: "Our town is undoubtedly quite bad enough, and there is abundant room for moral improvement, but that we are such a cess pool of iniquity as is often represented is not at all true."

In the spring of 1870 the Methodist women took up the challenge about entertainment. They acted in the matter by dividing themselves into four bands, each of which took turns in providing a week's amusement for young people. The record of activities is lacking, and there is reason for the assumption, that, like most such enterprises, the plan withered for lack of continued support.

In May, after showing in Kansas City, Leavenworth, Topeka, and elsewhere, and undergoing major reorganization, the National Theatre returned: "Fort Scott has an almost paternal interest in the 'Nationals,' and will give them a warm welcome home." This was a perspective quite different from the pretentious advertisement of January and much more realistic. The only remaining member of the former cast to register upon the Monitor editor was Miss Stowe, whose finished performances were in sharp contrast with her "stammering beginnings" of the previous January. Misses Preston and Blande were no longer with the company, but instead, the leading lady was Nellie Boyd, a newcomer who did not make a marked impression upon the theatrical editor. He did not realize that Nellie Boyd was soon to rise to an enviable stardom, heading

24. Ibid., April 8, 1870.
25. Ibid., April 27, 1870.
a company of her own, one of the leading traveling troupes to entertain Midwestern audiences for more than a decade. After a few performances, the ubiquitous General Darr helping out on occasion, the National Theatre moved on. 26 About a month later the William A. Rouse Dramatic combination made history of a sort, when on June 1, for the first time in Fort Scott, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” was presented. 27

On June 15, the Daily Monitor chronicled the “closing of the Opera House.” —“The exhibitions have not been of a very exalted moral tone, and since the novelty of the affair wore off, it has not been so well patronized, and has lately entirely lost favor with our citizens. Its sudden demise provokes no mourning.” Four days later the editor lamented: “Mr. and Mrs. Couldock will play in Leavenworth this week. We hope they will come to Fort Scott. A meritorious dramatic entertainment in this city would be really refreshing.”

IV. The Olympic Theatre, 1870-1871

Preparations for the winter amusement season were announced in August, 1870. General Darr had returned after a prolonged absence looking like he had been “swelling the receipts.” As related to the theatre, the Monitor, August 24, announced that “Fort Scott’s genial favorite, Gen. Darr,” would manage “a full theatrical company,” which would open the season at McDonald’s Hall about September 1: “The General is not slow in the histrionic line, himself. . . .” The enterprise assumed the name “Olympic Theatre.” McDonald Hall underwent another remodeling; further ventilation, a new stage door, changes in the main entrance, and redecoration. Also, “With regard to the theatrical enterprise, no effort will be spared to furnish a company equal to any in the West, and inducements will be held out to the most prominent stars to favor us with their delineations.” The costs of the preparations were being financed by the owner of the hall and General Darr: “A city without public amusements is most forlorn, and only by aiding the proprietors of the enterprise can we hope to retain it.” 28 This description indicated clearly the nature of the institution contemplated; a resident company (often called a stock company) which could function as a “full company” staging plays in its own right, or provide the support for traveling stars. This was the sort of thing that Leavenworth had attempted during the early 1860’s, but had aban-

26. Ibid., April 27, 28, May 5, 7, 1870.
27. Ibid., June 1, 1870.
28. Ibid., August 30, 31, 1870.
doned after 1867. The experiences of the coming season would determine whether or not Fort Scott could succeed, or await the circumstances that might afford the city entertainment by the newer type of traveling theatre.

