



The Two Rivers Opera House. Monograph 44

1981

Niquette, Robert A.

Manitowoc, Wisconsin: Manitowoc County Historical Society, 1981

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/EE2SLLGD4TI3R8S>

This image cannot be copied or reproduced without the written permission of the Manitowoc County Historical Society. For information on re-use, see <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/Copyright>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

MANITOWOC COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

OCCUPATIONAL
MONOGRAPH 44

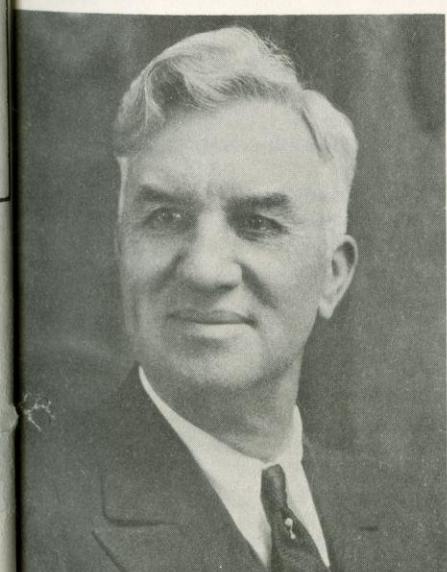
1981 Series

Preface

**TWO RIVERS
OPERA HOUSE**

The existence of the Opera House, or Turner Hall, as it was first called, in the City of Two Rivers receives sparse attention in early history books or even in contemporary history books. In the "History of Manitowoc County" by Dr. L. Falge, 1911, it is barely mentioned. In the contemporary history of Two Rivers, "Neshotah" by Evan Gagnon, 1969, again very little comment about this colorful place is made. It would seem that a building which was one of the main social centers of the community for over 65 years would merit considerable attention. The fact that so little attention has been paid to it prompted me to make a search of the Two Rivers Library as well as the City Hall to see what was on record there. At the Library, in the "History of Two Rivers", by Elmer F. Beth, 1927, a short paragraph refers to the Turner Hall as being built in 1867 and "occupied the site on which the Hamilton factory 'C' now stands". It is true that the Turners did use Voshardt's Hall at that location for a few years, but never did they build a hall at that location. The City Hall had no plans or specifications under Turner Hall or Opera House. I was further chagrined to learn that almost no record of this lively spot existed, and began to understand why no history writer could include much in his work of writings.

What did this building look like? Where had it stood? Who had owned it and had



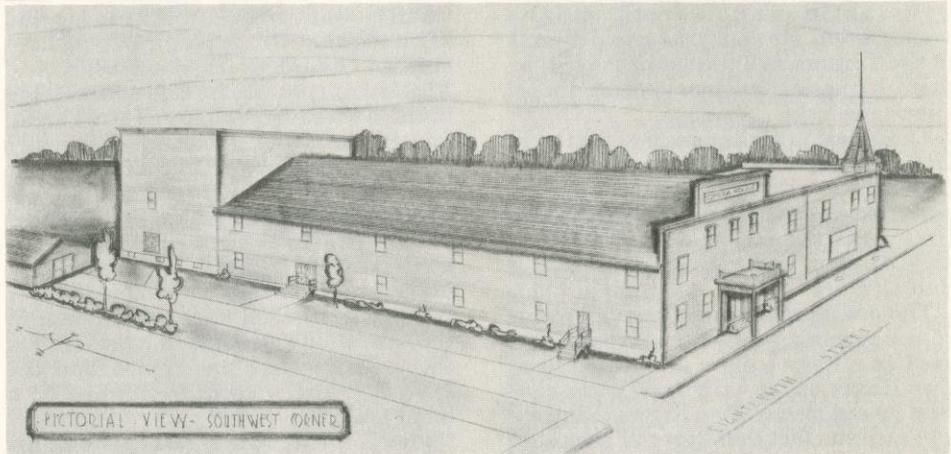
Edward A. Niquette, 1866-1946

APR 16 1981

THE TWO RIVERS OPERA HOUSE

PUBLIC LIBRARY
MANITOWOC, WIS.

by Robert A. Niquette



Two Rivers Opera House, 1516 18th St., circa 1930

run it? How big was it? Where did the original need for it come from? Would it be historically interesting to study? Would it have potential as an historical site to reconstruct? Could it have a purpose today as a functioning historical site? All these questions and more created an interest on my part to learn more about the Two Rivers Opera House.

Some early newspaper clippings and pictures which I had found in my parents scrapbook and photography books formed the basis of my early interest. My grandfather, Edward Niquette, had owned and managed the Two Rivers Opera House for nearly 20 years. My father, Cyril J. Niquette, lived for a while in the living quarters added to the original building by my grandfather and he had also worked many years there. Several years before the death of my Aunt Julia (Niquette) Porter, while visiting with her in her apartment, she showed me pictures which she had saved of the building. Her memories of many happy hours of living and working in the Opera House further enkindled my interest. She had repeatedly said to me that her years there were the happiest of her life. However, it was at the timely visit of my Uncle Lester Niquette of Lockport, New York, at the time of the death of my Aunt Julia, that I realized that if I didn't get to my task of gathering information soon, no one who was intimately familiar with the building or what went on in it would be alive to help me.

Fortified with Lester's vivid memory, some early pictures, a few newspaper articles, and the help of a commercial artist by the name of Russell Miersch of Sheboygan, we started to reconstruct detailed sketches and scale drawings of the Opera House. We ended up with such

detailed plans, that I am sure we could rebuild the place from them. As we went along and blank spaces appeared in our knowledge and memories, still more historical information was needed. Lester simply could not recall each detail and shape. We became particularly perplexed about roof lines and heights of the stage addition. Someone suggested that we contact Hubert Wentorf of Two Rivers. Hubert had what we needed in the way of old photographs and more! It was, in fact, an old photograph showing the construction of the Rivoli Theatre (now Evans Department Store) which gave us the last key for our sketches and drawings. I owe Hubert Wentorf a large debt of gratitude of even greater degree for he had notes of a talk given by Mrs. Katherine Moseler to the Two Rivers Historical Society in 1968 and it was this article, and an interview that he had with Mrs. Moseler at her home at a later date, that really furnishes much of the earliest history of the Opera House when her father, William Schaefer owned and operated the Opera House before 1904.

I sincerely hope that the following article and series of pictures will recapture an earlier time for the reader and give him insight into a time without radio, motion pictures, or television. It was a time when people got together for vaudeville, roller skating, basketball, silent pictures, or just sat around in the bar on a Sunday afternoon with nothing but a beer and a sandwich. It was a time to talk, argue, play cards or perhaps to sing to the tunes of a piano or accordian. In the early beginnings of the Turner Hall, it was a simpler time — a time of horse and buggy, kerosene lamp, pot bellied stove, free sandwich and nickel beer. The necessities of life and working for them consumed most of everyone's

efforts. Leisure time was more concentrated and intense with physical involvement being much more wide spread for amusement. This will become clearer as we explain the origins and early history of Turner Hall in the first section.

ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

The Opera House — so named by William Schaefer when he purchased it in 1889, was built as a place of exercise and physical activity by the young men known as "Turners". They belonged to a society called in German the "Turn Verein". The word Turn means gymnastic and Verein means organization. No doubt the social aspects of the Turners and the use of the hall by them for social functions began almost simultaneously.

The occasion of the razing of the Opera House as reported in the Reporter and Chronicle of May 11, 1932, caused the paper to reminisce about the "Old Turner Hall", and the fact that the "Hall was (the) Athletic and Social Center (for) a Half Century".

The article starts out: "what's become of the turning pole — the elevated bar used as a body builder by the youths of Two Rivers as far back as 65 years ago? Few young men of Two Rivers today are aware of the fact that 'turning' was once the principal recreational activity of the youthful male population of the city long before it was incorporated — and today 'Finis' is being written for those memorable days in the razing of the Opera House, once Turner Hall and

headquarters of the Turners in their heyday".

Mentioned as the only living survivors of the early group of Turners at that time were William F. Ahearn, Frank Kaufman, John Waskow, and Charles F. Kirst of Two Rivers, and Anton Herman of Sheboygan. Mention was made of a banner made in 1857 by the ladies of the day and being as "good as new" when unfurled in 1932. We believe this to be the same banner which William F. Ahearn is seen holding in the picture with this article.

Charles Kirst's father, Carl, was a member of the early organization and Charles was credited with saving the banner along with remaining equipment such as "Indian Clubs, dumb bells, etc." The article continued: "The membership of the Two Rivers original Turn Verein, formed in 1857, included practically every man in the city. Only a few of those pioneers were actually participants, but they were members just the same. It was an old German activity but was pursued with as much interest — if not more — over here. Not only the young men of German extraction were outstanding in the recreation even though it belonged to them. There were the French and the Irish who also went in for turning on a large scale."

