Bloomington’s First “Real Theater”: The Harris Grand

By Penelope Mathiesen

In the early years of the twentieth century, a new form of entertainment, the silent film, prompted the appearance of movie houses in Bloomington. They showed short films, and some also presented vaudeville acts and plays. Movie houses, or nickelodeons (the admission price was initially a nickel), mushroomed here in 1907–13. They included the Vaudette in the former Mendelssohn Hall on the south side of the square, the Rex and Star theaters opposite each other on South College Avenue north of Fourth Street, the Theatorium on the “Levee” at Fifth and Morton streets, the Nikalo on the east side of Walnut Street just north of the later Princess, and the Crescent on the west side of College a half-block north of Sixth Street. An open-air theater occupied the southeast corner of College and Seventh, and a movie house operated in the basement of the old Monroe County Bank at Walnut and Fifth. All were gone by late 1913.1

The early twentieth century also saw the arrival of entertainment entrepreneur Robert H. Harris in Bloomington. He was born about 1876,2 grew up “as a poor boy in Atlanta, Ga.,” and made his way to London in his teens, where he appeared in theaters as an American actor. After returning to the United States, he “continued to appear in various dramatic productions, finally organizing the Harris-Parkinson Stock company which exhibited under a tent in every state in the union” in the 1895–1906 period.3

One of Harris’s shows, Daniel Boone on the Trail, was presented at the Bloomington Opera House (also known as the Armory) at Seventh and Morton.4 In 1901, he hired James P. Leffler, a Bloomington resident who had been working as a grocery clerk,5 to become the manager of Harris’s repertory company. He also met and fell in love with Leffler’s sister, Ida Jewell, and they were married on 10 April 1901 in Brazil, Clay County, Indiana.6 He was so impressed with Bloomington that he moved his headquarters here from Atlanta.7

In June 1906, a local newspaper reported that Harris’s theatrical company had completed the most successful year in its history. “Business has been remarkably good, and judging from press reports the company is one of the highest class … now on the road.”8 But Harris had another undertaking in mind. On 17 July, a news item announced that he was planning “to construct a $25,000 opera house.”9 On 27 July, it was reported that he was already selling tickets for the opening, and sales were “now over $3,000.”10

Postcard dated 1 June 1910, showing the Harris Grand shortly after its completion. From the collection of the Monroe County History Center.
The Harris Grand (Cont. from p. 1)

“At that time Bloomington had no real theater, nothing better than the Armory, which was a combination theater and home for the local militia.” Harris believed “that a full-fledged legitimate theater here would be a profitable investment.” He purchased a 63-foot frontage on the southeast corner of Seventh and Walnut from W. B. Seward, which had been “part of the old Seward foundry lot.” John and Bridge Nichols were the architects; Caldwell and Drake of Columbus, Indiana, builders of the Monroe County Courthouse, received the construction contract. When completed in 1907, the Harris Grand was three stories tall with a brick exterior: it was described as “fully modern,” “truly grand throughout,” and “the first theater in Bloomington built from the ground up specifically to be a theater.” The ultimate cost was $40,000.12

The Harris Grand opened on 18 September 1907. The Murray and Mack Co. arrived via the Indianapolis Southern railroad for a performance of the Sunny Side of Broadway, with a cast of forty and music “furnished by the Howard Tournier orchestra of Indianapolis.”13 The show was a musical comedy that featured the vaudeville duo of Charlie Murray and Oliver Turnbull, comedy stars in their time but almost unknown today.14 The theater had 1,021 seats distributed over the first and second floors, gallery, and boxes. One thousand citizens attended on opening night, including the families of Fred Matthews, W. N. Showers, Henry B. Gentry, and John Nichols.15 Robert Harris was unable to attend the opening because he was traveling “with his company in Charlestown, West Virginia.”16

Harris continued his successful tent shows and supported “the theater to a great extent with the money he sent home.” The Harris Grand presented live entertainment, including vaudeville acts, musical comedies, and dramatic productions in which famous names of the period appeared. It also began to show moving pictures as part of the program. When this proved successful, Harris erected a second theater, the Princess, in 1913. “In 1923 both theatres were rebuilt and enlarged at an expenditure of many thousand[s] of dollars. The movie business grew to such an extent that Mr. Harris retired [from] his road show and came home to manage the two local houses.”17 The Harris Grand continued to present a combination of live entertainment and feature pictures, as demonstrated by this 17 January 1923 advertisement from the Bloomington Evening World:

“A Vaudeville Bill of Novelties / Edwards & Kellie, Harmonious Comedy / Burke & Lillette, Singing, Comedy and Piano Capers / Revolving Collins, Something New in Novelties / Our Feature Photoplay for Today Only, Elaine Hammerstein in Handcuffs or Kisses, a Lewis J. Selznick Production / Thursday, In the Days of Buffalo Bill.”

