

Opera Houses

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This picture of the Opera House in Whitehall was taken some time prior to 1884. Records indicate that those in the picture are as follows: an as-yet unidentified man on steps; E. M. Ruggles, Druggist and owner of the Opera House; Harlow Ruggles, father of E. M.; Henry Beardsley, clerk for E. M. Ruggles; James Ocobock, Mill Owner; Hiram Hinman, Lumberman; Benjamin Reed, Justice of the Peace; Thomas Widoe, co-owned of the Whitehall Clothing House, with his father John (not pictured).

The Opera House in Whitehall was built around 1882 by E. M. Ruggles. It was located on Colby Street just west of the alley where the Century Building now stands. It was quite an impressive structure for a town the size of Whitehall.

The first level of the building provided space for two stores and the Opera House occupied the remainder of the building. The Opera House had a balcony and box seats. Many internationally famous

opera and stage stars performed on its stage, and it was on the Orpheum circuit which included Grand Rapids.

A map from 1884, indicated that a saloon was located to the left of John Widoe's Whitehall Clothing House.

Unfortunately, the Opera House was just one of the many buildings destroyed in the fire of 1890. It was never replaced.

Montague also had an Opera House. Actually, they had three of them over the years.

The first one was Sorenson's Opera House which was built in the Spring of 1875 and located on the corner of Ferry and Bridge streets, which was the site of the former Montague House Hotel. Unfortunately, it burned in September 1875.

Not only was the Opera House lost, but several businesses which had located there as well. Sorenson & Phelps Meat Market was located in the lower level; Thomas Bennett had a Boat & Shoe shop; John Phelps lost his harness shop and his personal household items; and Turnbull & Rahaley's Boiler shop was also lost.

According to an area map from 1883, a second opera house, referred to as Burrows and Jones Opera House, was located in the middle of the block on Ferry Street, between Ripley's drug store and the City Hall. There was Miss Gibbon's millinery shop and Burrows & Jones grocery store located on the ground level of the building. Unfortunately, in October 1884, it too burned down.

Despite the best efforts of the firemen from both towns, the fire crept through the woodwork of the opera block and into the C. D. Dowling block adjoining and then into the Ripley block. When the fire reached Morse & Bell's hardware store, a number of dynamite cartridges exploded breaking the windows in all the neighboring buildings. By the time the fire was finally out, the west wall of the Ripley block was all that was left intact.

Other businesses that were destroyed in the fire included: J. F. Keiley, general store; W. H. Ricaby, jeweler; J. R. Conley, ladies' fashions; Thomas Phelan, clothing; W. A. Frary, barbershop and residence; W. E. Marshall, photographer; the Masonic Lodge; George M. Duram, musical instruments; Dr. Hollis, dentist; the Lumberman printing office as well as the law offices of Editor Frank Bracelin; and the Township Library. There were also several other people who occupied rooms over the building who lost their personal belongings. Total losses reached nearly \$80,000.

In late 1901, W. E. Osmun and Charles Ohrenberger began construction on a new Montague Opera House at a cost of approximately \$9,000. It was located on the corner of Ferry & Spring streets where the current Montague City Hall is located. It opened in February 1903.

The building, which was constructed of brick, was 90 feet in length, 48 feet in width and was 37 feet high. The main floor was 48x60 feet, the stage is 28x48 feet and the drop curtain is 12x20 feet.

The seating capacity will be 800 – 500 on the main floor and 300 in the balcony. A thousand persons could easily be seated if necessary.

The main door opened into a spacious anteroom with the ticket and cloak room on one side and a general-purpose room on the other.

The stage was equipped with a beautiful drop curtain and an abundance of sliding scenery, flashlights, trap doors and everything that was necessary for the production of first class plays.

The woodwork of the interior was finished in polished birch, maple, and oak. The balcony was very pretty and comfortable with its artistic curves and panel work.

The entire hall was brilliantly lighted by its own acetylene gas plant, and the stage lights were independent of the others.

All of this was lost in November 1912, when fire consumed the building. All of the woodwork above the ground floor was burned which let the roof to collapse. Part of the side walls also tumbled over. Nothing was saved – all the chairs, the scenery, and the piano were totally destroyed. Some of the unburned rafters had oil on them in numerous places. It was believed to have been some type of deliberate action as the front door was found open with the lock turned and the back door was broken in.

The destruction of this structure was a great loss to the community and left both towns without a large hall for meetings or entertainment.