

Journal of the

**LANCASTER COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Reminiscences of the
Fulton Opera House

by Doris Burns

The purpose of the following reminiscences is to share with many people the golden days of theatre in Lancaster at the Fulton Opera House as remembered by several Lancastrians who recall those days with affection and enjoyment. [Doris Burns interviewed these Lancastrians in 1964. We thought it would disturb her introduction and their comments too greatly if we changed tenses and rewrote portions to agree with the deaths of some of those interviewed.]

Several generations are spanned by those who recall the great moments and the lighter ones: Dr. H. M. J. Klein, interviewed at the age of 90, remembered attending the theatre in the 1890's while a student at Franklin and Marshall College; James P. Coho, local attorney whose family owned the Fulton Opera House at one time, vividly remembers the entertainments he saw as a very young child. In between Dr. Klein and Mr. Coho are many others who delight in telling of their experiences at the Fulton Opera House.

Indeed, these people (and many others) were exposed to a cultural life foreign to almost all of America—then and now. For many years, Lancaster was, together with Hartford, Connecticut, the try-out town for all live productions (it was called "trying on the dog"). If a play or musical gained acceptance in Lancaster and Hartford

it was slated for the metropolitan areas. There was good reason for Lancaster to be considered an excellent "theatre" town: The Fulton Opera House was known for its superb acoustics; the stage crews were able to handle the largest productions; the theatre was equipped with every known device to mount any presentation; the railroad spur running on Water Street immediately back of the theatre enabled the crews to load and unload properties and sets with unparalleled speed; and, very important to traveling companies, the Stevens House Hotel was a stone's throw from the theatre, and well-known and appreciated for its accommodations and metropolitan appurtenances.

In all America, from 1853 when the theatre was built, to 1930, when the advent of motion pictures occurred and stock companies petered out, Lancaster, Penna. was one of the best known names to theatrical persons—from the most world-famous to young aspiring beginners. Thru the years, when Boston and Philadelphia were getting their reputation as "cold" theatre towns to play in, all performers appreciatively listed the Fulton Opera House as "tops"; the theatre was ideal in every respect and, more important, the audiences were discerning but honest. If you had ability and were able to project it, Lancasterians told you so by their applause; and, since they were knowledgeable theatre-goers, you looked forward to their verdict and accepted it.

Nearly 80 years encompassed the theatre-goers of Lancaster: the touring stock companies had accustomed them to every type of production—regular Shakespearian cycles, minstrel shows, the finest artists of the music and dramatic worlds, magicians, travelogues, orators—you name it: they had it.

They had a wealth of entertainment unknown in today's world. And their "remembrance of things past" is heightened by their realization of the wealth they enjoyed, and the hope that the Fulton Opera House, now belonging to the citizens of Lancaster, will again present the greatness of live music and theatre to the generations enlightened by twentieth century life. This is their hope: that Lancaster will again become a city interested in the arts; that the arts will once again match the accelerated rate of growth all other areas have shown to make Lancaster the progressive city it has proved to be.

Dr. H. M. J. Klein needs little introduction to Lancasterians. He has been called "Mr. Lancaster" for many years. A native of Allentown, he came to Lancaster in 1891 as a student at Franklin and Marshall College, returned to the college campus in 1910 as head of the History Department, where he guided and taught thousands of students. Beloved by his students and all of Lancaster which has been fortunate enough to know him, Dr. Klein, "professor emeritus"

in truth in the minds and hearts of his friends, remained until his death one of Lancaster's most revered citizens.

"I am greatly interested in the preservation of the Fulton Opera House. It is one of the precious landmarks of Lancaster because of its age and associations with many of the cultural aspects of the community. It is unique in its architecture, as well as in its associations. It represents the early Victorian era and is a vital part of the history of Lancaster in the past one hundred and ten years. It was originally known as Fulton Hall and later, renovated as the Fulton Opera House.

"My knowledge of the building has three phases: the first is historic, the second is personal, and the third represents the more modern era.

"I have been greatly interested in the history of the Fulton Opera House, both in its relation to the college and the community. All the public ceremonies of Franklin and Marshall College, for at least fifty years, took place in this building. Commencements, inaugurations, and the anniversaries of the literary societies, which were real social events in Lancaster, took place in this building, for there was no auditorium on the campus of Franklin and Marshall College. The chapel was smaller, then, than it is now.