The first contingent of players arrived August 30: Annie Jamison, leading lady, Annie Ward, “soubrette, dauseuse, and cantatrice,” Thompson and Russell, formerly of the Nationals, and some others. O. H. Barr joined the group on September 3, and from time to time additional players were announced. Apparently, performances began as scheduled, but the names of the plays were not featured, and only fair houses were reported. The troupe was taken to Nevada, Mo., about mid-September for three days. Although optimistic notices appeared in the Monitor about the support given the theatre during September, reality caught up with the reporter and, October 4, the public announcement was made that it would be closed temporarily. 29

Before the Olympic Theatre reopened something new had occurred in the offices of the Monitor, announced September 29, 1870: “Capt. E. F. Ware, of Cherokee County, takes charge temporarily of our local columns.” Prior to this time Ware had divided his year, summers and winters, between his farm and the Fort Scott harness business. Upon coming to town for the winter on this occasion, he undertook editorial work. Just how long his temporary tenure lasted is not clear, but probably until the end of the year, when the owner of the Monitor, George A. Crawford, obtained the services of D. W. Wilder to take over the managing editorship, January 1, 1871. During his short term as locals editor, Ware was supposedly responsible for what appeared on the city page. In due course, however, some questions on this score do arise.

A “new edition” of the Olympic Theatre was announced in the Daily Monitor, October 19, to open October 24, “a new company and change of scenery” which would entertain “with first class dramatic art.” Day by day the advertising campaign unfolded: “General Darr is a man of energy, and we have no doubt that his efforts will be crowned with success.” The “news story” of October 23 opened with the hackneyed but realistic statement of fact, applicable probably to most people concerned: “The Winter season now approaching demands a succession of amusement festivities to relieve the dreary monotony pervading an inland town. . . .”

In this particular instance the public was assured that “we know of

29. Ibid., September 8, 4, 6-8, 10, 11, 15-18, October 4, 1870.
no more formidable indication that ‘fun will reign supreme’ than the announcement of the reopening of the Olympic Theatre and Darr’s Fort Scott Varieties,” both under General Darr’s management: “It would be superfluous to state that the company selected for the ensuing season at the ‘Olympic Hall’ will rarely find its equal in any first class Opera House outside New York.”

The “Varieties” and the “Theatre” were separate investments; “the ‘Varieties’ will be conducted on first class principles” in the place “lately occupied by Gunn’s Domino” and will be a favorite resort for the general convenience of those who attend light amusements. Music, singing and dancing will comprise the bill of fare at the latter place;

A lunch counter on the Eastern plan will be provided and meals can be secured at all hours with little cost.

General Darr promises some great novelties in both of these public resorts, and nothing will be tolerated in either that can offend the most fastidious.

The energy and enterprise of the Proprietor deserves a most suitable acknowledgment in the way of greenbacks.

The announcement had significance to the competitive scene—outwardly, at least Darr had won out over Gunn’s Domino. Another question is not clear, however, because the article had appeared in the locals column in the form of a locals editorial; who was responsible, the business manager or the locals editor? Was it a local or an advertisement?

The Olympic Theatre did not open on schedule, October 24, “owing to extensive preliminary arrangements,” but supposedly the varieties did: “The General is ‘immense’ on ‘popular amusement.’” But in another editorial type of advertisement, printed October 26, the statement was made that “General Darr proposes to open an institution commonly termed as ‘Varieties,’ where African Minstrels, Fun and Jollity predominate.” The location was the former Gunn Domino premises, “nearly opposite the Wilder House, and will begin its season in a few days . . . it caters only to enjoyment without vulgarity. If the performances will be as represented, and the promises held out fulfilled, there is every reason for congratulations. . . .” This carried the advertisement tag “Oct 26 dlt.”

On October 27 the Monitor reported that “Gen’l Joseph Darr visited our office yesterday, in company with Mr. [M. V.] Lingam . . . the Manager of the Olympic Theatre. . . . If the theatre is conducted as promised by the General and Mr. Lingam, it

30. Ibid., October 25, 26, 1870.
will be a favorite resort for our citizens.” Again a definite date, October 31, a Monday, was set for the opening of both the theatre and the varieties, and the editorialized advertisement closed: “with reference to both entertainments, we repeat the saying, ‘you pays your money, and you takes your choice.’” The Sunday Monitor, October 30, recorded that: “Darr’s Varieties were in full blast up to a late hour last night.” An item of the same Sunday urged that ladies should patronize the Olympic Theatre performances, and Tuesday morning’s paper reported that many had been in attendance. Although extravagant boasts were made about the quality of the players, the best troupe that had ever been in the city, those named were Lingham, the new manager, and some members of the former cast, George Beach, D. K. Russell, and Annie Ward. No leading lady was listed. 31

