

Excerpts from the book:

Remembering Steubenville: From Frontier Fort to Steel Valley

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PART VI

MUSIC AND ENTERTAINMENT

STEUBENVILLE'S FIRST THEATRES

Even a decade after the death of the great Hollywood entertainer Dean Martin, the name of that Steubenville native still tends to overshadow all others. Long before Dino, though, there were sons and daughters of Steubenville who made it big on the national stage. Conversely, there were big name stars from elsewhere who played Steubenville's many stages in the heyday of variety and vaudeville.

Though small midwestern cities like Steubenville became punch lines about "playing the sticks" to every song-and-dance team that dreamed of playing the Palace in New York, such cities were also the lifeblood of vaudeville. Every major popular act from the time of the Civil War until after World War II played Steubenville. The peak era of live entertainment in Steubenville was probably 1882-95, when the city boasted three theatres of 800 or more seats (Garrett's Hall and the City Opera House, both over 1,000 seats each, and Weeks' Theatre Comique with 800) and smaller venues such as Philharmonic Hall and Adam Hammerly's London Theatre, each seating about 350. The city itself was briefly in show business at that time, running the City Opera House from 1883 to 1889 and then leasing it to private managers.

As a frontier town, Steubenville might be expected to discover theatre rather late in its history, but precisely because it was a frontier town—to easterners and Europeans on their way to the wilderness, a last glimpse of "civilization"—hotels were thriving in the town's first generation, and innkeepers were anxious to find ways to entertain their guests. In 1819, a Connecticut lawyer and War of 1812 veteran, James Collier, came west to Steubenville and put up what was then the tallest building in town: a three-story brick hotel known as Washington Hall, which housed a tavern known as the Golden Lamb, a reading room with the latest newspapers and magazines from more than twenty American cities, London and Edinburgh—and Steubenville's first theatre.

A group of Steubenville's literary-minded young men began the Steubenville Thespian Society in Washington Hall in 1820. August Culp was the leader of the group and became its stage manager; Dr. Samuel Ackerly, who ran a private school for boys, directed; and Thomas Cole, apprenticed to his father as a wallpaper designer, painted the sets. They were, doubtless, amateur in quality, but the artists

THE OPERA HALLS: GARRETT'S AND THE City's

Kilgore Hall continued to be the home of the mainstream, more respectable theatre, even after it changed hands in 1869. In 1868, the Doily Herald taunted Steubenville because the opera diva Euphrosyne Parepa-Rosa, who was touring the United States with her Grand English Opera Company, played Pittsburgh and Wheeling but snubbed Steubenville for lack of "a hall suitable." She was not being a prima donna, despite the fact that she was, well, a prima donna; Kilgore's stage, the best in the city,

simply could not accommodate the huge, multiple sets that a major opera company transported by train.

The following year H. G. Garrett, a prosperous dry goods merchant who was also founder and treasurer of the Union Deposit Bank in Steubenville, was outraged at the insult to his city and decided to do something about it. He bought Kilgore Hall and completely renovated the stage, expanding it to fifty feet wide and thirty-one deep, with ten flats for scenery, trapdoors in the floor and trapeze moorings on the ceiling. Garrett doubled the number of gas jets for lighting to eighty and increased the seating capacity to one thousand. The resulting Garrett's Hall could now stage any production that any eastern road company could throw its way.

For about a decade, Garrett's Hall (later Gray & Garrett's) was the only home in Steubenville of large theatrical and operatic productions from New York and Boston. In 1882, however, Steubenville's city council took a gamble. Convinced that the city could support more than one full-size opera house, the council voted to expand the city market building by adding an upper floor—in the form of a fully equipped opera house. City Solicitor Charles H. Reynolds ran the opera house for its first year. The grand opening was the hit of the New York stage, the melodrama *Lights o' London*, on August 27 and 28. Reynolds struck on an ingenious method of ensuring a large local audience. All of the leads were New York and London professionals, but the director came early to engage and rehearse local actors and singers for the chorus. All of Steubenville turned out to see family, friends and neighbors in a "New York show."

A various and stunning season followed: *Hamlet*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—In fact, several productions of *Uncle Tom* competed at the opera house and Gray & Garrett's (which now called itself Garrett's Opera House to keep up with the city), and other titles that were household names in 1883 but now known only to theatre historians. A production of *Cinderella*, in April 1884, was a technical breakthrough for the opera house, using calcium or limelight to spotlight soloists. A technician was brought in from Pittsburgh to run the special light.

