Finding Aid to the
Fargo Opera House Programs

Fargo Opera House
Fargo Opera House Programs, 1899-1911
1 linear ft.
Collection number: Mss 62

OVERVIEW

Links: See Mary Darrow Weible Collection (Mss 620) for miscellaneous Opera House programs from 1894-1908.

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Citation: [Identification of item], Fargo Opera House programs, MS 62, Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo.

HISTORY

The Fargo Opera House was born out of the ruins of the Fargo fire of 1893, when most of downtown Fargo, N.D. including most of its previous entertainment facilities were destroyed. First serious talk of a new opera house started at a meeting of the Fargo Board of Trade on September 15, 1893. A proposal was brought forward by Newton Stanford to build an opera house on the ruins of the Keeney block. Monetary
pledges of support were made by several prominent citizens, the first being Alex Stern. By October 1893
the site of the new opera house had been changed to property owned by Mr. Hagaman, a Chicago
businessman, on the southeast corner of 2nd Avenue N. and Roberts Street. The Hancock Brothers were
hired to design the building. On October 6, 1893 clearing of the fire ruins on the site started and
construction quickly commenced. The interior of the opera house featured an expansive dome, an
immense chandelier, frescoed walls, eight private boxes, a balcony, and seating for 988 people. The
theater’s full capacity of 1200 could be met with additional chairs. It was lit by both gas and electric
lighting. The drop curtain was painted by scenic artist, P. Clausen, and featured a view of Lake Como in
Switzerland. The total cost of the opera house was $28,000, not counting the cost of the land. Opening
night was February 14, 1894; the first play was Frohman’s Gloriana.

Management of the Fargo Opera House was placed in the hands of Walker Brothers who owned a
printing firm in Fargo. Active management of the opera house was place into the hands of C.P. (Corliss
Powers) Walker, under whom the theater flourished. In August of 1897, C.P. Walker started the Red
River Valley Circuit, which included opera houses in Fargo, Grand Forks, and Winnipeg (later Crookston
and Brainerd, Minn. were added). Mr. Walker moved the headquarters of the circuit to Winnipeg, where
he conducted his business. Other staff at the Fargo Opera House included: N.S. Matson, superintendent;
Harry Hance, stage manager; A.O. Rupert, orchestra leader; and Alson Brubaker, treasurer.

The Fargo Opera House attracted some of the great performers of the 1890s and 1900s including Eddie
Foy, Anna Held, Lillian Russell, Nance O’Neil, and Donald Meek. The acts ranged from comedy acts,
magicians, musical reviews, minstrel shows, plays and operas. Musicians, John Philip Sousa and his
band, and Italian conductor Ruggero Leoncavallo and his LaScala Orchestra performed there.

In July 1902, Walker Brothers purchased the opera house from the Hagaman estate, and immediately
made an addition onto the building’s west side. This addition included a cigar store, café and more
storage for scenery. The second floor of the addition contained apartments. The interior was remodeled
and redecorated several times by Walker Brothers, and improvements made to ventilation and lighting.

On December 22, 1912 a fire of undetermined origin destroyed the Fargo Opera House. The Walker
Brother’s plan to rebuild a new fireproof theater never materialized, and stage performances moved to
other theaters in town. The ruins for the Fargo Opera House remained until 1916, when the property was
sold to the North Dakota Realty Company. The new building on site, called the Equity Building (later the
Graver Hotel), utilized the east and south walls of the old Fargo Opera House.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Fargo Opera House programs, entitled The Theatre, were produced from the opening in 1894 till it
was destroyed by fire in 1912. The Institute holdings contain the years 1899-1911. The seasons of 1899-
are complete and in leather bound books likely produced by Walker Brothers printing firm. The
remaining years are loose leaf and very incomplete. The Mary Darrow Weible Collection (Mss 620)
contains an incomplete set of programs from 1894-1908.


BOX AND FOLDER LIST

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The Theatre programs

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