If there is any relevance to the question of authorship of what appeared in the locals columns of the Monitor during these weeks, who wrote this (carrying the tag “Nov 4 dl” for Friday morning’s Monitor, November 4), and why?—

The proprietor of the “Olympic Theatre” is at a loss to know in what fitting terms to express his most intense gratification at the very liberal and enormous patronage extended to his managerial enterprise by the overflowing houses of this week, which enables him to add to the debit side of his Ledger over $500. A farewell performance will be given for the benefit of Gen. Darr on this Friday evening. When, if the attendance is as liberal as heretofore experienced, he will probably leave the city in debt and enabled to effect his long cherished desire of selling another corner lot for the benefit of this “one horse village.”

The following day two announcements were made. First, that the proceeds of the theatre for Wednesday night, November 9, would go to the Catholic church building fund under the direction of General Blair and Dr. Hays. The second announcement was that there would be four more performances, ending Wednesday, when the troupe would go on tour of neighboring cities: Paola, Lawrence, Topeka, Sedalia, etc. Instead of closing Wednesday, however, performances continued through the week.

On November 11 the announcement was made that Annie Tiffany had been secured for an engagement of six days, November 14-19; a “leading lady” who would be supported by the resident members of the Olympic Theatre. Thus the star system was introduced in Fort Scott. Plays in which Miss Tiffany specialized were being rehearsed over the week-end—“The Hidden Hand,” “The Little

31. Ibid., October 27, 28, 30, November 1, 4, 1870. Lingham was the spelling of the manager’s name used later.

It was played with much ability—too much in fact. There is no use in putting a whole audience in tears; an actor ought to play kind of easy when he sees the eyes of the audience getting humid; at least when he sees a prominent citizen stepping down for his handkerchief with his eyes shut, he ought to "weaken" on the pathos; still it is impossible to find fault, for the play was splendid.

In "Othello," Lingham played Othello, D. K. Russell was Iago, and Miss Tiffany did Desdemona to Edwin Tiffany's Cassio. The Monitor made no comment on the play itself or on Shakespeare: "The Hall was so crowded last night that all of the audience could not be seated. The play last night was very fine . . . [and] was fully appreciated." The surprise of this performance apparently was the acting of D. K. Russell, the troupe's funny man. The impression persisted, because at a later time the theatre critic reverted to the occasion by remarking that: "He surprised us all by his delineation of Iago a week ago." 32

The year 1870 was the occasion of the Franco-Prussian war, the fall of the Second Empire, and the attempt to establish a French Republic. Frenchmen and sympathizers had met in the Monitor reading room and the office of the town company in October to pass resolutions and raise money; "As France loaned us a Lafayette when we were trying to start a republic, we ought to return the favor now." The French feeling at the theatre was strong enough that late in November, the report was made that the orchestra "plays the 'Marsaillaise' every evening, and it is always received with uproarious applause. It is the song of a Republic and belongs as much to us as anybody, and the Americans have adopted it." 33

A new leading lady, Alice Gray, was engaged to open in the play for Monday, November 28—Wilkie Collins' "Man and Wife," as dramatized by W. W. Austin. The house was reported crowded: "The ladies turned out en masse." The same play was repeated Tuesday and Wednesday. On Tuesday morning the Monitor admonished: "This play is fearfully tragic, and all those who come ought to bring two or three extra handkerchiefs." But the theatre critic had some ideas of his own: "The death of Delmaine strikes

32. Ibid., November 11-14, 19, 20, 22-24, 25, December 2, 1870.
33. Ibid., October 29, November 1, 24, 1870.
us as not being poetically just.” The suggestion was offered that he should be disposed of suddenly.

