THE ROLLER SKATING RINK OPERA HOUSE
OF OIL CITY, PENNSYLVANIA:
THE 1884-1885 THEATER SEASON

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The problem of finding a space for the staging of drama was solved in France in 1634 when an indoor tennis court was converted into the first Theatre du Marais; in England in 1660, William Davenant's theater was converted from Lisle's tennis court.1 While the solution of the problem of where to produce drama in each of these periods — the French Classical and the English Restoration — was to use the home of a waning sport, one American Victorian solution was to use the home of an increasingly popular sport, roller skating.

Oil City, Pennsylvania, was the enterprising community that adapted a roller skating rink for use as a theater when the city's opera house burned in 1884. The enterprise of the entrepreneurs who developed the new theater is a reflection of the spirit of the city itself and the mode of life fostered there.

Northwestern Pennsylvania was a functioning oil region long before the oil boom at the middle of the nineteenth century. Excavations along the west side of Oil Creek in the 1840s revealed about two thousand pits in an area of five hundred acres. The pits, seven or eight feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep, were lined with logs. When they were cleared of debris, oil floated on the surface of the water which collected in them, indicating that the collection of oil was their intended purpose. Because the trees in the area, which were from two to three hundred years old, were not there when the pits had been dug, the pits must have been created before the 1540s.2

1 Oscar C. Brockett, History of the Theatre (Boston, 1968), 232, 256.
Into this area had come the Senecas in the seventeenth century. They used the “Seneca Oil” for treating rheumatism, strains, and sprains.\(^3\) When white settlers moved into the region, they used the petroleum they found floating freely on the streams, in the springs, and mixed with the brine in salt wells. The settlers found that oil mixed with flour made a practical lubricant, and lumbermen used it in their mills in its natural state. The poor burned it in their lamps in spite of the smoke and odor.\(^4\)

When, in August 1859, Edwin L. Drake succeeded in sinking the first producing oil well in nearby Titusville, the rush was on. The small settlement on Oil Creek grew, became a borough in 1862, and by 1865 had “one hundred stores and workshops of various kinds, to which additions are always making. Fourteen hotels, large and small, and half a dozen saloons, minister to the bodily comforts, whilst the spiritual wants are supplied by four churches. Healthy as Oil City is claimed to be, there has been found employment for eight doctors. . . .”\(^4\) The traveler who made these observations in 1865 described Oil City further in this way:

Oil City at last. Oil City with its one long, crooked and bottomless street. Oil City, with its dirty houses, greasy plank sidewalks, and fathomless mud. . . .

Oil City is worthy of its name. The air reeks with oil. The mud is oily. The rocks hugged by the narrow street, perspire oil. The water shines with rainbow hues of oil. Oil-boats, loaded with oil, throng the oil stream, and oily men with oily hands fasten oily ropes around oily snubbing-posts. Oily derricks stand among the houses, and the “town-pump,” if there is such an institution, must pump oil.\(^6\)

Another writer said, in 1865, “As Oil City has the most disgusting name in all Petrolia, so every thing else is in keeping therewith.”\(^7\) Calling the city a “finished town” with a population of about five thousand “besides a thousand or two of floating elements,”\(^8\) he described what a visitor would experience there in this way:

At morning, mid-day, and evening, the screams of steam-whistles at the various machine-shops, foundries, and refineries, are painfully long and loud. In the various houses or sheds thrown up on the principal streets, where lots sell at New-York City prices, he finds whole platoons of land agents,


\(^4\) Ernest C. Miller, *Pennsylvania’s Oil Industry* (Gettysburg, Pa., 1959), 3.


\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) William Wright, *The Oil Regions of Pennsylvania. Showing Where Petroleum Is Found, How It is Obtained, and at What Cost. With Hints for Whom It May Concern* (New York, 1865), 47.

\(^8\) Ibid., 48.
North Side of Oil City, Pennsylvania, in 1885. Photo courtesy of Heritage Society of Oil City.
New Opera House.

STAR LYCEUM COURSE.

Thursday, January 22, 1885,

MISS FLORENCE MARRYAT,

Author of "Love's Conflict," "Veronique," etc., Daughter of Captain Marryat, R. N. C. B., Author of "Peter Simple," "Midshipman Easy," etc., will make her appearance in her celebrated Musical and Dramatic Monologue entertainment, entitled,

"LOVE LETTERS."

