For One Night Only, or a Look at Theatre on the Kerosene Circuit

When Edwin Drake successfully tapped a vast, subterranean deposit of oil near Titusville in August of 1859, he unleashed a mania that within a decade enshrined the name of St. Petersburg—together with Foxburg, Parker, and Petrolia—in the annals of an infant industry. A once sleepy village of some thirty houses, St. Petersburg erupted between 1870–1875 into the largest town in Clarion County, struggling to cater to the needs of a reported 6,000 inhabitants.¹ That they might be served, five hotels as well as numerous boarding houses advertised their presence in an Oil Region directory. So, too, did three hardware and oil well supply stores, four blacksmith shops, a boiler works, and three pipeline offices.² A walk down St. Petersburg's streets would have revealed barber shops, livery stables, billiard parlours, and, not least among these professional establishments, the Opera House Hotel, whose second-story performance hall testified to the community's hunger for entertainment.

In point of fact, so potentially lucrative did St. Petersburg appear to Jerome Aiken, the proprietor of a large concert hall in Petroleum Center, that he conceived the plan of physically moving his establishment by water and rail to a St. Petersburg site. However, according to the Petroleum Center Daily Record (April 11, 1872), when Aiken put his plan into execution, the vessel transporting his structure down the Allegheny ran aground in the vicinity of Oil City. Not until May 25th did the same paper report the freeing of the vessel, the completion of the voyage as far as Foxburg, and the subsequent rail journey of the concert hall to St. Petersburg. Then, on June 14th, the Daily Record announced that Aiken had, on the

¹ 1872–1972 St. Petersburg Centennial (privately printed, 1972), 14, hereinafter, Centennial.
² Allegheny Valley and Oil Region Directory, for 1876–77 (Philadelphia, 1877), 29–32.
previous evening, opened his newly located establishment with a ball. Thereafter, issues of the *Venango Spectator* catalogued the appearance on June 25th of the Albert W. Aiken Theatrical Troupe, and subsequently, in November, of the Henry Robinson Troupe of Negro Minstrels and Silver Cornet Band. But then on February 21, 1873, fire broke out in a "little grogery" adjoining the hall and quickly spread to that structure. In the words of a town historian, the latter burned "like Tinder."³

Yet such was the demand for entertainment that a new concert hall or opera house building with a billiard parlour and a hotel on the first floor and a performance hall seating between 800 and 1,000 patrons in the second story was a reality within a year's time.⁴ The sometime manager of these enterprises, T. H. Lloyd, kept a diary throughout a portion of his stewardship as well as an account book detailing theatrical seasons locally from 1876-1877 to 1882-1883.⁵ His faded and often cramped entries image the kinds of fare that were the staple of theatres on the kerosene circuit: local entertainments and amateur productions from neighboring communities, together with an intermingling of improving lectures, select musical evenings, and emotion-charged melodramas as performed by the shabby and shoddy theatrical combinations that were the lot of so many houses in the provinces.⁶

But leavening this unexceptional fare, beginning late in the 1876-1877 season and continuing throughout the following theatrical year, are the names of luminaries that theatre historians nostalgically recall in discussing the years when our theatre was truly a national

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³ *Centennial*, 27, reproduces an extended description of the fire from Reisman's *History of Western Pennsylvania*.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 42, reproduces a stereoscopic view of the exterior, which reveals the windows of two commercial establishments on the ground floor—presumably the hotel and billiard parlour—and a balcony at the second story level, no doubt utilized by minstrels to serenade patrons into the hall. No description of the opera house's facilities exists in the theatrical guides of the day, but if it resembled the Grandin Opera House in Tidioute, built about the same time, its stage, extending across the front of the building, was raked to compensate for a level auditorium floor. Very likely, too, there was a horseshoe-shaped balcony.
⁵ Xerox copies in the author's possession of the original in the Clarion County Historical Society.
⁶ Theatres on the kerosene circuit, professionally primitive, used individual kerosene lamps in place of the gas light troughs that were to be found in the first-class theatres of the day.
institution. Their presence is explained by recurring references in the account book to Sam T. Jack, the organizer of the Oil Region Circuit. The story of St. Petersburg's opera house is of interest then on several counts. Not only does it illustrate the benefits accruing locally from the formation of theatrical circuits, but it suggests that, on the kerosene circuit, a public-spirited or stage-struck opera house manager was a first requisite. Given an upstairs house to manage, he was in a position to please himself as well as his friends and neighbors—that is as long as he could persuade troupers to advertise their presence "For One Night Only."

