

# THE THEATRE OF PITHOLE, PENNSYLVANIA, OIL BOOM TOWN

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**I**N the years immediately following the Civil War, according to Vernon Louis Parrington, "exploitation for the first time was provided with adequate resources and a competent technique, and busy prospectors were daily uncovering new sources of wealth. The coal and oil of Pennsylvania and Ohio, the copper and iron of upper Michigan, the gold and silver, lumber and fisheries, of the Pacific Coast, provided limitless raw materials for the rising industrialism."<sup>1</sup>

The pattern of exploitation set by earlier gold and silver rushes was duplicated in the discovery of other resources. When a new source of raw materials was found, there was a great influx of population to the discovery areas, and towns sprang up rapidly. Such a boom town was Pithole, a town that existed for a brief time in the oil region of northwestern Pennsylvania. The largest structure in the town, "a high, barn-like, three-storied building,"<sup>2</sup> was Murphy's Theatre, Pithole's home of legitimate drama. The purpose of this study is to record the essence of the theatrical activity which it and others brought to Pithole.

Before considering this activity, however, some perspective may be gained by examining the development of the town, itself. The major factor was, of course, oil drilling.

". . . I claim to have bored the first well that ever was bored for Petroleum in America and can show the well, and if I had not done it, it would not have been done to this day," said E. L. Drake in a letter to J. M. McCarthy on June 28, 1872.<sup>3</sup> Drake's claim to have drilled the first well may be justified, but his latter claim is certainly unlikely.

Crude oil had been used as an illuminant as early as 1819, but it was unsatisfactory because of its tendency to smoke and to give off an

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1 Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920*, Main Currents in American Thought, 3 vols. (New York, 1958), 3:9.

2 William C. Darrah, *Pithole, the Vanished City* (n.p., 1972), 138.

3 Paul H. Giddens, *The Beginnings of the Petroleum Industry: Sources and Bibliography* (Harrisburg, 1941), 59.

unpleasant odor. Consequently, tallow candles and whale-oil lamps were used to light most American homes before the Civil War. Because of their cost, however, only the wealthy could use them freely.

Illuminants derived from animal fats and turpentine met with limited success. Then, in the fifties, kerosene, at first in the form of coal oil, was distilled from soft coal and shale.

Petroleum was not used extensively for commercial purposes until Samuel Kier of Pittsburgh collected it from his father's salt wells near Tarentum. He sold eight-ounce bottles of his "Seneca" or "Rock" oil as medicine for fifty cents each.<sup>4</sup> Since Kier soon had more petroleum than he could sell, he experimented and finally devised a method of distilling it into a product which he called "carbon oil." Because this carbon oil was cheaper, safer, and better than the other illuminants, its use became widespread in Western Pennsylvania and in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

With the new market for oil as an illuminant, greater supplies were needed. There was little success in increasing the supply until E. L. Drake drilled his well and struck oil on August 27, 1859, along Oil Creek, a half mile south of Titusville, Pennsylvania. Drake's oil sold at twenty dollars a barrel, and his well produced about twenty-five barrels a day.

As strikes of "black gold" spread along Oil Creek, A. P. Duncan and George C. Prather, businessmen from Oil City, purchased the Holmden farm which lay in the heart of the oil area. They saw the feasibility of a plan for laying out a town to satisfy the needs of workers and travelers for food, lodging, supplies, and amusement. A thousand buyers were on hand to purchase five hundred lots which were offered on May 24, 1865.<sup>6</sup>

In his *History of Pithole*, published in 1887, Charles C. Leonard, who usually wrote for area newspapers under the name of "Crocus," claimed that one would be surprised as he neared the city by the number of derricks being erected and the number already erected along the creek. "At first sight," he said, "it seems that every available spot of ground is occupied by these lofty and skeleton-like structures, so near together that it appears impossible for a wagon to drive between them. . . . But a near view shows that there is room enough to spare; at least so think the owners of the land, who will sell you a

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4 Nelson Manfred Blake, *A History of American Life and Thought* (New York, 1963), 321.

5 Paul H. Giddens, *Early Days of Oil* (Gloucester, Mass., 1964), 1.

6 Darrah, 29.

lease, if it is only large enough to sink your driving pipe upon; your derrick must be put upon your neighbor's territory."

Crocus further describes the city in this manner:

As you enter the deeper stratas of liquid mud, which distinguish the main streets of the town, a sight is presented which is not witnessed elsewhere, on any discovered portion of the globe and the like will never be seen again.

It is a wooden town, not a brick or stone house in it. The streets are narrow, with but a single plank for a sidewalk, and in many instances the plank is so far beneath the surface that more than the ordinary length of limb is required to reach it. The buildings, on either side are of every size and shape imaginable, from a four story hotel to the diminutive stand of a ginger-bread or pea-nut merchant.

The smell of new lumber, fresh paint and the "crude" is everywhere discernible. Here may be seen a building which is neither sided, floored nor finished, but the roof is up, — from the peak of which swings a sign, informing the public that "oil leases" will there be bought and sold (if the building gets finished, and the owner gets time).<sup>7</sup>

Pithole's newspaper, the *Pithole Daily Record*, began publication on September 25, 1865. In the first issue the editor quoted this accusation from another newsman: "The City of Pithole, aside from its connection with oil interests, has but few attractions, either in its highway approaches to lure the traveler on or its subsequent accommodations to prolong his stay." The *Daily Record* editor's long response is included here almost in its entirety because of its flavorful, albeit chauvinistic, account of the city's development:

This remark must be qualified by the fact even now we are on the eve of great changes. Already several fine extensive hotels have been opened and as rapidly filled by an appreciative public, and numerous others of a like class are in the process of erection. A few weeks ago the rapid influx of strangers crowded at nightfall every tenement; beds, sofas and even chairs were luxuries for the few, — the many were obliged to seek the shaving pile or the hay-rack and sometimes even content themselves with the most susceptible side of a pine board.

