Advent of “Moving Pictures”

The film industry took off at the turn of the century. Like many local theaters, the opera house had to adapt to keep up with demand. In May of 1915, the opera house was equipped with a projector booth in the upper gallery and a screen. Opening day was May 31, 1915 (see next advertisement from the Bennington Evening Banner).

“Americans traditionally indulged themselves on laying the biggest and best of anything. Show business was no exception. The people who lived in small towns wanted bigger and better shows than the cities did.”

—Robert C. Tull, Film Historian

Popular Films

Mary Pickford was America’s first movie star. The opera house showed her silent film, “Sally’s Long Leg” in December of 1917.

With the possibility of moving pictures, Americans across the country could see the world for the first time. Lyman House’s short films transported Vermonters to Yosemite and beyond.

Controversial Topics

Stop This Marriage! That Man Has Open Your Eyes

WWI (1914–1918)

During WWI, the opera house provided entertainment for the Bennington area, and also, it served on several occasions as a meeting hall for the community’s war efforts.

Bennington Opera House: Early 20th Century Entertainment in Rural Vermont

Karyn Norwood, Vermont Digital Newspaper Project

“[It is well understood that an Opera House here cannot be a paying investment. It is built for public pleasure... Bennington owes Mr. H.W. Putnam a debt of gratitude... for giving to our country town a metropolitan Opera House.”

—A.P.V.,” days after the opening of the opera house, in the Bennington Banner, Dec. 16, 1912.

Bennington Opera House (1892–1959)

The opera house was built by Henry Putnam, a wealthy businessman, realtor, and inventor, in 1912. Arguably the largest in Vermont when built, the theater was equipped with the very latest in theater technology. The opening performance was Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

For the next sixty-seven years, until it burned down on February 15, 1980, the opera house hosted musicals, bands, plays, vaudeville performances, movies, and other miscellaneous performances.

Opera House Block, c. 1907. Courtesy of the Bennington Museum.

The opera house proper is built of brick, is 104 feet long, 44 feet wide... The proscenium and dress circle have a capacity of 800... From the center hangs a large electric light chandelier... There will be two electric lights in the auditorium, of which 20 will be footlights... The total cost of the house when completed and furnished will be about $60,000...

—from “Bennington’s New Opera House,” Bennington Banner, Nov. 11, 1907.

Developments in Newspaper Advertising

Indicative of both the advancements in newspaper technology and the public’s ever-shortening attention span, opera house advertisements improved greatly in its first three decades.

March 10, 1895 ad in the Bennington Banner

Sept. 9, 1904 ad in the Bennington Evening Banner

March 22, 1918 ad in the Bennington Evening Banner

Conclusions

The Bennington Opera House in the years from its inception to the early 1920s demonstrates Vermonters’ and, at large, Americans’ growing appetite for entertainment and the rapid changes that the entertainment industry underwent at a pivotal time in the development of mass media. While often financially strapped, it hosted a range of notable theatrical performances, opera musicians, famous personalities, and, by the late-1910s increasingly showed movies. The Bennington Banner, Bennington Semi-Weekly, and Bennington Evening Banner, the local newspapers of the time, give an invaluable glimpse into the diverse offerings of the opera house in the early 20th century, and, how Vermonters of the period were entertained.

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