Mention was made of Ed LeMere for his expert chinning, while William Ahearn was the "Turnwald" for the class in the eighties.

The first headquarters of the Turn Verein, according to the newspaper account, was built at the Twenty-third

Street and Jefferson Street corner, which was then "out of the city". It was on the Joseph Smongeski property in 1857 and remained there for eight or nine years when it became too small. Plans were then started for building a hall. Land was purchased from a Mrs. Nibbs. The site was two lots on Eighteenth Street (the Pine Street) between Washington and Adams. Mrs. Nibbs was a well known character in the city, a widow, who supported herself making yeast for residents of the city.

It was one of the original Turners, man named Julius Kahlfus who was the designer of the structure. It appeared that he had a good knowledge of how the halls were built in Europe. When the building was done, it was a "handsome structure" and considered one of the finest in the territory".

Shortly after the completion of the hall a group of youth who were "turning" on their own on the "Boehringer" property at Seventeenth and Adams Street were initiated into the Turn Verein. Among them were Frank Kaufman, William Ahearn, John Waskow, and Anton Herman. For years William Ahearn directed the class.

William F. Ahearn, as mentioned earlier was "Turnwald" of the group in the 1880's and acted as teacher and leader for many years. The article which appeared in the newspaper in 1932 showed Mr. Ahearn when he was 85 years of age. He died in 1942 when he was almost 85 years old. His son Raymond Ahearn who I interviewed in January of 1978 while a resident of St. Mary's home told me that his grandfather, also William Ahearn, came from County Cork in Ireland and found his way to Two Rivers while working for the railroad. He supervised the laying of the track from Chicago to Manitowoc and then to Two Rivers.

When I questioned Raymond about his father, William F., he explained that the Turners practiced often and hard and became very proud of their feats of strength and dexterity. In addition to using the swinging bar for chinning, swinging, and acrobatics, they also used mats and had routines alone and in groups. He remembered one stunt in particular that his father was noted for and that was one of holding himself horizontally by means of his arms and doing so on one vertical bar. He could do this for short periods of time and claimed that this trick was unique with his father.

Other Turners of the period were Henry Thuss, Edward and Robert Suettinger, Martin and Anton Wyzsinski, Henry Wilkins (assistant turnwald), Michael Bartelme, William Weighardt, Timothy Hayes, Louis Kaufman, Frank Kaufman, Fred Kurtz, and Anton Herman. Early records were all kept in German with complete account and record kept of monies collected for the use of the hall. The Turn Verein was officially organized on June 21, 1857.

According to the recollections of Mrs. Katherine Moseler, daughter of William Schaefer, early operator of the Turn Hall and later owner of the Opera House, Schaefer was custodian of the Turn



William Ahearn Sr. Turnwald

Hall from 1877 to about 1881 at which time he left to take a job as custodian of the Opera House at Port Washington. Apparently the times were difficult and rental of the hall by various groups was too infrequent to support his employment at Two Rivers. During the time from 1881 to 1899 various other custodians were employed. She mentioned a Mr. Dobruski and a Mr. Golmbeski. She also recalled that during this same period Voshardt's Hall had many social activities held at that hall. Apparently the Turner Hall fell on hard times in this period as Mrs. Moseler mentioned that Joe Schroeder had a lien on the hall and she also mentioned that the activity pretty well died out by 1899. William Schaefer purchased the hall in late 1899 or early 1900 and ran it until December 23, 1904 at which time he sold it to Edward A. Niquette. Mr. Niquette ran it for the longest period selling it to John J. Tadych on July 13, 1921. Mr. Tadych owned it until he sold it to the Federal government for a post office on May 29, 1931.

TURNER HALL AND HAMILTON MFG. CO.

In his "History of Two Rivers", 1927, Elmer F. Beth credits the early Turners and the Opera House with being the indirect causing agent of the Hamilton Mfg. Co. He points out that William F. Nash, editor of the Two Rivers Chronicle, had an order to print some posters advertising a "Grand Ball" in the Turner Hall, and since he had no large display type, he asked James E. Hamilton to try to manufacture some for him. Mr. Hamilton had set himself up in business part time sawing out brackets and fancy woodwork with a scroll saw while still working at the pail factory. He was doing this in a small workshop near his home.

From facts about the Hamilton Manufacturing Co. and from Mr. James E. Hamilton taken from an article in the Chronicle of Wednesday, August 6, 1924, and from a letter of Mr. Hamilton to Elmer F. Beth, dated November 12, 1925, Mr. Beth wrote in the above noted publication as follows: "Mr. Hamilton, with the help of his wife, drew the patterns and cut them out of thin wood with a scroll saw, then glued them on blocks of wood to make them 'type high' and the first wood type was made in Two Rivers. The two type blocks 'GRAND BALL' and 'TURNER HALL' proved very satisfactory and Editor Nash straightway ordered a font of display type from Mr. Hamilton. Seized with the possibilities of the new venture, the young craftsman sent samples of his type to printers all over the state, and soon began to receive orders. The first order for \$3.00 worth came from the Green Bay Gazette. The next day a stupendous order for \$12.50 came from a Mr. Cunningham of Chippewa Falls. He quit his pail factory job and turned all his time and attention to designing type, manufacturing it and studying printers goods and needs.

Mr. Beth also said this, concerning the Opera House: "The Opera House is the oldest show place in the city, filling the place formerly held by Turner Hall, and even today is variously used for speeches,

concerts, theatricals, mass meetings, and dances. The Empire Theatre started in competition in 1911, and both continued the showing of moving pictures until the New Rivoli Theater, built in 1922, virtually forced the Opera House out of competition for patronage."

HEYDAY OF THE OPERA HOUSE

There was a period on the American scene that existed between 1875 and 1925 which preceded the radio, the silent or "flicker movie", and later the sound movie. It was the time when home grown talent, traveling play groups, vaudeville, and circuses were front and center. The land had been cleared, a road system was developing, and land and water transportation were rapidly developing efficiency. Immigrants were pouring into the country from all over Europe and bringing with them the home experiences of entertainment and sports. The automobile was to come at the end of this period and begin to make the whole population mobile. At that time, a train trip was really a big event. Sailing vessels were still seen on the Great Lakes, although steam powered ships with steel hulls were starting to chase them off the water. People looked to their own community for almost all of their entertainment. Minstrel shows, tumblers, dog acts, masquerades, and society dances were main events. People were excited by the coming of most performances and if any originated from out-of-town or had a certain traveling reputation, why then, surely it was something special to anticipate and it was looked forward to with keen excitement.

This condition and set of circumstances existed more intensely in rural and small town America. When a town was out-of-the-way or when the rural population was too small to turn out a full house to defray expenses of a traveling group or more well known group, home grown entertainment had to suffice. The circus or traveling company could afford to go just so far into the territory before it was no longer economically practical to do so.

People everywhere wanted diversion and entertainment and if nothing else

was available, they furnished their own. Wedding dances, confirmations, and anniversaries also required halls or lodges for the gathering of friends and relatives, but it was the need for a place to put on performances of road shows, vaudeville, and the home grown talent shows that caused village halls to turn into "Opera Houses". Most of the really true opera houses have now been torn down, but even today one can still drive through rural Wisconsin and see the fading words "Opera House" — a place developed for its time.

Such circumstances existed in Two Rivers and led, in part, to the early development of Turner Hall. Surely the early Turners saw this need when they planned their hall for their early tumbling and acrobatic activity. In addition to membership dues, they must have needed outside revenue to help pay for the early structure.

All the situation needed in any one community was a profit minded promoter with some good business sense to see the opportunity and an opera house would begin to function.

Certainly William Schaefer was an early promoter in this sense and in all likelihood ran a viable and profitable Turner Hall in Two Rivers for many years. Another such early promoter was Edward A. Niquette, the son of a French-Canadian whose parents migrated to near the Village of Mishicot in the 1850's to start farming. In all likelihood, Collis Niquette, Edward's father, came to this area with his wife from the Montreal area because the land was fertile, available, and cheap. It was reported that land in those years could be purchased for as low as \$.50 per acre.