Admission, 50c; with Reserved Seat, 75c. Tickets for the Course: Admission to Three Entertainments, with Reserved Seat, $1.50.

Advertisement appearing in the Oil City Blizzard, Jan. 20, 1885, for a program at the opera house.
lawyers, speculators, the agents of merchants and manufacturers, whose wares are likely to be in demand there, "drummers" of all kinds and from all parts of the country.9

In 1870, Oil City was described as one of the most important commercial towns of the oil region. It had its shipping facilities, some producing wells within the borough, and a rapidly increasing business.10 At this time the people of the region were said to possess such valued nineteenth-century characteristics as strict integrity, respect for the law, initiative, temperance, hope, industry, skill, perseverance, and the ability to exercise "the best business and mechanical knowledge that our country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, could supply, or money obtain."11

While these qualities cannot be attributed to the entire population, they must have been present in many people to enable them to endure the hazardous nature of life in the oil boom area. Within the space of a few years they survived: the Ice Gorge of 1862, in which sixty thousand barrels of oil and two hundred boats were lost; the Oil Fleet Fire of 1863, in which losses reached $150,000; the Ice Gorge of January 1864, in which two hundred boats and many buildings were forced down the river; the Pond Fresnet Jam of May 1864; the Great Flood of St. Patrick's Day, 1865, in which losses reached $5,000,000; the April Flood of 1866; the Great Fire of May 1866, in which losses were estimated at $1,000,000; the Flood of August 8, 1866; and the Fire of 1868.12

The railroads nearest to the oil region, in 1860, were from twenty to twenty-five miles to the north. Until 1862, about six thousand teams were used to carry oil to those shipping points.13 Other requirements of the oil business were pipelines and storage facilities, both of which contributed to the economy of the area.14 The railroads came in 1866, eventually providing five lines operated by four of the leading railroad companies.15

In 1884, the editor of the Oil City Derrick boasted that the

9 Ibid., 37.
11 Ibid., 190, 191.
12 History of Venango County (Chicago, 1890), 443-45; Atlas of Oil City, Pennsylvania (New York, 1887).
15 Atlas of Oil City, 3, 4.
permanency of Oil City, "the Hub of Oildom," was assured. Ex-tolled in subsequent articles were Oil City's advantages as a place of residence: "its healthfulness, its picturesque location, its pure air and water, its schools, churches and society." The banking facilities, the financial condition, and the unmatched railroad facilities were also praised. The editor had earlier expressed his enjoyment of the fact that New York City was in a turmoil when its wire service from Oil City had been interrupted. Apparently, New York brokers lost thousands of dollars because of the stoppage. "This is a singular state of affairs," he said, "for a city which claims the leadership of the speculative oil business." 

The editor found it necessary, however, to carry on a lengthy battle with the city council over the problem of the cows. The council simply would not pass ordinances to keep cows and other farm animals off the streets. After one of the council's failures to act, the editor complained: "The cows are victorious. They came, they saw, they conquered, and consequently they remain. The cows of Oil City have met the Common Council of Oil City, and they are victorious. The meek eyed bovine will continue her work of destroying lawns, chewing up shrubbery and fruit trees, and making barnyards of the sidewalks." 

It was in the city of prosperity, growth, struggle, endurance — but, as the battle of the cows indicates, provincialism — that fire destroyed Love's Opera House on February 29, 1884. John Love had built his opera house in 1872 at a cost of $30,000; it was remodeled completely in 1878 and was used continuously until it was destroyed by the fire. The opera house had been preceded by the construction of a large frame building, Bascom's Hall, which had opened in 1865. Eventually it became known as O'Hara's Hall, and, after being used for various purposes, was allowed to deteriorate.

In spite of the loss caused by the fire, there was much to be grateful for. The performance of The Black Flag had begun promptly at eight o'clock that evening, and the final curtain had come down at 10:30, ten to twenty minutes earlier than usual. The fortuitous early curtain enabled the entire audience to leave the building unaware that flames were about to burst through the floor into the second story.