"On many an occasion, the faculty and the student body would march from Old Main, down James Street to Prince, led by the City Band, then downtown to Fulton Hall for its public ceremonies. An interesting incident occurred on one of the commencements: a student from Lancaster in the graduating class was to deliver a speech. The faculty objected to this commencement speech because it contained statements unfavorable to the board of trustees. The president of the college interrupted the speech. Immediately after the close of the commencement, the student delivered his speech from a balcony next door to the Fulton Hall, to the great delight of the students and many citizens of Lancaster.

"My historic interest is also due to the many prominent personages, lecturers, actors and actresses, who came to Lancaster, and here gave its citizens the benefit of their talent. In the early days it was the only auditorium of any consequence in the city and many great Americans spoke here on the lecture platform. Miss Alice Nevin told me that she heard Wendell Phillips speak here and said he 'stood there like a Greek god, perfectly motionless except for the movement of his lips', and delivered a terrific invective against slavery before the Civil War. He was the greatest orator of his day—in the 1850's.

"Then there were the musical events which took place here. The fact that Jenny Lind sang here in her early days is enough to glorify any building. Famous pianists and orchestras, as well as vocalists, appeared on this stage.

"As far as actors and actresses are concerned, few companies

in America failed to appear in the old town of Lancaster, which was accessible by two railroads, and not far removed from Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore.

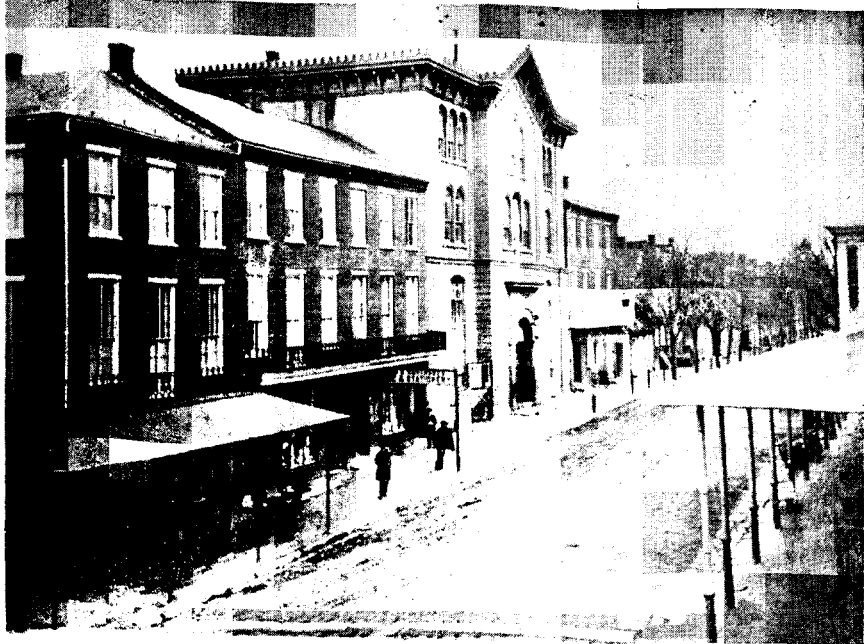
“As far as my personal associations with Lancaster are concerned, they relate especially to my student days in the city—from 1891 to 1896—when the best theatrical companies in America came to Lancaster, including the Drews and the Barrymores and many others whose names I’ve forgotten. Our studies of Shakespeare in college were supplemented by many of the plays we heard at the Fulton Opera House at a price that a college student could afford—twenty-five cents.

“The third period of my association with the Fulton Opera House was after 1910, when I returned to Lancaster as a professor in the Franklin and Marshall College. In the early part of that period, as I recall, the Fulton Opera House maintained a high quality of dramatic art, for the traveling companies were still in vogue. I remember hearing Sarah Bernhardt playing *Camille* in those days. Later, of course, the traveling theatre company became a rarity, and the Fulton Opera House became one of a number of movie theatres. But meanwhile, another trend has developed:

“Throughout Lancaster County as throughout the whole nation, there is a renaissance of interest in the dramatic arts by the young people of this generation. It is a thing to be encouraged, not only by the schools, but by the community as a whole. These young people ought to have a place in which to produce their plays for the benefit of the public. This is just one reason why, in addition to my historic interest in Lancaster, I am delighted to know that the public is taking over and restoring this historic building, which cannot be duplicated in the United States.”