Edward Niquette was born on a farm in the Town of Mishicot on September 27, 1866, the son of Collis and Caroline Lawrence Niquette. Little is recorded about his early childhood, but when in his early teens he must have decided that farming was not for him, he came to Two Rivers and enlisted in the early U.S. Life Saving Service. The crew in Two Rivers was under the command at that time of Captain Oliver Pilon. The shore from Point Beach down past Two Rivers



After the Parade, 1915

Left to right: Erwin Klabunde, James Lodi, Edward Poczny, Anton Marsecek

was the scene of many shipwrecks, so no doubt Ed Niquette had his share of excitement. After several years in the government, he started into business in the late 1890's by purchasing the Marine Exchange, a popular rendezvous for Great Lakes mariners. This tavern was located at 16th and Jefferson Streets and was purchased by him from Charles Willard. In December of 1904, he sold the Marine Exchange to Charles Kurtz. The Chronicle of Tuesday, December 13, 1904, reported the sale as follows:

IMPORTANT REAL ESTATE SALE. "Last week the fine saloon and residence property of Mr. Ed Niquette, located on the corner of Main and Jefferson Streets was sold to Chas. Kurtz, who has been employed as bartender of the Lake House for the past three years or more. The property sold is known as the Marine Exchange and it is perfectly equipped and a modern building. The price paid is \$6,300.00. The location is good and commands a large trade. The property has paid for itself in the past four years. The reason given for selling was that Mr. Niquette had another business project under consideration. Mr. Kurtz, the new proprietor, is a popular and energetic young man and will, no doubt, do as well with the property as its former owner."

As an interesting aside, an article appeared next to the above article and showed minutes of the regular Common Council proceedings of Tuesday evening, December 6, 1904. Among the bills being approved was an item to William Schaefer, owner of the Opera House, for "refreshments for 47 men: \$7.05". Judging by the rest of the bills being approved, these men had helped with a local fire by assisting the volunteer firemen.

In the same newspaper noted above, the following story also appeared two weeks later on December 27, 1904: **THE OPERA HOUSE CHANGES HANDS.** "Yesterday the Opera House owned by Wm. Schaefer was sold to Mr. Ed. Niquette, recent proprietor of the Marine Exchange, the price paid being \$8,750. This transfer has been contemplated for some time. Mr. Schaefer wanted to sell the Opera House and Mr. Niquette wanted to buy it, and the sale would have been made earlier, perhaps, had Mr. Niquette been able to find a purchaser for his Marine Exchange sooner. Mr. Niquette will, we believe, make a successful manager of our local Opera House. He is a great lover of the drama and will, no doubt, bring us some first class attractions. He is, besides, an alert and active business man and will make the Opera House a paying investment."

It seems that the Opera House was to see better days. Not only did remodeling start at the Opera House, community utilization was maximized as will be seen later in this monograph.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION AND OTHER MATTERS

To understand the function and purpose of an Opera House at the turn of the century, and to realize how it could serve its customers in so many different ways, a clear picture of its layout and design is necessary. It is true that many varieties of shapes and sizes of opera

houses existed in cities and towns all across the country, but a certain sameness also developed. The opera house in Two Rivers, after a series of remodelings was as sophisticated as any.

We can be reasonably sure of the general layout, size, and room utilization of the Opera House as it existed after the remodeling by Edward Niquette shortly after his purchase of it in late 1904, but any knowledge from before that time is very sparse. Anyone with any recollection of the building prior to 1900 no longer is living and few records existed. However with those pictures which exist of the building in hand at this time and working with dimensions of such things as doors and windows which were pretty standard, one could come up with scaled measurements. A check at City Hall failed to turn up any specific information or plans of any kind. Building codes and requirements as we know them today just did not exist at the turn of the century.

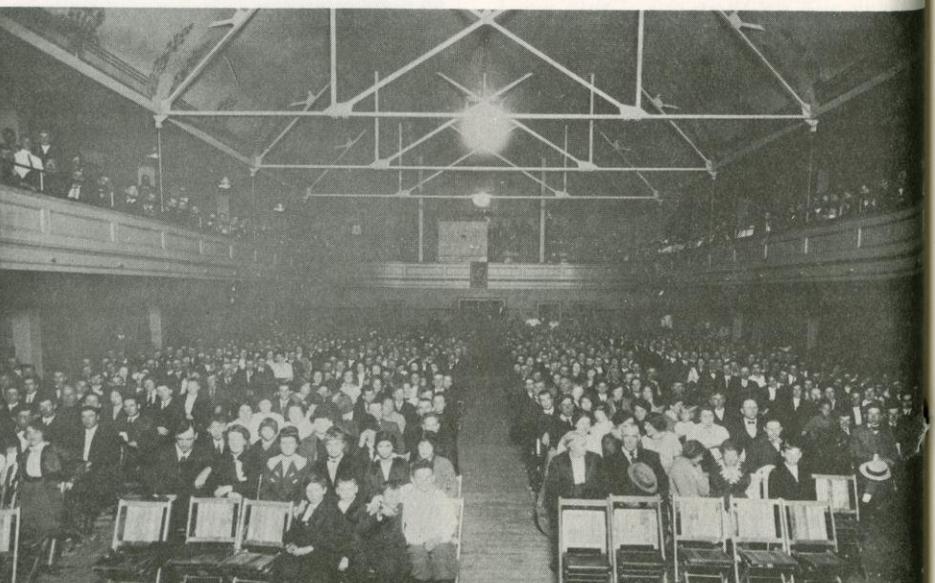
One very definite measurement did come down to us through Lester Niquette and that was the exact measurement of the hardwood floor of the hall. Since the hall had various uses such as basketball, dances, roller skating, and the like, the floor's surface conditions and needs changed almost daily. Since the removal of wax which was needed for dances had to be done in those early days by means of a pumice stone, and since this back breaking task often fell to Lester with some regularity, he was absolutely sure of the length of the floor. During discussions with him when gathering data in preparations of sketches, I can still hear him saying: "One dimension I can be absolutely sure of was the length of the damn floor! Many a time I had to get up early and rub it down with a pumice stone from stage to front door and it was exactly 100 feet!"

When first constructed by the Turn Verein Society in 1873, the original hall was placed on cedar posts and only the main hall was built. What service rooms existed on the main floor or partially excavated area under the main floor remains unclear. An early picture of the

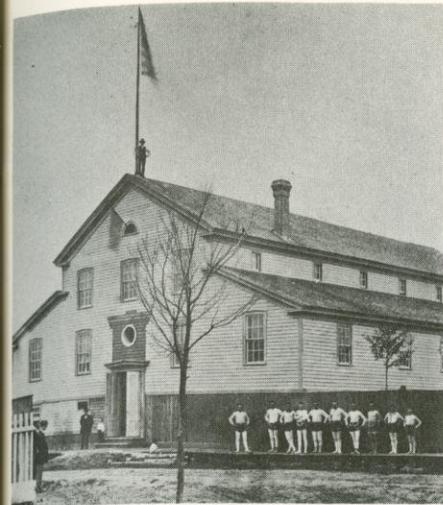
hall showing signs of remodeling of the front entrance to bring the entrance street level lends credence to an lithograph of 1879. This lithograph by Wellge and J. Bache of Milwaukee names the hall on the key as "Turner Hall" and shows two sets of stairs running parallel to the sidewalk with one ascending from the west and one from the east to common platform in front of the main entrance. It appears that this platform eight to ten feet above the street level also appears on this lithograph that row of windows exists on the west side below the floor line of the hall. This seems to confirm the idea that a lower living area existed at that time.

The south front elevation of windows and the pattern of these windows have remained the same in all pictures, but older pictures show the windows were above street level as compared to later pictures. One can only assume that when a brick foundation and brick pillars were put in place, the whole of the main hall was lowered. Study of surrounding buildings, remaining long after the Opera House was torn down, shows a sign that the grade of the street was dramatically changed. A great deal of skill and labor no doubt then was used to bring about this dramatic change to the hall. Since no person who may have had knowledge about this change could affirm or deny this theory we will have to assume it is correct. The only interesting comment, and that again by Lester Niquette, was that an old creek must have crossed 18th Street long ago as he remembers that when the street was improved in his youth, an old wooden bridge was uncovered in the street.

In recollections of William Schaefer's daughter, Katherine Moseler, as reported personally to Hubert Wentorf, member of the Two Rivers Historic Society and unofficial holder of much historical lore in that city, Mrs. Moseler speaks of a kitchen and dancing room located on the southwest side of the hall and a long hallway leading to the barroom and lunchroom. She must have been speaking of this lower level below the main floor as this description does not



Inside the Opera House, circa 1915



Two Rivers Turner Hall, 1900

Left to right: William Ahearn, Frank Kaufman, Ed LeMere, Fred Kurtz, Henry Thuss, Anton Herman, Robert Suettinger, Edward Suettinger, Mike Bartleme, William Wiegardt.

the layout of the Opera House as our sketches show it existed in 1904. Note these details on pictures which accompany this article of the early hall with the Turn Verein members posing in front. Also note the recent remodeling to the front entrance.

