

# Early Day Theatricals in San Francisco

BY HARRY GATES

It is quite natural that the younger generation of theater-goers should find it difficult to locate the sites of a majority of the theaters built during the first ten years of San Francisco's history. Only those who were familiar with the business districts before Montgomery avenue was cut through diagonally from the corner of Montgomery and Washington streets can remember with anything like certainty just where the vanished theaters stood, and it is amusing to see how easily old-timers are confused or mistaken as to the exact location of the places they know so well from a quarter to a half century ago. Early in the '70s the opening of Montgomery avenue changed the topography of the neighborhood materially by cutting off corners and obliterating some of the ancient landmarks on the west side of Montgomery street. About as pretty an argument as one would wish to hear may easily be started by getting into a gathering of old pioneers and asking anybody where the stage door or the gallery entrance of the early theaters were. In the end there is pretty sure to be an argument upon the location, but there will be something like a picnic before the opinion is unanimous, and the searcher for information will be surprised to learn how long it takes to get the old memories in working order.

While there were no new theaters built in San Francisco during '56 and '57, several changes in name and management must be noted to avoid confusion. On the 29th of November the name Maguire's Opera-house was adopted at San Francisco Hall, and Concert Hall was opened January 16, 1857, on the corner of Clay and Sansome streets. The first entertainment was a diorama of Bunker Hill, which was consolidated subsequently with a minstrel company, and the hall was occupied a short time after by a panorama of the principal incidents in the crusade of the vigilance committee. Two attempts were made by incendiaries to destroy the panorama. The second, on May 11, was successful, and Concert Hall for the time

mining camp in Plumas County, now known as Laporte, where her mother kept a boarding house. She started her theatrical career with a jig dancer named Gridley, who owned the show in which Sue Robinson played the organ. Lotta played in many concert halls in the mining camps, as well as in San Francisco, and was a great favorite. Her magnetism was something surprising and John Brougham made a good name for her when he called her "The Dramatic Cocktail." She was greatly loved and respected by her associates and later on when her father took a shot at Manager Tom Maguire in the public street of San Francisco for the alleged reason that Maguire had spoken in an insulting and unwarranted manner of the little actress, there were many who wished that Papa Crabtree had used a double barreled shotgun in place of a small revolver, which wounded the manager but slightly.

Lotta has always had a great affection for San Francisco and California people, the fountain at the junction of Kearny and Market streets having been presented by her to the city many years ago.

Sue Robinson, the girl alluded to as a

member of the company with Lotta, also became a great favorite and made a successful tour with poor Walter Montgomery.

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The Worrell sisters, Sophie, Irene and little Jennie, who afterward became brilliant comedienne on the dramatic stage, opened at the North American Circus on May 12. Emma Stanley, presented by "smooth old Sherry," as Sheridan Corby was subsequently known, sang at Maguire's Opera-house October 7, and Harry Courtaine and his wife, Emma Gratian, arrived from the East November 2. They opened in "The Little Treasure" at the opera-house on the 23d and at once became great favorites. Courtaine's little troubles began almost immediately, and he was a source of great anxiety to his friends for many years thereafter. It was on the 29th of December, 1857, that Mr. and Mrs. John Wood arrived, but they did not appear until January 18, 1858.

The summer of 1857 was notable for the first great German musical festival, which began July 25 at the Metropolitan and ran three days, the second at Russ Gardens and the last at Turnverein Hall. W. B. Chapman died in San Francisco November 7, and Mrs. Rosalie Pelly died on board steamer while on her way East. A variety house, known as Johnson's Melodeon, was opened December 15, 1857, at 152 Montgomery street, opposite the Metropolitan, and the Bella Union, then a gambling resort, where free concerts had been advertised for a month or two, came into the field as the Bella Union Melodeon, though there is no record of its success for some time thereafter.

The Lyceum, in the upper portion of the building on the northwest corner of Washington and Montgomery streets, was opened by John Wilson, lessee, on March 13, 1858. It seems, however, that the number of theaters was not to be increased, for on June 2 the Adelphi, on Dupont street, was entirely destroyed by fire. On the 7th the opera-house, which had been closed for alterations and repairs, reopened with a combination of George Christy's and the San Francisco Minstrels.

being passed out of the game.

On June 6 the name of The Union was temporarily changed to The Olympic, and burlesque on classical dramas were presented for a short time. Reduction of prices one-half, making the highest 50 cents, failed to draw and on the 29th the standard was raised to a dollar once more. The season closed a few days later.

It appears from the records that noted dramatic stars were not so willing to make the long trip to this coast in 1856 and '57, and the minstrel companies divided the cream of the amusement business with the circuses.

Edwin Booth and Harry Sedley took a couple of benefits jointly at the opera-house early in January, and it was in San Francisco just before his farewell benefit that Mr. Booth made his first appearance as Richelieu and King Lear, the first great character at the Metropolitan. May 27, 1856, and the second at the same theater September 3, on the occasion of his last appearance for twenty years. Mr. Booth went East on the 15th and was soon after recognized on the Atlantic Coast as a superb actor, the one Booth who inherited the great genius of his illustrious father.

Distinguished actors and other celebrities in the order of their arrivals and first appearances during '56 and '57 were as follows: Miss Rowena Granice, at the Union, April 7, 1856; Mr. and Mrs. E. S. Conner, April 8, at the Metropolitan; Julia Dean Hayne and Charles Pope, at the same house June 23; Frank Mayo, then 17 years of age, made his debut at the American as the waiter in "Raising the Wind," July 19.

