

MR. HALL'S HALL, AN UNLOVELY RELIC OF OPERA-HOUSE AMERICA

JOHN L. MARSH

HIS name happened to be Hall — Orris Hall — and like many another businessman whose fortunes were tied to a “stirring” nineteenth-century community he left his imprint literally in brick, in what was to be known as the Keystone Block in Warren, Pennsylvania.¹ An unlovely structure, three-stories wide at the ground floor, it claims our attention only because of its third floor, which a newspaper wag christened “Mr. Hall’s Hall.” Boasting what was described as a “regular” theatrical stage, the hall hosted between 1869-1883 various kinds of theatrical and quasi-theatrical attractions, together with a plethora of miscellany that invariably pleased a generation of viewers.

The annals of Mr. Hall’s Hall, or Keystone Hall, or Roscoe Hall (as it finally came to be known), is the story of countless such facilities — upstairs houses the road came to call them — which sprang up in the years following the Civil War in response to a demand for entertainment. While it was universally pervasive, it was especially notable in the oil region of Pennsylvania: witness the existence of Bascom’s Hall in Oil City, Murphy’s Theatre in Pithole, Metropolitan Theatre in Petroleum Centre, Corinthian Hall and Bliss Hall in Titusville, and the Corry Opera House. More often than not the Roscoe Halls of America were incorporated into otherwise commercial structures. Most frequently they occupied one or more of the upper floors. The rents from the ground-floor business and professional offices on the second floor, in effect, subsidized the hall and, in that old phrase, allowed the builders to have their cake and eat it, too. Of these, only Roscoe Hall (Mr. Hall’s Hall) survives, though it has undergone renovation to the point that its original appointments have been com-

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¹ Relevant biographical details concerning Hall are to be found in J. S. Schenck, *History of Warren County* (Syracuse, N. Y., 1887), 650-51.

pletely obliterated. Nevertheless, it may serve as a touchstone in a discussion of such facilities whose individual histories are case studies in the commercialization of nationwide entertainment.

Today in Warren the very name — Roscoe Hall — is virtually unknown save to a handful of members of the county historical society. A search of their files turned up only an undated typescript of a talk to the local woman's club, titled "Early Theatre in Warren." Its author, a J. H. Alexander, drew on his own recollections to describe being taken to Roscoe Hall in the 1880s to witness a group of Bohemian glassblowers practicing their trade.² But beyond this reference, and a very few programs, the only recourse the local historical group could suggest was the name of a direct descendant of Orris Hall — a G. Hall Todd, minister of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Though his family had retained ownership of the building until he was a young man, Dr. Todd could not recall ever having been within it and could remember only what he had been told of the "original" curtain — that it was painted to represent an Allegheny River scene with rafts and lumbermen prominently featured — not inappropriate as the building fronted the river on what was then called Water Street, today Pennsylvania Avenue.

The present owners, the Sons of Italy in America, were very willing to open their third floor — which had been Roscoe Hall — for inspection but had little knowledge of the building's history prior to their purchasing it. A careful search of the walls, and especially the scars yet discernible, uncovered what may have been the proscenium wall, but little more than educated guesses could be made concerning the room's original appearance. That story comes to life in the fading and brittle pages of the local papers of the day which reveal all we are likely to know of the physical building and of its performance history.

The first mention of Orris Hall's intent appears in the "Home News" section of the *Warren Mail* (August 18, 1868) which notes the existence of Mr. Hall's Hall in the new brick block under construction. The brief announcement gives its dimensions as 50 x 80 x 18 feet and mentions it was not only to have a "regular" theatrical stage but to be so constructed that a gallery could be erected if needed — apparently it never was. It appears that the stage was built into that end of the building opposite the street front. And while the width of the proscenium arch cannot be calculated, the stage area was per-

² Alexander was the manager of Warren's Library Hall in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

haps fifteen feet deep and if raised above the auditorium floor some three feet, the height of the stage could not have been above fifteen feet. Very evidently there was almost no fly space (or area above the stage) to hang drops and borders (the traditional scenery of the day), and wing space on either side of the stage proper must have been limited in the extreme. Where the actors could have found space to dress is unknown. A subsequent notice in the *Mail* (October 20, 1868) makes it clear that the hall was incorporated into the third story of a three-story building with the ground floor devoted to stores and the second floor to various offices and professional rooms. In this notice the third story was referred to as Keystone Hall.

No doubt the entertainment-minded citizens in Warren rejoiced as there were those among them who could remember when their community lacked even a concert hall. In those early days, if there was an entertainment that could be classed at all as of an improving or moral character, it was housed in one of the local churches. But if no such claims could be made for it, the courthouse — “the people’s edifice” — was the only recourse of the promoters. Then relief of sorts was provided about 1854 by Johnson’s Hall and subsequently by James’ Hall. These, however, boasted only speaker’s stands and moveable seats, and, though acceptable as sites for concerts, had only the most limited accommodations for the minstrels, brass bands, novelty troupes, and the newest of sensations — glassblowers — who penetrated the region in the wake of the discovery of oil. These quasi-theatrical aggregations were soon augmented by traveling combinations which in the years immediately following the Civil War exposed the people of Warren to the legitimate drama. It was the professional requirements of the last named that virtually mandated the erection of Mr. Hall’s Hall.

Unfortunately the paper fails to describe its appearance upon completion, and subsequent references to it give only a very general picture of the appointments. By way of example, the *Mail* (October 1, 1872) catalogues various improvements being undertaken which included raising the seats in the rear of the hall as well as the seats in the center of the auditorium. Further, the front seats, formerly benches, had been replaced by chairs. New scenery was also executed by a J. W. Carner, an actor of some repute in the Oil Region, who will be discussed in more detail. The paper’s correspondent closed with the judgment — in fact erroneous — that when the alterations were completed “Roscoe Hall” would be one of the “best” in the country. That

it was scarcely the best in the country can be seen by reference to virtually any of the area opera houses already cited. By way of example, Murphy's Theatre in Pithole, built in 1865, boasted a commodious gallery, dress circle, six private boxes, a full orchestra box, a stage thirty by forty feet, a full set of scenery, and a splendid drop curtain. Neighboring Tidioute welcomed the opening of the Grandin Opera House in 1872, and though the community was considerably less important than Warren, its lavender and blue and gold opera house had an air of elegance and a gem-like quality Roscoe Hall could not even approximate.

Orris Hall had chosen that name in memory of his eldest son, Roscoe, a sergeant in Company D of the Forty-second Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry (Bucktails), killed at Second Bull Run on August 30, 1862.³ All too soon, the hall's patrons began to express a dissatisfaction with its facilities. For throughout the decade of the seventies there are continued references in the press to the "unusual inconvenience and want of room and stage accommodations" as well as to the shabbiness of the scenery or the uncomfortableness of the seats. This harping appears to have borne fruit, for in November 1877 when a Mr. William Smith and a T. W. McNeet leased the hall, it was repaired and repainted. Orchestra chairs were put in and the stage remodeled. The seats were rearranged, too, and 200 new chairs added. As well, the walls were newly papered and the house given a general cleaning.

Roscoe Hall's detractors were silenced but for only a matter of years. Early in the 1880s the *Mail* (December 25, 1881) despaired: "Good traveling troupes are usually well patronized in Warren. Now if Warren had a nice little Opera House, what a good 'show town' it would be. But alas, it hasn't." Late in 1883 it acquired just that and more in its newly opened Library Hall (today Library Theatre), a theatrical facility fully adequate to the times. A theatrical directory of the day gives the following information so necessary to a Warren-bound dramatic combination: "seating capacity, 1,000; size of stage, 30 x 72; size of proscenium opening, 28 x 29; traps, 3; number of sets scenery, 11." Major remodelings over the years have radically altered the interior, but behind today's motion-picture screen and its

3 The *Warren Mail*, Sept. 13, 1862, reprints a letter dated Sept. 1 to Orris Hall from his nephew Robert Hall (also a member of Co. D.), which describes Roscoe's death and burial on the field. Subsequently the body was removed to a Warren cemetery.

accompanying sound equipment the wings, flies, and fly galleries remain much as they did in the days of passion, pathos, and platitude. Roscoe Hall, on the other hand, with its uncomfortable seats, its inadequate lighting and ventilation, and its awkward stage and insufficient scenery could not compete and was put to other uses, becoming for a time a national-guard armory, a roller-skating rink, and finally a home for the Eagles Club and subsequently the Sons of Italy in America.

The Sons have recreated a stage that of late years has served prize fighters, burlesque entertainers, and the like, reestablishing — in a manner of speaking — Roscoe Hall's quasi-theatrical character. But its men's smoker entertainments are obviously a far cry from the traditional sources of entertainment that were its stock in trade for some fifteen years between 1869-1883. And it is this record — or at least as much of it as survives — which constitutes the real story of Mr. Hall's Hall; in its essence as an individual record and representative chronicle of opera-house America in our country's innocent years.