It might be well to talk in detail about this picture as a number of people can be identified. (See caption of picture above). William Schaefer can be seen hanging on to the flag pole atop the building. Along the near edge of the roof can be seen studs nailed in place for climbing to the flag pole. The picture was taken just about 1900 as the building appears just as it did in a photo taken during the dedication of the Civil War Monument in Central Park. This event can be documented to the summer of 1900.

The floor plans and elevations drawn by Russell E. Miersch all show the building as it existed during the ownership of Ed Niquette who purchased the building from Mr. Schaefer on December 23, 1904. These sketches, as mentioned earlier, were prepared mostly from pictures and from memory of those who had been intimately familiar with the building as long time occupants.

An article which appeared in the Two Rivers Reporter February 7, 1946, shortly after the death of Edward Niquette, pointed out that "among the first improvements were the rebuilding of the sprawling gallery overlooking the spacious main floor and the enlargement of the stage made necessary by bookings of larger road shows". The recollection of Lester Niquette is that his father added the stage addition to the rear of the hall and that it was not there at time of purchase. This addition had a roof which extended well above the sloping roof line of the hall. In this new stage addition and below the stage itself were six dressing rooms, the central heating plant for the stage and hall, a coal bin, and an access door to the north. The central area below the stage in the center of the dressing rooms was used for the storage of trunks and baggage of the performers. If the different acts used animals of any kind such as dogs or monkeys this area

would also be their home. It was not unusual to see monkeys getting loose and enjoying the freedom of the elms behind the stage area. Lester Niquette could remember one time in particular when it proved very difficult to get the monkeys out of the trees and young lads had to be found who could climb almost as well as the monkeys to reclaim them by show time.

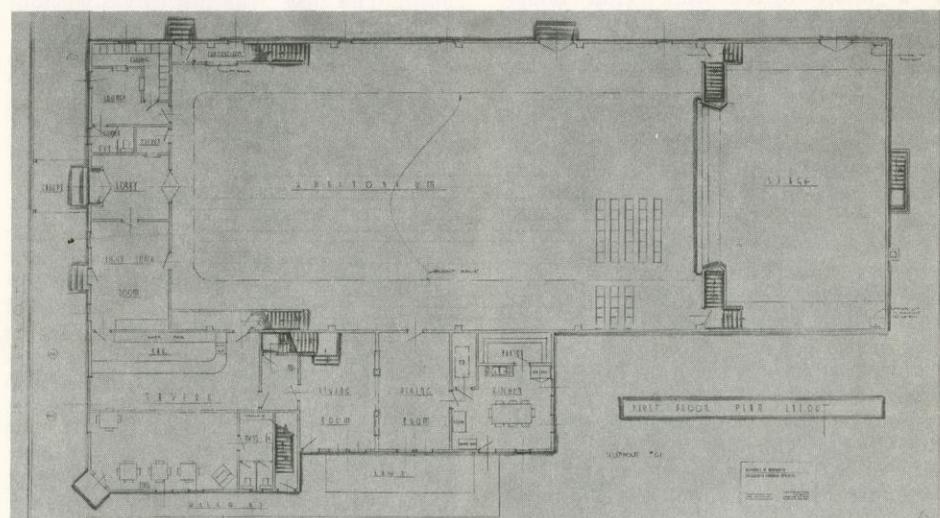
The stage had the typical rope hung staging in addition to the free standing types and the ceiling was high enough for suspended storing of the various backdrops used for different scenes. This was controlled by means of pulleys, weights, and ropes. Working platforms at two levels above the floor were accessible by simple open wood ladders. The stage had its own power panel for house lights and other similar equipment which was common to the period although it was constantly being updated as new things became available. The performers were as demanding then as now.

No information is available as to when the street canopy was added or just what changes, if any, were made to the front lobby, light lunchroom, and ticket and lounge areas at this time, but we do know the Ed Niquette remodeled the Opera House by also adding the tavern addition and family living quarters to the east of the hall. It was probably at this time that

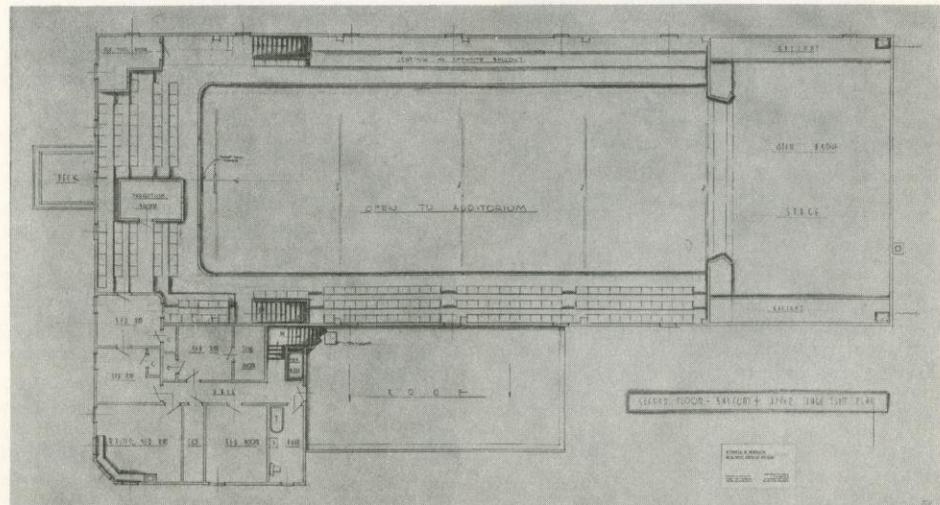
modifications were made to the facade to bring the front into total harmony.

The addition of the tavern must have been an important change to the character of the place. As pointed out earlier, Ed Niquette had run the Marine Exchange prior to purchasing the Opera House and it was a "fine saloon" to quote again the Chronical of December 13, 1904. The property is "perfectly equipped and a modern building" . . . "and commands a large trade . . . the property paid for itself in the past four years". So no doubt the tavern addition was well done and the building would not have been complete without this additional aspect.

The tavern and housing addition were quite complex and well thought out. And basically the tavern addition was two story with the bedrooms above the bar. The living quarters were to the rear of the tavern and included a living room, dining room, and kitchen. This addition also had a full basement with the furnace under the tavern. Access for coal as well as ice was gained through the sidewalk area with manholes. The basement area under the living quarters was used for beer barrel and liquor storage as well as for firewood. Under the kitchen area of the living quarters was the laundry and fruit cellar for household use. Access to the crawl space under the hall was also



First floor plan.



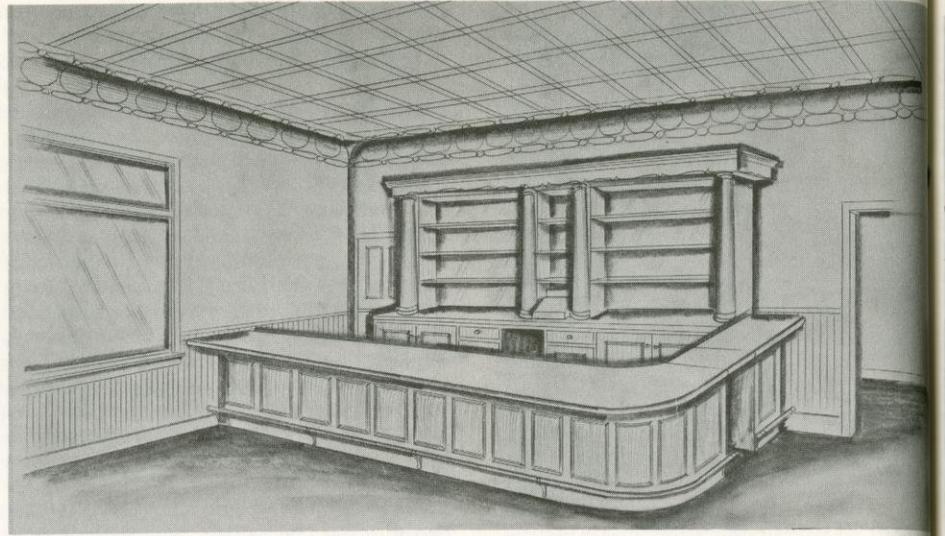
Second floor plan.

gained directly from the basement and was immediately behind the beer barrel rack. Lester Niquette remembered that this barrel rack held barrels three levels high. During prohibition, the access which was hidden behind the barrel rack, was used as the door to the hidden area under the main hall floor and was the perfect hiding place for bootleg supplies. This area was immense being the full width and length of the hall and dotted by brick pillars. Both Lester Niquette and his cousin Clyde Rau made special comment during interviews of this "feature" of the Opera House.