What makes the season of 1876–1877 so remarkable is that until August 17, 1877, there was no rail connection linking St. Petersburg with the outside world. Then, when the Foxburg, St. Petersburg and Turkey City Railroad was completed as far as Lloyd's home town, it was narrow gauge and remained so until the change to standard track in 1911. What this meant, of course, is that theatrical baggage as well as freight had to be transferred at neighboring Foxburg, one more item of bother and expense with which touring aggregations had to contend. Given this circumstance, it is not surprising that the season's early performers—transported by coach—were single acts, quasi-professionals from the neighborhood, or far-ranging combinations that took the initiative and wrote Lloyd for open time.

To illustrate, the season began with the October 7th appearance of the lecturer Theodore Tilton, who was followed on the nth by the Carner Combination in that celebrated emotional drama Rose
Michelle. The Carner troupe had been organized in Meadville on September 4th by the actor-manager James R. Waite to support J. W. Carner, a professional actor of some reputation throughout the region. Flushed by the success of productions in Meadville, Waite announced a brief tour that included St. Petersburg. Unfortunately, their appearance in the latter community drew only a poor house, which may or may not have led to the troupe’s early return to Meadville before the month was out.\textsuperscript{11}

Following a political meeting on the 12th, St. Petersburg’s opera house welcomed the Hyer sisters, Emma and Anna, stars of one of the first colored opera companies to take to the road. Though the account book does not specify, their vehicle on October 13th was very likely \textit{Out of Bondage}, which was advertised elsewhere in the area as a “Moral Musical Drama” replete with sparkling dialogue, witticisms, drolleries, plantation scenes and songs together with classical selections.\textsuperscript{12} Though they drew, according to Lloyd, a poor house, variety-oriented entertainment was popular locally as evidenced by the appearance on October 17th of Henry Robinson’s Minstrels, on the 19th of the West “Terrall” Minstrels, and by the coming of the Draper company on the 27th and 28th.\textsuperscript{13} Then more of the same was offered on November 24th with the advent of Mr. Hickey and his “Trubudours,” an Oil City aggregation.

The final offering in November was a Thanksgiving dance on the 29th followed on December 1st by a Catholic fair that occupied the premises for seven days. Otherwise, in December it was booked for a dramatic troupe from neighboring Edenburg on the 9th, by the Masons for a dance on the 14th and by “Sherden” and Mack, variety performers, who advertised on the 26th.\textsuperscript{14} The new year welcomed “Callwagners” Minstrels on January 10th\textsuperscript{15} and Blind

\textsuperscript{12} Notice of their various tours of the region is found in Bob H. Copeland, “The Oil Circuit: A History of Professional Theatre in the Oil Region of Northwestern Pennsylvania From 1857–1900” (University of Denver dissertation, 1969).
\textsuperscript{13} The Draper Company may have been the Rial and Draper Co., for many years associated with \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}.
\textsuperscript{14} Sheridan and Mack appeared at the Grandin Opera House, Tidioute, on January 4th.
\textsuperscript{15} Copeland in his chronology, “Professional Stage Performances, Titusville, Pa., 1865–1900,” lists them as Happy Cal Wagner’s Minstrels.
Tom, the Negro concert pianist, on the 24th. Then, in February, Signor Bosco the magician was on hand as was the Royal Yeddo, announced as a Japanese troupe. Though the last two productions were elsewhere in the region condemned as third rate,\(^\text{16}\) such inferior offerings were offset, in St. Petersburg at least, by two bookings in which Sam T. Jack very likely had a hand: the Buffalo Bill-Texas Jack Combination on March 1st and the Richings-Bernard Opera Company on the 18th.