Informal references to Roscoe Hall and to comparable facilities often refer to them as "opera houses."⁴ Of course, they were not literally such, but the term was widely used in speaking of "upstairs houses" about the country. Very probably the designation came into currency as a means of boosting the cultural pretensions of the community and may well have served to counter the reservations of society's arbiters hesitant to be seen at a mere theatre but willing to lend their patronage to an opera house. Yet, by whatever name they were known, there were, in fact, public halls available to all who had the means to rent them, and over the years they housed a bewildering array of fare. Roscoe Hall's first season (1868-1869) makes this circumstance abundantly clear.

But before discussing this season, or subsequent ones, it seems well to point out that the newspapers of the day in Warren — unlike others in the region — frequently made little of the public entertainments offered to the community. Only a very few of Roscoe Hall's attractions, for instance, were formally advertised in the fashion that was to become popular in the decade of the 1880s; rather, small "quarter-sheet" bills or still smaller programs detailing a soon-to-be-seen event were widely distributed, serving as advertisement and

⁴ See especially the early diaries of a passionate Warren playgoer, Dr. Michael Valentine Ball.

Old Folks Concert.

The Warren Musical Union is composed of ladies and gentlemen of the different Churches and congregations in Warren who take a deep interest in musical culture. Most of them sing in our choirs and give their time and money to sustain in a creditable manner this part of public worship. For the benefit of the young it is desirable now that a competent teacher should be employed to give a course of lessons in the rudiments as well as the more advanced branches of church psalmody. To raise money for this purpose they propose to give two Old Folks Concerts on Monday and Tuesday evenings of this week, June 2d and 3d. The Concerts are of course arranged to be as curious and attractive as possible: We give their programme below, verbatim, et literatim, et spellatim, as the boys say. The singers will dress in the old style as far as possible, and we have no doubt they will give us a very enjoyable entertainment. Don't fail to go with your "four York Shillings" and give them substantial encouragement in so commendable an undertaking:

1773.

YE PSALMODISTS

of ye Warren Musikal Union
will sing ye old stil of Musicke at
2 GREATTE CONCERTES,
to be attended in ye Halle called ROS-
COE, wh is sette downe on ye Banke of
ye Allegainy River, over Nayber Friday
his grocery shoppe—on

MONDAY AND TUESDAY NIGHTS,

Ye 2d and 3d of June, A. D. 1873.

1873.

YE LISTE OF YE PSALMODY:

Ye firste parte.

Some musicke by ye Fiddlers, etc.
Auld Lang Syne, Olde Folkes.
Invitation, Alle ye singers.
Sound ye Loud Timbrel, Olde Folkes.
A tendere songe,
By foure smarte singers.
Sons of Zion,
Alle ye menne and womin singers.
Russia, Olde Folkes.
Ode on Science,
Alle ye scientificke singers.
A Worldly Songe,
By ye foure smarte singers.
A morale songe about Captain Kidd,
Alle ye Olde Folkes.

*A reste of 5 minnits; so ye Congregation
can shuffle their feet aboute, and ye Olde
Folks can get a cuppe of tea.*

YE SECONDE PARTE:

Musicke by ye Fiddlers etc.,
Strike ye Cimballe, All ye strikers.
David's Lamentation, a wale,
Fulle Chorus.
Do you love me sister Ruth? A tunefulle
dialogue, in wh shee says shee does,
A youth and a mayden.
Easter Antheme, Alle ye singers.
A Four Parte Songe,
Ye foure smarte singers.
How beautifulle upon the Mountains, a
Solemne Songe, All ye Psalmodists.
Majesty, Olde Folkes.
A Sacred Songe, Foure smarte singers.
Olde Hundred, In wh alle ye tunefulle
of ye Congregation are invited to singe.

Ye Timist will sounde at 8 of ye clocke.
One will be taken in for Foure Yorke
Shillings.

Ticketts to come in to be sold by Na-
ber Wells in his apothecarie shoppe—
likewise at Variety Halle, and ye Yoste
Poste Office.

Printed at ye Mail Offs, wh Jobbes be
taken in and dunne.

Mail June 3, 1873

"playbill" in one.⁵ The papers confined themselves to noting briefly the attraction's advent and very likely failed to announce all of them, feeling satisfied that the town had been "billed" sufficiently. And Warren's press rarely deigned to comment or "review" after the fact.

⁵ The character of this advertising is evocatively recalled by Joseph Francis Daly in *The Life of Augustin Daly* (New York, 1917).



An unidentified amateur production in Warren. Just possibly the setting is Roscoe Hall.



Rostoe Hall today. A sign over the ground floor entrance indicates the upper floors serve as the Sons of Italy Recreation Center.

Unfortunately, today the searcher has little beyond the papers to guide him.

This condition duly noted, activity commenced with a fireman's ball on February 3, 1869, in celebration of the opening of what the papers referred to as Hall's Hall.⁶ Following this "pleasant and agreeable" evening, those who returned on March 2-3 were treated to the Presbyterian Festival held in Keystone Hall — as the third floor of Mr. Hall's Hall was briefly known. Supper was served "at all hours," and the *Warren Mail* (March 2) advertised charades, tableaux, and pantomimes in addition to vocal and instrumental music. Those who attended on the second evening were assured that Professor Fritz Schmit of Berlin would "read" an essay on natural history.

The following month brought an offering by the Young Men's Literary Association of Warren. It was a "grand dramatic entertainment," written by one of their members, titled the *Amateur Millionaire, or What Came of an Oil Strike*. The synopsis of incidents included in a surviving program has our hero, a young farmer, coming into a fortune in act one, being defrauded by a rascally agent in the second act, as well as being rescued by the efforts of two old friends. Then in the final act he is married to his true love. It was evidently the stuff of which popular theatre was made as was the "laughable burlesque," *A School for Scamps*, which concluded the evening at Roscoe Hall, alias Keystone Hall.

In May the community welcomed Blind Tom, that celebrated black pianist, who gave a concert on the first of the month. In announcing him, the *Mail* (April 20) said, "We have heard the gentleman from Africa, and can assure those who like this sort of thing that they have a rare treat in expectancy." Then, following his appearance, the paper (May 4) included, for it, a rare review: "Blind Tom's concert last night was a smasher. The new hall was full and all seemed pleased and surprised at the wonderful doings of the 'gentleman from Africa.'" No such appreciative comment, however, followed the presentation by the ladies of Trinity Memorial Episcopal Church of an operetta, *Miracle of Roses*, June 8-9, nor of a subsequent offering by the same group on June 14-15. Titled *The Fairies' Complaint*, it featured nine little girls dressed in white dresses with spangles and their hair especially curled for the performance.

⁶ I am indebted for the yearly tabulation of events at Roscoe Hall to one of my graduate students, Miss Carla Burgason, who compiled them as part of an independent study project in theatre in Western Pennsylvania.

ROSCOE HALL, WARREN, PA.,

Friday Eve., Feb. 2, '77.

First appearance in Seven years of

BLIND TOM.

The musical phenomenon of the age, renowned throughout the world as the

Greatest Natural Pianist Living.

At these performances Blind Tom will exhibit the marvelous gift which has gained him world wide celebrity, and which has astonished and delighted the greatest masters of music.

Admission.....80 cents
Children.....25 cents

Reserved Seats, 25 cents extra, now for sale at J. F. Wells & Co's drug store.

The Steinway Piano used at this concert is from the warerooms of Steinway & Sons, New York.

Mail January 23, 1877

This modest roster of entertainment for the first season was brought to a close by a touring company of "fine dramatic talent" offering that nineteenth-century standard *Fanchon the Cricket*. And though the seven attractions of the first year more than tripled in subsequent seasons, the kinds of fare had been prescribed. In its time Roscoe Hall hosted a variety of social events, especially those where the accent was on dancing, as well as church-sponsored activities of interest to the community at large. Not to be ignored were the opportunities it provided for amateur dramatic or musical groups, nor its importance in attracting to the community from afar concert artists, lecturers, or theatrical combinations. Mr. Hall's Hall was truly a facility for all manner of men and events.

Orris Hall may well have been the man responsible for securing these attractions in his first season, and for some little time thereafter, but in April 1871 the *Mail* (April 15) announced that George L. Friday had leased the hall and was asking all those desiring to rent it to contact him at his store. This raises the interesting question of just how out-of-town attractions were brought to Warren in the days before centralized booking agencies. At the outset the possibilities were two in number. Either the local manager traveled himself to New York on a yearly basis to secure productions for the season, literally bargaining on the sidewalk with actors and company managers, or he depended upon those same individuals to write him for "open time."

In the case of Roscoe Hall, it was the latter method that probably

prevailed, which may or may not account for the early sparsity of out-of-town attractions, especially among touring theatrical combinations. A boost of sorts was given in the seventies to halls, or opera houses, in the area by what came to be known as the Oil Region Circuit. This was created by a Samuel T. Jack to furnish bookings to theatres throughout the region and thus relieve local managers of the necessity of yearly visits to New York or of dependence on the mails in putting together an attractive season.⁷

Occasional references in the Warren papers to Sam. T. Jack as the manager of a particular feature at Roscoe Hall suggests that the circuit was supplying some, but obviously not all, of its attractions. These in the first five full seasons of the hall's existence climbed to a high of twenty-nine in the 1872-1873 season. In the main, social occasions predominated and dancing seemed very much in order at Christmas balls, calico hops, masquerade parties, and summer-evening soirees. These were sponsored by such local groups as the Saengerbund Society, an organization of German immigrants; by one or another of the community's fire companies; by the Red Men; or by the Machinists and Blacksmiths' Union. Church groups of all denominations flocked repeatedly to Roscoe Hall for fairs, festivals, and entertainment which featured not only refreshments but charades, tableaux, and the like.