Mrs. J. Nevin Schaeffer retains the sparkling wit and intelligence long respected by her friends and acquaintances. Wife of the late J. Nevin Schaeffer, honored humanities’ professor at Franklin and Marshall College, and mother of five children (three of which live in the Lancaster area), Mrs. Schaeffer has long been a personality in her own right. Quiet, selfless in her devotion to her family and community projects, Mrs. Schaeffer’s memories of the Fulton Opera House retain most of the thrill and pleasure she felt from early childhood when entering the “magic world of the theatre:

Most memorable to her is the first opera she ever saw: *Parsifal*. As a youngster at Miss Stahr’s School (the forerunner of Lancaster Country Day School), in the early 1900’s, the students trooped to the Fulton Opera House one blizzardy day, carrying their individual box lunches and settling in their seats in the third floor “peanut heaven”. The opera was a long one—starting at 3:00 in the afternoon, ending many hours later. The blizzard had impeded the initial



Fulton Opera House—Prince Street in 1862

mounting of the stage and many people had been unable to get to the theatre because of the storm, but the children were oblivious to anything but the sound and sight of *Parsifal*. To this day, Mrs. Schaeffer thrills to the motifs of this particular opera.

She remembers going to the theatre as a young bride with her husband, who had carefully taught her in advance what the great Duse, Sarah Bernhardt, would portray. (Bernhardt spoke only French, and the house was sold out to many Lancasterians who would assure each other of the magnificently "cultural" evening they had enjoyed—not daring to admit that they had been bored to death by Bernhardt twirling her "real" pearls and her famous deathbed scene in *Camille*, particularly since they had not been able to understand a word she said!)

Mrs. Marion Wallace Reninger shares other illuminating memories of the Fulton. Mrs. Reninger has written these histories of Lancaster: "Orange Street" and "Mulberry Street and Lime". A native of Lancaster, she spent thirty years away from the city. Now a widow, she has returned to Lancaster, where she has many friends

Both Mrs. Schaeffer and Mrs. Reninger remember the "specialness" of evenings at the Fulton. They were dressed in silk dresses, hair ribbons, white silk gloves. Mrs. Reninger was taken to her first play at the Fulton by her uncle, Judge Hassler. Although the great Maxine Elliot was the star, equal billing was shared by Mrs. Reninger's thrill at being escorted to the theatre of the adult world. Mrs. Reninger remembers, from research she did for her "Lancaster" books, the tie-in between Franklin and Marshall College and the Fulton Opera House. When Franklin and Marshall united in 1853 (they had previously been separate schools), the ceremonies were held at the Fulton and presided over by James Buchanan, while Woodrow Wilson gave the commencement address for the college at the Fulton in 1912.

Miss Margaret B. Rahn remembers being taken to the Fulton Opera House in the 1890's. For many years, the well-liked and respected Parish Worker of St. James Episcopal Church, Miss Rahn was devoted to the theatre.

Her earliest memory of being taken to the theatre was to see a child's production of *Little Lord Fauntleroy*. Miss Rahn's programs date back to 1894; each program lists a daily matinee and evening performance. Listed also are the trolleys (held to the end of each performance), which traversed to 12 points in the county: Millersville, Mountville, Columbia and Marietta, Neffsville and Lititz, Mechanicsburg, New Holland, Ephrata, Strasburg, Petersburg, and Manheim.

As a young girl, Miss Rahn and her friends sat in the lobby of the Stevens House Hotel to try to see the stars. Some years ago, she tried to look up the record of what stars had stayed at the Stevens House, but the registers had been destroyed.

Her favorite memory of the Fulton is sitting in the Parquet Circle, which is no longer in existence: it was a ring of seats, attached to the front of the balcony and slightly below it. From the Parquet Circle, Miss Rahn remembers seeing Ethel Barrymore, Billy Burke ("she was cute"), Della Fox, a musical comedy star, Pavlova, Schumann-Heinck, Zimbalist, and Alma Gluck, and many "excellent and well-trained stock companies". As she looked thru many playbills of the performances she saw at the Fulton, she commented: "Today's generation doesn't have as much as we did."