In 1928, the Harris Grand “showed the first talking movie in Bloomington and only the second in the state.” This signaled conversion to a movie house in 1929, when Paramount Pictures’ theater chain, Publix, signed a twenty-year lease on the Harris Grand and Princess theaters for $28,000. After the stock market crash late in 1929, the Harris Grand operated at irregular intervals for several years.18

Robert H. Harris died on 12 October 1931 at the Mayo sanitarium in Rochester, Minnesota. He was buried at Rose Hill Cemetery in Bloomington. The estate was left to his wife.19 In 1933, Mrs. Harris refurbished and reopened the Harris Grand. In 1935, it was leased to Young and Wolfe, who showed movies until a 1942 fire. They renovated and reopened the theater and ran it until 1955, when Harris’s widow died. In 1955, her heirs sold the theater to George Yost. In the mid-1960s, he sold it to Peter Terkulis, who changed the name to Towne Cinema. “On April 27, 1981, the Harris-Grand Towne Cinema caught fire … and was damaged beyond repair.”20

Although the Harris Grand and the Princess are gone, Robert H. Harris’s obituary reminds us of his theatrical vision for Bloomington: “He built his theaters at a time when they were mere experiments and staked his last dollar on the future growth and progress of this community.”

Notes

2. Rosehill and White Oak Cemeteries, 1818–2018 (Bloomington, IN: Monroe County History Center, 2018), 154.
4. Skirvin, “Harris.”
Harris Grand Contractors Also Constructed Courthouse

By Penelope Mathiesen

When the Harris Grand opened on 18 September 1907, its contractors, Caldwell and Drake, were completing work on the Monroe County Courthouse. The supply of iron that had delayed construction for two weeks had finally arrived, and the erection of the tower and clock remained to be done, but Caldwell estimated that everything would be finished by 17 January 1908.1

The new Monroe County Courthouse was dedicated on Saturday, 4 July 1908. “Beginning Friday and continuing all day Saturday, every incoming train was loaded to standing room on the platform with visitors.” Throughout the day, “the crowds left the 4th of July festivities on the streets to throng the corridors and beautiful rooms of the new structure.”2 The three-story building was built of native limestone in the Beaux-Arts Classical style. Atop the copper dome, whose supporting walls contained a four-faced clock, was “a 3’ 9” gold-leaved copper weathervane in the shape of a fish, which [had] been an ornament on all of Monroe County’s courthouses since 1825.”3

The 1908 courthouse was designed by Wing and Mahurin, a Fort Wayne architectural firm that drew plans for many significant structures, including “at least three other Indiana courthouses.” The contractors, George W. Caldwell and Lester Drake, were based in Columbus, Indiana. Caldwell was born on 16 August 1860 in Delaware County, Ohio. In 1887, he entered the insurance and real estate business in Columbus, Indiana, eventually expanding his enterprises to include contracting and construction. He established a partnership with Drake, and their firm erected courthouses and other public buildings in Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, and West Virginia. They were the only ones willing to undertake construction of the West Baden (Indiana) Hotel according to the proposed schedule,4 which included erecting “the largest dome built up to that time.” Another of their projects was the Palace of Agriculture at the St. Louis World’s Fair—“the largest building ever constructed under one roof at the time of its execution.”5

One of Caldwell and Drake’s downtown Bloomington buildings— the Harris Grand theater—is long gone, but the Monroe County Courthouse still stands. It was saved from demolition by dedicated preservationists, and extensive renovation efforts have restored much of its original beauty.6

Notes

The Harris Grand (Cont. from p. 2)

Notes
11. “Well-known Theatrical Man.”
Remembering

Everette John “Jay” Ely never met a stranger and could have a conversation with anyone he met. When he and the granddaughters would go to Dairy Queen, the waitress knew his name and would say “He’s back again,” as she poured his coffee.

