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← EAU CLAIRE OPERA HOUSE "THE GRAND"

In 1883 the Eau Claire Opera House was incorporated with a capitol stock of \$45,000 and the following officers: President and Treasurer, D.R.Moon, Sr.; Secretary, George B. Shaw; Manager J.E. Cass.

The Eau Claire Opera House, later known as "The Grand", was erected the same year at a cost of \$65,000, the structure being of brick and it had a seating capacity of 1000. The officers of the company built wisely and well and the Opera House was a credit to their foresight, judgement and ability. It was large and commodious, with main floor, balcony and gallery or "Nigger Heaven", and it's heavy chandelier, red velvet hangings and gilt ornamentation made it, we liked to think, a smaller Metropolitan Opera House. The boxes at right and left of the stage were occupied by patrons who could appreciate the luxury and distinction they afforded. The stage was large and deep and well equipped with good technical accommodations so that the management was consequently able to obtain many attractions in the years following which would have otherwise gone directly from Chicago to the Twin Cities, thus giving us in Eau Claire opportunity to see and hear the best entertainment before the public of the day. And too it was a strong incentive for home talent to prepare for appearances on it's stage.

To list all the attractions which appeared at the Grand during it's history, if possible at all, would require endless research, so that the list which follows is largely from memory, supplemented here and there with partial lists published in the daily press.

Many incidents come to mind and the temptaion to digress from the strictly musical is perhaps pardonable. A number of campaign orators were heard there and presented the virtues and qualifications of their various candidates, attracting much larger crowds than would be possible in these days of radio and television. I remember an amusing incident which occurred there during the Benjamin Harrison for President campaign. At the conclusion of a long and eloquent speech the speaker paused dramatically and put the following question to his audience: "And now who will have your vote in November?!" One lone, high-pitched voice came from the Nigger Heaven as a small boy promptly responded, "Ben-ja-min!" Who can doubt that this enthusiastic response was contagious and added votes to the Harrison column.

In the 'Nineties I recall going to hear F. Hopkinson Smith, an American artist, author and engineer, on a bitterly cold December night, and the same month we heard Robert J. Burdette, known as the "Hawkeye Man" an American humorist and editor of the daily Hawkeye in Burlington, Iowa.

In 1898 General John G. Gordon spoke. He was an ex-Senator of Georgia Governor of that state and a Confederate general who fought in important battles of the Civil War and was the idol of his native state. Also in that year the Reverend T. DeWitt Talmadge, a melodramatic Presbyterian preacher from New York who had a large following, lectured.

The musical attractions presented at the Grand as time went on were varied and for the most part of a high order, with outstanding and internationally known vocalists and instrumentalists. Good plays on tour were presented to large audiences and they too contributed to an appreciation and maintenance of high standards.

The home talent items, which is in incomplete list, prove the real interest in and the hold music had on the people in the community generally and the pride in all the local artistic efforts, capacity houses being the rule. In this connection honorable mention must be given first to the pioneer Folly Company of ancient vintage which made it's