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16 Oil City Derrick, May 27, 1884.
17 Ibid., Dec. 8, 1884.
18 Ibid., Dec. 8, 13, 1884.
19 Ibid., Mar. 7, 1884.
20 Ibid., July 24, 1884.
21 History of Venango County, 459, 460.
theater. While some of the actors had to make their escape in less than adequate clothing, others had the time to save the company's equipment. The only person injured was the porter from a neighboring building whose arm was broken when he was knocked down by the water from a hose which a fireman had dropped.\textsuperscript{22}

It was reported that some men in the crowd watching the opera house burn to the ground had expressed a willingness to invest in a new one if such an enterprise were contemplated.\textsuperscript{23} The March 4, 1884, issue of the \textit{Derrick} told of the interest of a Mr. Wagner, the proprietor of a number of opera houses in various communities, in taking a "reasonable balance of stock" in a new opera house if local capitalists raised an appropriate amount of money. The editor was pleased with Wagner's faith in Oil City "as a show going town," and he claimed, "Oil City, being run in connection with ten or a dozen of other good towns, has been one of the best show towns in the country. . . ."\textsuperscript{24} The new opera house, however, was not immediately forthcoming.

March 20, 1884, brought the announcement, "At last we are to have a roller skating rink." The fifty-by-thirty-foot building was to be completed within two weeks.\textsuperscript{25} Roller skating, which had been introduced to America by James L. Plimpton in 1863, had achieved great popularity by 1870.\textsuperscript{26} The grand opening of the Elm Street Rink did not occur until April 22, but on that day the rink was crowded with the "best and most respectable citizens, standing room even being at a premium." Entertainment was provided by "Miss Ina Decker, the acknowledged champion acrobat on skates. . . ."\textsuperscript{27}

Following upon the success of the Elm Street Rink, another rink was built on the south side of Oil City. At the formal opening in July, it was difficult to get even standing room to view the skating, bicycle racing, and the performances of the Franklin Cornet Band and the Oil City Exchange Band. Excursion trains brought guests from Franklin for the event.\textsuperscript{28}

That summer, many events were presented at the Elm Street Rink. There were contests with such prizes as a "handsome skating badge," "a fine silver prize cup," and a "pair of fine nickel-plated

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Oil City Derrick}, Mar. 1, 1884.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibid.}, Mar. 5, 1884.
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Ibid.}, Mar. 20, 1884.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Oil City Derrick}, Apr. 22, 1884.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, July 22, 1884.
roller skates"; there were masked carnivals; there were special skating performers such as the Boston midgets, Master Archie Deacon, and Miss Hattie Gould; and there was even a Women's Christian Temperance Union tea. A special weekly newspaper, *The Oil City Rink News*, kept everyone apprised of events.

On September 25, 1884, the *Derrick* reported that three members of the Oil City Oil Exchange had bought the interest of C. S. Mark in the South Side Rink and that, along with the other owner, W. F. Hamilton, they would convert the rink into an opera house. They announced October 8 as the last night the building would operate as a rink. Meanwhile, the scenic artist Frank H. Johnson had arrived and planned to complete his work in a short time, and the carpenters expected to finish their work within twelve days.

On November 13, 1884, the *Derrick* carried an extensive description of the remodeled skating rink. The auditorium was fifty-nine feet by seventy-three feet with a ceiling twelve feet high at the sides and twenty feet at the apex. The lattice-covered orchestra pit was three feet lower than the floor of the stage. The floor of the auditorium was raked so that the rear was three feet higher than the front. Seven hundred-eight chairs were put in, and room remained for one hundred more. The sixteen-by-fifty-two-foot gallery had a seating capacity of two hundred. The arrangement of seats was claimed to guarantee everyone an unobstructed view of the stage. The ceiling was covered with canvas "so smooth and so nicely painted and decorated" that it looked "as substantial and elegant as plaster." Two large Siemens lamps illuminated the auditorium, and between them Johnson, the scenic artist, had painted "a beautiful landscape, showing the Kinzua bridge in the foreground."

The article assured the readers that attention had been paid to their safety. The main entrance was eight feet wide, and exits three feet wide had been provided on each side of the building. There was also an exit from the gallery to the street. All the doors swung outward and, it was claimed, they could all be opened in three seconds.

The stage, "unexcelled by any opera house in the country for elegance and convenience," was four feet above the floor of the auditorium, fifty-nine feet wide, twenty-seven feet deep, and had a proscenium opening of twenty-eight feet. To the left of the stage was the "star" dressing room, and to the right had been added a twenty-

by-thirty-foot addition containing three large dressing rooms. It was claimed that there was "ample room for trunks and trappings generally."