These days have passed away. It is quite a month since most if not all could provide themselves with the luxury of a bed. It is true that jew and gentile were, and in many cases still are, mingled promiscuously in "field beds," made up in rows along the floors of attic rooms and upper chambers. It is still true that most of the hotel tables are so crowded that it is a privilege to get comfortable seat at "the first table," and not be compelled to wait till "the firsts" are thr'o and then take what remains.

All these minor evils in company with many greater are now destined to pass away and become the things of other days. Pithole has still its evils notwithstanding, and among these are the changing weather of our mountain climate, the mud — not ordinary mud which consolidates into hard clay during a few hours sunshine — but mud thick, consistent, deep and wide-spread, mud which flies easy and sticks hard; a cold clammy mixture which adheres to everything it touches with the tenacity of mortar, slippery as hypocritical smoothness itself; it lubricates the clay beneath and lays pitfalls at every step for the unwary pedestrian, and woe betide the individuals who fall in its midst. Reforms are needed and remedies can be suggested by which much of its inconvenience can be avoided.

<sup>7</sup> Charles C. Leonard, *History of Pithole* (Pithole City, 1867), 35.

Some sickness has visited us but comparatively very little. We have even heard the assertion that Cholera was doing its deadly work here. These statements are without foundation. The season through which we are now passing is one of the most trying of the whole year. No locality in America is now entirely free from the different kinds of diseases incidental to our summer months.

The mortality of Pithole has been very small when compared with the number of people it contains and the exposed and irregular manner in which many have been obliged to subsist.

A better state of things however is about being inaugurated. Affairs generally are settling down into a more orderly state than hitherto. Improvement is on the forward march. Everyday new proofs of its advancement are exhibited. Property is hourly shifting hands, much as little boys play jackstones, and every time it exchanges it increases in value. Dwellings, Stores, Hotels and Saloons are rising like mushrooms on all sides. Capital, in both money and labor is rapidly flowing in and finding here speedy investments, with almost invariably a sure prospect of a safe and remunerative return. New wells and new individuals alike are striking oil on every hand.

According to the best means within our reach, Pithole now numbers some nine hundred or one thousand buildings. Three months ago it contained two. Its population must be some eight or ten thousand or even more. In its immediate vicinity there are about seventeen flowing Oil Wells, which included with those that are pumped, yield about six thousand barrels of oil per day. These wells are situated along the bed of Pithole Creek.

The city is built on sloping land rising up from the western side of the creek. This locality has been well selected. On either side, two small runs or streams present natural main sewers sufficient for drainage purposes in the largest city.

"Pithole had everything and most of it bad," says Ernest C. Miller, oil industry historian. He enumerates the hordes of soldiers who had been discharged from the army as the Civil War neared its end, speculators in oil and oil lands, bankers, lawyers, newspapermen, teamsters, laborers, thieves, and thugs; he also lists brothels, concert saloons, variety theatres, "and every other form of vice that human iniquity could concoct."<sup>8</sup>

A reporter for the Doylestown, Pennsylvania, *Democrat* reported in the October 3, 1865, issue of his newspaper on a trip he had taken to the oil region during September. He claimed that often a building would be inhabited while it still had only three sides and that often business had begun in a building with no front. "The hotels generally present a pretty fair exterior," he maintained, "and perhaps the office and barroom are papered with rich gilt paper, and the partitions hung with pictures but go beyond this and you will find unplanned boards and larger crevices in the partitions." However, two hotels were being constructed properly at the time, and, said the reporter, "a theatre has just been completed and the play commenced."<sup>9</sup>

Already Murphy's Theatre had been under construction in July

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest C. Miller, *Tintypes in Oil* (Rutland, Vt., 1961), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Ernest C. Miller, *This Was Early Oil: Contemporary Accounts of the Growing Petroleum Industry, 1848-1885* (Harrisburg, 1968), 83, 84, 86.

of 1865.<sup>10</sup> It was in operation by September of the same year and caused one observer in the area to maintain, "Murphy's Theatre on First Street, when completed, was equal to many swell play houses in larger cities. Some of the most famous actors in the country appeared on the stage at Murphy's."<sup>11</sup> Although the fame of some of the actors was less than countrywide, many had collected impressive notices.<sup>12</sup>

As for the theatre itself, some descriptions are available. It was constructed substantially but had no outside adornment. It has already been mentioned that the building was three stories high and barn-like in appearance. The interior, however, must have been more impressive. There was seating for eleven hundred persons, eight hundred in the orchestra, two hundred and fifty in the gallery, and the rest in six boxes which were carpeted and fitted with damask draperies.<sup>13</sup> The stage measured thirty feet by forty feet and contained "a full set of scenery." R. Frazier, of Nardo's in New York City, decorated the stage curtain with scenes characteristic of the oil region. Tiffany's of New York supplied the chandeliers for the handsomely painted and decorated auditorium.