A variety of concert fare was no less popular in the five seasons under review. Local musicians advertised ballad entertainments, children's singing, and grand-conservatory concerts. The Saengerbund Society was active as were various church-sponsored musical groups. Then beginning with the 1871-1872 season a variety of out-of-town musical groups passed through. These included Horton's Grand Orchestra and Operatic Company on November 18, 1871, and the Tremaine Brothers on June 25, 1872. One of the most active of musical aggregations beginning with the 1873-1874 season was the Warren Musical Association. Their orchestra sponsored a concert on September 4, 1873; a sociable dance on January 1, 1874; and an operatic cantata, *The Haymakers*, August 4-5, 1874. What drew the attention of the *Warren Mail* (August 1) to this event was the cast's spreading and then throwing hay about on the stage floor not to mention the production's ending with a thunder and lightning storm.

⁷ The mechanics of "the road" are detailed in a variety of sources but never with more authority than by Jack Poggi, *Theatre in America, The Impact of Economic Forces 1870-1967* (Cornell UP, 1968).

Attractions that were scarcely as prestigious as an operatic cantata, though undeniably popular, were the minstrel troupes who rarely missed a season at Roscoe Hall. There were Mr. Sanford and his Negro Minstrels on February 3, 1870, and Collins, Hulmes and Mortimer's Minstrels and Brass Band on March 7-8. Of some interest must have been the advent on June 17 of the eighteen performers who constituted the New York Female Minstrels in songs, dances, jigs, delineations of character, and "lots of fun." With their Ethiopian Comedians, Tambourinests, and Eccentric Song Singers and Dancers they made the 1870-1871 season memorable.

One category of performer who found a ready welcome at Roscoe Hall was the lecturer, or public reader. Physically the limited facilities of the hall were best geared to his use, and between September 1869 and June 1874 some twenty-five of this breed sought to enlighten the minds or improve the sentiments of their listeners. Many of them represent little more than names today — Mrs. K. B. Roberts, Emma Garfield, or J. Prescott Eldridge — who were advertised during the 1870-1871 season. But, thereafter, figures of national reputation graced the hall. By way of example, the 1871-1872 year saw the reformer and woman's-rights leader, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in Warren to deliver "The Coming Girl." According to the *Mail* (November 21, 1871), she was well received. Perhaps she won local approval as she did not "rant" for woman suffrage but reasoned "logically." Apparently her argument was that girls should be healthy and get exercise, learn a trade, and be self-sustaining. In her view "the vine would be in bad shape if the oak died"; so women should not depend too heavily on men.

Her favorable reception perhaps encouraged other feminists to visit. These included her coworker Susan B. Anthony who came to town December 3, 1872, to lecture on "The Bread and Butter Question." Commenting on her presentation, the *Mail* (December 10) maintained that though she made "a strong argument and sharp points," she was "not a very agreeable speaker. . . . She says many good and some foolish things." While not strictly speaking a woman's rightist, Anna E. Dickinson, who lectured March 20, 1872, on "Demagogues and Workingmen," was certainly a female beyond the ordinary. Since the early 1860s she had been a passionate speaker on the political aspects of war, the causes of revolution, and the true basis of government, climaxing these early lectures with an address in the hall of the House of Representatives in Washington and subsequently ap-

pearing far and wide as a much sought-after speaker.

Like these lecturers, Frederick Douglass, who appeared December 19, 1871, was yet another figure of national reputation, incidentally favorable to woman suffrage, but certainly better known for his abolitionist oratory and services on behalf of his race. Very possibly there was an appropriateness in his topic "The Self-Made Man." Commenting on his visit, the *Mail* (December 26) wrote: "Mr. Douglass lectured to a crowded house. Having ridden here from Jamestown [New York] in a sleigh on a bitter cold day, he was in poor condition, but everybody was pleased with his talk. He seems to be as successful, on the platform as though he had been a master instead of a slave."

The subject matter of speakers appearing at Roscoe Hall was obviously varied in these five seasons: from the intellectual and social life of the farmer to the formation of the world, from man revealed by music to Sherman's march to the sea, or France and her revolution. Many of those who appeared were individuals of some reputation, but perhaps the best known of them today is Bret Harte, whose picturesque stories of the miners of California are still widely reprinted in short-story collections and high-school anthologies. Harte had come east in 1871 from the world that his fictions had made so memorable to try

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| <p>LYCEUM LECTURE COURSE.</p> <hr/> <p>BRET HARTE.</p> <p>SUBJECT,</p> <p>"The Argonauts of '49."</p> <p>AT ROSCOE HALL,</p> <p>Saturday Eve., March 1st.</p> <p>ADMISSION.....50 CTS.</p> <p><i>Mail</i> February 25, 1873</p> |
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his hand at lecturing, novel writing, and play writing. In the first only was he sufficiently adept to keep at it for several years.

At Roscoe Hall, Harte delivered one of the two lectures he had prepared growing out of his California days. Its title was "The Argo-

nauts of '49." Those interested can find it, with some changes, as the introduction to the second volume of his collected works. But after even a cursory look at it, one wonders that Harte could have pleased with it at all.⁸ But the large audience that greeted him in Warren was perhaps more attracted to the speaker than to his material. Witness the *Mail's* (March 4) attention to Harte's physical appearance, which "would attract attention any place."

Of the various amateurs in Warren to appear on Roscoe Hall's stage none seemed so ambitious as the members of the Warren Dramatic Association, who were especially active in the 1871-1872 and 1872-1873 seasons. They began with *The Idiot Witness* and *The Yankee Peddler, or Old Times in Virginia* on April 10, 1872, and repeated the former on July 3, 1872. The *Mail* (July 9) reported they drew a large crowd notwithstanding the oppressive heat of the evening. The following season they offered *Enoch Arden* and *Black-Eyed Susan*, which played to crowded houses two nights early in October 1872. The *Mail* (October 15) ascribed at least part of the production's success to the "very fine" new scenery painted by J. W. Carner. His name has been mentioned earlier as a sometimes professional actor well known in the Oil Region, and during the Christmas season and New Year of 1872-1873 he joined with the Warren Dramatic Association, or rather they supported him, on December 28 and 30, and again on January 16, in various of his "great" roles: Captain Cuttle (*Dombey and Son*), Timothy Toodles (*The Immortal Toodles*), Don Caesar (*Don Caesar de Bazan*), Solon Shingle (*Solon Shingle, or The People's Lawyer*), and Rip (*Rip Van Winkle*).

The mention of Carner prepares the way for an examination of the theatrical combinations that played at Roscoe Hall, certainly taxing its already limited facilities to the utmost. In a matter of years their professional demands and the increasing frequency with which they visited made the hall an anachronism in a world seemingly gone theatre-mad. Certainly the first full five seasons of activity in Mr. Hall's Hall suggest the community's taste for what the "road" in its early years had to offer.

⁸ Henry C. Mervin in *The Life of Bret Harte* (Boston, 1911) quotes a number of letters written by Harte to his wife of his fortunes on the circuit. Of his Washington appearance (Jan. 7, 1873): "The audience was almost as quick and responsive as the Boston folk, and the committee-men, to my great delight, told me they made money on me." But of his Ottawa experience in March: "... the whole thing was a pecuniary failure. There was scarcely enough money to pay expenses, and of course nothing to pay me with."

Grand Holiday Performances.

A Happy New Year to All.

The Warren Dramatic Association,

In conjunction with the well known and favorite actor,

J. W. CARNER,

Who will appear in four of his greatest characters—

CAPT. CUTTLE,
TIMOTHY TOODLES,
DON CÆSAR DE BAZAN,
OLON SHINGLE,

AT ROSCOE HALL,

Saturday eve. Dec. 28, 1872,

AND

Monday eve. Dec. 30th.

On Saturday evening will be presented one of Dickens' greatest works entitled

DOMBY AND SON,

AND THE

IMMORTAL TOODLES.

On Monday evening will be presented the great three act drama, in full costume,

DON CÆSAR DE BAZAN,

Concluding with

Solon Shingle.

Seats secured by number two days in advance at the store of J. F. Wells & Co.

Mail December 24, 1872

The season of 1869-1870 featured two appearances by the Wallace Sisters Theatre Burlesque and Comedy Company. The sisters — Agnes, Jennie, Minnie, and Maude — were perennial favorites in Warren, returning almost as faithfully as the minstrel troupes. Not a

ROSCOE HALL!

For Two Nights Only

Wednesday & Thursday Eves,

APRIL 23d and 24th.

AGNES WALLACE,

(Leading Star of the Wallace Sisters.)

AND HER UNRIVALED

BURLESQUE & COMEDY TROUPE.

Opening in the Roaring Farce of the

IRISH EMIGRANT,

To conclude with the Burlesque Extravaganza of

CLOREIDA,

OR, THE GIRL OF THE PERIOD.