Access to the basement storage area which was actually under the living and dining room of the living quarters could be gained by a stairway on the east side of the building and led directly to the outside. Another stairway into this same basement area went from the hall between the living quarters and the tavern. This same hall was open at the top to the winding staircase which went from the living room to the bedrooms. A skylight existed in the stairwell area. This hallway also held the house telephone, several benches, and was a very active area. The phone also had an extension into the home.

Entrance to the main activity hall could be made from the tavern by means of a short offset hall. This offset prevented patrons being able to directly see from one area to the other and also prevented easy access or performance viewing by tavern patrons. During show time a ticket taker or guard was stationed at this offset hall entrance. Since many children and families would often be in the hall for dances, games, and sporting events, great care had to be taken to not allow easy access into the tavern or to prevent the over indulged from disrupting the activities going on in the main hall. A similar door directly to the back of the bar and on the south end of the bar opened into the light lunchroom or sandwich shop. This gave access for passing beverages and supplies directly from the bar. The door here was split for security reasons for the underage. The bartender could then sell soda, candy, popcorn, and the like without leaving the bar. The tavern room had three or four tables with chairs for patrons, and also had a "free lunch table" which was set up most of the time to encourage after work drop-in trade. This was a very popular feature of the Opera House Tavern, as Mary Niquette was a very good cook. Typical fare of the time included cold duck, goose, occasionally pheasant, cold cuts, cheeses, crackers, and bread. The free lunch table was protected during the bug season with a hinged cover and screen. Although the constant lunch was a considerate expense and bother, it encouraged longer stays in the tavern with the resulting heavier bar trade. Later in this article, the lunch table will be the center of a fine human interest story.

No picture or interior views of any kind exist of the tavern, but the pencil sketch named "Opera House Tavern and Back Bar" drawn by R. E. Miersch shows the room as remembered by Lester Niquette.



Opera House Bar

When the sketch was completed he remarked: "Yes, that's how it looked — yes, that's exactly how it looked. It's like I'm standing right there". The opening to the short offset hall leading to the main hall can be seen on the right, and the "dutch" door (shown closed) can be seen to the left of the bar. A dispenser for soft drinks usually stood on the bar to the left or near the window.

In general the decor of the room was plain. The floor was hardwood without any other cover. The big street window had a pull shade and a center horizontal bar for a sliding curtain. Two windows to the east were made of frosted leaded glass which were made by Joe R. Rehrauer a brother of Aloy Rehrauer who was a local painter and paper hanger and brother-in-law of Ed Niquette. Joe had also made a decorative outdoor leaded glass canopy which appears in a picture displayed with this article. The ceiling of the tavern was an embossed metal tin covering which was seen all over at the time.

During activity in the main hall, a concession stand was usually open. This stand was run usually by a separate party or concession stand operator who made this arrangement with the hall owner. This stand was located under the southwest balcony stairs, and was not a very big area. It was equipped with a lift type door much like an outdoor stand. The concession stand was usually open before and after performances on stage and during all general admission events such as basketball games, roller skating, and dances.

To the rear of the hall and on the balcony was a projection booth for showing still pictures and movies. This, no doubt, was added last and probably not before December 28, 1908, when the first flicker movie was shown. An earlier projection or light booth was also in the balcony in the southwest corner and was used for a time. During basketball games a net was placed all around the balcony to protect patrons and equipment.

A story in the November 28, 1905 Chronicle advised that a "Stereopticon & Moving Picture Entertainment consisting of over fifty first class stereopticon views and about fifteen moving pictures scenes" would be shown at the Opera House. "The moving

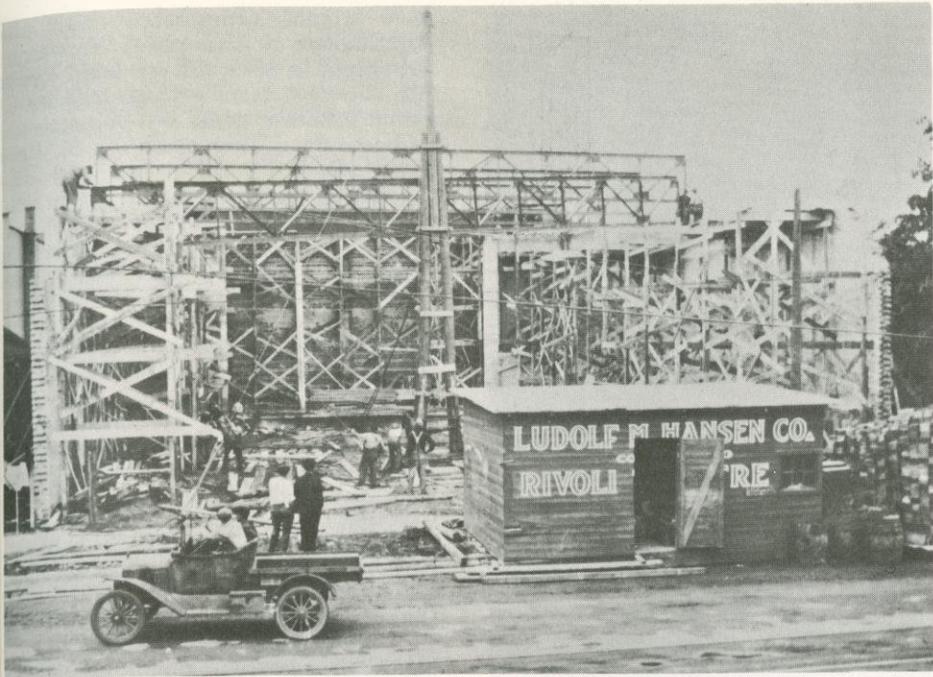
pictures will represent various scenes such as the FIRE RUN, NIAGARA, THE BURNING STABLE, and NEVER TROUBLE, etc.". Lester Niquette recalled during an interview in January of 1976 that the first big movie play was "Birth of a Nation" and played for two weeks. He said that they came up from Milwaukee with their own orchestra. No doubt the older projection booth was used for early "pre-flicker" projections as the angle proved to be bad from the old booth.

Cyril Niquette often worked in the projection booth showing the films. He was the oldest of the four children and he fell the more difficult jobs. After he mastered the piano, he also played the piano for the silent movies. When elaborating on "People and Stories of the Opera House", I will get into his background a bit more.

Just a few words concerning the sleeping quarters above the tavern will do. The bedroom nearest the balcony was somewhat extended into the main hall at the balcony level, and had windows which could be opened into the balcony area. One faced the stage. During vaudeville, movies, or stage plays, certainly was no punishment to be sent up there!

Various elevations have been sketched to show the building from all sides, and this was done mostly from old photographs and filled in by memory of those recalling the building. During the razing of the building in 1932 a good photograph showing the west and front of the building was in the newspaper, and this helped considerably on the west elevation. The Post Office Department had a good clear photograph of the front and the family had many photographs of the east side as this is where much of the yard living was done. Also, Lester could remember this area best as it was his home for many years, and his memory was invaluable for filling in many of the details.

An old photograph showing the Riviera Theatre under construction, picked up a view of the roof condition and height of the stage addition to the far rear of the building and this chance view solved the last detail which no one could seem to remember or explain. Thus it was that



Building the Rivoli, 1922

became possible to actually fully reconstruct the whole building on paper. As many views as possible will be shown along with this printing.

PEOPLE & STORIES OF THE OPERA HOUSE

Reference has been made throughout this article on the Two Rivers Opera House about the place being the center of activity for the community for many years. This could be taken as an exaggeration by some because no doubt other halls and public rooms existed simultaneously with the Opera House. These had their history of activity also and many relatives may still be living with similar memories and stories of past years. The purpose of this section entitled "People & Stories of the Opera House" is to establish the credibility of the claim of being the civic center for many years. A further purpose is to mention as many interesting and fascinating events as possible and to also mention the people who frequented the Opera House as either performers, employees, participants and residents.

Of most valuable assistance to me in gathering this data has been Jane Kahlenberg of Two Rivers — a life-long resident of the city as well as a personal friend. Without her valuable help much of the research needed to present this section might still be buried in the archives of the Joseph Mann Library. Her painstaking efforts to find the valuable references used here from the Chronicle and the Two Rivers Reporter were both numerous and accurate.

Let us now take still another look at the Turner Hall and the Opera House. Here are a series of representative samples of interesting references by date from literally hundreds of such examples which appeared in newspapers of that time. These presentations should dispel any notion that Turner Hall or the Opera House was not the social center of Two Rivers.