It was also reported that the "latest and most improved machinery" had been used for handling the scenery. The grooves in which the scenery was to be run were hung on hinges and pulleys. Wesley Swanson describes stage grooves and their typical use in this way:

These grooves were . . . parallel grooves in the floor and ceiling of the stage, in which the upright flats and wings could slide. Sometimes they consisted of tracks which could be laid upon the stage temporarily for certain scenes. From three to five sets of grooves were used. The expressions, "set in one," "set in three," and the like, originally referred to the groove in which the flats of that particular scene were supported.32

The overhead lights were hung the same way, so that both scenery and lights could be raised or lowered "to accommodate the scenic effects that any show in America" carried.

The writer of the *Derrick* article of November 13 admitted that his descriptive powers were "not equal to the emergency" of describing the scenery; he did make some comments, however, as he listed the various scenes:

- Two door plain chamber.
- Center door boxed parlor. Very beautiful.
- A fine landscape.
- "Kitchen scene."
- "Dark forest" scene.
- "Light forest" scene.
- "Garden scene." Very elegant.
- "Prison scene." True to life.
- "Rocky pass." Wild and weird.
- "Street scene." One of the best.
- "Horizon." Great artistic skill.

There were also "set trees, set cottages and all things needful to make up a collection of scenic property unexcelled by any."

The New Opera House, as it was called, opened on Tuesday, November 18, 1884, with a production by the Oil City Burlesque and Comedy Club, an amateur minstrel group. The show included a farce, a Shakespearean burlesque, a lightning sketch artist, a whistling solo, many songs, and a "National Tableau." 33 The first professional

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33 *Oil City Derrick*, Nov. 19, 1884.
play to be presented in the new theater was *The Shaughraun* starring Dion Boucicault as Conn. Boucicault, who appeared on one night only, November 26, was billed as the greatest living actor.\(^3^4\) Certainly he was one of the most popular of his era as well as being renowned as a playwright, director, and producer.

The New Opera House served as Oil City’s theater from November 18, 1884, through December 19, 1885.\(^3^5\) By eliminating the fifty-seven Sundays during that period, it can be determined that there were three hundred forty-seven nights available for performance. The proprietors, T. A. Kane and G. B. Tracy, filled the theater on one hundred of those nights, not including the schoolchildren’s concert on June 13 at twenty-five cents admission, the prize essay contest on June 15 at fifteen cents, and the graduation exercises on June 16 at fifteen cents.

Touring combinations, with their acting companies, costumes, properties, and, usually, scenery, continued to provide professional theater in Oil City as they did in the rest of the oil region. Sixty-eight different companies presented one hundred performances at the opera house. Of that number, eighty-four were professional and eleven were amateur; two nights of lectures and three nights of concerts completed the list. Two companies failed to arrive for their performances because of their inability to make proper railroad connections, one company folded before reaching Oil City, and one company had to postpone its performance until a later date. The few matinees which were presented are not considered because of the inconsistency with which they were advertised and reported.

Of the professional performances, nineteen nights were devoted to minstrels, variety shows, and concerts; operas and operettas were presented on seventeen nights, making a total of thirty-six professional musical productions. The fifty-one nights of plays were comprised of twenty-eight comedies and twenty-three “serious” plays, consisting mainly of melodramas and spectacles, but including two Shakespearean productions. The total is complete when the eleven nights of amateur productions and two lectures are added.

Only ten of the professional companies played for more than one night. Three of these played for two nights; three played for three nights; two played for four nights; one played four shows on five nights; and one, the Sawtelle Comedy Company, played seven

\(^3^4\) Ibid., Nov. 26, 1884.

\(^3^5\) Figures that follow are compiled from *ibid.*, Nov. 18, 1884-Dec. 19, 1885.
different shows on six nights and one afternoon. With so many one-
night appearances, it seems remarkable that there were so few inter-
ruptions of the schedule. Three amateur productions played two-night
runs and one played for three nights.

While the admission prices were generally thirty-five, fifty, and
seventy-five cents, some companies such as the Sawtelle group and
Hamersly's Standard Opera Company charged only ten, twenty, and
thirty cents. Perhaps such low prices were necessary to lure the play-
goer to the theater since the obstacles to moving about the city were
sometimes formidable; for example, on some occasions the city was
literally mud bound just as it had been two decades earlier. The
editor of the *Derrick* had these comments about the problem:

The mud is holding a tight check on field operations around Cogley and
other places which depend upon Oil City for supplies and the situation will
only be changed by a cold snap. Mud, though indigenous to the glorious climate
and soil of the oil region, and tolerated through the 25 springs and 25 falls of
the region's history, is a disorder that could be happily dispensed with.6

An inducement to attend the theater appeared in the December 27,
1884, issue of the *Derrick*. The proprietors had arranged for a line of
sleighs to run from the Oil Exchange corner to the New Opera
House. The fare was ten cents.

