

Lansing's Early History

The First Shows

It was in 1847 that the capital of the state of Michigan was moved to the town of Michigan, renamed Lansing: and in February 1848, while the first legislative which met at the new capital was still in session, the first opera troupe to exhibit in the future auto metropolis appeared in the dining room of the old Seymour house, now Franklin Terrace on Franklin avenue east.

Wood & Gillam's Minstrels was the first show staged here and the dining room was packed with state officials, legislators, townspeople and visitors from Dewitt and other places. Van Rensselaer Tooker can remember well the show, which the two mulattoes and their troupe presented, and it is perfectly evident that the event, the first of the kind he or Lansing had ever seen, left a vivid impression upon his memory.

"There were twelve members of the company,' he says, "all colored men and they gave a regular old fashion minstrel show. It was there I first heard the song 'The Camptown Races,' with the chorus which became famous: 'I'll bet my money on the bob-tailed mare; who'll bet on the grey?'

"Those minstrels were reckoned very good in those days, and they certainly had one of the finest shows of its class I ever saw.

"The next show which came to Lansing was the Antonio Brothers. Frenchmen, acrobats, who exhibited at the same place to a large house. Many people had to be turned away. As I remember it, the troupe consisted of a father, who was the manager, four sons and two daughters.



Edwin Booth

“Shows were given in different halls throughout the city after that. In March 1873, the first entertainment was given in Buck’s opera house, before it was finished, a fly-by-night concern exhibiting there. The opera house was formerly opened May 3, 1873, by Edwin Booth in ‘Hamlet,’ exhibiting to a house which netted \$1,596. That night 30 tickets were sold to Greenville people. May 9, the same year, Joseph Jefferson appeared in ‘Rip Van Winkle’, playing to a \$900 house.



Joseph Jefferson

“Lawrence Barrett appeared here in ‘Cardinal Richelieu,’ the date I do not remember; it was soon after the house was opened. Barrett and I were chums in Detroit, where we lived together as boys. Barrett used to ‘supe’ in the Ellis & Parker’s old theatre there, and would frequently get passes for me. Later he became a bell boy at the old Michigan Exchange then he set the type in the office of the old ‘Advertiser’, all the time studying for the stage. When he finally became a full fledged actor I lost track of him until he came here.



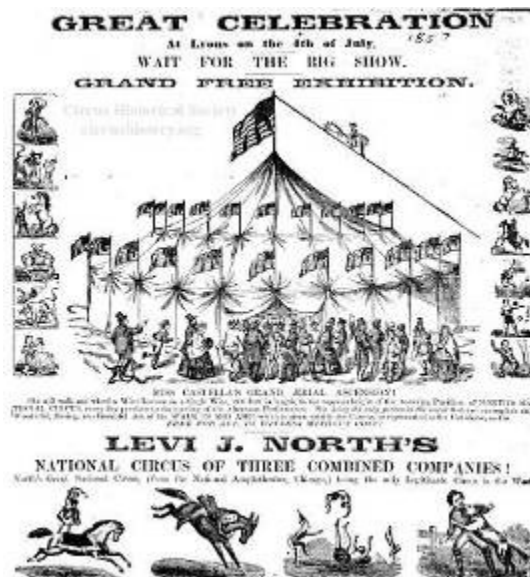
Lawrence Barrett

"I had been told by theatrical people that Barrett would not recognize me. When he appeared at the opera house I was lighting the gas, with which the theatre was lighted. I asked him if he remembered what had become of his friend Chauncey Tibbles. He had not. Asking my name, I told him 'Jim Tooker.' After that he was very cordial, asking me from the front of the theatre — I was tending door — to the stage where we had a long visit. He asked me about my family, said he would like to meet my wife, and we had a good old time talking over our early days in Detroit.

"Accidents in the old opera house? Not a one. Panics? Not a scare. Once we did have a small sized riot. A spiritualist was the bill — one of the fake variety — and he had a lot of people up on the stage when someone raised a kick, and the audience demanded their money back. The old fakir started for the box office where Mate Buck had the money, but I got there first and mate went across to the furniture store, where it was dark, with the money done up in a bag. We finally succeeded in quieting the audience, who had begun to toss chairs around and got them out of the house locking the doors.

"Once, too, a number of college students became dissatisfied with the show and tried to block the hallway, but 'Billy' Mathews, who was a special policeman, and I cleared the hall and dispensed the crowd.

"The first circus that came here was Levi J. North's in 1858. North showed on a lot across from R.E. Olds present home. He had one tent, a 90 foot round top, the early circuses having no menagerie. He came here in wagons from Jackson. I remember that 'Bill' Lake was the clown; one of the best clowns in the early days.



"Dan Rice, in 1862, had the first railroad show, and came to Lansing from Owosso on the 'Ramshorn' the deep cu. From there wagons had to be drawn to what is now the Third Ward park, where the exhibition took place.

"Shows were held here for several years. Later the state lot was used. Forepaugh once put up his tents on the site of the Wagon works. The Olds Gas Power company site, the Sparrow block on Washington avenue near the Grand Trunk tracks, and a lot in the western part of the city between Ottawa and Ionia streets, were also used. The only time John Robinson showed here, I forgot the date, he used the land now occupied by the Omega Separator company.



"In 1872 I first entered the bill-posting business here, before that, since 1862, having been associated in the circus business with J.E. Warner, with whom I visited every important town from Mackinaw to Cincinnati and from Portsmouth, New Hampshire to Council Bluffs.

"Van Amberg bought the first menagerie to Lansing in 1874. Van Amberg, I remember was the first man who entered a cage of lions. Hyatt Frost was the manager, and he had another intrepid animal tamer, Herr Drisback, a German or Russian. That year I handled the paper for five circuses, the greatest number ever in Lansing in a single season. Besides Van Amber's, there were the Great London shows, Forepaugh's and two others. Barnum, at a later date, was the first to use private cars, all others having hired their trains of the railroads. Barnum was also the first to have two trains.

"Buffalo Bill had the first 'Wild West' show in the opera house. The next year he came back with a canvas fence.

"The parade was a feature of the old circus, but was a meager affair compared with the display that has been made in later years. One year Dan Rice's parade consisted of Mentor's cornet band, the blind horse, Excelsior jr. and two trick mules.

"Bill posting in those days was carried on in a more extensive scale than now. The paper was cheaper, but it was well printed in colors, although fewer lithographs. Most of the printing was done by the Cincinnati Inquirer, the Buffalo Courier and two New York firms, Booth & Co., and Clavey & Riley. I recall one show when I handled nearly 350 sheets of billboard advertising."

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