All three of the above ladies remember the "Tens, Twenties and Thirties", which was a traveling stock company whose title indicated admissions prices: 10 cents, 20 cents, 30 cents. The productions were of excellent calibre. Here are some they remember: *East Lynne*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and *Ten Nites on a Barroom Floor*.

They remember seeing Maude Adams, Green Room presentations (the Franklin and Marshall College dramatic group), Shakespearian works, musical comedies. They recall that Ethel Barrymore usually stayed with the late Mrs. Edward Brinton at 126 N. Lime St. She and Mrs. Brinton had gone to school together in Philadelphia. Mrs. Brinton always gave a party for Miss Barrymore, inviting friends and neighbors.

Miss Mary Warfel is discussed with gratitude. A native of Lancaster who was a famous harpist, Miss Warfel had concertized with the world's great artists. She ultimately returned to Lancaster and decided to bring these artists to Lancaster, thus making a contribution to the cultural life of the town. She borrowed \$10,000 from her father, who was the original publisher of the Lancaster New Era and, thru the 1920's brought the world's great musicians to the Fulton. Among them were: Lotte Lehman, Alma Gluck, Caruso, Schumann-Heinck, Paderewski. Although many people thought Miss Warfel made a lot of money in her role as impressario, the sad fact remains that culture is always fortunate if it "breaks even". This was the case with Miss Warfel, who always was proud that she was finally able to repay her father's loan.

Both Mrs. Schaeffer and Mrs. Reninger remember performing in local shows. Mrs. Reninger played "Ophelia" in a production entitled *Scenes from Shakespeare* in 1910, after she returned home from Wellesly College. Both remember their director and producer, one Donald McDonald, who put on the first Junior League Follies and later became the official director of the Junior League Follies throughout the country.

Many local people appeared in these shows at the Fulton Opera House. Among them were Percy Appel, Kitty McDevitt, Florence Peterson Swarr, Anna Mary Frantz Young. One well-known couple met there, fell in love, were married: Joe Breneman, who sang with Alice Straub. It can truthfully be said that the historic boards of the Fulton have been responsible for more than the function of entertainment!

Although he looks and speaks like a man in prime middle-age, Percy Appel, is a frank 80 years; he's concerned with the future, his daily 9 holes of golf, visits to his son in California. Even though he was a successful business man in Lancaster for many years, several generations of the theatre-going crowd remember him as the romantic young singer who starred in local productions at the Fulton Opera House.

"I was only a boy!" Mr. Appel protests, but he recalls with an astonishing accuracy names, routines, tunes, and can demonstrate songs by singing them in what is still a lovely, legato tone.

"I can remember being made up for the matinees, then just

touched up for the evening shows—this permitted us to stroll up and down North Queen Street, strutting in our make-up.” Often, rehearsals were held at the Brunswick Hotel, because regular stock companies would be performing at the Fulton. Each of the local shows ran for a week, with matinee and evening performances each day.

Among Mr. Appel’s leading ladies were Florence Peterson Swarr, Elsie Samuels, Mary Malone (later Mrs. S. R. Zimmerman), Julia Garwood, and Mrs. Henning W. Prentis, Jr.

