

Faded Shadows

When crossing a Milwaukee street meant dealing with packs of roaming wild dogs, ever-present heaps of horse manure, giant mudholes filled with sewer water and thousands of dead fish it's no wonder the citizens of early Milwaukee looked for a few hours of entertainment when the opportunity arose.

Story by Larry Widen • Photography from the author's collection



Shubert Theater (Academy of Music). Milwaukee, Wis.

A mere mention of the word "gaslight" evokes a romanticized image of a time when life was slower and people spent time in parlors and sitting rooms illuminated by soft, golden light. From 1852, when Milwaukee's first gas streetlight was installed, until 1880, when electric lights were placed in the Newhall House hotel on the northwest corner of Michigan and Broadway, city streets, public buildings, and private residences were lit by natural gas. During the gaslight era, which lasted approximately 35 years, daily life for Milwaukee's residents was often more difficult than nostalgic reminiscing would indicate.

Packs of wild dogs ran rampant through the streets of downtown, foraging for food at will. Pedestrians, particularly ladies whose skirts brushed the ground, routinely dodged the ever-present heaps of horse manure near the sidewalks. Giant mudholes on major thoroughfares were often filled with sewer water and thousands of dead fish, causing unsavory, if not unsanitary conditions.

With daily challenges such as these, it's no wonder the citizens of early Milwaukee looked for

a few hours of entertainment when the opportunity arose. In 1842 the city's population numbered only 2,100; still, an enterprising showman named John Hustis sensed a need for a the-

ater in which popular dramas of the day could be performed. Hustis' theater, located at N. 3rd Street and Juneau Avenue, was a rustic frame building with hard wooden benches and tallow

candle illumination. On a September evening, a handful of patrons braved a treacherous, vile-smelling quagmire on 3rd Street to assemble at Hustis' hall for a performance of "The Merchant of Venice," as performed by a troupe from Chicago. The theater offered two seasons of drama before it burned to the ground. John Hustis retired to build a home in nearby Hustisford, the town he founded.

In Hustis' absence, plays were performed at the Milwaukee Saloon, a hall on Broadway near Wisconsin Avenue. In 1846, Chicago theater man John B. Rice presented drama at Military Hall on E. Wells Street. Although Military Hall was less than adequate, it sufficed for two years until such time as Rice was able to open his new theater on Broadway. Also in operation at this time were Gardener's Hall at Water and Wisconsin, John Ryan's Gaiety Theater on Broadway, and the Albany Hall on E. Michigan Street, all of which offered varying degrees of musical and dramatic entertainment.

That most of these theaters burned down in the early 1850s coincides with the introduction of gaslight illumination for public streets and buildings. Although the new, natural gas illumination was superior to tallow candles or lanterns, gas lighting was not without its problems. Explosions and other fiery mishaps were commonplace in these theaters. One of them, Young's Hall, actually burned down twice. Proprietor William Young eventually constructed his third theater out of brick in 1860 at the corner of Milwaukee and Michigan streets. In 1865, the 1,400-seat hall was renamed the Academy of Music and would survive for another 60 years. When John Rice's Broadway Street theater burned, he returned to Chicago where he won the election for mayor. Later Rice was elected to Congress.

With a permanent theater company yet to establish itself in town, amusement hall owners relied on traveling companies to perform on their stages. In those days, itinerant actors considered themselves lucky to have their room and board covered. More often than not, the meager box office receipts meant the actors were stranded in town until enough money was collected to send them on their way. "Bully" Foster, a popular

opened his own theater on the top floor of the old City Hall building, which was located on the site of the present City Hall. Kurz and his family wrote music, painted scenery, built sets, and even acted as their own press agents. Because they were the first to use a newspaper ad to promote their shows, Milwaukee's first theater advertising was in German.

Tickets to shows such as "Two Gentlemen and One Servant" and "The Dead Nephew" were 50 cents and 25 cents. As money was not accepted at the theater itself, tickets for shows were available only in advance at Leuddemann's restaurant or Ott's bookstore. With the financial backing of prominent businessmen, Joseph Kurz emerged as the founding father of Milwaukee's German theater movement, which would flourish until it was quashed by the anti-German sentiment of World War I. The Kurz family's crowning achievement was the construction of the 1,000-seat Stadt Theater in 1868, an opulent stage located at 3rd and Kilbourn that was devoted exclusively to the German theater.

When the Newhall House installed electric lighting in April, 1880, public reaction to the new, safer illumination spelled the beginning of the end for gas. Ironically, the fabulous hotel also burned to the ground three years later in one of the greatest disasters in the city's history. World famous midget performer Tom Thumb, a guest in the hotel at the time, was rescued; 75 other people were not as fortunate.



The Academy of Music, built in 1860, was originally named Young's Hall. In 1865, the theater was renamed the Academy of Music. Other names included the Imperial, Lyceum, and the Schubert, the name it bore upon closing in 1923. As the Academy of Music, the theater had the distinction of being the first in Milwaukee to install electric lighting (1882), and the first theater to show a motion picture (1896). Courtesy of Milwaukee Movie Palaces, published by the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

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actor/promoter of the time, actually pawned his pocket watch to settle his debts before leaving. Foster thought Milwaukee a fine theater town and wanted to be able to return at a later date.

In Milwaukee's theater infancy, the performances were all English-speaking productions. However by 1852, the city population was more than 20,000 people. With nearly one half being of German descent, there was a market for a theater that offered productions in that language. Musician Joseph Kurz and his family presented musical comedy shows in an informal setting at Mozart Hall, at 8th and Wells. The following year, Kurz

The Academy of Music was the city's first theater to install electric lighting in 1882. A contemporary newspaper account stated that the lights on the Schlitz Park theater's pagoda could be seen 14 miles away.

Although it would be a while before electricity completely dominated the landscape, each year saw more streets, more public buildings, and more residences accept the conversion. From an entertainment standpoint, theaters built after 1890 were beacons in the Milwaukee night, brightly lit and ready to accept the advent of motion pictures when they were unveiled at the Academy of Music in July, 1896. 📖