

BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

September/October 1993

Blue Earth County Historian

There's No Business Like Showbusiness

Mapleton's Opera House and Company

Inella Burns

A century ago, the village opera house served as a community center where townsfolk could enjoy traveling shows, dances, club events, evangelical meetings and performances by local talent.

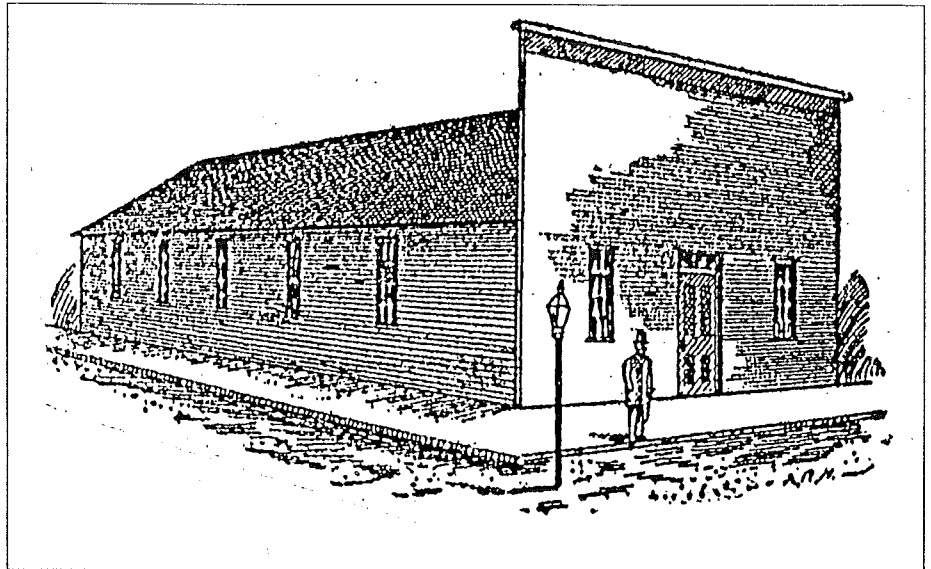
In Mapleton it was also the home of the Mapleton Opera Company.

The Mapleton Opera House began as a skating rink in the late 1880s. Soon a stage was constructed at one end and the building adapted for theater use.

Charles Brown, son of pioneer merchant James E. Brown, had both the enthusiasm and talent for producing plays and musicals.

The Mapleton Opera Company was organized under Brown's leadership. C. Griebel and A. Bierbauer worked with Brown to manage both the opera house and company.

The Mapleton Opera Company performed in John Sprague's Hall, a second floor auditorium, before converting the skating rink. In the fall of 1887, after hoisting Brown's upright piano up the long stairway, the company began rehearsals for its first



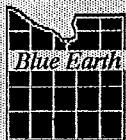
An artist's drawing of the Mapleton Roller Skating Rink. The building was converted for use by the opera company sometime during the 1890s. The company performed in John Sprague's Hall, a second floor auditorium before acquiring the roller rink. (BECHS Collection)

performance, "The Mikado," with Joe Stevens in the title role. This was followed in 1888 by "The Little Tycoon," starring John Bishop.

"The Chimes of Normandy" was the opera company's first production to be staged in the Mapleton Opera House. For this musical, the company's first press-printed handbills (some on white muslin) were tacked up around the village.

Flo Hanna was the lead vocalist, and in the supporting cast were Viva and Retta Plymat, Frank Davis, Joe Stevens, Pat Keaveney, Ed Gilmore and professor Giddings, the school principal. Other early plays or operettas were "Erminie," "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Ali Baba" and "Said Pasha."

Along with the above cast, actors frequently appearing in these productions were Charlie



Blue Earth County Historian

The *Blue Earth County Historian* is published bimonthly by the Blue Earth County Historical Society.

The Blue Earth County Historical Society is a non-profit organization and has been collecting and preserving artifacts of historical value to the people of south central Minnesota since 1901.