Clorinda.....Mr. SAM. B. VILLA
 Prince Poppett.....Miss AGNES WALLACE
 Other Characters by the Company.

SECOND NIGHT,

The Screaming Farce of

B. B., OR, MISTAKES WILL OCCUR,

To conclude with the Latest Sensation of

ROBIN HOOD.

AGNES WALLACE.....as the Sprightly Robin
 SAM. B. VILLA.....as the Innocent Marian
 STEVE ANHLEY.....as Baron de Bœuf
 Other Characters by the Company.

Admission 35 cents. Reserved Seats 50 cents.
 Reserved Seats can be secured at J. F. Wells & Co's Drug Store.

Doors open at 7; Curtain rises at 8 o'clock.

J. F. VILLA, Proprietor.
 Col. J. H. Rice, Business Manager.

Mail April 22, 1873

little of their appeal throughout the Oil Region was their freedom from vulgarity, which the *Titusville Herald* (April 4, 1870) noted: "Nothing was uttered that could not be heard at the fireside of the family circle." And following a subsequent appearance by the sisters, the *Herald* (March 24, 1871) commended them for their "clean" shows: "The low jokes that are so often a feature of the Opera Bouffe and Burlesque are entirely dispensed with by the Wallace Sisters."⁹

In their first appearance in Warren, February 14-18, 1870, their repertory included *Clorinda, or The Girl of the Period*; *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*; *Fra Diavolo*; and *Ixion, or The Man at the Wheel*. Unfortunately the local paper did not note their offerings when they appeared on June 1-2, but presumably they brought "more fun and less leg" than at least some of the troupes to appear at Roscoe Hall. They played Warren again February 16-18, 1871; October 12-14, 1871; and November 18-19, 1872. On none of these occasions does the *Mail* name what they were appearing in. Presumably the public was informed by the bills distributed throughout the community.

Not until the Agnes Wallace Dramatic Company came to town, April 23-24, 1873, is there mention in the press of what was offered. On this occasion the company featured *The Irish Immigrant*, *Clorinda*, and *Robin Hood*. In the burlesque tradition, Agnes played Robin while a Sam B. Villa took the part of Maid Marian. Apparently Villa frequently assayed the role of a female; his *Clorinda* was described by the *Titusville Herald* (April 17, 1873) as "simply killing." Continuing, the reviewer noted: "His singing was truly artistic and his make-up could not have been bettered." It seems evident that for this season, at least, Agnes Wallace was not performing with her sisters, for the very next attraction on April 28 was the Wallace Sisters Troupe, featuring Jennie, Minnie, and Maude. Perhaps to make up for their sister's absence, they were supported by a powerful company of twenty-five artists, full orchestra, and brass band.

Another favorite of Warren audiences was Denier's Comique and Pantomime Troupe, which made the first of a number of appearances in Warren April 5-6, 1871. On this occasion John Denier, one-time muscle man and gymnast, sought to publicize his appearance by walking on a tightrope stretched between two buildings. The previous

⁹ A useful source, especially for the theatre in Titusville, is B. H. Copeland's doctoral dissertation "The Oil Circuit: A History of Professional Theatre in the Oil Region of Northwestern Pennsylvania from 1859 to 1900" (University of Denver, 1969).

month he had appeared in Titusville and the *Herald* (March 21) had been not a little appreciative:

The Opera House was partially filled last evening, it being the first appearance in this city of the versatile Denier and his company of first-class artists. The program for the evening consisted of varied selections of farce, song and dance, and nearly all were rendered in a superior manner. The horizontal bar act, by Denier, was one of the best performances of the kind we have ever witnessed, while the songs and dances of Mr. James King were alone worth the price of admission. Frank Carleton, in his song of "Keyser, Don't You Want to Buy a Dog" gave one of the liveliest Dutch impersonations of the season. Miss Maggie Willett and Miss DeVere displayed considerable talent, the former being as sprightly as the original cricket on the hearth, and was loudly encored. The entire performance, in fact, is replete with new and comical features, interspersed with Denier's choicest hits and unapproachable impersonations.

In Titusville, as at Warren, he had performed his ropewalking act for the public at large. The *Herald* (March 25) described his feat as follows:

Yesterday afternoon a rope was stretched across Diamond Street from the roof of the Herald building to the roof of the Clark building, for the purpose of giving our citizens an opportunity to witness the acrobatic performance of Mr. John Denier, whose troupe performed at the Parshall Opera House last evening. He made his appearance on the rope about four o'clock and went a series of very daring and difficult feats, such as walking forwards and backwards on the rope and wheeling a barrow across, etc. Mr. Denier has been twenty-nine years at the business; is 36 years of age, stands 5 feet 7 inches high and weighs 128 pounds. He has traveled all over the world and has been the recipient of twenty-three medals from various persons of distinction.

Quasi-theatrical entertainment with the accent on variety was evidently very much to the taste of the times. Attractions other than those already enumerated which bear on the genre include the Tremaine Brothers' Grand Musical Entertainment, together with the John G. Pierson Operetta Troupe and Burlesque Bell Ringers appearing on March 7-8, 1872; the Berger Family of Swiss Bell Ringers with Mr. Sol Smith Russell in town September 22, 1873; and the Peak Family of Swiss Bell Ringers, Vocalists and Harpists, who attracted a good audience May 5, 1874.

In the record of these first five full seasons dramatic entertainments by professional companies were actually in scarce supply, contrary to what one might suppose to be the case in a theatrical facility. The 1870-1871 season saw only Nellie Love's New York Comedy and Burlesque Company. When they appeared April 7-8, 1871, they presented *Our Country Cousin* and *Cinderella, or The Glass Slipper*. Not until J. W. Carner appeared on March 4-6, 1872, in *Dollars and Sense* and *Rip Van Winkle* did the patrons of Roscoe Hall witness the efforts of a legitimate dramatic troupe. Carner, whose name has

figured in several instances in these annals, had made his first appearance in the Oil Region in 1868, and his rendition of Rip was more popular with local audiences than was Joseph Jefferson's approach to this American favorite. The *Titusville Herald* (December 20, 1870) spoke for many in applauding Carner's Rip:

We believe we but echo the expression of a discriminating audience in pronouncing Mr. Carner's *Rip Van Winkle* a great success. There is a grace, finish and ease about it, which stamps him as a genuine artist. His conception of the character is natural and his performance artistic. There is no straining after effect, no attempts to make points and invite applause. Joy, pity, remorse, anger and forgiveness are alternately displayed with a naturalness which makes the auditors forget that they are witnessing the "counterfeit presentment" of the real feelings, and from the opening to the closing scene the interest is effectively sustained.

The 1872-1873 season brought two dramatic combinations. First, on October 24, 1872, the Norris-Norton Comedy Combination pre-

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FOR TWO NIGHTS ONLY.

NELLIE LOVE'S

NEW YORK COMEDY & BURLESQUE

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Supported by 13 Star Artists.

FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 7th,

OUR COUNTRY COUSIN,

NEW SONGS and DANCES, and

Cinderella, or the Glass Slipper.

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ENTIRE CHANGE OF PROGRAMME.

Admission 35 Cts. Reserved Seats, 50.

Doors open at 7½ o'clock, Commence at 8.

See Programmes and Posters.

E. M. GOTTHOLD, Agent.

Mail April 8, 1871

sented *Niagara*, a society drama by Edward Kidder. The company had appeared on October 16 in Meadville, Pennsylvania, and on that occasion the local papers noted that from the way very similar pieces had drawn, "we imagine that it will suit the tastes of theatregoers, being light, humorous and sensational."¹⁰ Very possibly the company pleasantly entertained the Warren audience as they had in Meadville. Whether or not the second company on November 20, 1872, pleased those at Roscoe Hall is not known, but the Meadville audience was very skeptical of the talents of Mrs. Macready, advertised as "the eminent tragedian and Shakespearean actress."

She was what was described as a "breeches" actress, that is she specialized in male roles. Oil City audiences had seen her Shylock and the *Derrick* (January 10, 1872) contended that in trying to act like a man and use a "manly" voice she "put power into unimportant words and passages and falls off in force in critical ones," and becomes a "shrewish, angry, coarse woman rather than a shy Shylock." Meadville, which witnessed her *Richelieu* a month before, could find little reason for her, much less any woman, to portray male roles:

Mrs. Macready's Shylock we consider a remarkable rendition of the character for a woman but cannot but regard the part as much too heavy a one for her, nor any other woman. She is unsuited for the character more from lack of voice than for any other reason, but it was painfully apparent to all who understood the character, that she has not the volume of voice necessary to a correct rendition of the part.

It is unfortunate that Warren's papers do not contain the kinds of review material that editors elsewhere in the region encouraged. But, as has been remarked earlier, the coming of such troupes as Jennie Carroll's New and Select Company on October 6, 1873, or Rouse's Combination on October 20 were noted only in passing. One suspects, though, that what they offered was most likely improving in nature, moral certainty, and probably didactic as well — that is, if what they offered made any pretense at claiming distinction. If not, such catch words as "light," "humorous," and "sensational" do very well in describing not a little of the popular theatrical fare that delighted audiences in opera-house America and then vanished from the scene.