Carol Maxine Fowler is lovingly remembered for her blackberry cobbler, talented sewing, and filling her home with love, kindness, and making memories.

Steven Michael Kain pursued his career and passion for education, shaping and molding the minds of the youth in several school districts. He worked as a Latin teacher for Crawfordsville Schools, a principal for Lebanon Schools, Superintendent of Logansport Schools, and Superintendent of Richland Bean Blossom Schools.

Jerard “Jerry” Goeke Ruff was a longtime Bloomington physician, fitness advocate, athlete, and sports fan, as well as a dedicated supporter of numerous community programs and organizations. Jerry was a proud and true Hoosier who thought globally while engaging and acting locally.

Lorna Jane (Ross) Seward was an ardent supporter of the Indiana University School of Music, serving on the Board of the Society of the Friends of Music. She was also a longtime supporter of St. Margaret’s Hospital Guild and became a life member.

Annual Appeal

We hope you and your families are safe and well as we head into the holiday season. We are proud of our work in 2021 and are excited about what we will accomplish in 2022. You can expect to hear from us soon in the mail with the Year-End Report. While you wait, you can contribute now through donations, Kroger Cares, Amazon Smile, and our Amazon Wish List - all of which you can find on our website by clicking “Join & Give” at the top of the page:

https://monroehistory.org/join-and-give/
A Note from the Director

By Daniel Schlegel, Jr.

Hello again! Since our last newsletter, we have had quite a lot going on at the History Center. We hosted the Bloomington community el Dia de los Muertos/Day of the Dead Altar while the Mathers Museum of World Cultures is being renovated and incorporated into the IU Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. There was a great community response to it and a wonderful closing reception at the end.

For the first time in our 41-year history, we had a second garage sale fundraiser in the beginning of November. Our Garage Sale Ladies, the volunteers who work tirelessly all year, did a wonderful job of reorganizing the space to have a very cheery Christmas feel to it. The sale was quite successful and raised nearly $40,000 for the History Center. We are extraordinarily grateful to the hard work and dedication of those ladies.

And as I write this, we are gearing up for a play, “A Soulful Thanksgiving” by Resilience Productions, about the customs and traditions of the local black community. The performances will be complete with a taste testing after the play during a question and answer session. This will be a wonderful way to engage and open dialogue to learn more about our friends and neighbors as a complement to our current Rechter Gallery exhibit, Monroe: A County of Cultures.

With this in mind, we cannot tell you how much we appreciate our volunteers who help make all of this happen. The dedication and level of service our volunteers provide is what allows the History Center to accomplish so much. If you know one of our volunteers, be sure to thank them for all their time at the Center. If you are a volunteer, please accept our appreciation. We have some amazing volunteers with great stories and accomplishments, and they choose to spend extra time helping to create a better community center with us. We are all the better for their efforts and are eternally grateful.

Collections Corner

The History Center has entered into a long-term loan agreement with Gannett Co. to acquire The Herald-Times newspaper archive collection. Housing thousands of print photographs, negatives, and microfilms, the collection is an amazing addition to the History Center. The archive includes images of community events, such as the 4th of July holidays, County Fairs, and the Bloomington All-American City award celebration; and building renovation and construction, including the Bloomington City Jail, Fountain Square Mall, and the 4th Street parking garage.

With a collection this large, it will take quite some time for staff and volunteers to process all of the photographs. Thankfully, we have received generous support from Dr. John Thiel, who has sponsored a paid internship to process and digitize the collection. The position will be for the 2022 calendar year and will include opportunities to share the collection. Follow us on social media and our blog to see highlights from this wonderful collection in the coming year!
Volunteer Spotlight

Rod Spaw has been volunteering with the Collections department at the History Center since his retirement in 2019. His professional experience as a journalist and as a retired editor for The Herald-Times newspaper has been essential for connecting the History Center staff to the HT. His knowledge of the newspaper staff and archive has helped facilitate a long-term loan of the archive to the History Center. The breadth of community history in the newspaper archive is astounding, and we have to give a huge thank you to Rod for helping us gain this collection. Over the coming months, Rod will be helping Hilary, Megan, and our Dr. John Thiel Intern to process the collection and reach out to his contacts to help us accurately identify the photographs and objects. In addition to his passion for local newspaper history, Rod also has a personal collection of vintage postcards and has helped date many of the postcards in the History Center's collection based on his knowledge. Rod and Hilary worked together to create an online collection, which you can visit on our website, that highlights the different kinds of postcards as well as some unique postcards in our collection. Hilary and Megan are so very thankful for Rod and his reliable support and knowledge. What would we do without him? We don’t want to know!