BECHS is the only organization or institution entirely dedicated to the collection, preservation and exhibition of Blue Earth County History.

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(Mankato State University Intern)

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415 Cherry St.
Mankato, MN 56001

BECHS also operates the historic R. D. Hubbard House. Built in 1871 by Rensselaer D. Hubbard, founder of Hubbard Milling Company, the elegant mansion and nearby brick carriage house contain many displays and artifacts which are open to the public.

The Hubbard House is owned by the city of Mankato and has been operated by BECHS since 1938.

The Hubbard House is being readied for restoration and is listed on the State Historical Record, as well as the National Register of Historic Places.

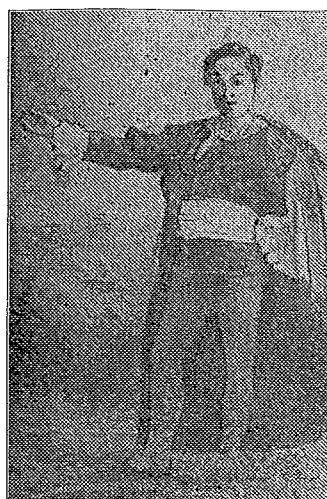
Hubbard House
606 S. Broad St.
Mankato, MN
1-4 p.m.

Tuesday - Sunday



From the June 2, 1938 Blue Earth County Enterprise
Left: Charles Brown as Grenicheaux in "Chimes of Normandy."

Right: Ed Gilmore in "Erminie." (BECHS Collection)



opera company and sewn or otherwise created by actors and their friends or families.

Kimonos for "The Mikado" were made of brightly colored calico. Wigs for male characters were white stocking caps covered with curled furniture moss. Jim Wishart's blue wedding cut-away--adorned with brass buttons, red lapels and lace cuffs--appeared in numer-

ous performances. Brooks, Lurton Moses, Lottie Johnson, Jack Johnson, George and Ada Gilmore, Hattie Weatherbee and Minnie Troendle, who often served as accompanist.

One of the company's operettas, "The Sleeping Queen," was staged at a reception given by Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hotaling and Mr. and Mrs. Charles Brown to honor visiting Blue Earth County teachers.

The opera house, furnished with sofas, easy chairs, rugs and even singing canaries, was elaborately decorated.

In the center of the room was a garden fountain in the form of a cupid holding up a sea shell. Water from the fountain flowed into a pool wreathed in ferns and potted plants.

"A good time was had by all," reported the Blue Earth County Enterprise.

Although T. Henry French's illustrated book of period attire was often consulted, costumes were mostly improvised by the

ous performances.

The character wig in "Erminie" was ordered from New York, but the white court wigs were made locally from "white crepe hair."

Some of the boots and shoes were made in Charles Griebel's custom shoe shop in Mankato. Eventually the opera company acquired a good sized theatrical wardrobe.

Everyone helped paint the scenery. Cotton sheeting was tacked onto a 9-by-12 foot frame, sized with hot water containing glue and yellow ochre, and left to dry. On this was sketched a garden, ship's deck, palace or other required scene and then painted with water colors from the local drug store.

Through the years the company stockpiled an assortment of usable scenery, although an occasional scene had to be ordered from Chicago.

Lighting the stage proved to be a challenge and sometimes a hazard, as Brown recalled years

later in a Blue Earth County Enterprise article:

Kerosene lamps and tin reflectors served as footlights. On one occasion, two tanks of gas were expressed from Minneapolis, and a real 'lime-light' was used with colored gelatin for light effects.

Later 'Tinner' Johnson made a set of gasoline footlights which worked fine until an actor happened to drop his handkerchief on one of the gas jets putting the flame out.

Soon the gasoline ran from the open jet into the tin footlight trough, setting it afire. Shutting off the gas tank stopped the flow, however, and the fire burned out. We did the rest of the show by candlelight.

