

Opening Night at The Fairmont Opera House February - 1902

The Fairmont Opera House has evolved from its inception over 100 years ago in 1902, to the Nicholas Theater that at one time included popular as well as some less than main stream movies, and then resurrected by those civic minded citizens of the recent past back to its origins once again as the Fairmont Opera House. It has had a rich history woven with sightings of bats, structural and financial trials, generous donors, and a wealth of willing volunteers. With that said, let's take a look back to that opening night, February 13, 1902, as told in the February 14, 1902, edition of the *Martin County Sentinel*.

The headline, "Grand Opening of the Fairmont Opera House," graced the front page of the newspaper that included two full columns describing in great detail the events of that first show. The opening night featured a performance entitled "The Chaperons," as spelled in the *Martin County Sentinel*, which was described as a very pleasing comic opera." It was said that all of Fairmont was in its finest attire and that the *Sentinel* critic in attendance was convinced that Fairmont would never again have as large and brilliant array of artists to entertain in this area. An article from the *Martin County Sentinel* the preceding week emphasized Fairmont's duty to buy tickets for the opening performance, whether a businessman, county official, teacher, owner of real estate, or professional man, because, "The Opera House was built not for profit but for the use and benefit and pleasure and entertainment of all the people." Incidentally, over 400 seats sold at \$5.00 each in the first hour that they were available for sale.

The Fairmont Opera House was described in great detail in this account, emphasizing the beautifully designed walls, the brilliant and varied electric lighting, as well as the rich and fashionable costumes of the ladies scattered throughout the body of the theater which in turn made a scene "never to be forgotten." The author of this article went on to say, "While the seating portion of the new play house was a scene of brilliancy and beauty, it was only a somber background to set off the wonderful stage effects, which, for sparkling beauty and splendor of scenery, are rarely eclipsed in the large cities." This was obviously a significant event within a uniquely created structure in a small Minnesota community of the early 1900's.

Although it was noted that a number of the leading members of the cast were ill and that understudies filled in for them, the following was said: "The *Sentinel* critic does not feel equal to attempting a criticism of the entertainment. There is a suspicion that the fifty elegantly costumed beauties upon the stage caused every man in the audience to lose his head. The dramatic editor is only human, and a man at that. He can criticize nothing intelligently with which he is delighted, hence floats with the tide of enthusiasm for Perley (the producing

manager of the company) and his bevy of beauties.” He was obviously quite impressed by what he witnessed that evening it seems, especially, as he so eloquently stated, the “bevy of beauties.”

The writer of the article also goes on to say that he would not attempt to give a description of the many elegant gowns worn by the ladies of Fairmont in attendance. Although he felt that he could perhaps pick out more beautiful women in the audience than on stage, which admittedly could be challenged, he concluded that “the beautiful gowns and pretty wearers on this occasion will have to be preserved only in memory.” Maybe that was the easy way out for him.

Next was a rather elaborate description of the performance, a two act play that takes place in Paris. The writer concluded the following: “As a comic opera we do not see how the Chaperon could well be improved.”

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of this historical account was the in depth analysis of those in attendance, stated as follows: “Scattered all through the audience were well-to-do farmers of Martin County, with one or more members of their families.” It went on by saying, “It shows that not only the people of Fairmont to be prosperous but the farmers as well, and that so many of them showed their loyalty to Fairmont by helping so materially to fill the new opera house at \$5.00 a seat is very gratifying to all.” In addition to the support of the locals, the attendees from out of town communities were not only acknowledged, but mentioned in many instances by name and profession. It seemed to appear like a “Who’s Who” in Martin County and the surrounding area of that time.

This account of the opening night of the Fairmont Opera House concluded with references to the firemen stationed in the Opera House, which was directed by state law at that time, and the receipts from the sale of tickets. Regarding the firemen, their stationed locations were mentioned, including the following: “Nick Hengel was monarch of all he surveyed behind the scenes with the chorus girls.” Apparently, Fireman Hengel had the “choice” duty of the evening bravely protecting the chorus girls backstage from the somewhat remote possibility of fire.

Finally, the receipts for the opening night totaled \$2,500.00. The cost of the entertainment was \$1,000.00, which left the Opera House with a profit of \$1,500.00 for their first performance.

Throughout the course of local history involving the Fairmont Opera House, times have changed, performances have varied, audience attire has transitioned from the “beautiful gowns” of 1902 to the more casual wear of today, ticket prices and performance costs coupled with daily expenses have escalated, repairs have been made, and managing directors and

boards have come and gone. Yet the one constant remains – that being the Fairmont Opera House, its legacy, and what it means to our community and the surrounding area.

For more information on this topic visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.