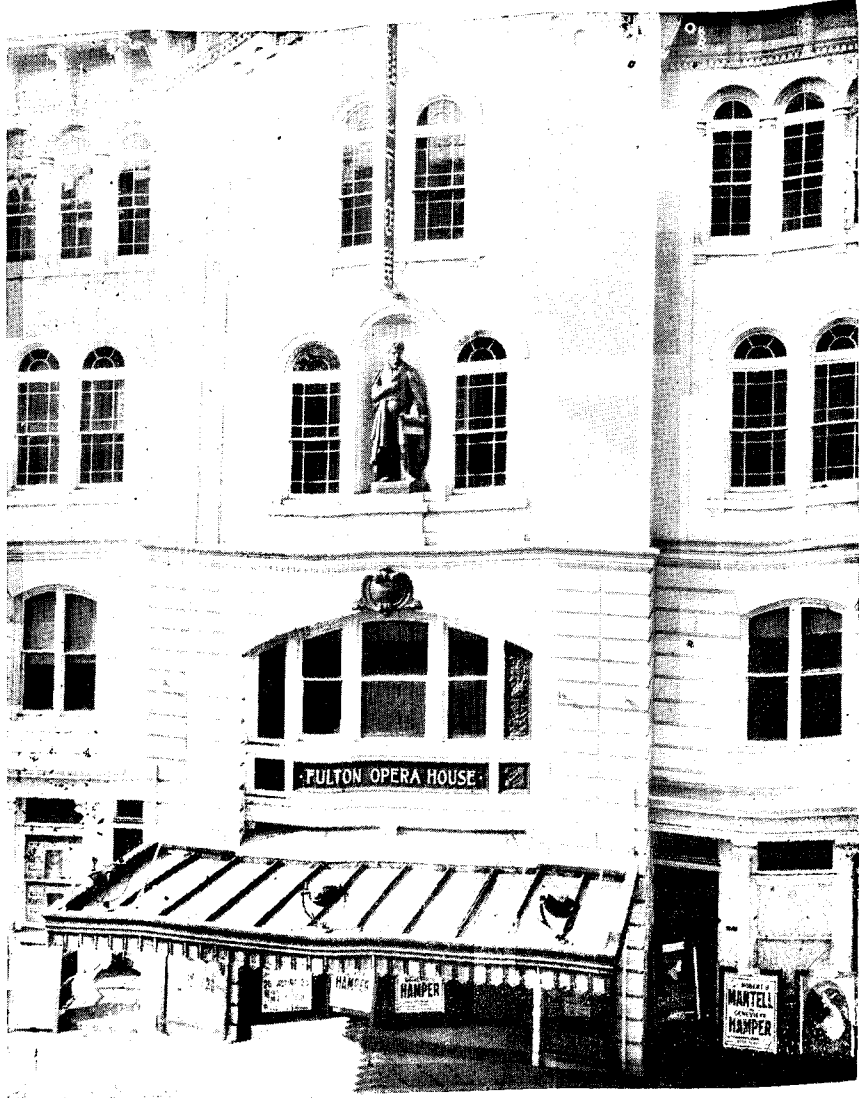
Elsie Samuels, whose father had the Bon Ton Millinery Store, sang one song, standing back of a parasol and showing her profile—this was effective, because she was a pretty girl! Julia Garwood, in *The Red Mill*, walked onstage toward Mr. Appel, who was sitting in a box pretending to be a member of the audience; she sang to him, he acted flustered, dropping the program he was pretending to read, then stood and answered her with a song. This bit of action was considered by everyone to be a high-light of the musical, as stage action goes! Mrs. Henning W. Prentis, Jr. had the reputation of being the foremost singer in Pittsburgh; although her husband was to become Chairman of the Board of Armstrong Cork Co., when they lived in Pittsburgh, he was known as the man who married Bernice Cole! She and Mr. Appel sang a duet, in which she stood on a balcony, with her head framed in velvet pansy petals, so that her face was the heart of the flower. The tune was “You’re Just a Flower from an Old Bouquet”. Mr. Appel laughs as he remembers that at this time he was a young married man with a son who had been taken to see his Daddy’s show; the boy was thoroughly disgusted with his father for singing to a lady other than his mother!

Donald McDonald directed these local groups, teaching acting, dancing, singing. A particularly good dancer and actor was Joe Breneman, while the Brown brothers, Douglas and Bill, were known for their dance acts. Doug had had experience with the Mask and Wig productions at the University of Pennsylvania. Laird Brown, whose father was president of the Follmer-Clogg business of national fame, was also known for his dancing.

Burger’s Orchestra played for every production which required music. Standard instrumentation included a drummer, trombonist, trumpet, and a pianist, with additional instrumentalists as needed. Ed Levan was one of the pianists, as was Anna Martin, who later married Henry Howell.

Mrs. George Reynolds, Sr. (Lillie McFalls) sold tickets, as did her sister, who later married Frank Musser, to become mayor of Lancaster. Mr. Appel remembers the McFalls sisters as “pretty girls.”

Mr. Appel was “ringer tenor” with the Franklin and Marshall Glee Club, which sang at many affairs in the city and county. A thrill for the boys was being featured for one week at the locally



Fulton Opera House, October 1926

famous Woolworth Roof Garden, in company with well-known stars of the music world. Another remembered thrill was being part of an octet which was formed by Bill Raub of Raub Supply, which went to Toronto, won "second money" in international competition. In the Franklin and Marshall Glee Club were John Bissinger and Clyde Shissler, who both played in the *Drummer Boy of Shiloh* at the Fulton.