The next production was “Ingomar,” originally a German play. Whether or not the orchestra played the “Marseillaise” was not recorded. The theatre critic was enthusiastic: “Last night Fort Scott had the best theatrical entertainment that it has ever had.” He insisted that people who were familiar with the play had never seen it better done in the East: “We do not propose to praise theatrical efforts unless they are meritorious, but will say that the performance last night was coon.” On Friday night “The Hunchback,” and on Saturday night “The Marble Heart” were the offerings as benefits for Miss Gray and Lingham, respectively, and the “season” ended. In retrospect the theatre critic “bid farewell to the talented Miss Gray with the hope that she will not confine her dramatic reputation to the performance of such stupid disagreeable pieces as ‘Man and Wife.’” His only adverse criticism was that Miss Gray was “too lachrymose,” and Miss Tiffany “too fearfully gushing for Southern Kansas.”

General Darr took his Olympic Theatre on a three-week tour of the cities at the opposite end of the Gulf railroad. As the Leavenworth performances are most fully documented they may be used as a mirror of General Darr in that setting; first a two-night engagement, December 6, 7, and later a full week’s run December 12-17. All the advertising was in the name of the star, Annie Tiffany—“The Tiffany Troupe.” The press notices were reprinted from Eastern newspapers; for example from Memphis, and were in praise of Annie Tiffany, without a reference to General Darr and “The Olympic Theatre” of Fort Scott. Scarcely was General Darr’s name to be found in connection with the Leavenworth engagements, and then only casually as the manager—it was Tiffany’s show, for publicity purposes the “property” of the star. That was pretty much the way the star system worked. Upon leaving Topeka the Commonwealth, December 23, indicated the troupe’s itinerary: Lawrence, Fort Scott, Sedalia, St. Joseph, and other Missouri towns, and then back to Topeka for the session of the state legislature. In neither place was the name of the Olympic Theatre used, and neither was Fort Scott credited with being the base of General Darr’s company.

34. Ibid., November 26, 29, 30, December 2-4, 1870.
35. Leavenworth Daily Commercial, December 1-4, 6-8, 10, 13-17, 1870.

In Topeka the Darr troupe played five days, December 19-23 (Monday through Friday). Miss Tiffany dominated the publicity but General Darr’s name was used in a secondary role—“genial whole soiled gentleman.”—Topeka Daily Commonwealth, December 16, 17, 20-23, 1870.
On home ground, things were a little different. The Olympic Theatre returned to Fort Scott for a short engagement, beginning Saturday, December 24, Christmas Eve: “The company, as at present organized, is the best that has ever played in the city. . . .” The stars were “The dashing and versatile Miss Tiffany, the refined and lady-like Miss Boyd, the lively and graceful Miss Ward, and the masterly and accomplished Mr. Lingham.” The people were admonished to show their appreciation of General Darr. The opening play for December 24 was “Delicate Ground, or the French Republic.” In the personals appeared the following: “Gen. Darr, that man who knows, and is known by everybody, called on us yesterday. We are glad to learn from the General’s own lips that he has ‘accumulated great wealth’ from the north, since he showed his smiling face at our sanctum; and that he has come home for the benefit of Fort Scott.”

Miss Tiffany’s last night with the Olympic Theatre was December 30, when the hall was reported crowded—“our citizens turned out to ‘swell the receipts.’” On January 7, 1871, the Olympic Theatre closed in Fort Scott, a benefit for Mr. Lingham: “The management had reason, for one night at least, of the holiday season, to be grateful to the Fort Scott public.” But adverse comment was added: “His support was not altogether of a character that would call forth unqualified praise; the prompting was altogether too plentiful, and the halting and stammering of a portion of the characters absolutely painful in some of the scenes.” These factors, no doubt, helped to explain the final statement: “We regret that financially our energetic and jovial friend, Darr, has not been successful during his present stay among us. . . .”

But the cup of woe for Joseph Darr, Jr., was not yet full. The Wilder House Hotel and the Wilder House Saloon were sold, the dissolution of partnership notice being dated January 3, 1871. Besides Darr’s varieties, there was one other house of entertainment that had been mentioned occasionally, but March 7, 1871, the Monitor commented bluntly its pleasure that the variety was closed, the Alhambra had died a few weeks earlier. Now there was no place of “amusement” in Fort Scott. Of course he was using the word “amusement” in a special sense. The editor stated frankly that he had opposed such “dens” and had refused them advertising in the Monitor. This was a new voice speaking in behalf of the paper—D. W. Wilder had taken the editorship, January 1, 1871.