In point of fact, this was the first of three visits by the celebrated scout to St. Petersburg, though he had been seen in the Oil Region as early as the 1873–1874 season. He was on this occasion touring in \textit{Red Hand; or, Buffalo Bill's First Scalp Hunt}, which capitalized on such a recent event out of Cody's own past as his duel with Yellow Hand and on the Custer massacre, a tragedy literally purloined out of yesterday's banner headlines. Adolescent and fantastic as this dream of the Wild West undoubtedly was, its spokesman, a frontiersman turned showman, had discovered that he had only to appear on the stage—any stage—and applause followed. In his person, viewers, feeling themselves witness to the real thing, were ready to forgive any of the crudities of his noisy, rattling gunpowder entertainments that, beginning with the 1876–1877 season, featured live Indians from the Red Cloud Reservation.\(^\text{17}\)

Very likely the Richings-Bernard Opera Company that presented \textit{Martha} on March 18th suffered by comparison. Certainly their vehicle had none of the Injun killing, red fire, or the rough and tumble that was the Cody hallmark as long as his combination was on the road. Very likely, too, the remainder of the season was a distinct let down, even though the Waite company from Meadville was in town on April 17th with that sure-fire standard \textit{Ten Nights in a Bar Room}. Possibly, too, the Hyer sisters tried their charms on St. Petersburg once more on May 22nd—their presence deduced from an entry in Lloyd's account book indicating the name C. D.

\(^{16}\) \textit{Franklin Citizen}, Feb. 22, 1877.  
\(^{17}\) If St. Petersburg's audience was anything like that described by Oil City's \textit{Derrick} (Feb. 27, 1877), they found this "blood and thunder" play so interesting and startling that many rose in their seats and watched "breathlessly." Readers desirous of learning more of Cody's days as an opera house trouper should consult Louise F. Cody, \textit{Memories of Buffalo Bill} (New York, 1919), or more recently John Burke's \textit{Buffalo Bill, The Noblest Whiteskin} (New York, 1973).
Goodsell [sic] beside the booking date and more particularly from the fact that a C. D. Goodsell was the sisters’ manager in this season.

Nominally one might have expected the season to have closed out at the end of May, but the avidity of the local audience was very likely responsible for the appearance of an F. J. Wildman on June 4th, for the return of the Waite Combination on June 27th and 28th in Rose Michelle, and for a booking identified only by the notation “Sam T. Jack” on July 2nd. The latter’s interest, as has been noted, continued for yet another season in St. Petersburg and, with the completion of the railroad to the community, Jack’s Oil Region Circuit was in a position to supply a variety of fare superior to any the local audience had yet seen, beginning with the presence of the Berger family, who opened the 1877–1878 season on September 14th.

Though the Bergers had advertised themselves during the 1870–1871 season as bell ringers, they had become by the time they opened the season at Warren’s Roscoe Hall on September 11, 1877, a concert aggregation. In Warren, and then presumably in St. Petersburg only days later, the troupe included Jeppe and Francis DeLano, sketch artists; Anna Berger, cornet soloist; Kate Douglass, soprano; Etta Morgan, saxophone soloist; Alice Kellogg, trombone soloist; and the Coleman sisters, Alice and Clara. If they resembled other touring family groups, theirs was a thoroughly proper and decorous entertainment, no doubt setting a standard of respectability for what followed: an unspecified booking by Sam T. Jack on September 27th—Duprey and Benedict’s Minstrels on October 12th, the Washburn troupe on the 23rd, and on October 26th the Union Square Theatre Company, which that season was touring with The Dancheffs, one of those strongly emotional dramas which so delighted the hinterlands.19

18 Entries in the account book indicate not only the play date but, on occasion, the date when the attraction was secured. By way of illustration: Wildman, appearing on June 4th, was not scheduled until May 28th; the Waite Combination, on June 27th and 28th, not until May 22nd; and the offering on July 2nd, identified only by Jack’s name, not until June 25th. It would seem casualness prevailed.

