

## Remembering a Local Showman - Karl Lindstaedt

In the early 1900's, theaters were not exactly as we know them to be today. In those early days, movies were somewhat rare, and theaters frequently booked road shows or stock companies for their performances. When early movies made the scene, they were generally accompanied by organ or piano music until the "talkies" became available.

An individual associated with those early days in theater, who in fact began his career in Fairmont, was Karl Lindstaedt. He could truly be characterized as an original showman and a Vaudeville artist, in addition to becoming a very successful theater manager. He was born in 1897 and grew up in Fairmont. According to an article in the March 14, 1948, edition of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, he got his start in Fairmont at the age of ten peddling handbills for the Haynick. Lindstaedt gradually moved up to being an usher-janitor during his high school years and was content being able to see all the shows free of charge in place of being paid for his work.

According to the May 31, 1951, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*, in 1915, a production entitled "*The Birth of a Nation*," played two performances daily in Fairmont for one week when Lindstaedt was working here. The performances, which were about the Civil War, were sold out and cost \$1.50 instead of the usual fifteen cents. A thirty-five piece orchestra accompanied the film along with a sound effects crew working backstage as well. This brought many spectators to the theater that had never before seen a movie.

Then, in 1917, Lindstaedt ventured into Vaudeville after meeting Rita Bell, a piano student, while he was studying voice at a Twin Cities music school. Bell's uncle urged them to go into Vaudeville, "purely as an educational and travel opportunity," as stated in the previously mentioned newspaper article. They were warned that they wouldn't make a fortune. Lindstaedt confirmed this prediction as true upon returning to Fairmont after thirteen months with the sum of two cents jingling in his pocket. Although, he admitted that he did get an education.

Lindstaedt went to work for the Strand Theater in Fairmont after his Vaudeville experiences, according to an article in the September 1, 2008, edition of the *Austin Post-Bulletin*. At the Strand, he operated the player-piano as music was used before sound films made their debut in order to enhance the drama of the movies. The article continues in stating that in 1924 Lindstaedt went to Duluth to manage a remodeled theater. The *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* reported on August 29, 1924, that "Fairmont will regret to lose Karl. He is one of her most popular and hard working boys. He has gone as far as he can in the theatrical game here, however, his friends will welcome his advancement in a larger city." That theater eventually failed due to the closing of an iron mine. From Duluth, he returned to Fairmont and then, in 1927, he went on to Rochester to manage the Chateau Theater. From there, he went to Austin to manage the Park Theater. A headline in the April 6, 1929, edition of *The Fairmont Daily Sentinel* reads as follows: "New Austin Theater Costs \$150,000 – Lindstaedt, Fairmont Boy, Manager." It goes on to say, "Karl Lindstaedt of this city will be manager of this new \$150,000

theater, which Finkelstein & Ruben are building at Austin, and which is to open in August. The house will replace the one demolished by a tornado a year ago. It will seat 1,003 persons and is to have Movietone and Vitaphone equipment." That theater was apparently a benchmark for its day with modern equipment of the time.

Lindstaedt had many interesting experiences along the way. One he encountered was that of parents using the theater as a baby sitter. In some instances, they would bring their children to the 1:00 p.m. show, leave them there with a packed lunch, and return to pick them up at 8:00 p.m. that evening. On one occasion, he informed parents attempting to leave their children for the day that leaving them for seven hours at a cost of thirty-six cents would get him in trouble with the baby sitters union. Perhaps a bit of humor helped to make his point.

He also spoke of high school students and some of their antics. Around the time they would have their annual class play, students would sneak backstage at the theater where the plays were being held. They would arrive in the morning and hide in the loft until the evening performance. Then, during a romantic scene, they would drop confetti from the ceiling and walk across the stage wearing heavy coats and pulling a dogsled, obviously creating a scene in distinct contrast to the scheduled performance.

On another occasion, a temperamental Irish tenor that was performing at one of his theaters demanded that a special onstage dressing room be built for him, including carpeting and a stage hand guard. Lindstaedt, with his friend who just happened to be the sheriff, went to the performer and "persuaded" him to back off his requests. Needless to say, he quickly backed off.

An incident in Fairmont when "*Sheperd of The Hills*" was playing proved quite fascinating. The scene involved a shepherd, played by an elderly, bearded, white haired, man seated by a fireplace that depicted his cabin in the Ozarks. During the performance, a shepherd dog casually walked down the aisle of the theater looking for his master who happened to be a local farmer. The dog made his way onstage and laid down beside the actor, as if the actor was his master. The actor continued, unperturbed, as if the dog was in fact meant to be included in the scene. Although the local newspaper ran a story explaining to whom the dog belonged, most seemed to believe that this incident was actually meant to be a part of the performance.

Lindstaedt retired in 1967 after fifty years in the movie business. He was honored in August of this year, 2008, with the unveiling of a bronze bust which is displayed at the Paramount Theater in Austin that he managed for forty years. A quote from his niece, Janette Horman of Minneapolis, printed in the September 4, 2008, edition of the *Austin Daily Herald* reflects Lindstaedt's devotion to his job: "He would come home every Christmas Day and request the family have dinner at precisely 11:30 a.m. so he could get back to work (in Austin) for that evening's performance." Horman, who also lives in Fairmont during the summers, went on to say, "For that reason, I never really knew him. He was always on the go." Lindstaedt was obviously dedicated, well respected, and greatly admired. He died in 1988 at the age of 90.

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