Lotta Crabtree, then called La Petite Lotta, made her first appearance here in song and dance at the second American, November 20, 1856. Although she is said to have been born in Grand street, New York, November 7, 1847, she had been singing before 1856 at Rabbit Creek, a

brother actor with a congratulatory greeting to which his answer was: "Yes, I did splendidly this time. Only lost \$3." A hasty calculation on this basis would make Mr. Deaves a debtor to his manager for a large sum during the last three years of the fifties.

It would be worse than useless to attempt to keep a record of the circus enterprises and their location during this period. Lee & Marshall figured extensively and there were many efforts to combine dramatic and equestrian entertainments. Performing elephants and grand opera got mixed up with a model of King Solomon's Temple, which was exhibited at a pavilion on Montgomery street, between Post and Sutter, the prices for the manager's show being higher than the best seats for the opera, while the minstrel shows under various names kept right on drawing good audiences at high rates of admission.

If one was to ask the veteran minstrel, Lew Rattler, who is still a resident of San Francisco, how many companies he was featured with in those early days, it is more than likely that he could not remember the number, although he could entertain you for many hours with interesting reminiscences of the pioneer minstrels of California. Broken in health and yielding to the encroachments of old age, Mr. Sanford is one of the sturdy old gentlemen who reflect credit and honor upon the profession they followed for many years.

There was a sensational story of kidnapping in the latter part of '59 which is worth mentioning for the reason that Louise Poullin, who was said to have been abducted, carried aboard the Panama steamer November 5 and brought back the 12th, was well known as a comic opera singer several years ago, and her husband, Harry Warner, was for many years business manager of Daniel Frohman's celebrated Lyceum company.

The opening of Gilbert's Melodeon on the corner of Kearny and Clay streets, December 5, 1859, was a notable event.

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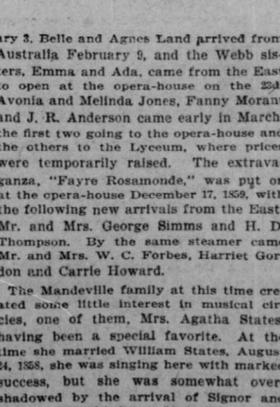
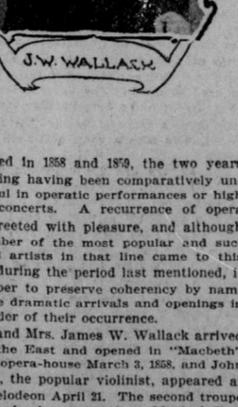
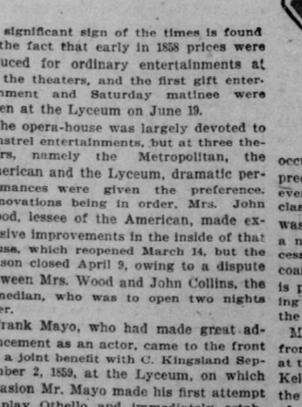
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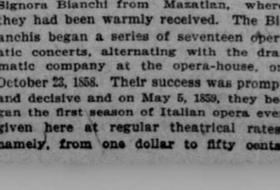
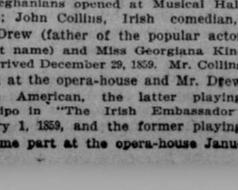
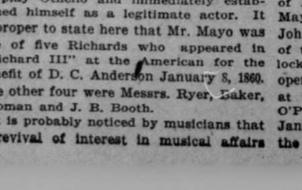
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The Bianchis, who remained in San Francisco for many years, were assisted on this occasion by Signor and Signora Roncovieri, the reliable local artists, who were always in demand for first-class operatic work, also by Stephen W. Leach, who had taken up his permanent abode in California. Madame Feret and Mr. Newman were members of the company, under the baton of Mons. Feret. "Trovatore" was the first opera, of course, and success had fairly perched upon the Bianchi banner when the Lyster English Opera Company arrived from Australia, May 16, with Rosalie Durand, Georgia Hodson, Ada King, Madame Boudinot, Fred Lyster, Frank Trevor, M. Boudinot and others under the musical direction of Anthony Reiff.

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MRS. LANDER (JEAN DAVENPORT)



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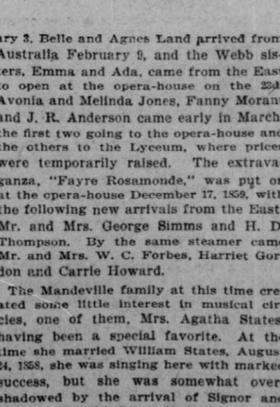
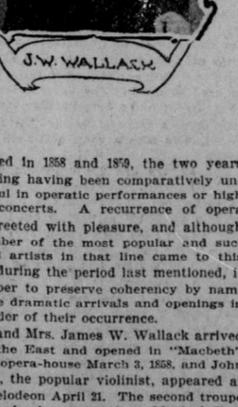
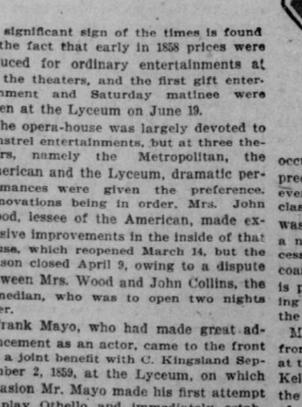
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