19 John R. Towe in Sixty Years of the Theatre, An Old Critic’s Memories (New York, 1916), 2, describes the typical fare of the day as follows: “sentimental or violent melodrama, pseudo-romance, domestic comedy equally destitute of truth and reason, knock-about farce, and spectacular frivoly. Of this mixture, burlesque, in its best estate, was by no means the most contemptible element.”
November brought more of the same fare: the Merry Bishops on the 6th and a minstrel troupe on the 26th. A Sam T. Jack production appeared on December 7th and the "Gothe" Combination stopped off on the 14th and 15th. Then the Commonwealth Minstrels, who had been advertised for the 24th as well as a Jack booking scheduled for the 31st, cancelled—a not uncommon annoyance to opera house managers, especially in the smaller houses of the kerosene circuit. The Wallace sisters, long favorites in the region, did appear on the 3rd of January in *Minnie's Luck, or, The Ups and Downs of City Life*; however, Jane Combs, an artist of national reputation then touring under Jack’s banner in *Camille*, cancelled, as did Welch and Hughes Minstrels booked for the 26th and George S. Knight, who was to have appeared on the 31st. Unquestionably, a manager’s lot was not always a happy one—even with a Sam T. Jack in the wings.

February was more rewarding, commencing with the appearance on the 6th of the Georgia Minstrels, a prestige troupe with Daniel Frohman as their agent. They were succeeded by the California Blonds on the 8th and by what appear to have been dramatic combinations on the 19th and on the 22nd. March 6th brought a variety troupe whose one-night-only entertainment was very likely eclipsed by the return of Buffalo Bill on the 7th in *May Cody, or Lost and Won*, which the Oil City *Derrick* (March 7th) announced was to play at Millerstown, Petrolia, Parker, St. Petersburg, Franklin, Oil City and Titusville. May Cody was the name of Buffalo Bill’s younger sister, but the play presumably written about her by the dime novelist A. S. Burt bore no relation to her or to any of her experiences. Audiences were untroubled by this circumstance, if indeed they knew it. Rather they were attracted as of yore by its star, whose presence continued to be worth the price of admission.

March seems to have been very much a premier month for those who patronized the St. Petersburg opera house, for, in addition to Buffalo Bill, "Gennevieve" Rogers was on hand in *Maud Muller* on the 12th and Milton Nobles advertised on the 18th. The latter is of particular interest as his current vehicle, *The Phoenix*, was one of the genuine successes of the day—especially with its refrain, "And

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20 The Meadville press described *Minnie’s Luck* as having “just enough plot to hold together their vaudeville talents.”
the villain still pursued her." A final offering in March was Happy Cal Wagner's Minstrels, who were followed on April 6th by Eliza Weathersby's *Froliques*—indicative of the strong hold variety had on the local audience. Sam T. Jack was the manager of the last named company and of at least one of the two attractions that concluded the season in May.

Jack was responsible, too, for the April 23rd appearance of John T. Raymond, yet another of the celebrated performers of the day whose trouping took him to all manner of performance halls. Raymond's current vehicle, one with which he had been associated for many years, was *Colonel Mulberry Sellers*, a dramatization of Mark Twain's *The Gilded Age*. Sellers, the novel and drama's principal character, was one of the most beguiling of the day and his perennial pursuit of schemes in which there were millions to be made must have struck responsive cords in many a St. Petersburg viewer. Then, too, Raymond's abundance of animal spirits and rich extravagance characterized that species of entertainment with which they felt most at home. Very likely they congratulated Lloyd on his showmanship, but more likely Jack was responsible, for it was his bread and butter to know what the halls of the kerosene circuit would pay to see.

Commencing with the 1878–1879 season, Lloyd was again on his own—Jack having abandoned his interest in supplying attractions to a community of no more than 2,000 potential viewers. At this juncture the former had cause to congratulate himself on his facility's location in the upper story of a structure otherwise given over to a hotel and a billiard parlour. So situated, St. Petersburg's opera house was not obligated to sustain itself out of its own revenues and, given the modesty of its operating expenses, it survived Jack's abandonment, though there was a falling off in the number of attractions and in the quality of those that did appear.