The Mapleton Opera Company was an enterprising, dedicated amateur troupe. Flo Hanna had the only trained voice, and everyone else sang by ear, learning the music by singing in unison around the piano. No part singing was attempted.

Music and lyrics for a production were usually available, but when it was impossible to get the dialogue, as in the case of "Ali Baba," the company got together and wrote an original story to fit the music.

"In those days, we had to create our own entertainment or do



Bob and Eva McGinley, professional actors and friends of the Hotalings. They performed several times at the opera house. (BECHS Collection)

without," Brown wrote.

For some, the amateur experience paid off. Jack Johnson became a professional actor, Flo Hanna toured with the Andrews Opera Company and Brown wrote and produced profitable musical comedies and plays in the east.

The Mapleton Opera Company lost its manager and an enthusiastic worker when the Browns moved to New York in

1896, but it continued its productions in the opera house, which was also used at that time for a variety of entertainments, evangelist meetings and lectures.

Random samplings from the Enterprise include a temperance lecture by Father Cleary, president

of the National Total Abstinence Union in 1887; a local cast of 50 in "Temple of Fame," a Christian Endeavor benefit directed by Carrie McCune of Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1898; a week of picture-machine entertainment by the Kickapoo Medicine Company in 1903; and a number of Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve balls.

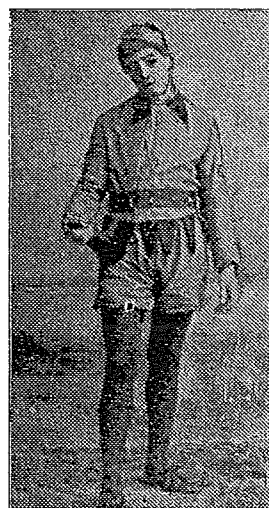
Eventually abandoned as an opera house, the building was used by Schwear Equipment Company, McGuiggan Garage and Frank Elevator until 1972 when it was torn down and replaced by the new home of Harold and Fern Rosenquist.

The Enterprise recorded its final days:

Work will soon be completed in the dismantling of what is known as the old opera house in Mapleton. The Harold Rosenquist crew have been busy tearing down the old structure, and each day a little more



Left: George Gilmore as Marks the Lawyer in "Uncle Tom's Cabin."



Right: Jack Johnson in "Ali Baba." From June 2, 1938 Blue Earth County Enterprise

I often like to walk along the railroad tracks downtown. As I do, my mind sometimes wanders back to an era long before my time.

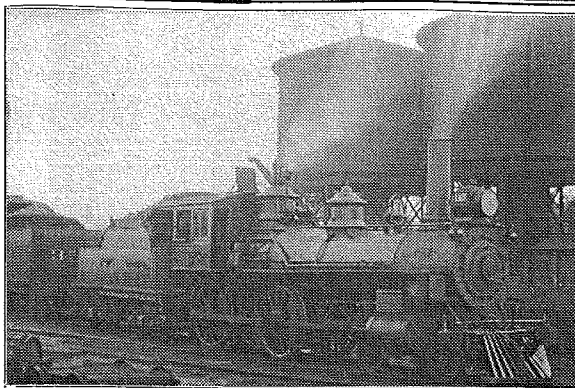
The pungent odor of sulfur fills the downtown Mankato air as coal smoke haze rises from the direction of the railroad yard.

A bell is heard frequently ringing followed by the bark of a steam locomotive and the banging together of freight cars.

Down in the Hubbard Mill yard, an Omaha Tenwheeler is "kicking" grain cars, making up a train bound for the Twin Cities.

It's more than 80 degrees outside but the soot covered crewmembers in the locomotive are wearing overalls and chore-coats to protect themselves from the firebox heat, and the soot and grease of the locomotive.

The smell of creosote, valve oil and steam are intensified by the



blistering summer heat.