This was the theatre that housed the second stock company in the oil region, the first having appeared in Titusville. Cleveland real estate dealer William Murphy and his brothers, Charles and Andrew, opened the theatre about the middle of September. Among the members of the company were Billy Forrest, Harry Rynar, Kate Rynar, Mr. Sullivan, and Mr. Tyrell as leading man. By the middle of October, Charles Loveday was the leading man, and Evelyn Evans and the Rynars had left to form another company at Titusville.<sup>14</sup>

An observation concerning the original company appeared in the *Titusville Morning Herald* on October 9, 1865: "We hastened on to Murphy's new theatre on First Street where little Billy Forrest was enjoying a huge benefit. *The Octoroon* was on and it was rendered with creditable effect. Forrest, as Salem Scudder, the tender hearted Yankee; Rynar as Jacob McCloskey, the foulhearted overseer of Perosboyne [*sic*]; Evans, as Pete; Tyrell as Wah-no-tee, and Kate Rynar as Zoe, were all effective in their parts — the last two were

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10 Darrah, 50.

11 Alfred Wilson Smiley, *A Few Scraps: Oily and Otherwise* (Oil City, 1907), 97.

12 Bob H. Copeland, "The Oil Circuit: A History of Professional Theatre in the Oil Region of Northwestern Pennsylvania from 1859 to 1900" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Denver, 1969), 40-55.

13 Darrah, 138.

14 Copeland, 45.

particularly good. When Titusville can boast of as creditable a theatre, it will be worthy a more extensive patronage." <sup>15</sup>

It is not to the writer on the Titusville paper, however, but to the editor of the *Pithole Daily Record* that we are indebted for further news of the company at Murphy's Theatre. Unfortunately, there is a gap in the record until late in November of 1865, at which time Murphy's was to receive some competition. The *Record* carried an announcement concerning the Canterbury Music Hall: "This new institution will be opened this evening. It is reported that the performers are all of a high order of talent. The proprietors . . . intend to conduct everything with perfect propriety. One of our police will be on hand every evening, and will preserve good order." <sup>16</sup>

On Tuesday, November 28, the *Record* reported the Monday evening performance of *Othello* at Murphy's. The audience had received the strong cast with prolonged applause. "Among the scenes that were well done were the scenes between Othello (Loveday) and Iago (Stevens), in which the latter arouses the Moor's jealousy, and the concluding scene. At the conclusion Mr. Loveday and Miss Bridges were called out. J. A. Heaney brought down the house with his song of 'A Lovely Flea.' To fully appreciate this song it is necessary to hear and see him sing it. The evening performance concluded with 'Sarah's Young Man,' a farce which kept the audience in roars of laughter."

The *Record* of Wednesday, November 29, reported that the audience had been pleased with the previous night's performance of *The Octoroon*. It also announced that the benefit for Miss Eloise Bridges, the visiting star, would take place on Friday evening. On Thursday, November 30, the Wednesday performance of *Othello* was mentioned and much praise given for Mr. Heaney's song and Mlle. Brignoli's dance. The editor also said, "We notice that the tragedy of *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare's best, is announced for the benefit of Miss Eloise Bridges tomorrow night. The tragedy is certainly one that will bring out the full strength of the company, and at the same time would draw a crowd even if it were not the benefit of so popular an actress."

The same issue announced the opening of another variety theatre like the Canterbury Music Hall mentioned earlier. This one was to be called the Athenaeum. "The proprietor assures us," said the editor, "that he will spare no pain for the amusement of Pitholers, and at

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<sup>15</sup> Darrah, 138.

<sup>16</sup> *Pithole Daily Record*, Nov. 25, 1865.

the same time preserve good order, so that ladies may be taken any time. A commendable feature in connection with this Variety Troupe will be the absence of a bar attached to the building."

Friday, December 1, brought the report that *The Colleen Bawn* of the previous evening had performances "such as would do no discredit to New York City." Attention was called once again to the imminent benefit performance of Miss Bridges, "a lady who has so often instructed and amused . . . in her parts as an actress, and at the same time is so great a favorite with Pithole that the mere announcement is sufficient to cram the house." The editor observed further, "We predict (and in these matters we seldom err) that as Lady Macbeth Miss Bridges has but few equals in the United States, and Mr. Loveday will show new beauties in the part of Macbeth."

On Saturday, December 2, the editor reported that the theatre had been jammed, as he had anticipated. Of Miss Bridges he observed, ". . . We do not remember a part in which she has played so well, it being one that suits her style of acting admirably." Also, as the editor predicted, Mr. Loveday played "with a truth and fidelity that showed new beauties in the play." J. C. Dunn played Macduff, J. Sullivan played Malcolm, and Miss Imogene Tracy "was loudly applauded as Hecate."

After the performance, the audience had demanded a speech from Miss Bridges. She responded "in a neat and feeling manner, thanking the audience for their kindness to one who was so lately a stranger to them, and expressing a hope to meet them again ere long." Then there was singing by Mr. Frank Clarendon, Mlle. Brignoli, and Mr. J. A. Heaney, and "dancing by the charming Miss Brignoli." The performance was to be repeated that Saturday evening.

Miss Anna Levering was the next guest star, according to the December 4 *Record*. She was opening that night as Mrs. Haller in *The Stranger*. "She comes to us well-recommended from Erie and other theatres," said the editor, "and will meet a hearty welcome." It was also reported that the Athenaeum had opened the night before with the performance of Maude Stanley and La Petite Celeste, "ladies of a high order of talent, and the gymnastics of Walter Wentworth."