STEUBENVILLE'S FIRST CROONER: WILLIAM H. MACDONALD

Although Dean Martin is Steubenville's high-water mark for national celebrity, he was not the first singer from this city to make it big nationally. When Steubenville's opera house premiered, one of the leading American tenors in light opera and operettas (the precursor of the Broadway musical) was William H. MacDonald of the Boston Ideals—born in 1849 in Steubenville, where he received his first musical training (though in his teens he studied for four years in Italy). While MacDonald never achieved anywhere near Dino's level of fame, even by nineteenth-century standards, he did rise to the top in his niche and was, at the end of the 1800s, a household name.

In the late 1870s, when Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878) and *Pirates of Penzance* (1879) had crossed the Atlantic and had Americanized the British craze, Steubenville's MacDonald, then in his early twenties, was just establishing himself on the Boston and New York stage. In Boston, a woman named Ober brought together the premier church choristers of the city to cash in on the Pinafore craze and in 1883 formed the Boston Ideal Pinafore Company. The following year, when they began expanding their repertoire beyond a single Gilbert and Sullivan operetta (though that play alone could have kept them touring for a decade), MacDonald joined them and very quickly established himself as one of the great male leads in that genre.

Unlike so many stars then and now, MacDonald, while staying in the New England and Broadway limelight, did not forget his hometown. Since theatrical companies often shut down in the summer in

those pre-air conditioning days, the musicians and directors (in those days nearly exclusively European-trained) were idle three months of the year. Many of the Boston musicians taught at Boston Normal School, but it, too, was idle in the summer. MacDonald saw a way to boost the level of musical education in his hometown. Steubenville's own Female Seminary was also idle in the summer—why not send those German and Italian virtuosi to Ohio for the summer?

So on July 9, 1884, the Boston Normal Musical Institute began operation at the Steubenville Female Seminary. Professor Harry Benson, the rare American in the group, headed the Steubenville institute since he spoke Ohioan. Steubenville's best young singers (predominantly young women) gave a well-received concert August 11, and in the ensuing years home-grown productions of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas were produced at the city opera house.

Meanwhile, MacDonald continued his career, becoming president of the Boston Ideals. His greatest triumph, however, and the role that would be associated with him for the rest of his career, came after he left the Ideals (always a sad day when someone leaves his ideals) for Broadway in 1891. On September 22 of that year, he opened in the title role of a musical version of Robin Hood, which became a sensation and kept MacDonald in Broadway leads for another fifteen years. While he did a variety of roles on Broadway—often romantic foreigners like the Spaniard Carlos Alvarado in *The Serenade* (1897) and the Italian Corleone in *The Viceroy* (1902)—he was identified for a generation with the dashing hero of Sherwood Forest, first in a 1900 Robin Hood revival, then in a sequel named *Maid Marian* (1902, though in this he played Little John) and finally his last revival of Robin Hood in 1902.

When we tell our children and grandchildren what a great crooner Dean Martin was, we can always back it up with CDs and DVDs and MP3s. Or maybe vinyl or 8-tracks if we can find a museum piece to play them on. But with earlier stars—at least the ones who predated the phonograph—we can only imagine their performances. Fortunately for the curious, however, MacDonald was at his peak in the early days of audio recording. His 1898 duet "Don Jose of Sevilla" with soprano Jessie Bartlett Davis was recorded by Berliner Gramophone. If you can't find it (or can't afford it) at your antique dealer, you can listen to it for free online.

Funeral director James A. Lindsay founded the National Amusement Company at 517 Market, where he booked vaudeville acts. In 1913, the National moved to 172 Notch Fourth, where it built a larger stage, fifty-four feet wide and thirty deep. In 1915, Pittsburgh entrepreneur George Shafer took over the management of the theatre. The same year the Steuben, a new one-thousand-seat movie house, boasted a fourteen- by eighteen-foot screen. Live theatre was becoming rare in Steubenville, as Garrett's became the Rex Theatre and the opera house became the Victoria.

At this time, Hollywood was not yet the major locus of filmmaking. Edison Studios in New York led the pack, and in 1908, Charles Stanton Ogle, son of Steubenville preacher Joseph C. Ogle, appeared in the Edison feature *The Boston Tea Party*. Two years later, he would make movie history by becoming the first actor to portray Frankenstein's monster in the first film version of *Frankenstein*. The film was long lost, but in 1976 it was found in a private collection and partially restored. The coursing electricity of the later movies was not used for Ogle's version—instead, he arose dripping from a vat of chemicals. In all, Ogle would appear in nearly three hundred feature films before his retirement in 1925—four years before sound came in, which is the main reason he is not well known even in his native city.

Most of the films that Ogle was in no longer exist. The nitrocellulose film on which they were made eventually decomposed into nitric acid, which further accelerated the decomposition of the film stock.

But one blockbuster in which he appeared was rescued and restored: Cecil B. DeMille's original 1923 version of *The Ten Commandments*, in which Charles Ogle played a doctor in the "modern" scenes.