Outside the Omaha roundhouse, No. 143 and a 350 class Tenwheeler simmer on the ready track. They sit majestically silent except for the distinctive whine of their steam powered dynamos and the rhythmic pounding of their cross-compound air pumps.

A hostler comes toward the locomotives from the roundhouse.



Summer

Ghosts of

• Opera House from page 3 •

of the building disappears.

But not all of the Mapleton Opera House has disappeared. According to Fern Rosenquist:

When my husband and his crew of two were tearing down the old opera house--board by board--an old gentleman who lived nearby came every day to collect square nails into old tobacco cans.

The lumber of the old building looked 'tough'--blackened with age--but seasoned, straight and dry. With

the dismantling completed, the crew started to put up the framework of the new residence using the old lumber of the opera house.

On seeing what was happening, the old gentleman picked up his nail filled tobacco cans, turned to my husband and said with determination, "I watched you tear down that old building, but I'll be d----- if I'm going to watch you put it right back up again!"

The kindly old gentleman is long gone, but the "spirits" from

the old opera house still dwell on the opera corner. They remain there enclosed in the new family residence underneath its coat of modern siding.

Surely among these "spirits" are the many memories of the Mapleton Opera Company performances.

Sources:

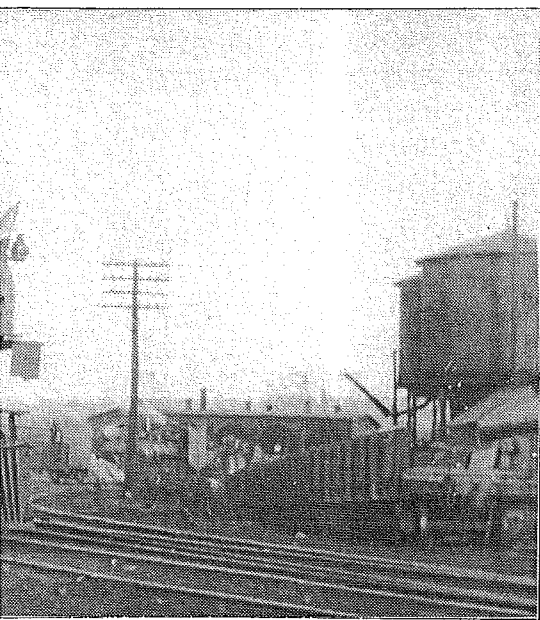
Blue Earth County Enterprise, June 2, 1938

Ronald J. Newell, "Where the Winding Maple Flows"

Daydreaming

the Omaha Road

Jeffrey Braun



He carries with him a "long-stem" oil can. Soon he'll be "oiling around" No. 143 and checking its fire in preparation for another run.

The ornate No. 143 is a venerable American type dating back to the 1880s. More than forty-years old, it's still pounding the rails, holding down the local passenger runs.

Its 4-4-0 wheel arrangement was an industry standard from the 1850s to the 1890s. No. 143 was a big road locomotive in its day, but now is hopelessly out-classed by modern steam power on the Omaha. Relegated to branchline duty, its days are numbered.

Out on the south end departure track, Tenwheeler No. 311 is flying green flags, signifying it's

heading up the first section of an outbound freight.

As soon as the conductor and his brakemen finish their brake test, they'll signal the engineer and head back to their caboose.

With a "highball" from the conductor, No. 311's engineer will start the bell ringing, give two blasts of the whistle, drop the Johnson bar forward, release the brakes and ease the throttle back.

Now the fireman gets to earn his pay as the exhaust draft tries to suck his fire (and shovel if he's not hanging on tight!) through the boiler flues and out the smoke-stack.

If he planned ahead, he already banked the fire and filled the boiler with water while the rest of the crew did its brake test.

The fireman still has his work cut out for him though. With clouds of steam escaping from the cylinder cocks and the exhaust barking loudly, the coupler slack stretches out and the train slowly begins to move.