Miss Levering, the *Record* reported on December 5, had a small audience "owing to the fire then in progress." Miss Levering did, however, exhibit "much talent and judgement in her performance" to applause that was "hearty and frequent."

An alarm at 7:30 P.M. on the opening night of *The Stranger* alerted the community to the blaze which destroyed the Rochester Hotel.<sup>17</sup> Such blazes were frequent, because all the buildings were made of wood, and there was so little water available for fighting fires. By the middle of 1866, fire losses exceeded three million dollars.<sup>18</sup>

The *Record* editor expressed his annoyance with the editor of the *Meadville Daily Republican* on Wednesday, December 6. The Meadville man had editorialized earlier concerning "indecencies" practiced by "actors" in places of amusement in his town. "Such things might be tolerated at Pithole or the purlieu of Five Points," he complained, "but ought to be hissed off the stage at Meadville." The *Record* editor countered: "Was the editor of the *Republican* ever at a place of entertainment in our city, or is he down on them because he didn't get a dead-head ticket, or did he attend a private 'dance-house' or where did he spend his time, to form an idea that indecent performances would be tolerated here more than at the delectable borough of Meadville?"

Miss Anna Levering's Wednesday evening performance as Pauline in *The Lady of Lyons* was reported in the Thursday, December 7, issue of the *Record*. She played "with skill and was frequently applauded." It was also observed that "Mr. Loveday as Claude Melnotte, has few equals in the United States." The play for Wednesday evening was to be *Black Eyed Susan* to be presented with all new scenery.

Perhaps it would be interesting to consider briefly what competition in the field of entertainment was being provided for the company at Murphy's. The *Record* editor did sometimes spend an evening outside Murphy's. On Saturday, December 9, for example, he reported that the performances on Friday evening at the Athenaeum had been very good and that "although fun was plentiful, yet no word was heard that could raise a blush to the most modest cheek." He observed further: "Maude Stanley is truly a charming vocalist, with very distinct powers of enunciation, and is at the same time a first-rate violinist. She took with the audience, for she was encored every time. La Petite Celeste is also a star of the first magnitude, and met with much applause. Walter Wentworth surprised all present by his wonderful feats upon the 'flying rings.' The farce, 'A Trip to the Races,' was excellently performed, and kept the house roaring. It is a great credit to Pithole City to support so talented a troupe, and we hope to see the house better attended."

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 5, 1865.

<sup>18</sup> Darrah, 171.



The *Record* editor was rather cool toward the Saturday evening performance of *Black Eyed Susan*. On Monday, December 11, he noted only that all the characters had been "ably sustained by the company." Yankee Locke was to make his first appearance that night in *Green Mountain Boy*. "His humorous powers are too well-known to need a further notice," said the editor.

On Tuesday, December 12, a theatrical advertisement appeared in the *Record*. Such an advertisement was uncommon since places of entertainment in Pithole seemed to rely almost entirely on handbills for their advertising. The notice heralded the opening of still another variety house, the St. Charles Opera House. It claimed: "The proprietors in announcing the opening of a new Hall, on Thursday, December 14, 1865, confidently assure their patrons, that the entertainments will be chaste and elegant, as well as moral and amusing. A company of acknowledged merit has been engaged."

Yankee Locke made a great hit in *Sam Patch* on Tuesday evening, according to the Wednesday, December 13, *Record*. "He takes a complete hold of the audience from the time he enters the stage until his exit," it was observed. Mrs. Hotto as Bridget and Mr. J. Stevens as the steward were also praised. Mr. Locke was credited with exhibiting "the raw down-easter to perfection" in the farce, *A Wife for a Day*, and praise was also given Mr. Sullivan and Mlle. Brignoli.

The same issue of the newspaper called attention to the ability of the Athenaeum's Jim Campbell. The editor claimed, "In his ventriloquism he displayed powers we had not thought to see in Pithole."

*Ten Nights in a Bar Room* was the Wednesday, December 13, play at Murphy's. The next day it was observed in the *Record* that Yankee Locke "took the part of Sam Switchell with much spirit, giving quite a new style of acting to the previous nights. His drunken yankee was particularly laughable. Little Lize Dunn created quite a sensation by the perfect manner in which she took the part of the drunkard's child, and her artless manner brought tears to the eyes of many of the audience." A second performance of the play had to be promised for the next night since large numbers of people were turned away because of the full house.

The editor saw fit to devote his observations in the December 16 issue of the *Record* to the farce of the previous evening, undoubtedly because of the subject indicated in the title, *Petroleum, or Dad's Struck Ile*. He wrote as follows:

The scene opens and discovers Maloney (J. A. Heaney), testing a well, in which Mr. Hoppergrass (Mackway), has invested all the money he could raise

by mortgaging his farm. Hoppergrass enters, followed by his wife (Mrs. Dunn), and afterward by his daughter (Mrs. Hotto), and a conversation ensues, in which Hoppergrass receives a lecture from his better half. Ebenezer Entwhistle (Yankee Locke), then makes his appearance and courts Hetty, who agrees to "hitch team" with him. At this juncture the well is visited by Percival Pearl (Sullivan), accompanied by C. D. Swell (Riley), who arrives in time to witness "Dad Strike Ile." Hetty is so much elated by the fact that she discards Ebenezer for the stranger, and the family build their fortune in the air, when all is dashed to the ground by Maloney rushing in and announcing the stoppage of the well after flowing two barrels full. Hetty now wishes to make up with Ebenezer, whose dad has just struck ile. He retaliates by using her own language, but finally relents in time to save Hoppergrass' property from the hammer.