By way of illustration, there was a concert on September 10th followed by an unidentified booking on the 24th. Then October

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21 Nobles in a little known work, *Shop Talk* (Milwaukee, 1889), describes the circumstances of the play's creation among various stage anecdotes and reminiscences.

22 For an early estimate of Raymond's talent see Oral S. Coad and Edwin Mims, Jr., *The American Stage* (New York, 1929), 228.
brought a local dance on the 10th, the E. A. Booth Combination on the 16th, and Greenbacks Hall (lecturer) on the 30th. November offered only the Fay sisters on the 23rd and December again but a single attraction, John Williams on the 25th. Apparently the house was dark throughout January and hosted only a single attraction in February. The latter, however, was an old favorite, Buffalo Bill, who came to town on the 23rd in *Knight of the Plains, or Buffalo Bill's Best Trail*. March brought a local church concert on the 28th; April, the Swedish Lady Vocal Quartette, managed by John Mishler on the 25th; and June a home town entertainment on the 14th, to which apparently no one came.

Decidedly, preceding seasons had been more active and presumably more remunerative to Lloyd, for those rental fees he lists seem a mere pittance: John Williams, $15; the Swedish ladies, $12. Perhaps such meager returns—not untypical of the kerosene circuit—discouraged Lloyd from prosecuting his managerial duties as vigorously as he had once done, for in the 1879-1880 season the opera house was utilized on only nine instances. These began with the October 13th appearance of Rial and Draper's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company. There was a good house on hand, and the Oil City *Derrick* (June 22, 1880) knew why the play invariably appealed to the popular heart: "it goes down deep to the roots of humanity and touches the cord of sympathy which has never failed to respond when called upon since the days of Solomon...." No less well received was Baird's Original New "Arlines" Minstrel Party that appeared on November 19th, or Perley's Idle "Opra" Company's rendering of "*H.M.S. Pinafore*" on January 6th. Apparently the first poor house of the season greeted that long time favorite, *Fanchon the Cricket*, which was the current offering of the Ashtons' dramatic combination. However, as they appeared on January 12th and 13th, the weather may just possibly have been

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23 Mishler is sometimes credited with establishing in 1872 the first theatrical circuit in America. His *Memories* (Reading, Pa., 1907) deserves more attention than it has received to date.

24 When the Rial and Draper Co. played in Warren, Pa., on October 7th, a paid advertisement in the *Mail* (Sept. 30, 1879) indicated that they had performed the play in question over 1,000 times.

25 Perley's was one of three different combinations bringing the works of Gilbert and Sullivan to the region for the first time.
responsible. Nonetheless, in the same month, good houses turned out for Ben Hogan on the 16th and for Hi Henry’s Minstrel Party on the 27th.

Hogan, self-styled the wickedest man in the world, was a reformed Oil Region sinner who knew how to hold a crowd as did Hi Henry, whose minstrel party came to town in its own private coach. Curious townsmen gawked at what could be glimpsed through its dusty windows even as they thrilled to the inevitable street parade that rent asunder St. Petersburg’s normal routine. In their wake came Callender’s “Gorgius” Minstrels on March 13th, but inexplicably they drew a poor house as did the Swiss bell ringers who followed them on April 7th. Then the season closed with a ball on the 23rd of the month.

What kind of season had it been from a financial point of view? Lloyd’s account book indicates that from October 14th to November 20th his expenses had been $36.87—the monies paid out going for lamp chimneys, muslin, oil, tacks and nails. Sam Money was paid $1 for ushering and a W. Collins $2.50 for fixing the W.C. (water closet). As to receipts—from October 14th through January 13th, these totaled $93.95, including an unspecified credit of $36.65. Additional expenses through February 12th for oil, coal, ushering, lighting, sweeping and bill posting brought the total expenses from the beginning of the season to $118.95. Add to this figure the itemized expenses of $42.42 through August 31st, and it is apparent that Lloyd’s total expenses for the season were $161.37. By way of contrast, his income, as reported, came to $187.74.

