Bennington Opera House: Early 20th Century Entertainment in Rural Vermont

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Advent of "Moving Pictures"

The film industry took off at the turn of the century. Like many local theaters, the opera house had to adapt to keep up with demand. In May of 1915, the opera house was equipped with a projector booth in the upper gallery and a screen. Opening day was May 31, 1915 (see right advertisement from the *Bennington Evening Banner*).

"Americans traditionally prided themselves on having the biggest and best of everything. Show business was no exception. The people who lived in small towns wanted bigger and better shows just as the city dwellers did."
–Robert C. Toll, film historian

Bennington Opera House
MOVING PICTURE OPENING
Monday, May 31
Special Matinee at 1:30   Regular Matinee at 3
"THE BLACK BOX"

Popular Films

Mary Pickford was America's first movie darling. The opera house showed her silent film *Daddy Long Legs* in December of 1919.

With the possibility of moving pictures, Americans across the country could see the world for the first time. Lyman Howe's short films transported Vermonters to Yosemite and beyond.

Controversial Topics

Shown in 1919, *Open Your Eyes* was a film warning of the dangers of STD's prepared by the U.S. Public Health Service.

The Very Idea, a eugenics-themed comedy, had a performance in 1918 to much acclaim.

WWI (1914–1918)

During WWI, the opera house provided entertainment for the Bennington area, and also, it served on several occasions as a meeting hall for the community's war efforts.

Above, Bernard Shaw's romantic-comedy was a popular war-time play. Notice how the play is advertised as "Not a Moving Picture."

"It is well understood that an Opera House here cannot be a paying investment. It is built for public pleasure…Bennington owes Mr. H.W. Putnam a debt of gratitude…for giving to a country town a metropolitan Opera House."

–"A.P.V.," days after the opening of the opera house, in the *Bennington Banner*, Dec. 16, 1892

Bennington Opera House (1892–1959)

The opera house was built by Henry Putnam, a wealthy businessman, realtor, and inventor, in 1892. Arguably the largest in Vermont when built, the theater was equipped with the very latest in theater technology. The opening performance was Shakespeare's *MacBeth*. For the next sixty-seven years, until it burned down on February 10, 1959, the opera house hosted musicals, bands, plays, operas, vaudeville performers, movies, and other miscellaneous performances.

Opera House Block, c. 1917.
Courtesy of the Bennington Museum.

"The opera house proper is built of brick, is 108 feet long, 64 feet wide…The parquet and dress circle have a capacity of 600. Over the dress circle is the balcony circle. In the rear of this is the gallery. The two have seating capacity of 400…From the center hangs a large electric light chandelier. There will be 200 electric lights in the auditorium, of which 56 will be foot-lights. The total cost of the house when completed and furnished will be about $55,000…"

– from "Bennington's New Opera House," *Bennington Banner*, Nov. 11, 1892.

Interior of the Opera House, c. 1900.
Courtesy of the Bennington Museum.

Developments in Newspaper Advertising

Indicative of both the advancements in newspaper technology and the public's ever-shortening attention span, opera house advertisements improved greatly in its first three decades.

March 10, 1893 ad in the *Bennington Banner*

Sept. 9, 1904 ad in the *Bennington Evening Banner*

March 22, 1918 ad in the *Bennington Evening Banner*

Opera

The Bennington Opera House indeed had opera performances, though not as many as its name would indicate. Notable performances and famous singers graced its stage.

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20
Mildred Holland
As Catherine The Great of Russia
The Triumph Of An Empress

Mildred Holland, one of the most famous opera singers at the turn of the century, came to Bennington in 1904.

Plays, Musicals & Musicians

The opera house had some of the best Broadway plays and musicians come to perform. Many big performances were favorites at the theater, and they came back year after year for repeat shows.

Left to right: Jason O'Neill's Monte Cristo came to the opera house for the first time in 1894; a picture of the performers in the rural play *Old Homestead* from 1921; and, an ad from 1921 for John Phillip Sousa's marching band.

Local Memories of the Opera House Experience

"In 1902, the Bennington Opera House really got under way, with a play direct from Broadway each week during the winter seasons. You could rush the gallery for 25 cents or sit in the front rows the balcony or downstairs for $1.50, the top price…

I remember 'Red Feather,' billed as a 'romantic comic opera,' with a cast of 75 people and a costume and scenery expenditure of $72,000. The Opera House had the only stage in the east where this spectacle could be produced. A beautiful lake with trees and flowers surrounding it covered the stage. The hero of the story paddled a canoe while the heroine made eyes at him from behind a parasol."

–Walter C. Wood, Bennington citizen

Conclusions

The Bennington Opera House in the years from its inception to the early 1920's demonstrates Vermonters', and at large, Americans', growing appetite for entertainment and the rapid changes that the entertainment industry underwent at a pivotal time in the development of mass media. While often financially strapped, it hosted a range of notable theatrical performances, operas, musicians, famous personages, and by the late-1910's increasingly showed movies. *The Bennington Banner*, *Bennington Semi-Weekly*, and *Bennington Evening Banner*, the local newspapers of the time, give an invaluable glimpse into the diverse offerings of the opera house in the early 20th century, and thus, how Vermonters of the period were entertained.