Perhaps the editor summarized this play for the same reason the summary is included here; the play is one of few which pertain in any way to the particular locale being considered.

On Tuesday, December 19, the editor observed only that *Jack Sheppard* had been performed the night before to a large audience considering the fact that it had been raining and that there were so many other attractions. Then he went on to talk of Miss Susan Denin's first appearance which was to take place that night. He announced that she would appear as Romeo in "Shakespeare's great play of Romeo and Juliet." He continued, "She is one of the most popular and best known of American actresses and will be most favorably received."

Instead of seeing *Jack Sheppard*, the editor must have been at the Athenaeum for he wrote that "La Pet Celeste danced a beautiful shawl dance, introducing much of her classical statuary." He added, ". . . the only fault seems to be that the managers are too anxious to give value for the admission fee and give too long 'a bill.'"

In the *Record* for December 20, it was noted that Miss Denin was "worthy of her renown." She would appear that night in *Love's Sacrifice* and as Sally Scraggs in *Sketches in India*. On the twenty-first, her "great success" was mentioned, as was Mr. Heaney's song. *Camille* and *The Jealous Wife* were announced for that night, Thursday, December 21. In the same paper it was announced that the long-awaited new star would finally be appearing at the Athenaeum. She was "the only female contortionist in the country."

The December 22 *Record* revealed that cold weather had kept Miss Denin's audience for *Camille* quite small. The play "started rather tamely," it was observed, "but warmed up as it proceeded and ended with as fine acting as we have seen here." Miss Denin's own dramatization of *East Lynne* was announced for her benefit that night.

*East Lynne* was a great success according to the December 23 *Record* and Miss Denin was "cheered lustily." Mlle. Brignoli, re-

ferred to as "Little Brig," got her usual encores. *Jack Sheppard* was announced for that night.

On Monday, December 25, the editor talked only of the farce, *Nan, or the Good-for-Nothing*. He said, "When Miss Denin as Nan was complaining that she could find no one to love her, an enthusiastic admirer in the parquette replied with much feeling, 'I will!' — greatly to the amusement of the audience who cheered his liberal offer, and to the gratification of Nan who felt bound to acknowledge the reception of so sincere an offer."

For that night, the Christmas program was announced. It was "the famous play of *Leah, the Forsaken*." Miss Denin would play Leah and Mr. Loveday would play Joseph. According to the December 27 issue of the *Record*, the Christmas play attracted an overwhelming audience and would have to be repeated on the twenty-eighth. On the twenty-sixth, however, the house for *London Assurance* had been very small because of heavy rains. The December 28 issue reported a repeat performance of *East Lynne* on the previous evening.

On Saturday, December 30, the *Record* editor mentioned that Miss Denin's benefit performance of *The Streets of New York* had taken place on December 29. Many had not been admitted because of the full house. They were the lucky ones, however, for according to the January 1 issue of the *Record*, "the drama of *The Streets of New York* was performed on Saturday evening, to a large house, and the performance was a great improvement upon that of the preceding evening."

It was announced that the same play would be repeated that night and that Miss Denin had been reengaged for a short time. Also, the Murphys were expecting three new actors. "With this addition, the company which already stands so high, will not be beaten by any other out of the Metropolitan cities," claimed the editor.

While many residents of Pithole sought entertainment at Murphy's Theatre and at the variety houses, others were participating in an activity which the *Record* editor deplored. Many men practiced pistol shooting around the oil wells, thus endangering many lives.<sup>19</sup> Others engaged in such a dangerous practice as shooting at chickens roosting on top of the Chase House,<sup>20</sup> a hotel which also contained the post office.

In the January 1, 1866, issue of the *Record*, the editor told of

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<sup>19</sup> *Record*, Dec. 25, 1865.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 30, 1865.

refusing the use of his newspaper to a Mr. Nichols who subsequently distributed handbills defaming Mlle. Brignoli, the popular actress, singer, and dancer at the Murphy Theatre. He justified allowing Mlle. Brignoli to print a reply in the *Record* in this way :

. . . Since he has gained the public ear and advanced charges most detrimental to the character of a lady who had been previously looked upon as virtuous and respectable, we could not refuse her the chance of a public reply. We cannot see Mr. Nichols' motive in this matter. It would seem that if a woman has acted as he claims Brignoli has toward him, his wisest course would be to leave her to her wickedness, instead of which, he pertinaciously follows her up with importunities for her to live with him. We trust public discussion will end, on this matter — both parties, in our opinion, having obtained all the notariety necessary.

In the same issue appeared Brignoli's response to the handbill which had been distributed :

#### To the Pithole Public

It appearing that a man by the name of Nichols, claims me as his wife. I wish to state to an impartial public, that he is a base falsifier. He has a wife living in Comstock, Michigan, from whom he never obtained a divorce. He imposed upon my credulity and got a pretended compact of marriage — but discovering what a low scoundrel he was, justice to my religion and the laws of my country compelled me to abandon him. His conduct towards me is too vile to mention : he has become a recent Catholic in hopes to gain me back, but Catholicism disowns bigamy. His lachadainical [*sic*] publication merits laughter and scorn. If he has slandered me — as I claim he has — then he is a low scoundrel too vile to notice ; and if I am the degraded creature he would make me, and his old chums of "the varieties" would make me, then he is a mean poltroon in again seeking to live with me. In either case, let Nichols hang up his harp on a willow tree and seek some buxom widow who may bring him *greenbacks* enough to support his *declining years*, but Brignoli will not come. Her mother has no influence over her, but her common sense tells her to shun a reptile who would crawl into her bosom only to suck her life blood. Let honest men sympathize with me. Nichols loves only my poor earnings. Failing to get me to live with him again, he seeks to do me all the injury he can, defame me before the public, and destroy my means of obtaining an honest livelihood for myself and poor fatherless children whom I and not he have always supported.