In the interim years — September 1874 through June 1879 — Roscoe Hall continued to serve as an all-purpose hall for the com-

¹⁰ All quotations from the Meadville papers are taken from B. B. Engel's doctoral dissertation, "Chronicles of the Meadville Stage: 1800-1899" (University of Pittsburgh, 1968).

munity. As it had earlier, it hosted assemblies, hops, and balls sponsored by local groups — among the most curious perhaps the Cigar Makers Union of Warren. In particular, masquerade balls appealed to Warrenites, and for these the hall itself provided rental costumes. Their outfits secured, the ticket holders paraded through the town on the afternoon of the evening the dance was to be held. Music for these events was provided by the Warren Quadrille Band, by Professor Coleman's Band from Titusville, or by the Crosby Band of Corry. On occasion they played until dawn, which must have seemed the ultimate in sophistication — or wickedness — to Warren's citizenry.

Indicative of Roscoe Hall's wide range of activities in the 1875-1876 season (at least as indicated in the local press) were a spelling bee, an exhibition of dances by a band of Iroquois Indians, and a Ladies Centennial Entertainment. Rounding out such miscellaneous uses of the hall were the May term of court and the Republican County Convention. The following season found a band of Indians on the scene. Advertised as Chief Cornplanter's descendants, they rendered war dances and recreated scalping scenes.

During 1877-1878 Roscoe Hall was no less available to those seeking a public meeting place. The local Baptist congregation used it each Sunday, beginning in October, until their church building was ready for occupancy, and the Catholics used it twice as the site for fairs. A hook-and-ladder company organized within its confines, and when the Decoration Day services were rained out, Roscoe Hall was hastily secured. But perhaps its most curious use in this, and the subsequent season, was as an arena for walking contests. The *Mail* (April 30, 1878) noted that an indoor track had been set up by civil engineers, and two contestants from Buffalo and a Warren man were to walk seventy-five miles in twenty-seven hours. A physician was promised in attendance at all times, and ladies were invited. On one afternoon a cornet band provided music.

The accent was on "home" entertainment, and surely not the least enjoyable events at Roscoe Hall were its concerts by local musicians, in particular the Warren Musical Association, whose hop and promenade concert was a lively affair in May 1875. Its memory may well have been eclipsed, however, by the musical entertainment the association presented in November 1877 which they followed by an oyster supper. For their afternoon concert on Christmas Day the *Mail* (December 23, 1877) informed its readers that the windows would be covered and the hall lighted by gas. It might be noted in passing that

this group's most ambitious undertaking was its rendition in April 1877 of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* with nine soloists and a chorus of sixty. Just how Roscoe Hall's limited stage accommodated this aggregation is a task for the imagination to comprehend.

The new year witnessed what promised to be an unusual event for music lovers — a telephone concert. The readers of the *Mail* (January 15) were told that on the evening of January 28 singers and musicians stationed at Jamestown, New York, would be plainly heard via telephone by those gathered at Roscoe Hall. In addition, Mr. Edison's phonograph was to be exhibited. This was described as "a kind of speaking telephone," which produced "an exact counterpart of the voice and words" of an individual speaking into the instrument. When the evening in question arrived, sounds from Jamestown could be distinctly heard in Roscoe Hall, but they were bereft of music.

In the midst of what has been described to date, the voices of lecturers and readers were still to be heard, although perhaps not quite in the numbers of yore. The 1874-1875 season, for instance, offered only (if the papers are again a reliable guide) exgovernor Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania on November 27. This distinguished war-time leader had been appointed by President Grant minister to Russia in 1869, and he was speaking in Warren on this occasion of his impressions gained in this post.

Possibly no lecturers appeared the subsequent year, but the 1876-1877 season found the Honorable W. C. Plummer of Titusville speaking in behalf of temperance; Mrs. Ann Eliza Young, divorced wife of Brigham Young, lecturing on "My Life in Bondage"; and Fannie E. Hamblin in an evening titled "Advertisement on Character Reading." The 1877-1878 year brought Mrs. Watson, yet another temperance speaker from Titusville; the Rev. F. C. Lampe in a selection of readings; what was described only as a "humbug lecture" which took the people's money but gave little else; and Mr. Christian Ross of Philadelphia, who spoke on the abduction of his son. And finally 1878-1879 brought with it a Colonel Atwood speaking on "greenbacks." His audience walked out on him. The unfortunate colonel was followed by the Reverend Fred Evans of Titusville lecturing on "Mistakes"; by Will M. Carleton, author of the widely popular *Farm Ballads* (1873), in readings from his own works; and by George S. Boutwell, a secretary of the treasury under Grant. His topic was "Abraham Lincoln."

That the theatrical road was gearing up to provide entertainment

nationwide seems clear, not only from the presence of assorted variety artists who advertised at Roscoe Hall, but from the increase in combination companies that vied with the attractions already named. In the former category the years between 1874-1879 yielded Zera the Magician and Ventriloquist with his petite marionettes; Signor Basco, another renowned magician; and Professor Reynolds, a mesmerist from London. Martinetti's pantomime troupe of twenty-two star artists returned, while the Royal Yeddo Japanese Troupe made their first and only appearance in Warren. Among their number were jugglers, sorcerers, necromancers, wrestlers, acrobats, contortionists, rope-walkers, balancers, and fearful sword manipulators. Truly theirs must have been an unusual evening for those who attended September 20, 1875.

Old favorites, too, in the variety-concert category renewed acquaintanceships made on previous visits. The Berger Family of Swiss Bell Ringers provided soft bell music, character songs, and novelties when they headed the 1874-1875 season on September 5, and they were on hand again to open Roscoe Hall for the 1876-1877 and 1877-1878 seasons. Another favorite family organization, the Wallace Sisters, had temporarily, at least, abandoned their burlesque format to appear on September 21, 1874, in John Brougham's dramatization from Dickens titled *Little Dorrit*. Very evidently the Oil Region was tiring of the burlesque tradition as evidenced by the "good" audience that greeted the sisters' dramatic venture at Roscoe Hall and by the reaction in neighboring communities. Oil City's *Derrick* (September 28), for instance, wrote appreciatively as follows:

We must call *Little Dorrit* the hit of the season. It is a gem of a piece in plot, incident and character, the little rills all hastening to swell the torrent of the catastrophe, the characters presenting those contrasts of innocence and villainy, stately pride and abject misfortune, that medley of contradiction, that mosaic and bizarre panorama of humanity, grouping the odd, the fantastic, the comical, the sad, the wretched, the mysterious, the cunning, the desperate, the brainsick and heartbroke, which made Dickens' stories so dramatic, and render *Little Dorrit* as popular a piece as had lately been put upon the stage. . . .

The sisters returned the subsequent season in *Minnie's Luck*, or *The Ups and Downs of City Life* and were numbered among the attractions during 1877-1878. Surely they were beloved of Warren audiences, but where once they had been numbered among a very few legitimate companies to play Roscoe Hall, they now had increasing competition in these middle years from a wide range of traveling combinations, some to be long forgotten but others whose presence helped to define a generation's taste.

Among the latter in the 1874-1875 season was the Townsend Family Troupe, who appeared October 29-30. Though the *Mail* does not indicate their dramatic vehicle, it was perhaps the same as they offered at Meadville, November 6. On this occasion the press of that city made much of the twenty-two players, their excellent orchestra, and their dramatic vehicle:

A fair audience greeted the Townsend Family . . . on their second appearance in the comic drama of "The Wonderful Woman." This play is much of the same stamp as the light society plays which are now so popular throughout the country. Miss Constance Townsend appeared to great advantage in the leading role, personifying the ambitious woman, the gay widow of a wealthy merchant, who was willing to sacrifice wealth and happiness to title. She gained the station so much sought by the Parisian belles and with it a husband, (a good one in disguise), whose debts she proposed to pay for his name. The Marquis de Frontenac (Mr. Harry Townsend) husband only in name, refused her wealth, and spurning all offers on her part, learned the cobbler's trade in a cottage opposite the residence of the Marchioness near Paris. Through the intricate law of courts the Marchioness was refused admission to court unless accompanied by her husband. This humbled her pride and led to an interview which ended in the sweet way we all like to see.

The 1875-1876 season welcomed the Crane-Merton Comedy Company and Roscoe Hall's old benefactor, J. W. Carner. Assisted by the New York Comedy Company, he appeared in *Fanchon the Cricket*, one of the first legitimate dramas to be seen in Mr. Hall's Hall. But perhaps the most notable attraction this particular year was the appearance of Mrs. Henrietta Chanfrau on September 30 in *Parted*, a society drama. Only days earlier, when she had appeared in Meadville, that community's press had attempted to make sense of the play's complicated plot:

"Parted" gives an inside view of one of the many small "Black Friday's" that are frequently worked up in the mind of Wall Street, no doubt by unscrupulous schemers, with as dire results to innocent families as are here depicted, though not always with as satisfactory a sequel. The connecting element of the story is the fate of a financial bubble into which Courtland DeWolf and Silas Sandbury have inveigled a number of parties; but one of them, Dorsey Shirley, has become so deeply involved that he is worse than penniless, for by a mutilation of the books he is made to appear a forger with no means of disproving the charge against him. He leaves his wife, Grace Shirley (Mrs. Chanfrau) and his little daughter, allowing them to believe him dead rather than permit them to remain in close relations to a man who, in the eyes of the world, is a felon. Poverty is her portion, and the man who has ruined her husband serves her with a notice of ejectment from the house she lives in; but her husband in disguise, after prospering during several years of exile, purchases the house and finds means to otherwise care for her and his child. Events finally show his innocence, unmistakably, and proves as conclusively the guilt of those who entrapped and persecuted him, and the denouement both vindicates and avenges him. The idea of wifely honor and devotion is strongly brought out and enforced, and in his congenial character it can easily be imagined Mrs. Chanfrau can do herself thorough justice and win new admirers in this highly pleasant expression of her art.