The fireman, poised at the threshold between locomotive cab

and tender, begins his task of slinging coal into the firebox. The hot, clear exhaust from the locomotive turns to jet black plumes rising high into the air with the first few shovelfulls he throws in.

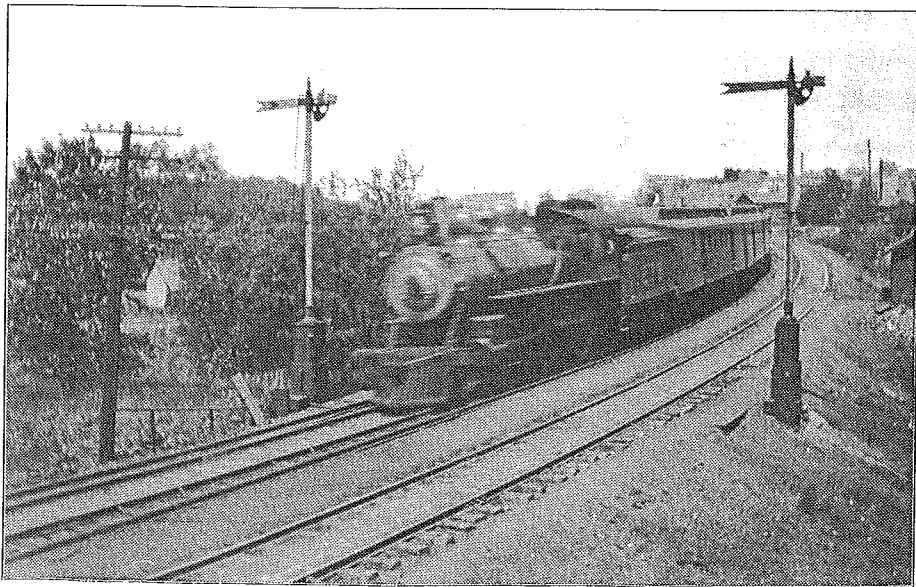
If he's done his job correctly though, the stack will soon clear and stay clear as long as the engineer is "working" the engine.

As the train leaves town, a lonesome whistle can be heard approaching from the north. It's No. 278 with some varnish (a passenger train) from the Twin Cities.

No. 278 is almost 20 years newer than No. 143 and still a premier passenger locomotive on the Omaha.

With its steam safety valve screaming, the American type speeds its train past the semaphores north of town and soon will slow to a stop at the Union Depot.

Unfortunately, the blating of a Chicago & Northwestern diesel's airhorn and the banging of freight cars brings me back to 1993.



From the Desk of BECHS Director

Linda Henry

The dream of restoring Hubbard house is growing closer to reality. Blue prints of the second floor have been drawn and sent to Charlie Nelson, Historical Architect at the Minnesota Historical Society, for approval. Upon Nelson's approval of the blue prints, bids will be accepted for the restoration work. It is our hope second floor restoration will begin by early fall.

There are many tasks to be done before the contractors begin working. We are in need of volunteers to help strip wallpaper and paint, as well as move articles from Hubbard House to the archives area of Heritage Center. Old display cases will

also need to be dismantled and cut for shelving and storage on third floor. If you are interested in volunteering for any of these tasks, please call Linda at 345-5566.

Please keep in mind that period furniture will be needed for the final steps of the Hubbard House restoration. We will inform you of the style and pieces we need in a future newsletter.

We would like to thank the many members who responded to our request for donations in our last newsletter. A total of \$739 has been received at this time.

Hope to see you at our Fall Festival on Sept 12.

BECHS News Briefs

• QUILT SHOW RAFFLE

Quilt Show 1993 ran July 1 through 31 and was a successful event. Thank you to everyone who displayed quilts or bought raffle tickets.

Winners in the quilt raffle were Jim Baer of Pemberton and Harley Goff of Mankato.

• FALL FESTIVAL

Woodworking, weaving, quilting, homemade ice cream and old time music are just a few of the attractions at the Fall Festival, Sunday, Sept. 12.