Brignoli

The January 3 issue of the *Record* carried an announcement signed by W. H. Murphy and Bro's. It stated: "The report having gained credence that M'lle Brignoli was to cease her engagement at our place of amusement, we take this mode of stating to the public that her valuable services are still to be employed for their and our benefit. Furthermore . . . her efforts to please are to be rewarded by a benefit at no distant day." The editor added his opinion, too. He maintained that Brignoli's reception at the theatre on the previous night should be considered "her best answer to the charges against her." Apparently, the Pithole audience stood by its own.

The *Record* of January 4 reported *The Lady of Lyons* as the per-

formance of the night before. The January 5 issue reported the previous night's performance as *The Honeymoon* with *The Two Buzzards* as the afterpiece. Mr. E. DuBarre had made his first appearance at Murphy's. "His personal appearance and voice are well fitted for his position in the company," said the editor.

The editor also discussed the fact that actors had been hissed in a Columbus theatre. He maintained that the Murphy brothers had always been so fortunate in the selection of their players that no hissing had ever been required. He praised the theatre also as one of the few pleasant places to spend a cold evening in Pithole. He claimed that the temperature was warm and agreeable there even on very cold evenings.

Miss Denin's January 5 benefit performance in *Oliver Twist* was reported the next day. "Miss Denin as Nancy Sykes gave some of the best and most life-like acting yet done on the Pithole stage," said the *Record* editor. "Mr. Loveday, as Bill Sykes, we have never seen surpassed. In the death scene the expression of remorse on his countenance was so real as almost to lead me to believe it was something more than mere acting." The editor's comments on this performance are especially interesting in the light of his comments on the repeat performance in the next issue. On Monday, January 8, he said, "There was a decided improvement over the acting of the previous night, the parts being much better studied."

*Angel of Midnight* was announced for that evening, January 8, and Mlle. Brignoli's benefit for the following evening. It was to be "her farewell to the Pithole public with whom she has become so popular."

Miss Denin was still with the company according to the January 11 *Record*. She had played *The Woman in Red* the previous night and would play that night by special request in *Angel of Midnight*. On Friday, January 12, it was announced that she would play Robert Brierly in *Ticket-of-Leave Man*. The editor commented of Miss Denin: "During her stay she has made many friends and won golden opinion of her faithful acting." On Saturday, January 13, *The Streets of New York* was announced as another benefit for Miss Denin. The editor observed: "We are pleased to see so much encouragement given to Murphy's — the only legitimate, rational place of amusement in the city."

On Monday, January 15, it was announced that Murphy's Theatre had closed for the season. "We are sorry to part with the members of this excellent company of performers at this popular place

of amusement," said the *Record*. "We understand Messrs. Murphy Bros. intend repairing and thoroughly re-fitting their theatre, and reopening soon again."

It was only two days later, January 17, that the editor was complaining: "We have now no Theatre, Concert Hall, or any legitimate place of amusement in our borough. An enterprising manager bringing a good company here could do well, we have no doubt." Again, on January 29 he expressed his longing for the reopening of the theatre. Unfortunately, things would never be quite the same at Murphy's Theatre.

Pithole had been incorporated as a borough in December 1865. In February of 1866, the new government was trying to raise money by issuing liquor licenses. However, Pithole already had passed its peak. Each new well, therefore, brought forth editorials in the *Record* with such headings as "Pithole Not Dead Yet!"<sup>21</sup>

Monday, February 19, brought the announcement that Murphy's would reopen that night. "It is now thoroughly refitted and repaired," boasted the *Record*, "and will be more popular than ever. The celebrated Zanfretta Troupe open with Ballet and Pantomime, and are considered one of the best amusements traveling." An advertisement stated that the performance would begin with a comic ballet called *The Merry Pasha* and would include "Dexterous Manipulations, Trapeze, Horizontal Bar and an Amusing Pantomime. . . ."

The editor advised his readers on Tuesday, February 20, that "all who wish to laugh and grow fat" should see the show. "The Theatre as remodeled," he continued, "makes a fine appearance, and Mr. W. H. Murphy, as usual, is on hand to make his patrons comfortable."

An advertisement in the Wednesday, February 21, *Record* announced that Colonel Wagner and Sam Hague's Minstrels and Brass Band would appear at Murphy's for one week, beginning on February 26, 1866. There were to be twenty artists in the company, "each and every one a star." On Wednesday, February 28, the editor expressed his enjoyment of the minstrel show, especially the clog dance of Sam Hague and Henri Stewart, and the good music of the orchestra.

On March 15, the *Record* reported the arrival of a packet of sheet music from W. W. Whitney in Toledo, Ohio. Among the songs contained in the packet were "Do We Love as We Loved Long Ago," "Blue-Eyed Jenny," "Bear It Gently to My Mother," "Johnny Kean's

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21 *Ibid.*, Feb. 13, 1866.