Often gifts were awarded to members of the audience. Signor
La Cardo promised "50 Large and Valuable Presents Nightly 50." He made the following claims: "No Trash! No Trash!! No Trash!!!
But large and costly and valuable presents. Just think of it. We never
split, never divide, but carry out our programme to a letter. You can
depend on it, the grandest and best magical and ventriloquist gift
carnival of the world."7 To every child under twelve years of age,
Little Dot Pullman, who did "marvelous feats of the Revolving
Globe" with Henry Pullman's Boston Dime Museum and Theatre,
promised a souvenir of herself which would be worth more than the
price of admission.8 "Dan'l" Sully was more specific in his
promise: he would give to each lady attending the performance a
Handsome Card Receiver as a memento of his first appearance in
Oil City.9

Miss Florence Marryat did not give gifts when she performed
her monologues, but she always displayed on some part of the
platform a red velvet banner emblazoned with her monogram and

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coat of arms. "Woman in England has no right, as a rule," explained the Derrick editor, "to display a coat of arms, and Florence Marryat is one of a dozen only who possess that privilege." 40

For the first time in several years, Uncle Tom's Cabin was to come to Oil City. The announcement indicates the way in which Fred R. Wren's Mammoth Double Uncle Tom's Cabin Company attracted attention: they "present this thrilling drama in a very realistic manner. They have a pack of fierce blood hounds, two Uncle Toms, two Topsies, and in fact all the leading characters are presented doubly." 41

Other shows made their bid for attention through spectacle, which "during the last fifty years of the century often attempted to satisfy the spectator's taste for realistic representation and for striking and unusual effects." 42 Kerry Gow advertisements encouraged the audience to "See the great Blacksmith shop scene. See the sagacious trained Carrier Doves. See a real horse shod on the stage." 43 Across the Continent boasted of "The Terrible Snow Storm! The Great Fire Scene! Byron's Dynamite Cocktail! The Terrible Death of Dissolute Dude! The Merchant's Drawing Room, Fifth Avenue! The Picturesque Railroad Station! The Exciting Telegraph Scene, etc., etc." 44 Streets of New York included "Union Square by Night, Brooklyn Heights, Fulton Market, Baxter Street, Five Points, and the Greatest Fire Scene Ever Witnessed." 45 Silver King had "All the Magnificent Scenic Effects, including the Wonderful Double Stage and Revolving Scenery, constructed from the Original Models used at the Princess Theatre, London, England, and Walleck's Theatre, New York." 46

The Oil City amateurs obviously felt they could emulate successfully the spectacles of the professionals. The Sons of Veterans, in their military drama, Allatoona, had one hundred people on stage and used "Horses, Brass Band and Drum Corps! New Scenery! New Music! Calcium Light Effects." 47 Unfortunately, the company had difficulty with the timing of their production. The waits between scenes were so long that the special farce, called Oil Exchange Bull Ring, had to be omitted from the first two performances because

40 Ibid., Jan. 20, 1885.
41 Ibid., May 21, 1885.
42 Richard Moody, America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theatre, 1750-1900 (Bloomington, Ind., 1955), 225.
43 Oil City Derrick, Nov. 25, 1885.
44 Ibid., Dec. 12, 1885.
46 Ibid., Oct. 28, 1885.
47 Ibid., Jan. 28, 1885.
of the lateness of the hour.\textsuperscript{48} True Blue, a Grand Army of the Republic production, was more successful except for the battle scene, which, although it was stirring, "did not pass without casualties, as some of the troops engaged in firing shot too low and the wax wads did damage to the faces and hands of those in the foremost ranks." \textsuperscript{49}

Probably the most unusual bonus provided for the Oil City theatergoer occurred on January 19, 1885. It involved Prince Flatow, the contortionist with Pullman's Boston Dime Museum and Theatre, and was reported as follows on page one of the January 20 issue of the Derrick:

All the chairs were occupied, and as for the gallery it was packed to suffocation, and many were turned away. The regular programme was enacted and as the curtain was rung down on the last act there was a noticeable uneasiness among the audience which plainly indicated the intense interest felt concerning the great event of the evening, namely the marriage of Prince Flatow and Miss Gray. (It might be well to mention here that Miss Hattie H. Gray is a resident of Meadville, and has relatives and friends in both this city and Franklin. She and the Prince have been engaged for some time, and it was only when the museum exhibited in Meadville, three weeks ago, that the novel idea of being married on the stage was talked of.) All preparations having been previously perfected, the audience was not kept long in waiting.