No doubt it was a hard look at the financial meaning of the season just concluded that led Lloyd to ask a 30 per cent share of the house from the first company of the 1880-1881 season. These were the Ashtons appearing on August 31st and September 1st in that classic of the road, Under the Gas Light. However, in negotiating with the Maud Oswell Company, his second attraction of the season, Lloyd was again seeking a stipulated rental for the nightly use of the house. No matter the arrangement, he appears to have been the loser, especially in the latter instance.

Turning to a diary he kept during a portion of the season in question, it appears that Lloyd cut short a business trip that he might be in town on Thursday morning, January 20, 1881, to prepare for the Oswells’ weekend appearance. Evidently the troupers arrived on schedule and presented the first in a series of productions on Saturday evening to what Lloyd describes as a “rather small attendance.” Their Monday evening offering, Divorce, played to a poor turnout as did their attractions on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Reacting to this state of affairs, Lloyd wrote as follows in his diary on Wednesday evening: “I will not try to manage another trupe [sic] for the town. As I see it will not pay.” If, in fact, he needed further proof, it came when he attempted to collect his thirty dollar fee and failed to do so.

Apparently, Lloyd went back on his decision not to manage another show for the community, but a caution on his part is evidenced by his booking only two shows a season in the final two seasons of his management. Then, too, he confined himself to combinations offering only the most tested materials, like a production of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a comic concert, a variety troupe, and a touring rendition of that most popular of pantomimes, Humpty Dumpty.27 Never, however, did the rental fee asked exceed ten dollars a night and, though his account book does not itemize his expenses for this period, it is evident that theatre—long since a paying proposition locally—owed its continuance to Lloyd’s perseverance. That this was indeed the case seems borne out by the opera house’s future use in the wake of the latter’s death on December 12, 1882. For until the structure was destroyed on September 22, 1892, in a holocaust that consumed twenty-six of St. Petersburg’s buildings, it was used only intermittently by local groups.28

An era had come to a close—in St. Petersburg somewhat earlier than in other communities throughout the region. But surely it had begun with high hopes in the first flush of the oil hysteria. So sure a thing had the town’s desire seemed that an enterprising showman had bodily moved his theatre by water and rail to St. Petersburg, and when it subsequently burned to the ground, his successor expe-

27 Humpty Dumpty’s popularity rivaled that attributed to The Black Crook.
28 The devastation is described in the Clarion Democrat (Sept. 29, 1892).
ditiously rebuilt it. Then Sam T. Jack incorporated it into his Oil Region Circuit for the better part of two seasons, making available a plethora of attractions to tempt essentially untutored tastes.

However, once the speculative mania had passed to other areas and St. Petersburg resumed something of its villagelike character of old, Jack's interest evaporated and Lloyd, who had come to depend on his services, was thrown back on his own resources; and, if he had not done so previously, he must have appreciated the circumstance that his upstairs house was only incidentally dependent on its own revenue-producing potential for survival.\(^29\) Yet with the increasing commercialization of theatre nation-wide, as signaled by the rise to prominence of Daniel Frohman (who had managed a company playing St. Petersburg), it is readily apparent that many a house on the kerosene circuit was doomed to extinction or to become the refuge of companies of the poorest sort.

Yet in the first years of the road, when the entertainment industry was in the process of defining itself, the situation was otherwise. T. H. Lloyd, the man on the spot in the provinces, was in a position to bring his audiences not merely offerings of a purely local or neighborhood character but lecturers and concert performers with some pretension to quality, together with a sampling of the near-great and the great personalities of the day. St. Petersburg's opera house may have been a far cry from the theatres of New York—professionally primitive, surely—but what did that matter when theatrical history was to be had by climbing a flight of stairs.

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\(^29\) Unfortunately, Lloyd's account book does not detail the income developed by the hotel and billiard parlour. Perhaps reference again to the Grandin Opera House may be fruitful. Just one of the professional offices in the structure's second story rented for $250 a year. By way of contrast, the four legitimate combinations that stopped off in the 1885-1886 season paid fees amounting to only $120. The revenue producing contrast is apparent.