June 18, 1872: Performance by the

Dublin Troupe which was followed by a dance.

June 24, 1873: Manfred's Marianne em Weib aus dem Volke"

August 3, 1875: The Peak Family — a performance of bell ringers.

July 4, 1876: A long description of Centennial Celebrations

August 12, 1876: A Magic Lantern Show and a Band of Italian Minstrels.

August 15, 1876: Concert by Philharmonic Concert Company.

August 6, 1878: Acrobatic Exhibition: "An acrobatic exhibition and concert will be given at Turner Hall in this city next Saturday evening by the well known Wilson Troupe. The Troupe is famous for intricate and fancy turning, trapeze and slack rope performing and will undoubtedly give satisfactory entertainment. The entertainment is to conclude with a grand ball. Tickets including ball, 25 cents."

December 30, 1879: "The following is the program to be carried out by the Turner boys at Turner Hall on New Years Eve: 1) Turning on horizontal bar, 2) Russian athletic feats by Ed Suettinger and F. Kaufman, 3) Turning on bars, 4) Fencing, Robert Suettinger and A. Werzinski, 5) Duel-Tableau in 3 parts, 6) Clown traps."

February 6, 1883: "Draper's Double Uncle Tom's Cabin Co. were greeted by a full house last Thursday evening and their entertainment was pretty well received although it was a little too much variety for Uncle Tom and a little too much Uncle Tom for a variety. The Troupe has two or three good actors and their performance upon the stage was heartily enjoyed."

May 14, 1889: "A good stage, well supplied by scenery, should be built in connection with one of the halls in this city . . . The stage at the Turner Hall is no longer serviceable and the scenery is too dilapidated to be respectable. The Chronicle is positive that \$500 could be raised to aid in construction and equipment of a suitable stage. Let

someone make a move in the matter."

September 17, 1889: "Theatrical troupes seem to avoid this town. Is it because the stage in our hall is in such poor condition?"

June 25, 1889: "The graduation exercises of the High School take place at Turner Hall next Friday evening. The names of the graduation class are as follows: Albert Pilon, Fred Hartung, Joseph Wojta, Arthur Lohman, John Walsh, Rose Saier and Gussie Wiemann.

January 31, 1893: "New Scenery. Ernest Koeser and Joseph Schwab have been re-fitting the stage of the Turner Hall and getting it ready for the production of the celebrated play, 'Nevada'".

April 15, 1902: "Liedertafel Ball last Friday evening was a great success. The receipts were fully as large as were anticipated and will be used to defray the expenses of the Saengerfest to be held in this city next June. The Gold watch raffled off was won by George Piot."

August 25, 1911: "Picture War Has Now Been Declared". There is to be a moving picture show war in this city . . . Frank Bonk who has been operating a motion picture show in the Opera House has leased the Empire Hall for a period of one year." (Note: In January of 1911, John Tadych, proprietor of the Empire Saloon, started a new building on the corner of 18th and Washington Street. For further details see newspaper story of January 27, 1911, Joseph Mann Library.)

August 25, 1911: "Ed Niquette, the proprietor of the Opera House has decided to operate a motion picture show in his hall himself. On Tuesday he went to Milwaukee to buy the best motion picture show machinery obtainable. It is probable that the motion picture show will come down to 5 cents."

October 20, 1911: "Ed Niquette, the Opera House Man, is contracting for a sanding and polishing machine. Mr. Niquette will utilize the machine whenever the floor of his dance hall gets too rough for dancing."

February 17, 1912: "The New York National Basketball team will play a return game at the Opera House Thursday, February 22. The Hamilton team will be greatly strengthened for the game."

October 19, 1912: "Big Attraction at the Opera House. Mr. E. Kreutzer of Sheboygan exhibited a musical instrument at the Opera House which is a band in itself. The machine plays eighteen different musical instruments . . . electric power is used . . . (for) waltzes, overtures, etc. It is wonderful indeed."

February 17, 1912: "Minstrel Show Very Popular. Woodmen Present a Fine Musical and Entertainment Program. The Cocobola Minstrels was a roaring success in every respect. In spite of the cold weather the audience was very large. Many popular songs were sung and the singing could hardly be excelled. The jokes which were sprung were all original and were highly appreciated by every one. Special credit is due the "end men" for their singing and acting. The Gloe-Naidl Orchestra as usual delighted the audience with their excellent music. The costumes and arrangements were very



Cocobola Minstrels, 1912

attractive and finely fitted the occasion. William Bremer one of our successful manufacturers gave several exhibitions in slight of hand performing. After the concert the greater part of the crowd remained for the dance which lasted until 2 o'clock. Owing to many requests the performance was reproduced on Sunday with great success."

July 19, 1913: "The Opera House is being artistically decorated by Desthle & Co., of Milwaukee. The work will require about 3 weeks time to complete."

September 30, 1913: "The Kinetophone Exhibition. People in pictures, talking and moving about may be seen at the Opera House next Wednesday and what a short time ago we would have called a miracle is now a reality. Edison's wonderful invention the Kinetophone makes it possible . . . The engagement at the Opera House, Wednesday, September 24 will be the first appearance of this new Edison talking marvel here."

December 10, 1915: "Better Pictures Assured. The Opera House management has contracted to show the famous Paramount pictures each week. These pictures have heretofore been shown only in the best large city theatres, being high priced films."

April 15, 1931: New Community House Dedication.

Once the new J. E. Hamilton Community House began to operate full time, it became the final blow to a viable Opera House operation. The April 15, 1931 edition of the Two Rivers Reporter extensively covered the dedication of the Community House with the full program and pictures.

Perhaps one of the finest articles on the Opera House to appear was written shortly after the death of Edward Niquette and published in the Two Rivers Reporter on February 7, 1946. It is titled "Remember Way Back When Old Opera House Was Amusement Center Here?" It was written, I believe, by Seymour Alten although no credit by-line was claimed at the time. I can personally recall that my own father, Cyril Niquette, worked with the reporter in preparing background for the story. The article was so extensive and I will be calling on information and data from it so extensively, that I will not

be formally quoting or giving credit every time from here on.

If the Opera House building were still standing today, it would be fair to say it could become an historic site. It could also be developed into a working museum. For those still living who knew the place personally it would certainly bring back many memories. For those of us who were never there, it would enkindle many visions of an earlier era of an amusement life which would be rich in theatrical, social, political, educational, and athletic history.

BASKETBALL AT THE OPERA HOUSE

Perhaps it was basketball that was



Reach Athletic Team, 1904-05

Left to right: 1st row, Billy Reed, Frank Lamach, Anton Lamach; Back row, Julius Belz, Joseph Eggers, Gus "Shorty" Belz

most closely connected with the popularity of the place, however. Organized in 1902, the crack old Reach Athletic Club team with the celebrated Frank Lamach, made the Opera House its home floor. Then came The St. Joe team which was followed by the renowned Hamilton's team which in 1904 completed a successful trip to the West Coast. For a four year period a team of home talent stars kept the community from the caging map.

Earlier under date of February 17, 1911 mention was made of the game between the Hamilton Team and the New York Nationals. Raymond Ahearn, who recalled seeing this game at the time of my interview with him on January 27, 1978, said that the New York Nationals were the "best team in the nation". He said that the Hamilton team "swamped" them. Hamiltons was able to hold the National's star player, George Fogarty, to two points in the whole game. He recalled that Frank Krejcie guarded him first and then other players guarded him to give him a full court press. Hamiltons went on to win the game and it was real basketball history that was made. After that the Hamilton team of Harry Wierzbach, Frank Lamach, Frank "Bob" Wolf, Frank Krejcie, George "Mickey" Hammel, Otto Stangel, and Billy Reed went on tour to the west coast. The manager of this team was John Mosell. Raymond Ahearn recalled that this team played a team from Nome, Alaska, and also recalled that they played for no pay.

The Hamilton Mfg. Co. paid all their expenses and the team took a percentage of the gate for themselves. He further added that this team was known at the time as a "World Champion Basketball Team".

Big time basketball at the Opera House assumed further great proportions with the coming to Two Rivers of Dr. A. V. (Doc) Delmore who a short time later formed the Legionnaires, state professional champs for two seasons. Delmore's team broke all records in attendances in playing such teams as Skinny O'Connor's Milwaukee Bright Spots, the Milwaukee Harvesters, the Beloit Fairies, the Kiki Cuyler's Flint Team, and lastly the incomparable Chicago "Big Five".