The most bountiful year for lovers of the theatrical at Roscoe Hall was 1876-1877 when some ten companies appeared. Leading off was a black troupe, the Hyer Sisters, in what was referred to as a "moral musical drama." Its title was *Out of Bondage*. The *Titusville Herald* (September 12, 1876) praised the music:

The cabin songs and plantation melodies are sung with all the depth of feeling characteristic of the race, and the choral performance was marvelous in its uniform smoothness and power. . . . Anna Hyer was especially successful in her solos. . . .

And when the troupe appeared in Oil City, the *Derrick* (September 5) applauded them, too:

The acting was as natural as it could well be while no praise is too great for the singing. . . . Frequent encores showed the appreciation of the audience who in such pieces as "Peter, Go Ring dem Bells," "Carve dat Possum," "Dare's a Great Camp Meeting" were hardly satisfied with a repetition.

That Roscoe Hall provided something for everyone in the audience is suggested by the presence of Waite's Combination offering that ever-popular temperance drama, *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, on April 27 and *Rose Michelle* on June 13. Waite's organization was a Meadville-based combination composed of local and professional talent. Among the latter were Carner and his wife. Waite himself had for several seasons past directed the amateur dramatic talent in Meadville, and though he was very possibly hesitant about looking further afield, he must have been encouraged by the July 4, 1876, reception of his company at the Meadville Opera House. On this occasion Carner was recreating one of his strongest characterizations, Rip Van Winkle.

Heady with their success the Waite Combination, with James R. Waite functioning as actor-manager, put *Rose Michelle* into rehearsal early in September. When presented before a local audience it was announced as a benefit for Mr. Waite.

The review that followed the performance is of interest for what it has to reveal of the principals:

When the curtain rose, and the play proceeded so far as to develop something of its plot and introduce the dramatis personae fairly, the attention of all became at once engaged, and 'til nearly midnight they were held bound by the thrilling story of the trials and sufferings of Rose Michelle, and the final triumph of a mother's love. These were so faithfully and so vividly portrayed, that the audience signified their feelings now in bursts of loud applause, and now in the more eloquent words of tearful silence. Meadville is not unused to high exhibitions of histrionic art, and the reception given Mr. Waite's company last night ought to be and most certainly is appreciated by him as a high compliment. The Carner Company is made up of most excellent material. Mr. J. W. Carner has made a national reputation in his rendition of Rip Van Winkle, in which he has in many respects no superior. As Pierre Michelle, the Inn Keeper, he is the perfect per-

sonification of the miser whose God is Gold and who spares no victim in its worship. To work up a character sufficiently fiendish to sell his child to a libertine, and assassinate a man for his money requires a talent which few men possess. Mr. Carner's effort in this difficult role was a perfect success, he is most certainly a wonderful man. Mrs. Brooke is so well known and her talents so highly appreciated in Meadville that it is hardly necessary to say that, as the wife of Pierre Michelle and the devoted mother of Louise, she played a part in which she excelled. Her eminent abilities have been recognized in the great cities, where she has played with great success to increasing audiences. Her rendition of the difficult part assigned her last night was received with every token of approval. The remainder of the company is well selected, making it, upon the whole, a combination which will succeed despite the depression of the times.

Having pleased at home the Waite group took to the road to play Roscoe Hall and opera houses throughout the region. Thereafter, they returned to Meadville, the amateurs among the company no doubt flushed with their triumphs on the road.

Two of the most notable productions Roscoe Hall was to host appeared in 1876-1877. The first of these was the *Big Bonanza* presented by Augustin Daly's Fifth Avenue Company on June 27. Daly, at the outset of a brilliant career, had adapted this play from the German drama *Ultimo* (1873) satirizing the rage for speculation that followed in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War. In Daly's adaptation the scene was transferred to New York in the seventies, and what emerged was an amusing comedy which bordered on the farcical. As such, it was virtually guaranteed success with audiences throughout opera-house America, as was *Two Orphans* starring Kate Claxton. Tickets for the last named sold for seventy-five cents and one dollar, the highest ever asked at Roscoe Hall.

Miss Jane Combs's appearance under the management of Sam T. Jack in *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that the Oil Region circuit was active in 1877-1878. However, Shakespeare was not its staple; rather its very existence depended on plays like *The Molly Maguires* as rendered with appropriate blood and thunder by the Cohan and Budworth Combination on November 22. When it appeared in Meadville a week later the press summarized the complicated plot line which bespoke the taste of the viewing public:

Mark O'Dare, the handsome engineer of the Black Diamond Mine, falls desperately in love with Dianna Dichink, the daughter of his wealthy employer. Mark is a strong, hardy fellow, and is held in deathly fear by the Molly Maguires, who seek in various ways to take his life. Dianna overhears a plot for his destruction, and forgetting her pride informs him of his danger. The "Mollies" attack him while in her company and are repulsed with the aid of Banty Bob, O'Dare's faithful colored servant, who comes to the rescue with a small arsenal. Nathan Lyford, a New York speculator, loves Dianna. She scorns his suit. All of her father's money is invested in the mine. Lyford, though through a broker,

has advanced to Dichink the sum of \$50,000.00 to be paid at a certain day. The strike comes on; Dichink cannot pay the debt. Lyford offers to cancel it if Dianna will marry him. This the girl refuses to do. The Black Diamond Miners, under the leadership of O'Dare, refuse to enter the strike. By means of a decoy letter, O'Dare, who thinks he is aiding his employer, resolves to join the strikers as one of their leaders. Dianna hears of this, hastens to the Black Diamond breaker, and meets O'Dare. An explanation follows. O'Dare declares his love which is reciprocated. Banty Bob brings news that a gang of Mollies are on the way to burn the breaker, and kill the engineer. Bob is sent out to the junction for the Philadelphia soldiers. O'Dare prepares to defend his and Dianna's life. The Mollies, led by Lyford, are met and repulsed at the first fire. At the second attack, Lyford falls mortally wounded. The soldiers then rush to the scene, and the curtain drops on an exciting tableau.

Blood and thunder rendered in buckskin and gunsmoke was the emphasis, too, in *The Scouts of the Plains* brought to Roscoe Hall on November 22 by the Texas Jack Combination Troupe of Scouts and Indians. One of a number of comparable spectacles that made the scout a familiar figure on the American stage, it demonstrated that no matter how weak the acting, if the principals were played by "the real thing," the production could not fail commercially. The *Mail* (November 20) made much of its coming and enumerated various of the cast and their specialties — especially the champion marksmen able to shoot an apple held in the mouth or perched on someone's head — or even the ashes from a cigar. These it was promised could all be accomplished while looking backwards through a mirror. What the Warren audience thought of this "scalping show" is not known, but when it played in Meadville the following day, the gallery was filled with hoodlums who, having read Beadle's dime novels, were determined to voice their judgment on the stage business.¹¹

In the final half decade of its active service, Roscoe Hall's bill of fare exhibited a shift in emphasis. The hall continued to house a variety of attractions, but those which had once predominated were now decreasing in frequency. Purely social events and lectures, as well as local and imported musical attractions, were but sometimes occurrences. Home-talent dramatic and variety productions did hold their own but were augmented by amateurs from neighboring communities in elaborately mounted efforts. Witness Bradford's Company C., Seventeenth Regiment, National Guard of Pennsylvania, which rendered *Harry Allen*, *The Union Spy* in Warren on January 20-22, 1881. So successful did this "new and beautiful military allegory" prove that within a month Warrenites repeated it with the assistance of Company D. A

¹¹ For a discussion of this genre see Paul T. Nolan, "When the Curtains Rise, Scouts Fall Out," *The Southern Speech Journal* 29 (Spring 1964): 175-86.

program of this latter event promised new music, costumes, tableaux, and scenery. From "the synopsis of incidents" it is apparent that the story line was only a convenient excuse to introduce a series of tableaux, at least one to an act, which visualized moments of high resolve, dedication, and sacrifice in behalf of a noble cause.

Just how appealing such military spectacles were to audiences in the Oil Region can be gauged by the widespread production of the very similar *True Blue*, or *Brother Against Brother*. This "beautiful military drama" was presented in Warren for the first time March 27-28, 1883; and though a program of that production has not survived, one does exist for performances January 17-18, 1884, at nearby Tidioute. An examination of its "synopsis of scenery and incidents" reveals a blending of spectacle and comedy with singing and dancing, building inevitably toward the successful triumph of arms and the celebration of the victors in a Grand Tableau of Victory.