Stagestruck, together with many of the other boys, Mr. Appel remembers often standing on Water Street, watching the stage crew

Street to ride to Reading and remembers that the Fulton Opera House maintained ticket offices on Water Street, back of the Stevens House. In order to get into the shows free, the young men of town would volunteer to help the stage crews and then be permitted to stand in the wings to watch the current show. One of the few times Mr. Appel remembers sitting in the front row was to see Eddie Foy and "all of the little Foyes"; Mr. Appel felt as if the Foyes were singing only to him.

He remembers the Shakespearian cycles, Douglas Fairbanks, Ethel Barrymore (who was entertained by Miss Gertrude McGovern—who later became Mrs. Percy Appel), The Three Guardsmen, who dueled on stage; Savina, the Italian tragedian; Lou Docstader's Minstrels—the most famous of their day—who would parade in white suits with a band before the show; Chester de Von, the matinee idol of the "Tens, Twenties, and Thirties", and Thomas E. Shay, of the same group, who was the star famous for his portrayal of *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Murder of a Polish Jew* and other tragedies.

An amusing recollection of Mr. Appel's: he and a friend attended *The Murder of a Polish Jew*. They stood backstage in the wings watching the tragedy: a man was thrown into a lime kiln—murder! It was snowing onstage; finally, the protagonist committed suicide. The two friends left the theatre. It was snowing and late at night. As they silently walked up West King Street toward the square, still under the spell of the play, they passed a silent farmers' curb market opposite the Hager store. Curb markets were too much a part of town to be noticed. Suddenly, some farmer's goose honked, loudly and imminently. The ghastly honks were too reminiscent of the recent scenes they had just watched. The boys started running and didn't stop until many blocks later!

Owen Bricker, well-known local attorney, well remembers his years of attendance at the Fulton Opera House. A young 73 years of age, Mr. Bricker was another who attended the Fulton from boyhood, thus acquiring an early taste for theatre.

His father first took him to see Keller the Magician, in 1902 or 1903. Shortly after, Herbert Hartman took Mr. Bricker and his son John to *The House of a Thousand Candles*. As children, they saw minstrel shows and afternoon matinees. It was customary to sit in the "peanut heaven". Mr. Bricker laughs as he admits that he was fairly well-grown before he realized the theatre had a downstairs.

An amusing incident he remembers happened during the melodrama called *The Ten Ton Door*, in which the villain hid behind a door when the hero came on stage. A highly excited little boy in the audience called: "Watch him! He's hiding behind the door!" which bit of instruction broke up the audience.

The Franklin and Marshall boys tried to get to every show. The

idea was to get in the front row of the balcony, which had only 22 seats (6 less if spot-lights were used). From 6:00 p.m. the lines would form, often running the whole way down West King to Water Street. After the show, the boys would go to the Stevens House to discuss the possibility of the show's success on Broadway.

Mr. Bricker remembers many shows: *The Merry Widow*, *Girl of the Golden West*, *In Honor of the Family*, *Blood and Sand*; and many stars: McIntyre and Heath, Raymond Hitchcock, Otis Skinner, comic Francis Williams, William Hodge, known for his "homey" shows, and a number of excellent Jewish comedians. One wildly funny play had these last playing a pinochle game. He remembers that the Fulton was more a "family" theatre—risque shows were rare and didn't draw.

Traveling stock companies were used for years, then abandoned; around the early twenties, there was a stock company in residence, which would get a day off when a traveling company came to town.

The nucleus of another theatre came from the Fulton: the Mt. Gretna Theatre. Ashmead Scott, manager of the stock company in residence, and Margaret Mansfield, his leading lady, wanted to form a work-shop theatre. Backed financially by Bill Raub, who has been active in Green Room presentations at Franklin and Marshall College, they settled in Mt. Gretna, hiring the same William Coughlan to direct them, who has remained active at Mt. Gretna since then.