ONE NIGHTERS

The Opera House was also well known for what was called "one nighters". Some of the finest "one nighters" played to capacity crowds in the Opera House from 1906 to 1912. Youngsters would flock around the billboards as Orville Henrickson posted those immense sheets on board in front of the Opera House and several other locations about town. The billings showed such offerings as "The Prince of Tonight" starring Henry T. Woodruff, "Tempest and Sunshine", Stetson's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "R. M. Harvey's Minstrels" — the latter two with their big street parades.

STOCK COMPANIES

Stock companies, usually one week stands, went well at the Opera House. The Winniger Bros. were very popular. There was Charles, Frank, and John. Charles Winniger became very popular on Broadway and in Hollywood. Other stock companies that played the Opera House were Don C. Hall, Frank E. Long, George Paul, Beach-Jones and the Shannon Players. Home talent productions were also popular in the early days of the Opera House. Recalling some of the amateur thespians — the Burgard sisters, Julianna Althen, Anna Haas, George (Himself) Tomaschefsky, Ed Sosnosky, Orville Henrickson, Jack Gehrke, Ben Schaefer, Sam Nelson, Jack Felsner and Robert Jebavy.

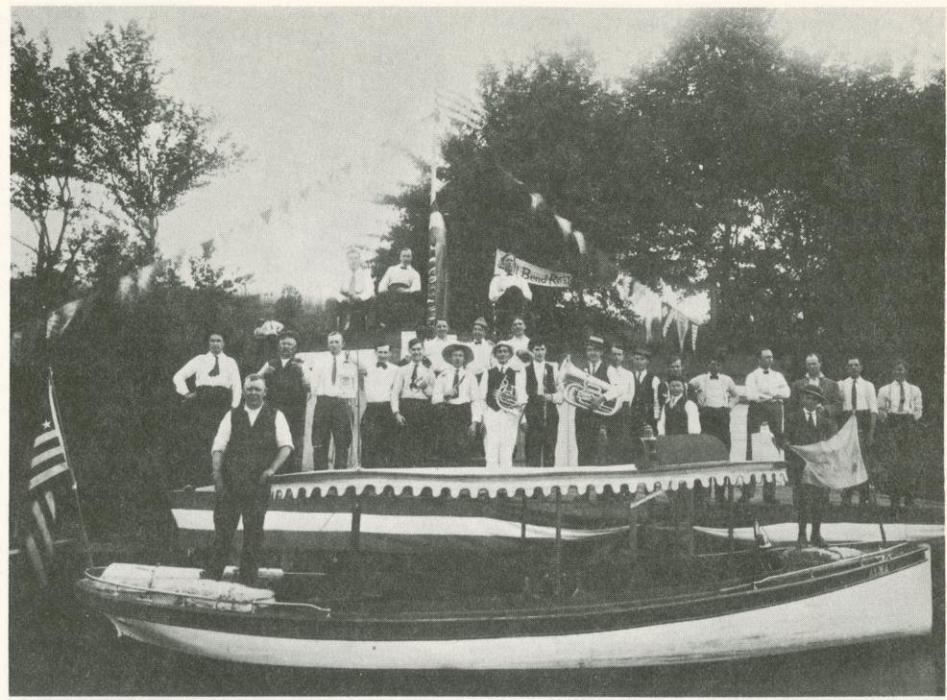
"Westerns" were the vogue in those home talent days as was indicated by some of the titles: "The Daughter of the Desert", "Rocky Ford", "the Little Big Horn" and "For the Honor of a Cowboy".

Numerous organizations staged dances annually at the Opera House. Among the most popular were the Quin Athletic Club's Easter Ball, usually the first event after the Lenten season, the Campfire Girls, headed by Mrs. Lucie Conant, the Knights of Columbus, and the Booster Club.

MASQUERADES

Masquerades were also extremely popular, particularly from 1904 to 1915. Most outstanding was the annual masquerade of the Dexter Hook and Ladder Company of the old Two Rivers Volunteer Fire Department. The Quin Athletic Club also found the holding of masked balls profitable during those days.

Two Rivers also waited faithfully each year for the Cocobola Minstrels, the



Still Bend Rest

Left to right: On Stern: Fred Smith; On Bow: unknown; On Dock: "Hipski" Miller, Frank "Baker" Walters, Joseph Beitzel, Albert Rumph, Milford Henrickson, Joseph Naidl, John Brintner, Joseph Rehrauer, Henry Wirtzbach, George Wolf, unknown, Hugo Henrickson, Joseph Pilon, Guido Berger, Charles Krause, John Vanderbloemen, unknown; Third Row: George Hammel, unknown, Charles Kotchi; Top Row: Ed Niquette, Charles Kurtz, Ed Lahey. offering of the local Modern Woodmen Camp. In the earlier days Arthur Alden was the musical director and the interlocutor role was taken by former city father, Guy C. Hurst. Later Mark Hammel successfully directed the undertakings. Lorenz F. Lueck, who came here from Ripon College and was director of the Hamilton Band, was the last of the directors of the pleasing home talent shows.

GLOE-NAIDL ORCHESTRA

Two Rivers' most famous musical organization for many years was the Gloe-Naidl Orchestra. The make up of the group varied from time to time, of course, but the Gloe twins Arthur and Archie were steady members. August Gloe played piano and Randy Gloe played the sax. Three Naidls, Frank, Joe and Albert played in the band. In a picture of the "Katzenjammers", Joe Naidl can be seen holding what appears to be a clarinet, and it was either Frank or Albert that played the sliding trombone. It is also remembered that William Kapitz played drums. As noted above, the members would change from time to time due to various reasons. According to Lester Niquette, one of their most popular stage presentations was a number called the "Anvil Chorus". A steel anvil was used and the drummers sticks were wired to electric power. The house lights would be dimmed and when the sticks were tapped on the anvil, sparks would fly and hiss. The orchestra also performed annually with the Cocobola Minstrels, and was active for many years playing dances and shows while appearing regularly at the Opera House. Popular at the Opera House were "Jitney" dances for which you paid a fee each time you danced. The Library Ball often had competition dancing. Couples would wear numbers

on their backs and be judged. The combination of Raymond Ahearn and Caroline Ammerman once won the prize as champion waltzers.

GRADUATIONS

Until the new Washington High School was built, the graduation exercises were held at the Opera House, as were those for the local grade schools. The building was used for musical recitals and band concerts, political talks and the like. One particularly sad graduation class was the class of 1922.

Mrs. Robert Murphy (Estelle) was a member of that class as was Roy Rudebeck. Actually Roy never graduated as the day before graduation he was killed in an unfortunate accident while working at the Aluminum Goods Mfg. Co., as the Mirro Corp. was then called. It seems that a truck he was riding in tipped on its side while crossing some railroad tracks and crushed him to death. At the exercises there was no singing during the march and a black chair in the front row was left empty to symbolize his death. After the graduation, the whole class marched from the Opera House silently to the cemetery.

KATZENJAMMERS

The Opera House "crowd" had a summer outing location on the East Twin River at a location called "Still Bend". Pictures which accompany this article show and name many of the members at some of these outings. Some arrived at the "Still Bend Rest" by boat and one of these boats shown on the picture is named the "Alma" after Guido Berger's daughter Alma who married George Brown. According to Raymond Ahearn being a Katzenjammer was a "big deal". The fellows would get together very often on weekends and holidays for drinking, smoking, singing, and playing of music.



The Katzenjammers

Left to right: Front Row: unknown, Jack Gehrke, John Vanderbloemen, Alfred Rumph, Hugo Henrickson, George Hammel, Alfred Zoerb, Dickenshead, Frank Kocarowski; Middle Row: Joseph Pilon, Edward Scheuer, John Beitzel, Milfred Henrickson; Back Row: Fred Smith, Charles Kurtz, Joseph Rehrauer, Guido Berger, Frank Wolfe, Ed Niquette, Ed Lahey, Joseph Kotchi, George Schnoor; Top Row: Charles Brandtner, Henry Wierzbach.

This often happened aboard the "Alma" as well. In looking over the enlargements which I showed him. Mr. Ahearn immediately recognized many faces. He said to me "There is Joe Naidl, he is the man with the horn. There is "Miffy" Henrickson and "Baker" Walters. "Baker" used to run the bakery two doors down from Schroeder's store. Frank Wolf is still alive and at the Hamilton Home (this was in 1978). And that is "Hipski" Miller, he was a crazy nut. Frank Kotchie used to run a tavern where Plantico Drug Store now is. Charlie and Gust Kirst were brothers and their home was where the Community House now is. That boat named the Alma is named after Guido Berger's daughter and there is your Grandfather, Ed Niquette. Oh, I tell you, that was a big deal!" That was in January of 1978 when Raymond was 84. I am glad that I had the tape recorder running as it all came so fast I would never have written it down fast enough.