However, the efforts of even the most ambitious amateurs were eclipsed by the influx of professional entertainers — minstrels, variety artists, and dramatic combinations — which in the final five years of Roscoe Hall's existence as an opera house suggest not only the growing strength of the theatrical road but the avidity of the audiences in the Oil Region (and throughout the country) for other than the modest home entertainments which once had satisfied. To be sure minstrel groups were no strangers in Warren, but where one or two companies at most had visited yearly, their number now more than doubled. In the 1882-1883 season, for instance, five companies stopped off: Hi Henry's Minstrels, Leavitt's Gigantean Minstrels, Harte and Sullivan's Female Minstrel Company, Dupre and Benedict's Gigantic Minstrels, and Baird's New Orleans Minstrels.

Variety artists, too, were in evidence, though single performers like Signor La Cardo, Wizard and Ventriloquist, were in the minority. The emphasis was on numbers; witness the December 17, 1879, appearance of May Fiske's Troupe of English Blondes and Cuban Beauties, who were eighty in number according to the *Mail* (December 16). Or the arrival May 19, 1882, of Howorth's Double Show and Mirror of Ireland, which promised not only three combinations in one but a moving canvas panorama boasting sixty beautiful scenes of Ireland. If it at all resembled other panoramic displays, it would be from eight to ten feet in height and several hundred feet in length. This quantity of canvas was stored on a roller, and to display it the roller was raised to an upright position. Then the canvas was unwound and

taken up by an empty roller positioned on the opposite side of the stage. Advertisements invariably made much of the length of the canvas and number of views, size seemingly being the standard of quality.¹²

Minstrels and variety artists were overshadowed, however, by the dramatic combinations who made Roscoe Hall, for all its limitations, their especial home between 1879 and 1883 introducing Warren audiences to that play of the century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Rial and Draper Company presented it on October 7, 1879, and they were in Warren again to open the 1880-1881 season on September 1.¹³ On the latter occasion the *Mail* (August 31) promised the company had been improved: "They now have grand scenery, a trick donkey, three mammoth trained bloodhounds, and a band of jubilee singers." Perhaps their popularity can be gauged by a subsequent reference to 150 people being turned away from the door on the evening they were announced.

Lest audiences not get their fill of a good thing, Miller's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared on February 1, 1881. The cast numbered by the *Mail* (February 1) count only fifteen persons, but they promised, as did many another company, "the only correct representation of this popular Drama." They also advertised that "Real Negroes" would play the black characters. Whether they pleased those in Roscoe Hall is not known; but when they appeared in Meadville on the eighth, they did not win friends, departing precipitously, and perhaps on foot, for Conneautville, Ohio.

It was during the 1880-1881 season that drama decidedly came into its own at Roscoe Hall, both in terms of quantity and quality — at least as the latter was then judged. Following its sure-fire opener, Aston's Dramatic Company appeared September 30 and October 1 in *Under the Gaslight* and *East Lynne*, plays whose very titles evoke a quarter half century of theatre in America. The former, crafted by Augustin Daly, was a front runner in plays which owed not a little of

12 The panorama is a much neglected, quasi-artistic-theatrical art form that was popular throughout the nineteenth century. By way of introduction see the opening chapter of John Francis McDermott, *The Lost Panorama of the Mississippi* (Chicago, 1958) or Charlotte Willard, "Panoramas, the First Movies," *Art in America* 47 (Winter 1959): 66-69.

13 Those interested in the Uncle Tom phenomenon should see Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit* (New York, 1947). Harlowe R. Hoyt in *Town Hall Tonight* (New York, 1955) has an evocative chapter titled "Poor Old Uncle Tom He's Gone" and long-time subscribers to *American Heritage* (p. 28-33) may recall in the October 1955 issue a handsomely illustrated article by Richard Moody, "Uncle Tom, the Theatre and Mrs. Stowe." Many volumes of theatre reminiscences tell the story from the actor's vantage point. See, for example, William A. Brady, *Showman* (New York, 1937).

ROSCOE HALL,
Tuesday, October 7, 1879.
 THIRD ANNUAL TOUR OF THE
Majestic Spetacular Revival
 Of Mrs. Harriet Beecher-Stow's Great Moral
 Religious and pathetic story,
Uncle Tom's Cabin,
 As originally revived and performed over
 One Thousand times, by
RIAL & DRAPER.

The public desire being so great to witness this remarkable natural play, and the interest it has awakened being still unabated, and owing to the artistic manner in which it is illustrated by this excellent company, who have played it over One Thousand times, have induced the management to present it again this season, which, with the magnificent scenery, charming musical effects and touching incidents, have aroused the greatest enthusiasm among all classes, and elicited the most favorable comments from the press, and the hearty endorsement of the

Leading Clergy of the Country.

Admission, 25 and 35 Cents. Reserved Seats,
 50 Cents. Seats secured at Wells & Noyes
 Drug Store.

Mail September 30, 1879

their success to a spectacular scenic effect, in this instance the heroine's rescue of the villain's intended victim, foully served and bound to the railroad tracks. To accomplish this she needs must break out of a station shed by means of an ax which has been stored and then forgotten within the shed. And even as she struggles to batter down the door with it, the noisy train is heard and then seen rounding the curve in the distance.¹⁴

East Lynne, "sensational" in its own way, was adapted from a novel frequently denigrated as flimsy and stupid, but then the play itself is no less flimsy, unnatural, incongruous, and feverishly sentimental. No matter. The heartbreaking suffering of a good, but erring, woman which it portrayed at great length was to the taste of the times as evidenced by the response of a Meadville reviewer to one of the many *East Lynne* companies that visited:

¹⁴ The story of the play's inception and initial reception is ably told by Edward A. Dithmar, *Memories of Daly's Theatres* (privately printed, 1897).

If the amusing parts of a play provoke unrestrained merriment in the audience, if the thrilling points bring bursts of applause, and the emotional passages make men as well as women shed tears, it needs no practiced critic to discover that nature is being painted with the skill of a master. Emotional plays are not pleasing to all persons. The breaking up of a happy home by the green-eyed monster; the cunning scheming villain and his successful design on the happiness of a weak woman; the desolation of the heart and home of a husband and father; the shame and abandonment of the betrayed woman; the remorse of crime; the unsatisfied yearnings of a mother's heart; the servitude of Madame Vine in the house where she ruled as Lady Isabel; the death of her child and finally that of herself, are scenes which require rare talent to portray, and strong nerves to enjoy. Yet these are the dramas which drew the largest houses.

In April Warren's theatre lovers were offered the Anthony and Ellis Company's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the twenty-third with their imported Siberian bloodhounds and the great, knowing donkey, Bruno — no doubt redeeming a somewhat tarnished product. Then the Donaldson Combination with new scenery and fresh costumes advertised *Two Orphans* and *Camille* on the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth. Literally within one month of the 1880-1881 season, playgoers had the opportunity to witness much of what constituted a generation's definition of popular theatre.

The new year, 1882, brought with it a rash of comic opera by such groups as Hume's English Comic Opera Company and the New England Opera Company, together with melodramas of little remembered distinction — *Legion of Honor*, *A Life's Mistake* and *Broken Vows* — which pleased probably because of the familiarity if not the triteness of their ingredients. There was yet another *Uncle Tom's Cabin* company to be seen; on this occasion a Double Troupe, advertising two Topsies, two Marks, two donkeys, etc. This particular "double" phenomenon had arisen out of the intense rivalry among "Tommers" seeking to attract through an emphasis on size — all the characters in pairs — which in its way reinforces a quest for the "mammoth" or the "gigantean" which had been observed in the advertising of minstrel and variety performers.

But perhaps the most interesting of groups to visit in this season was one of the prestigious Madison Square Theatre Companies in *Hazel Kirke*. That Roscoe Hall could attract such a quality production is evidence not of the adequacy of its facilities but of its audience's theatrical appetite. The play itself involving a projected marriage between unsuited partners, a mortgage on the family mill, the discovery of true love, an unrelenting father, and much more — but especially the heroine's attempt to drown herself after being driven from home — was familiar enough to audiences, but what was less familiar to

them was the evident care Gustave and Charles Frohman, two of the road's most astute showmen, took in mounting this and other Madison Square productions.¹⁵

Warrenites must have proven themselves Frohman-worthy for in 1882-1883 not one but two of the brothers' productions were in evidence: *The Professor* on November 24 and *Young Mrs. Winthrop* on March 8. The former, a first play by the actor-playwright William Gillette, was an amusing character study of a middle-aged teacher admired by a bevy of girls and in consequence badgered by the younger lovers of the girls. Audiences delighted in its species of whimsy and in its focus on the tribulations of young love. They welcomed, too, as in *Young Mrs. Winthrop*, the complexities of the marital relationship — especially when complicated by the charge of infidelity directed at one of the partners — a charge which eventually proved groundless.