In common with many of the other persons who remember the Fulton Opera House, Mr. Bricker speaks nostalgically of the street parades which were held before many of the productions. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* shows always paraded with their full retinue in white, shiny suits, together with bloodhounds and a band. In fact, Lancaster accepted the before-play parade as part of the action of the Fulton!

Winfield Applebach, known as "Scottie" to his friends, started working as a "second hand" member of the stage crew of the Fulton Opera House in 1909. Now 78, he can identify and explain the physical set-up of the theatre and the scene-dock; and can give an extremely clear picture of the back-stage operations.

Each big show brought a plot of the show, so that the property men could place sets and properties in the right places. There were often 20 to 30 drops to a show. It was commonplace to have an assignment to build parallels for 26 horses to go over. Big shows like *The Round-up*, *Eight Bells*, *Parsival* or *Ben Hur* were called "8 car-load shows" by the stage crew, because the properties and sets filled eight railroad cars.

Often, a property man and a stage carpenter traveled with the shows to show the local crews the set-up and to maintain the sets in

good condition. Sometimes the shows carried their own electricians, because many of them carried extra lights and had special lighting effects. In *The Murder of a Polish Jew*, "Scottie" remembers that one of his chores was throwing a green light on the protagonist at the end of the show, to spot-light the actor's face with a greenish hue as the man committed "suicide."

Eight men were regulars on the stage crew; ten or twelve more helped the crew as volunteers so they could see the play free. The main property man in "Scottie's" day was Burt Rhinehart (deceased), who was followed by the late John Binkley. Stewart Riley, now a stage carpenter in New York City, remains one of the few alive. The present ticket-taker at the Fulton, Mrs. Agnes Carr, was married to a member of the stage crew (he is also deceased).

At some time in the early 1900's, the front doors of the theatre were placed on the back of the property, on the building known as the "scene dock". These doors can be seen today on the segment of property farthest north.

Many people would congregate to see properties being loaded and unloaded. There was a ramp at the back of the theatre to bring horses to the stage; later, this ramp was installed in the "scene dock", where it remains today.

"Scottie" says: "We had the finest shows in the East. Lancaster was a theatre town. The Erlangers, the Shuberts, Kirk Brown and Co., Brian Bros. all played. And we knew how to mount them. No shows were too difficult. I tell my wife when we watch plays on TV, —those people known as actors today couldn't even walk in the back door of the Fulton Opera House!"

Mr. Jacob E. Mathiot, Technical Director of the Steinman Radio and Television Stations, shares with many others his memories of the Fulton Opera House, but can add a further dimension to his understanding of the "quality of sound" heard in the Fulton because of his knowledge of accoustics, having spent over 40 years in the broadcasting business.

"Accoustically speaking, I can well appreciate the ability of the man who was able to design and build the theatre," Mr. Mathiot said. He went on to point out that there were no sound reinforcements, such as amplifiers and other allied equipment in those days; that it is much easier today to overcome structural and size defects to promote better accoustics. In comparing the excellent accoustics of the Fulton Opera House, Mr. Mathiot can name no place built within the last fifty years which has not needed accoustical correction (major or minor), after being built. This places the Fulton in a class by itself, since it has basically the same structure as when it was built, and has never needed any correction, being accoustically sound from its inception over 100 years ago.

As a young man, Mr. Mathiot joined the youths in town watching the stars at the Stevens House and elsewhere in Lancaster, when they weren't onstage at the Fulton. He remembers seeing Evelyn Nesbit parading on the streets with a big collie dog on the leash. He saw many of the well-known stars of the day both on-stage and off. He remembers the Mask and Wig Shows, and having season tickets to stock company productions, one of which—the George Arvine Players,—particularly stands out in his memory.

But the high-light of Mr. Mathiot's memories has to do with the Lyman Howe Travelogue Movies—in a day when movies were not as common as they are today. As he recalls, the Lyman Howe Travelogue Shows came to the Fulton about once a year; they ran at the Fulton one or two nights to sell-out crowds, showing about two hours of movies of scenes from over the world. Scenery was often shown from the front of the train, as it moved, so that the effect was of a person watching the scenery as it unfolded. Narration went with the films.

Mr. Mathiot also remembers the Fulton as a "family" theatre. Vaudeville was featured at the Family Theatre on West King Street, which was managed by a Mr. Mozart and, later the Colonial Theatre had vaudeville, but the Fulton catered more to family entertainment. It's also his impression that the younger people attended the stock company performances; the older people had already seen most of them, and went to "star" and other "special" attractions.