37. Ibid., December 3, 8, 20, 25, 31, 1870, January 1, 4, March 7, 1871.
Although George A. Crawford was owner of the *Monitor*, he was not a newspaper man, and he had too many other interests to run the paper himself. Ware was filling in temporarily in a secondary position. The record is not clear as to who was responsible for the policy details of the paper, or how far Ware was accountable for what appeared on the locals page. In any case, the record was unsatisfactory, and Wilder’s explicit overhauling of the course of the *Monitor* sets off that situation in sharp relief. Also, Wilder’s assertion about the exclusion of certain types of advertising is important to the historian, because it is a candid reminder that, as a matter of voluntary censorship, he was excluding from the newspaper the record of an unsavory segment of the town’s social history.

Not only had General Darr been closed out at Fort Scott, but elsewhere his credit had run out. The Olympic Theatre was reported as playing in Humboldt. It was advertised to open in Wyandotte, Friday, February 3, and in Leavenworth, Monday, February 6, but did not appear at Leavenworth. The *Times* reported: “A despatch from Wyandotte informs us that they are ‘up in a balloon.’ We hope, if the balloon passes over this city, the agent will drop the small sum of fifteen dollars due this office for printing.” But a week earlier a report was in circulation that Darr had already left the theatrical business, and was operating the Baldwin House at Thayer, the terminus of the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston Railroad.38 The Lawrence *Tribune*, February 11, elaborated upon General Darr’s career, opening its editorial with a comment that the Fort Scott papers were no longer praising him “to the sky.”—

Since his retirement, from one place and another, and in one way and another, we have heard a great deal of Gen. Darr, and what we have heard, instead of altering to his advantage the poor opinion we had of him, has, on the other hand, confirmed this opinion and made it poorer still. Just before breaking up, Darr contracted debts in several newspaper offices, which now remain unpaid. We heard, some time ago, that he was in debt to every one of the actors he had employed. . . . [Russell confirmed this.] Our own transactions with the gentleman were of such a nature as to cause us to lose all respect for him.

We are not surprised that Darr has left the dramatic business, or rather that the business left him. . . . He had the best troupe that ever came to town. They are now scattered all over the country. . . .

One might say that doing of “facetious Joseph” became legendary in Kansas. A year later the Leavenworth *Times*, February 1, re-

printed "for the edification of the General's numerous friends" a letter he wrote to one of his creditors in Ottawa:

My Dear Hayes:—I have several times instructed my clerk (as I am away very often) to remit the amount of your bill, but since it has been so shamefully neglected, I begin to think of several reasons why it should

NOT BE PAID AT ALL.

First. The property was shipped by you solely for my accommodation.

Second. You made no profit on the articles, but cleverly run yourself in debt to others for them on my account.

Third. You are now properly mad because of the neglect of repayment; but you are as mad as you ever can be, and you

CAN'T BE ANY MADDER.

Fourth. It seems to be an unfortunate characteristic of mine to tax the patience of my friends in many matters far beyond endurance. I know of a tailor who has consumed dollars of postage stamps in earnestly calling my attention to an unpaid account; a dry goods merchant who weekly sheds bottles of ink mixed with tears in refreshing my recollection about an OPERA CLOAK

and sundry and divers articles of female apparel, for which he has not to this day been reimbursed; and several mournful hotel keepers who long to obtain a sight of my fractional currency or legal tender for meals furnished and lodging given to my late disbanded THEATRICAL CORPS

and multitudinous others who weep over my pecuniary frailties.

If you ever read Dickens' "Bleak House," you will no doubt remember my prototype "Horace Skimpole," who luxurated owing others, and to whom impossibility to pay his debts was a joy forever.