The festival runs from 1-4 p.m. at the Hubbard House, 606 S. Broad St.

Between 2 and 3 p.m., Margaret Schwankl will demonstrate

basket weaving and festival visitors can enjoy the old time music of Erwin Suess.

There will be other demonstrations throughout the day including woodworking by Julius Depyper and quilting by members of Deep Valley Quilters.

From 3-4 p.m., Carol Oney will demonstrate loom weaving.

In addition to the demonstrations, various collections will be displayed including: toy tractors, rocks, and the doll collection of Rosana Gasman.

There will be plenty of free samples of homemade ice cream made right at the Hubbard House by Bryce Stenzel.

In addition to the free food, hot dogs and 1919 Root Beer will

be sold.

Come out and join the Fall Festival fun from 1-4 p.m. at the Hubbard House, Sunday, Sept. 12.

• GHOSTS FROM THE PAST
Figures from Blue Earth County's past have been reported lurking in the woods of Williams Nature Center.

Rather than escaped criminals, these lurking figures are volunteers of the Blue Earth County Historical Society.

October 2 and 3, BECHS will host its annual "Ghosts From the Past."

Beginning at 5:45 p.m. both Saturday and Sunday, visitors will be guided through Williams Na-

ture Center's trail, encountering a variety of historical Blue Earth County figures. Each figure is played by a volunteer of BECHS.

Cost for Ghosts From the Past is \$6 non-members and \$5 members.

Bus service will be available between West High School and Williams Nature Center, near Minneopa State Park on Highway 68.

· **CRAFT AND BAKE SALE**
Mark Saturday, Nov. 6 on your calendar. BECHS annual craft and bake sale will be 9 a.m. - 4 p.m. at the Heritage Center.

B-BQ sandwiches and chips will also be on sale.

Call Linda at 345-5566 if you want a table, or just want to donate craft or baked goods, or volunteer your time to help out.

· **YOUNG HISTORIANS**
September is time for going back to school.

See what going back to school was like for past Blue Earth County children, Sept. 18.

Children will also get to make caramel apples.

October 30 is the Halloween Party.

There will be a prize for best costume. Pumpkin painting and refreshments will also be part of the fare.

Young Historians meets 2 - 4 p.m. at the Heritage Center and is free to members, \$1.50 to non-members.

Memorial

In memory of *Lawrence and Alvina Martinson* and *George and Beulah Anderson* by George and Harriet Anderson.

Thank You!

Blue Earth County Historical Society would like to thank the following people for their generous donations to the historical society's general operating fund in response to its plea in the last issue of Blue Earth County Historian.

Alma Severson
Lois Kvitek
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Willard & Doris Vetter
Stanley Steel

Membership News

Thank you to the new and renewing members.

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Robert & Glee Robinson	Beverly Stroebel
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Linda Henry	Director
Carol Oney	Archives Aide
Bryce Stenzel	Museum Aide
Betty Henry	Museum Aide

Calendar of Events September/October 1993

Sept. 12 - Fall Festival

1 - 4 p.m.
Heritage Center, 415 Cherry St.

Sept. 18 - Young Historians

2 - 4 p.m.
"Back to School" in Mankato Past
Heritage Center, 415 Cherry St.

Oct. 2,3 - Ghosts From the Past

Starting at 5:45 p.m.
Williams Nature Center

Oct. 30 - Young Historians

2 - 4 p.m.
Halloween Party
Heritage Center, 415 Cherry St.

Nov. 6 - Craft and Bake Sale

9 a.m. - 4 p.m.
Heritage Center, 415 Cherry St.

Heritage Center

415 Cherry St., Mankato

Exhibit Gallery 1-4 p.m.
Tuesday - Friday

Research Center 1-4 p.m.
Tuesday - Friday

Hubbard House

606 S Broad St., Mankato
1-4 p.m.
Saturday and Sunday only

Blue Earth County Historical Society
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(507) 345-5566

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