As the curtain rose the stage was discovered set as a parlor, with handsome furniture and decorations. Flowers and flags ornamented the room, and on a stand in the center of the stage were a number of beautiful baskets and designs of flowers. As the wedding march, composed for the occasion by Prof. Church, was begun by the orchestra, little Dot and little Pearl Pullman entered, strewing flowers before the bridal party, which entered, marched once around the stage and formed in two lines, ladies at one side and gentlemen on the other, with the bride and groom in the centre. Justice Luman Stevens then stepped forward and the marriage service was gone through with. As the happy pair were pronounced one, and the groom kissed the bride, a storm of applause arose, which continued until the curtain fell. The bride was beautifully dressed in a rich blue satin dress with lace trimmings, while the groom wore the conventional broadcloth. The bridesmaids were all charmingly attired and the whole presented a pretty picture.

The New Opera House hosted only one company employing child actors — as opposed to child performers. The Hollywood Opera Company presented the "fairy operetto," Cinderella. Baby Clara Hollywood, age five, who played Cinderella, and her brother, Master Dick, age six, who played the prince, were "pronounced by the press and the public to be the greatest child actors living." \textsuperscript{50}

Of the seventy-four different productions presented at the opera house, the Derrick reviewed forty-four. The impressions conveyed by the reviews indicate that attendance at four performances was excellent, at eighteen it was large, at three it was medium, at seven it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Ibid., Jan. 30, 31, Feb. 2, 1885.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Ibid., Feb. 13, 1885.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Ibid., Apr. 24, 25, 1885.
\end{itemize}
was small, and at one it was bad. The latter performance was the Northcott Concert which was attended by only about one hundred persons.\textsuperscript{51}

The editor’s reaction to four of the plays was enthusiastic, to twenty-five it was favorable, to eleven it was moderate, and to two it was negative. Among his negative observations were such comments as those on \textit{The Emigrants}. He said, “Both Baker and Farron are good dialect speakers and genuine actors but do not bring out anything particularly new or interesting in that line of stage business.” \textsuperscript{52} Of \textit{Over the Garden Wall}, he said, “Although there were some good points in this play, on the whole it was a disappointment. In the effort to make it funny, a lot of catch phrases are introduced so often as to become tiresome.” \textsuperscript{53} That the editor had temerity cannot be doubted when the evidence on which he based the following review of the Bijou Minstrel Show is considered: “None of the members of the \textit{Derrick}’s editorial staff were present, but from the expressions of gentlemen who were, we feel safe in saying that those who were not in attendance have not much to regret, as the show must have been very commonplace. With few exceptions the gags, songs, and funny acts presented were hoary with age.” \textsuperscript{54}

Among the performances to receive the most praise from the \textit{Derrick} editor was that of George C. Boniface and his troupe. The editor said that the company gave the best interpretation of \textit{The Streets of New York} ever seen in Oil City. He praised Boniface’s acting, the company’s support, and the fine dramatic effect of the scenery.\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Two Johns}, starring J. C. Stewart and William B. Murray, earned these comments: It “created as much mirth as has ever been crowded into three hours in this city. It is one of the very best comedies on the road and no company could give it better interpretation…” \textsuperscript{56}

\textit{Romeo and Juliet} was especially appealing to the editor because it had been so long since Oil City had seen a Shakespearean play. He found “the production . . . by so talented a company was a real treat.” \textsuperscript{57} One of the greatly anticipated performers was Florence Marryat whose solo production included songs and monologues. According to the \textit{Derrick} editor, Marryat “is a versatile and altogether

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Ibid.}, Apr. 22, 1885.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, Jan. 15, 1885.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, Feb. 10, 1885.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, Feb. 12, 1885.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, Oct. 14, 1885.
\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, Sept. 12, 1885.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, Feb. 20, 1885.
charming performer. Possessed of a magnificent physique, a fine presence, complete control of her facial muscles, gracefulness in movement and gesture, and perfect self-poise in all situations, she interests and amuses from first to last.”