Having talked to many different people about the Opera House and its operation for many years, a lot of names were dropped as to who did what as far as jobs, tasks, services, and employment. At what point in time these people did these tasks was difficult to determine, but surely it would be interesting to record them for the readers here. Keep in mind that many of these references are strictly from the recollections of people remembering names and situations fifty to sixty years ago and more. Therefore the failure to mention anyone, or to mention everyone in the exact right context, is unintentional.

Edward and Mary Niquette (nee Gagnon), owners of the Opera House, were the chief planners and decision makers during the period of their

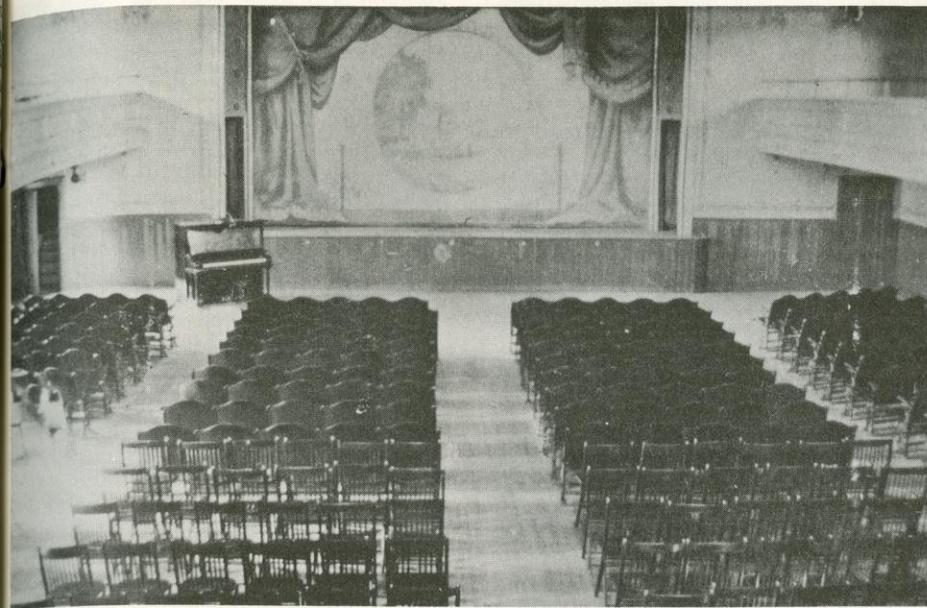
ownership. Edward spent a great deal of time behind the bar and organizing events and programs. Mary, besides raising her four children, minded the living quarters and planned much of the food for both the light lunch counter in the bar and for the sandwich shop toward the main entrance of the building. Various people helped in the sandwich shop preparing hamburgers, sandwiches and other light lunches — depending on the occasion. Art and Hattie Nischke were often making hamburgers and the smell of them frying often proved too much to resist. In those days exhaust fans and frying hoods were not required and they aided sales a great deal. Of course, Mary Niquette often worked the sandwich shop with her daughter Julia. Caroline Ammerman also worked there I'm told.

Several times Mike Beitzel's name came up as a bartender. John Beitzel was a door guard and ticket taker as was Frank Nischke. Lester Niquette and Cyril Niquette often took tickets as did John Dietz. Frank Rehrauer was one in charge of building security, but the duration or timing was not recalled. Raymond Ahearn and Lester Niquette often did cleaning chores, and Lester mentioned that Cora Sibenhorn dusted seats. The main hall had to have wooden chairs put up and taken down with great regularity as the main floor was alternately used for basketball and dances as well as movies and vaudeville.



Ed Niquette "Prop"

Left to right: Al Rehrauer, Milfred Henrickson, Al Rumpf, Mike Beitzel, unknown, John Beitzel



Opera House Stage

"one-nighters" and the like. Mary Niquette was very energetic and was remembered for her swift chair moving. However, this was such a big task that all available help would do it when needed.

For a time Henry McDonald had the concession stand which was situated under the west stairs to the balcony. From that small alcove large amounts of popcorn, candy, and pop were sold at all kinds of functions. It was an unusually busy spot and was aided by "hawkers" who would circulate through the crowds. Lester Niquette and Ed Kreschek would sell items at going prices and were allowed to keep 5 cents for every dollar's worth of goods sold.

Once silent movies became popular, background music was provided by piano. Some one remembered Olga Johannes and also Mark Hammel as piano players for all occasions. Many people will remember Cyril Niquette for his unique skill with the piano and later the electric organ. It is said that Cyril became interested in the piano after hearing Mark Hammel play, and Cyril took lessons for many years from Professor B. J. Wetzel who was principal of the St. John's School at the time. In 1912-13 he also studied with Ida Baetz and was soon playing for the early silent movies. There was a regular series of numbers that were used to create the proper mood atmosphere for the tender, tragic and suspense sections of the old films. "Hearts and Flowers" was a typical tear jerker. "Pony Boy" was used during the chase scenes of William S. Hart's horse operas. "Under the Double Eagle" was played as the rescuing troopers would charge onto the scene and "On Moonlight Bay" was popular at the clinch that concluded the show. Cyril once told me that he got to know those numbers so well that he could play them without needing the music at all and could even do school work assignments with his eyes at the same time without losing concentration. Cyril also became an accomplished organist and played pipe organs during movie intermissions in Two Rivers at the Rivoli, in Manitowoc at the Mikadow, in LaCrosse for a short

time. When working in Washington, D.C. during World War I he played at the then famed Knickerbocker. He was very proud of the fact that while playing there one

evening President Woodrow Wilson and members of his cabinet were in attendance.

Before bringing this history of the Opera House to a close, a human interest story needs to be told. It was told to me by Lester Niquette during one of our many periods of research. It was referred to earlier in this article, and this is about how he told it to me:

"As a young man, back in the early 1900's, I helped my father in the Opera House tavern. To encourage bar trade, we had set up a free lunch table and it was an instant success. One regular customer named Frank presented us early with a difficult problem, however. Each day after work Frank came in, ordered his usual 5 cent beer and went to the lunch table for his free lunch — which was more like a meal. He always left his beer sitting on the bar while he ate his fill. By then the foam would have settled and he always insisted that his beer be "topped off". Other patrons too became annoyed by this unfair treatment to the house as well, until finally one day someone slipped up and drank Frank's beer while he was at the lunch table. Of course, Frank was enraged, but Dad just insisted that he



Cyril J. Niquette, 1897-1966



Two Rivers Opera House, 1931

must have drunk it himself. The next day Frank returned with a little printed note which he put next to his full glass which said: 'I spit in this beer'. He then went to the lunch table as usual. Seeing this note Dad quickly added to the note: 'So did I'. Frank had finally met his match."

Ed Niquette finally sold the Opera House on December 24, 1922 to Gus Gloe. Since he died shortly after taking over, his widow sold to John Tadych. Various

managers worked for Mr. Tadych. One was Charles "Hinky" Kurtz who rented the bar and living quarters for a while. I'm told that Sid Kurtz lived there from 1918 to 1926. John Tadych Jr. managed the hall for his father.

Several circumstances led to the end of the Opera House and its sale in 1931 to the federal government as a site of the U.S. Post Office. The building by the late twenties was no longer up to date and had

fallen out of style. Building codes were being established for public buildings that required remodeling so extensive to be impractical. The Rivoli Theater was built in 1922 and opened on December 1, 1922. With Ed Niquette as manager and one of the principal officers this no doubt caused a further decline in trade at the former establishment. It is interesting to note that on opening night at the Rivoli the Gloe-Naidl Orchestra performed and there was a full vaudeville show followed by a movie entitled "Rich Men's Wives". Percy Cowan played the new Bartola organ. The house was full and the special ticket price for this grand opening was \$3.00 per seat. The public was really impressed with this new establishment.

Also in 1931, the J. E. Hamilton Community House was dedicated and opened as a gift to the community by Mr. Hamilton. This facility being brand new, larger, and offering a basketball court stage, comfortable seating and meeting rooms of various kinds, was the new "Opera House" of its day.

The Turners and their early activities down through William Schaefer, Ed Niquette and finally John Tadych helped mold the entertainment life of the community of Two Rivers to a good extent during the period. They also fulfilled a need in a developing community through which people could find entertainment, relaxation, and physical exercise in such sports as basketball, roller skating, and acrobatics.

We owe these early pioneers a debt of gratitude, and I hope this written effort acknowledges and pays that debt.

MANITOWOC COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Address of Communications To:

NEWSLETTER
1115 North 18th Street
Manitowoc, Wisconsin 54220

Non-Profit Organization
U.S. POSTAGE PAID

Manitowoc, Wisconsin
PERMIT No. 388