Courtship," "Beneath the Window and the Stars," "Then You'll Remember Me," and "a nice waltz entitled 'Moon on the Lake.'" The price for each was thirty cents.

March was also the month of some imminent state legislation that could have an effect upon Pithole. A bill prohibiting "pretty waitergirls" in "concert saloons" or other places of amusement had been passed in both houses. It wanted only the governor's signature.<sup>22</sup>

It must have been with some longing that the editor announced in the March 14 issue of the *Record* that Anna Levering had appeared that week as leading lady at the opera house in Rochester, New York. Evelyn Evans, however, was returning to Pithole for one night only, Friday, April 6. The announcement in the April 5 *Record* stated: "The celebrated elocutionist, will give his greatest selection of Poetic and Patriotic Recitations, which has been received everywhere with the greatest enthusiasm."

A report that a show had taken place the night before at Clark's Variety Theatre appeared in the April 11 *Record*. This theatre had not been mentioned previously. An April 15 article claimed that "Gus Clark's Variety Theatre is crowded nightly, and is really accomplishing a good work, as it is making an attempt to establish a legitimate performance in a place where 'free and easy's' have had their day of unenviable notariety. The playing at the Theatre is pronounced excellent, the dancing first-class, and the singing good. Success attend the new Theatre."

It was announced on April 16 that Mr. Heaney would play that night as "Toodles." The editor expressed his certainty that "Mr. Heaney's friends (and their name is legion) will all be there tonight." Clark's was not mentioned after April 17.

Once again, on April 25, the editor returned to his former complaint: "There is no respectable place of entertainment in Pithole. Will Artemis Ward or some of his brother showmen bring around a set of 'Wax figgers?' Even a hand organ and a monkey, with a broken-down Italian Count to 'boss the job' would be a relief to the oppressed community who have sickened of burnt-cork blackguards, and beastially indecent 'Free and Easy' performances."

The big news story of the May 1, 1866, issue of the *Record* was the early morning fire which had destroyed many buildings. The editor was justified in his anger over the lack of organization for fighting fires and the absence of a "Hook and Ladder Company." The frequent

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 30, 1866.

fires, however, were only one of the factors contributing to the decline of Pithole. A major factor was that crude oil now flowed directly from the wells through accommodation pipes to the pipelines. No more than two hundred men were needed for the entire operation. Some of the profits from the Pithole crude were going to Oil City and Titusville, while most went to Cleveland, Chicago, New York, and Boston. Pithole no longer prospered from the wages of carpenters, drillers, laborers, teamsters, and tourists. Oil, which had been the reason for the existence of Pithole, no longer had any need for the city.

The toll of the Tuesday morning fire was reported on Wednesday, May 2, in the *Record*. Seventeen houses, three barns, and a blacksmith shop had been destroyed. A sign of the decline of Pithole was that no longer was any effort made to clean up the debris of such catastrophes. Buildings were abandoned because their titles had reverted to proprietors at the termination of short-term leases.<sup>23</sup>

Hardest hit in the decline were the owners of the large hotels and theatres. Attempting to escape without great losses, owners arranged "gift concerts." The Murphy brothers, for example, announced their "Grand Gift Concert" for July 4, 1866. They offered tickets at five dollars, each of which entitled the holder to admission to the concert and a prize. Prizes were to include building lots, oil leases, jewelry, money, and the theatre itself. The total amount offered in prizes was fifty thousand dollars.

On Saturday, May 19, the *Record* editor announced that tickets for the Murphys' concert were selling briskly. He did not explain why, in the face of this fact, that the price of tickets had dropped from five dollars to one dollar. One of the better hotels, the Bonta House, was also being offered in a gift concert. As in the Murphy Theatre affair, prices were dropped, this time from ten dollars to one dollar.

The Thursday, June 14, *Record*, reported the June 13 fire which had destroyed twelve buildings. A long editorial appeared in the next issue, June 15, warning citizens "not to sell their property at a sacrifice on account of temporary dullness." He claimed that business had been improving the last couple of weeks.

The June 15 paper also mentioned Hoffman's Show, which was being presented in a tent on Holmden Street. The show included "boa constrictors, anacondas of fearful dimensions, wax figures, birds of strange plumage, and monkeys of all sizes." Drama was to return to Pithole, however, according to an announcement in the Saturday,

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<sup>23</sup> Darrah, 174-75.



June 16, *Record*. Sam Ryan's company was to perform "for a few nights only." His company included E. M. Day, H. M. Duncan, F. E. Booth, C. V. Hess, Mrs. Simcoe Lee, Miss Mortimer, Miss Nesbitt, Mrs. G. Mortimer, and others.

The opening of the Ryan company was announced for Monday, June 18, at the Murphy Theatre;<sup>24</sup> however, no further mention of it was made in the *Record*. Instead, the Saturday performance of a Mr. Stewart's company at the Metropolitan was praised. The Tuesday, June 19, issue said of the Monday performance of the Stewart company: "'High Life in Pithole' was performed with great eclat, the several parts being well acted." *Dumb Belle*, *Dead Shot*, and *Rough Shot* were scheduled for June 19 — *High Life in Pithole* and the farce *Jumbo Jum*, for June 22.<sup>25</sup>

On Saturday, June 23, the *Record* editor wrote of the need for larger audiences at the Metropolitan. He assured his readers that the plays selected were good and that "the moral of the place" was an "agreeable contrast to former performances in the 'classic halls.'" His plea produced a larger house for the Saturday performance of *The Poacher's Doom*. The Monday, June 25, performance would be the "great moral drama," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a benefit for Miss Dillingham.