Fifth. If I were now to pay you, my name would be obliterated from your books. Your clerk in glancing over the alphabetical index of his ledger would fail to take any INTEREST IN MY NAME

among the D's, including the D. B.'s and the D. H.'s, and I myself should be wiped away, perhaps, forever from your recollection, unless at some future time my portly form should loom up, and your lips would utter the euphonious exclamation, "There goes the DARNED RASCAL!

Sixth. Our poorly paid Congressional legislators have very wisely placed it in the power of every so-disposed scoundrel to entrench himself behind the complacent bankrupt law, where he can smile upon his soft or otherwise hearted creditors and be returned by a legal tribunal as "non comatibus in swampo," in which order of society I long to enroll myself a member of high standing.

Seventh. You may POSSIBLY NEED THE MONEY.

and this would, in the nature of things, add to my placidity of temper while it would correspondingly exasperate yours.

Eighth. Your politeness in all this matter, deserves a decided rebuke, and therefore I take great pleasure in enclosing the amount, and hope to drink a bottle of fine Rhine wine with you on the result.
V. Theatre, Railroads, and Kansas City Excursions

About the same time, 1870-1872, the ambitions of Kansas City, Mo., were tested out in new directions, based upon her rapidly developing rail net radiating to all points of the compass. Some of her leaders were thinking of their town as more than a city. They envisioned a metropolitan area, with the city as a focus. In this perspective Kansas City was reaching out to tie into her metropolitan area as much territory as her railroad system made possible. Opera House excursions were organized over all roads leading to Kansas City. Special package rates were offered, covering the round-trip ticket, omnibus fare between the railway station and the Coates Opera House, supper, and tickets to the show. In November, 1870, the Fort Scott tickets cost $2.50 to see Alice Gray in the “Long Strike” by Dion Boucicault. The following winter, 1871-1872, four excursions occurred: to hear Janauschek in “Mary Stuart” for $3.00; Edwin Forrest in “Jack Cade” for $3.00; Lucile Western in “Oliver Twist”; and the “irresistable Lotta” as Capt. Charlotte and Lady Lorrogan, for $2.25 each. Train schedules varied, but for example: on one occasion the train left Fort Scott at 10:46 A.M., arriving in Kansas City at 4:00 P.M., and returning left Kansas City at 12:00 midnight, arriving in Fort Scott at 6:25 A.M. Supposedly, Fort Scott contributed as many as 200 excursionists on a trip.

VI. The Railway Net and Traveling Theatre

Of course Fort Scott wanted entertainment closer home, something less strenuous and costly, and besides the city was ambitious. In spite of the great drought of 1873 and 1874 and the world-wide panic and depression which, beginning in the fall of 1873, demoralized business for several years, the Davidson Opera House was launched during the winter of 1873-1874, J. G. Haskell, architect. It was finished and formally opened January 1, 1875. In order to meet the competition, the old McDonald Hall, that had served for so long, was again rejuvenated, law offices occupying the upper floor. These were brave attempts but the times had not been right for big shows to patronize Fort Scott.

39. Something about the Kansas City story is told in James C. Malin, Grassland Historical Studies: Natural Resources Utilization in a Background of Science and Technology, Volume One, Geology and Geography (Lawrence, 1950). See especially chapters 20-22 and appendix.


41. Ibid., November 16, 1873, November 21, December 29, 1874, January 1, 3, 6, 1875.
In the meantime a few traveling companies showed in Fort Scott, the year 1871-1872, the best being Louise Sylvester. In 1872-1873 the Renfrow Troupe disbanded in Fort Scott, although the Lord Dramatic Company played to good houses for several nights, and again the following winter.42 The Simons Comedy Troupe began periodic visits to Fort Scott during the winter of 1873-1874. This company was built around a man-and-wife team.43 By the mid 1870's, the railway net had matured sufficiently in southern Kansas that the day of the small traveling theatre company had fully arrived, there as elsewhere.

42. Ibid., December 8, 1871, November 22, 24, 26-28, 30, December 8, 1872, November 9, 11, 15, 1873.
43. Ibid., December 17, 21, 23, 27, 28, 1873; March 3, 4, 1874; June 6, 11, 12, September 7, 8, 1875; January 19, 20, 1876.