Education Updates

Log Cabin Christmas, our December holiday open house in partnership with Wylie House, is postponed until 2022. But we are still offering activities for the holiday season. Our Education Interns, Kal Demaree and Grace Donahue, created the “31 Activities for December” available on our website. From signing songs to making recipes, there is something for each day and for everyone!

PuzzleFest returns in January! For 2022, our annual jigsaw competition will be virtual with competitors in team and solos categories. Registration is now open and available on our website. In 2021, we saw teams from California to New York, and we can’t wait to see where the competitors will be from this time. The afternoon of January 29 holds all kinds of educational programming from the Lilly Library and Press Puzzles.

For more information on upcoming programs, be sure to follow our website and social media.

News from the Library

library@monroehistory.org

Compiled by Megan MacDonald and Penelope Mathiesen

New in the Library

Mapping Monroe County, Indiana, compiled by David Paul Nord, has recently been added to the collection. This work is an annotated and illustrated bibliography of historic maps of the county, the city of Bloomington, and the Indiana University campus, from 1815 through 1941. It includes state and county atlases, federal land office records, property maps, city and town plat maps, railroad maps, road maps, geological and topographic maps, river navigation charts, limestone industry maps, soil and land use maps, postal maps, census maps, campus maps, national forest maps, and fire insurance maps. It lists items in dozens of map collections around the state and country. The PDF version of the bibliography includes clickable hyperlinks to all listed maps that are available online. The main purpose of the bibliography is to connect anyone interested in Monroe County, Bloomington, and the IU campus with the wonderful cartographic resources that are freely available online. The book is available in the library and on sale in the Museum Store for $15.00. (From an abstract provided by David Nord.)

Recent Acquisitions


Current Exhibits

RECHTER GALLERY: Monroe: A County of Cultures

*June 25-January 8th, 2022*

The Monroe County History Center is excited to display close to forty objects on loan from the Evansville Museum of Art, History, and Science. Representing centuries and communities from all over the globe, *Monroe: A County of Cultures* aims to show how organizations, institutions, and other groups practice and infuse varying ways of life into the fabric we all call home.

BROWN GALLERY: Transportation in Monroe County

For the past 200 years, the import and export of raw materials, finished goods, and people has been a challenge for those living in Monroe County. Exhibits in the Brown Gallery tell the story of how Monroe County continued to grow despite obstacles presented by hilly terrain and a region without a major water source. The ongoing theme of the exhibits in the Brown Gallery will be transportation in Monroe County with changing artifacts throughout the year. Come check out the newest exhibit on Ralph Rogers and the Rogers Group.

HILL GALLERY: Annual Holiday Exhibition: Antique Toys and Crafts

*November 6, 2021-January 4, 2022*

Before the days of big box and department stores, many families created their own crafts to give as holiday gifts and use as decorations. If you were lucky, you could go into town and purchase a fancy toy car or doll. See what Monroe County kids were able to make and dreamt of opening up Christmas Day!

(Photo—Public Service Company of Indiana Holiday Window Display, 1949. Courtesy Mary Ellen Haller.)

DECKARD EDUCATION ROOM: An Abridged Timeline of Monroe County Environmental History

*On display until June 25, 2022*

For better or for worse, the environment encompassing Monroe County has undergone many man-made and natural changes throughout its more than two hundred year history. Population growth, industrial manufacturing, weather emergencies, and a search for viable water sources have left their mark on Monroe County. This timeline aims to highlight some of the most significant events and raise the question of what kind of impact they had on the community and will have for future generations.


*December 1 to January 29*

This exhibit explores how cookware, bakeware, and food preservation items have evolved over the course of the last three centuries in Monroe County. From stoneware and cast iron pans to stainless steel and Fiesta ware, this exhibit highlights changes in the many types of food storage and preparation equipment that existed then and now.