The productions praised most enthusiastically, however, were those featuring J. K. Emmet and Frank C. Bangs. Of Emmet as Fritz in Frits in Ireland the Derrick editor said, “None like Emmet, none greater than he in comedy. A better pleased company of playgoers never left an evening’s entertainment. . . .” Bangs’s Silver King was considered to be one of the best performances ever given at the opera house, if not the best. The editor’s observations were:

The play . . . abounds in those situations which only such an actor as Mr. Bangs can carry out and there are some pathetic scenes in which . . . Mr. Bangs’ splendid acting brought tears to the eyes of his auditors more than once. Playgoers of Oil City have good reason to thank Messrs. Kane and Rogers for bringing this A1 attraction here and they also have good reasons to congratulate themselves on the fact that this able management have made the arrangements for the introduction of many other troops [sic] just as good as the Bangs Company in the near future.

Under the management of Kane and Tracy the New Opera House provided the people of Oil City with theatrical productions every month except August 1885. The troupes were either traveling repertory companies or combination companies, many of which carried their own scenery. They seem to have been quite reliable in meeting their difficult scheduling. The most popular types of productions were comedies, musical shows, and melodramas. The latter appealed both to romantic tastes and to the growing taste for realism. The musical shows included the operetta and the minstrel type of variety show. This period in Oil City may be considered atypical in relation to the rest of the oil region in its disregard for Oliver Goldsmith and R. B. Sheridan and its comparative neglect of Shakespeare.

What is obvious, though, is that theater was significant to the people of the period. It was significant enough that businessmen wished to invest in theater buildings, that many acting companies were available to fill the seasons satisfactorily, and that audiences wished to attend the theater.

On Monday, June 15, 1885, a stock company was formed to re-

58 Ibid., Jan. 23, 1885.
59 Ibid., Oct. 27, 1885.
60 Ibid., Nov. 2, 1885.
build the old opera house. Work began almost immediately. Some features new to the oil region were incorporated into the theater. The stage ceiling was forty-three feet above the stage floor to “admit of elevating and lowering the scenery and raising the curtain without rolling it.” Another innovation was the arranging of the auditorium into one series of steps from the orchestra rail to the rear wall. The gallery was divided into two sections, the first five rows of seats being separated from the rest of the gallery by a rail and designated as the balcony. Pride was expressed that a parlor scene could be arranged so that it was “‘boxed’ as it is technically known — that is, side scenes are to be painted, which can be quickly put in place, hiding the flies, giving it [the] appearance of a perfect room.”

While the skating rink opera house was exceptional in the oil region in that it was a single-purpose building, the new structure conformed to the pattern of the other opera houses of the period; that is, it comprised only one unit of a commercial building. John L. Marsh discussed the practice of constructing such buildings:

And providentially, in the days before building codes, fire laws, and the like, it was possible to include without undue expense a theatrical facility in the upper floors of an otherwise commercial entity — “upstairs’ houses” the profession came to call them. And how they flourished, giving their builders the chance (in that familiar phrase) to have their cake and eat it, too. That is to say the uses to which the lower floors of the building were put — usually in the form of rental stores and professional rooms — absorbed whatever expenses developed from the theatre above.

Kane and Tracy leased the new opera house and opened it on December 21, 1885, with W. E. Sheridan starring in Louis XI. “The opening entertainment is, as is customary, for the benefit of the management,” it was announced, “and as a large outlay of money has been made for the purpose of providing our citizens with a place of amusement there should be liberal patronage.”

The South Side Roller Rink’s heyday as an opera house came to an end on December 19, 1885, when Dottie Church starred in John A. Stevens’s Unknown. Since Stevens’s “successful drama” was done with “Entire New Scenery and Mechanical Effects,” perhaps the dramatic history of Oil City’s roller rink opera house ended with a flourish.

62 Oil City Derrick, June 16, 1885.
63 Ibid., Oct. 21, 1885.
64 Oil City Blizzard, Nov. 11, 1885.
66 Oil City Derrick, Dec. 17, 1885.
67 Oil City Blizzard, Nov. 13, 1885.
68 Oil City Derrick, Dec. 19, 1885.