On July 3, the *Record* announced that the Murphy prize concert had been cancelled because so few tickets had been sold. Refunds were available through agents from whom the tickets had been purchased. The Murphys could not even give their theatre away as a prize.

Saturday, July 14, apparently was the last performance by the Stewart Troupe.<sup>26</sup> Monday, July 16, brought Dan Rice's Circus and Menagerie.<sup>27</sup> Another fire was reported in the *Record* on August 4. From thirteen to fourteen thousand barrels of oil were destroyed and twenty-seven wells and rigs.

The lengthy stay of the Stewart Troupe (June 16-July 14) does not seem to have been duplicated at Pithole. Other companies stayed for much shorter periods. The Hernandez Troupe, for example, played the Metropolitan from August 27 through August 30, 1866. Among their offerings were singing, dancing, and such plays as *The Mountain Sylph* and *O'Flanagan and the Fairies*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Record*, June 16, 1866.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, June 22, 1866.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, July 14, 1866.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, July 16, 1866.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 27-30, 1866.

On Monday, March 10, the *Record* reported that Charles Kean had recently testified before a committee of Parliament that the theatre audiences in America were "more quiet and orderly than anywhere else in the world." No further theatre news appeared until December.

In the meantime, however, a school was finally to open at Pithole. The first term was planned for December 3, 1866.<sup>29</sup> The editor, ever optimistic, "was pleased to notice that the hotels of Pithole are doing a thriving business." He said: "It is one of the many indications of the prosperity of Pithole."<sup>30</sup>

From this time on, theatrical engagements were infrequent and brief in Pithole. The Sanford Opera Troupe was announced for December 6 and 7 at the Metropolitan,<sup>31</sup> and Miss Caroline Hayes's troupe for December 31, 1866, and January 1, 1867.<sup>32</sup>

It was boasted that Miss Hayes would act five characters in a single play and that Mr. Harry Hawk would be with the company. "It will be remembered by some," said the editor, "that Mr. Hawk was playing at Ford's theatre at the time of President Lincoln's assassination and was one of those who identified Booth as the assassin."

Theatre had, for the most part, come to the end of its brief heyday in Pithole, however. The one really legitimate house, Murphy's Theatre, had had only one real season with its own reputable stock company. The *Record* had agitated for the purchase of the theatre so that it could be used as a town hall. Of course, the borough had no money available for such a purchase.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, Murphy's was sold to J. T. McCoslin who rebuilt it at Pleasantville, Pennsylvania. The theatre was known as the Pleasantville Opera House until it was moved once again in 1871, this time to Titusville.<sup>34</sup>

The 1870 census revealed the population of Pithole to be two hundred eighty-one persons. There were forty-four families using only fifty-four of the approximately three hundred dilapidated buildings that remained.<sup>35</sup>

In August 1877, the court annulled the charter of the borough of Pithole City. The county commissioners bid in for \$4.37 the site

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29 *Ibid.*, Nov. 24, 1866.

30 *Ibid.*, Dec. 3, 1866.

31 *Ibid.*, Dec. 6, 1866.

32 *Ibid.*, Dec. 29, 1866.

33 Darrah, 177.

34 Copeland, 77.

35 Darrah, 227.

of Pithole, the parcel of land which had sold for two million dollars in 1865. In 1879, three families remained. One family lived there until 1934.<sup>36</sup> Today nothing remains of the city that once existed at Pithole except a few depressions in the earth where buildings once stood.

There was almost nothing to make Pithole theatre different from that in other communities of the oil region. It had its resident stock company for only one year, as did other theatres in the area,<sup>37</sup> after which, for its short existence, combination companies were relied upon to fill the theatre. The plays presented were essentially romantic in nature, and, typically, they were followed by farces, songs, and dances.

Perhaps the only thing distinctive, then, about Pithole theatre is that its development resembled so closely that of the city itself. Like Pithole, it arose rapidly, flourished impressively but briefly, and then faded, slowly, away.

#### EPILOGUE

The following article appeared in Gilbert Love's "Notebook" in Section C of the July 30, 1972, issue of the *Pittsburgh Press*:

A hundred years ago the once-booming city of Pithole, population 15,000, was becoming a ghost town because its oil wells played out.

This year a Californian named Jack Chodar, who had been bitten by the oil bug in Texas, came to the site of Pithole with a small drilling rig and the romantic notion that there might still be oil there.

Oil men around Titusville and Oil City, between which Pithole is located, shook their heads in disbelief.

They're shaking them in the other direction now.

Chodar struck oil and is getting six to eight barrels a day from his well.

It's no gusher, but according to Titusville publisher James B. Stevenson, who knows the old Pennsylvania oil region, if that production can be maintained for a year the well will be a paying proposition.

Chodar is planning to drill two more wells on nearby property.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 231-32.

<sup>37</sup> Copeland, 307.

## LECTURE PROGRAM

Good things still to come in the Society's 1972-73  
Lecture Program: All meetings will be held on the first  
Wednesday of each month, to wit: March 7, The Hon.  
H. John Heinz III—"Great-Grandfather's Pittsburgh."  
April 4, Cy Hungerford — "Political Cartooning in  
Western Pennsylvania." May 2, Charles M. Stotz —  
"Personal Recollections of the Lighter Side of History."