

The Coliseum

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White Lake Area Historical Society



C1913-1915 – The Coliseum shown on the left was located about where the Century Building is now.

As there was no venue in town for large gatherings, Fred S. Schmidt set out to build The Coliseum in 1913. Modeled after buildings seen in the large amusement parks in Chicago and Milwaukee, it was a substantial building covered in Dutch siding and the interior was finished with plaster board and panels. The roof was supported with truss work and the floor space was unbroken by any support posts.

It had a stage that was 30 feet wide and 12 feet deep on the north end with dressing rooms on each side. A gallery of 15 feet was built on the south end for the spectators.

Mr. Schmidt also planned to put in three bowling alleys in the basement.

It was also possible that basketball and indoor baseball teams might be organized for the winter months if satisfactory arrangements could be made for the use of the floor which was ideal for those games.

The Grand Opening was held on May 30, 1913. It was a roller-skating event from 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. A large crowd took the opportunity to skate. The Whitehall orchestra furnished the music for the opening. A souvenir spoon was given to each of the ladies that were present.

Under numerous difficulties, hometown talent entertained at the Coliseum on Monday evening, June 2, in the production of "The District School at Blueberry Corners". The scenery and chairs which had been ordered for many weeks and were shipped failed to arrive. Manager Schmidt did all in his power to hurry the consignment but to no avail. It was therefore necessary to secure all the available chairs in town and to put on the production without any scenery whatsoever. Much of the success of the play was due to the direction of Frank R. Adams.

On Saturday, June 7, skating was held in the afternoon. That evening there was skating from 7:30 to 9:30 followed by dancing from 9:30 to 11:30.

For two nights, October 16-17, the comic opera H.M.S. Pinafore was given at the Coliseum by local citizens some of which included Adolph Anderson, John Meinhardi, O. N. Dybvig, Rex Royal, Helen Ripley and Edith Quackenbush. The performance was so well received that a third performance was given on Friday, October 24.

Traveling theatrical groups also came to the Coliseum to put on performances.

By December 1913, the Coliseum Rink was being used two nights a week for basketball practice. Whitehall had not had a basketball team in several years, but an excellent team had developed by those who had already reported for practice.

The White Lake Dramatic Club gave a free concert of Sacred Songs on January 11, 1914, at the Coliseum Rink.

The rink was open on Saturday afternoons and evenings for skating. Prices for women and children: Afternoon 15 cents; Evenings 25 cents.

On August 13, 1914, the Wabaningo Jinks gave their Sixth Annual Entertainment performance at the Coliseum.

The White Lake Dramatic Club gave its second annual vaudeville performance on Saturday evening, December 12, 1914. The proceeds of the program were to be used to furnish and provide upkeep of their new Club room over the old State Bank building.

Early on Sunday morning, January 10, 1915, the Whitehall Coliseum was completely destroyed by fire.

The fire was discovered by Fred Grow and Charles Hanson who were driving by the rink and noticed the interior of the building to be brilliantly lighted. Upon investigation, they discovered the building was on fire and that called to Dr. J. L. Hercik, who was on his way to Montague in response to a professional call about three o'clock. He gave the alarm. Before the fire department arrived, there was an explosion and the roof of the building collapsed and the big building was a mass of flames and doomed to destruction.

Seeing the futility of their efforts to save the Coliseum, the firemen instead focused their efforts to saving the adjacent building owned by E. M. Ruggles and occupied as a restaurant and lunchroom operated by Rolland Merrick, who also had his living quarters upstairs.

Despite the large amount of water that was poured onto the structure, it was badly damaged by the fire. Fortunately, the wind was calm, or Whitehall would have experienced a more disastrous event.

It appeared that the fire originated from the furnace which had heated the building that night for the Dramatic Club's Masquerade Ball. When the 200 participants and spectators exited the building about 12 o'clock Saturday night, little did they dream that they would never set foot in the big hall again.

Walter Wendt, a young man employed at the coliseum, and who slept in the building, had a close call as he was awakened just in time to escape the burning building.

At the time it was the only place appropriate for the staging of theatrical productions in the two towns and the members of the Dramatic Club were expected to give another one of their productions in February.

In addition to the cost of the building listed at \$4,000, it was equipped with stage scenes, roller skates and seats valued at \$2,000. The building was insured for \$2,500 and contents for \$2,000

The Booster Club offered Mr. Schmidt \$1000 guarantee toward the construction of a new Opera House, to be built of tile and brick not less than 100 feet in length and 40 feet wide. It also had to be acceptable to the Dramatic Club for their performances. Mr. Schmidt assured the club that he would rebuild with such a guaranteed, provided suitable property could be found and purchased.

Mr. Schmidt, however, decided not to rebuild build his Opera House but Julius Nufer and Frank Adams did get The Playhouse built which opened in 1916.