Wagner and Reis were responsible, too, for the appearance at Roscoe Hall of Fred Lyons in *Jesse James, The Bandit King*. It appears from the *Mail* (April 10) that two of the company's principals were trained horses. Just how these navigated the stairs to the third floor had best remain a matter of conjecture, but their presence is evidence of a growing emphasis upon elaborate productions and upon theatrical spectacle. Companies of this kind included, for example, the numerous progeny said to occupy an entire private car of *The Devil's Auction*, a "spectacular" musical play, featuring demons and several

15 The brothers, engaged to manage the Madison Square Theatre's road productions, sent out four *Hazel Kirke* companies during the 1881-82 season and fourteen the following season. Daniel Frohman in his autobiographical reminiscences, *Daniel Frohman Presents* (New York, 1937), recalls that Charles was able to book an entire tour without looking at a map: "As thoroughly as other managers knew Philadelphia, Chicago and Boston, he knew Xenia, Macon, Urbana, Paducah, Gallipolis and their like throughout the country. He knew every opera house and lodge hall and hotel and railroad connection. What was more important, he knew the sort of audience each town could furnish, and he adapted each of our road companies to the character and the financial resources of the towns for which it was booked."

George Blumenthal, long a Frohman watcher, detailed something of Gustave's (G.F.) contribution in *My Sixty Years in Show Business, 1874-1934* (New York, 1936). He writes that G.F. sent celebrated circus agents out weeks ahead of the regular advance agents to let the towns know that the Madison Square productions were "different and fashionable and approved by the churches." Each company carried its own scenery, a novelty appreciated by audiences which before had had to put up with the haphazard drops and wings of local theatres. As well, a beautifully framed picture of the interior of the Madison Square Theatre was sent out to hotels, theatres, and offices all over the country as were souvenir programs and huge posters. It was no wonder that the Madison Square was the best known playhouse in the country and its road companies' appearances special events.

extravaganzas which appeared February 7, 1883, and the forty star performers in the by now familiar *Under the Gaslight* on July 13.¹⁶

When spectacle was not the point at issue emotionalism was, as can be seen by the October 17 return of Kate Claxton in *Two Orphans* and by the January 22 appearance of Oliver Doud Byron in *Across the Continent*, a play particularly associated with his name. The Meadville paper's report of it shows again an emphasis on emotional melodrama:

This play is no fiction but another true tale, a part of which occurred in New York on the night of the great fire, 1857, when one of our young merchants, after a champagne supper, wended his way in the vicinity of the "old five-points," where he found a woman dying in the snow. He bore her to her home where, soon after, she expired, but first leaving in her benefactor's care her twin offspring, a girl and a boy, who are now living and have married, and figure in the best society on Lexington Avenue, New York. In respect for the dead, we do not give the right names of the characters figuring in this most wonderful picture of the times.

Not only did audiences not tire of such a diet, but they welcomed time and again their favorite emotional and sensational dramas. If *Uncle Tom's Cabin* returned more frequently than most, it should be noted that the Kitty Rhoades Company revived *East Lynne* and *Two Orphans* late in November 1883. But with the departure of the Rhoades Company, Roscoe Hall's theatrical life was virtually at an end. Mid-December welcomed the opening of Library Hall, and its predecessor's fate was to host for a season or two the kind of activities with which it had begun: lectures, charity fairs, individual performers, Indian shows, and hometown minstrels.

A glance at the publicity attendant on the opening of Warren's newest hall reveals that it was rushed to completion in response to the "urgent" need of the community. Those who attended its opening production (December 3, 1883) rejoiced to be within "a comfortable, convenient, safe and handsome place." One first nighter remarked: "The entrance was so convenient, no trouble in getting your seat; no noise by rowdy boys; no dirt; and everything nice and pleasant; and at last, but not least, the hall was quietly and quickly emptied."

By implication, Roscoe Hall represented the antithesis, and even the remodeling that had taken place at the beginning of the 1877-1878

16 An examination of the Warren Hotel register for this date shows two pages devoted to the cast of 27. Each page is headed with the name of the production and in large bold script on the inner margin of the left-hand page the production's name again appears as does the information that the company was appearing at Roscoe Hall for one night only and that the next stand was Franklin, Pa. (See opposite page.)

ROSCOE HALL!

Thursday Evening, April 15, 1869.

GRAND DRAMATIC ENTERTAINMENT,

Under the auspices of the YOUNG MEN'S LITERARY ASSOCIATION, will be presented an ORIGINAL DRAMA, written for the occasion by a member of the Society; entitled the

AMATEUR MILLIONAIRE,

Or What Came of an Oil Strike!

Martin Turner }
 Fred. Graham } Young Farmers.
 John Wilson }
 Barnes Barnacle A rascally Agent
 Rev. Mr. Livingstone
 Tim Biggs (a genuine yankee)
 Greene— (Landlord of the Easyville House)
 New York Landlord
 Tom— (a waiter)
 First Loafer
 Second Loafer
 Mary Turner—Sister to Martin
 Helen Graham—sister to Fred
 Alice Wilson—sister to John
 Patty—Mary's hired girl
 Jenny Greene—a country girl

C. C. Thomson
 J. F. Wells
 F. D. Reeves
 O. Trantum
 C. Dinsmoor
 R. B. Smith
 R. Dennison
 P. A. Randall
 H. E. Brown
 D. I. Ball
 C. H. Noyes
 Mrs. R. Dennison
 Miss Libbie King
 Miss Mary Clark
 Miss Ettie Eddy
 Miss Mary Keyes

SYNOPSIS OF INCIDENTS &C.

ACT I. *Scene 1.* Martin Turner's cottage; Mary and Martin at tea; Aunt Dinah; By-gones and Anticipations; Patty and Tim have a confab; "She don't understand it" an unfortunate interruption; "That spoils it," a surprise party; "Wild Irishman"; Tim remembers something, The letter from Barnacle; "Hurrah for Petroleum;" \$100,000, "My! what a pile!" a general palping off; Good night; The afterthought.

Scene 2. Easyville House; Waiting for the stage; Arrival of Martin and Barnacle from Oil City; "Wet night;" "Let's take something;" Barnacle gets a soft thing; Tim gets sick; Martin too free hearted; He meets Livingstone; "Take some money;" "Pick up your hat;" Money no account; "Am I drunk?" Tim wants to fight; "Lead me to straw;"

ACT II. *Scene 1.* Helen and Mary comparing notes; Suspicions; A cure for blues; A call from Patty; How she fixed the pedlar; Suspicions confirmed; "We must save him;" "Let us all go together;" Patty in trouble; "I'll go too."

Scene 2. Whiskey poker; Barnacle's little game; Tim sleeps with one eye open; an old friend; Tim's plan; Freaks of an Oil Millionaire.

Scene 3. Patty in New York; Barnacle absconds; The Millionaire a beggar; Fred and Tim on the track; Affecting meeting between Tim and Patty.

Scene 4. A time serving friend; John Wilson goes home.

Scene 5. "What came of it?" Despair; Two old friends; "We've saved him."

Scene 6. The end of it; "I can't help it, I can't bear it;" A suicide prevented; "I'll go home with you."

ACT III. *Scene 1.* At home again; A triple wedding; A harmless glass; Tim's plan discovered; How to save money.

To conclude with the laughable burlesque of

A SCHOOL FOR SCAMPS!

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| Lord Belmont | R. Dennison | Sir Frederick Malison | O. O. Trantum |
| Old Gopus | F. A. Randall | Young Gopus | H. E. Brown |
| Hodge Cowslip | C. Dinsmoor | Lawyer Venom | C. C. Thomson |
| Jerry Cowslip | J. F. Wells | Frank Friendly | F. D. Reeves |
| Lady Belmont | Miss Mary Keyes | Matilda Belmont | Miss Mary Clark |
| Mrs. Gopus | Mrs. R. Dennison | Dorcas Cowslip | Miss Ettie Eddy |
| Abigail | Miss Libbie King | | |

Doors open at 7 O'clock, Curtain rises at 7½ O'clock.

ADMISSION - - - - FIFTY CENTS

A program, collections Warren County Historical Society.

season could not overcome its inherent limitations as a theatrically oriented facility. These were increasingly evident with the years and especially as companies brought more and more performers with them and as they placed a premium upon spectacular effects. Noticeably offerings in all those categories previously enumerated decreased in 1883-1884 and how, otherwise, to account for the decline than to suggest that the road had outgrown its, at best, meager appointments.

Yet the performance history of Roscoe Hall between 1869-1883 is a case study of the popular taste in entertainment and especially the growing commercialization and standardization of opera-house America. For nearly a decade all matter of events — but especially these of a local and nontheatrical character — predominated. Then a noticeable trend toward the products of the road, and particularly the dramatic combination, came to the fore. Bell ringers, pantomime artists, variety entertainers, and the like disappeared from the scene, except to be included as part of the stage action or to be put between the scenes and acts of plays whose popularity endured season after season because of their something-for-all-viewers appeal.

And, whatever we may think of the offerings of opera-house America, and in particular of Roscoe Hall, they fulfilled the expectations and the needs — social, moral, and intellectual — of the communities they served. Within the portals of unlovely and now-forgotten halls across the country one could dance the night away or stir to the rhetoric of a Frederick Douglass; rally to the support of amateur musical and dramatic talent; or respond with awe to the marvelous, never-before witnessed feats of variety and specialty artists. For the mere price of admission, patrons had at their doorsteps the plays and the players of the day. They must have sensed the world was coming to them and for them alone. It was an illusion to be sure, but for a little while at least Roscoe Hall made it appear to be so.