He remembers knowing two Yecker boys—probably the grandsons of the impressario of the Fulton: Blasius Yecker. They belonged to the same advertising club which he did, but he remembers that they had a flourishing billboard business and did not seem too interested in the theatre.

James P. Coho, noted local attorney, has more than a casual interest in the Fulton Opera House. His father bought the theatre in 1923, and James Coho, representing his father's estate, was instrumental in selling the Fulton Opera House to the Fulton Opera House Foundation this past Dec. 31, 1963.

Mr. Coho's forebears were long conscious of their cultural responsibility to the community, and he feels it extremely fitting that the Fulton Opera House has become the property of the citizens of the Lancaster area, and as such, will serve the community in the finest possible capacity.

Although only 44 years old (and as such the "baby" of the persons who are able to reminisce about the Fulton), Mr. Coho's earliest recollections are of sitting in the family box at the theatre, watching with wide-eyed interest almost every show. He remembers seeing the Singer Minstrel Midgets, Thurston the Magician (at least three times), *Rio Rita*, a musical comedy show, *Rose Marie*, *The*

Guardman, with Lunt and Fontanne, *Il Trovatore*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata* (at least two times), *Hit the Deck*, the Cleveland Symphony, the Mask and Wig Shows, Paderewski (at least two times), Blackstone the Magician, and many Shakespearian plays.

The Tune Detectives were two pianists who listened to anyone in the audience hum a few notes, and then would make a tune out of these notes; William Gaxton, who later won a Pulitzer prize for his work in *Of Thee I Sing*, was star of *Connecticut Yankee*, which particularly impressed the young James Coho; and Lawrence Tibbett sang one time when a faulty radiator hissed so that he could not be heard—breaking up both Mr. Tibbett and the audience.

Probably his early attendance at the Fulton plays and musicals led James Coho, as a student at Franklin and Marshall College to take part in the first show the college saw at its new "drama" theatre: the Green Room, in 1937. At any rate, he has retained a love for all things theatrical.

Mr. Coho points out that "generations ago, Lancaster was not only a center of learning, industry, the professions, but also of arts in the United States; the last several years have seen a decline in the arts. I hope to see a realization of concomitant growth of the arts now that the present community has assumed the responsibility of operating the Fulton Opera House."

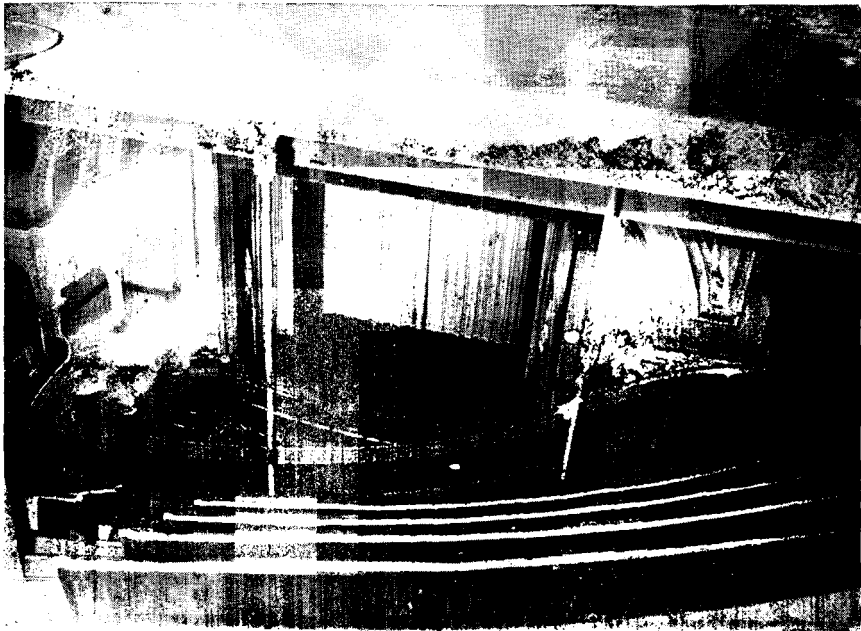
Frederick S. Foltz is another who needs little introduction to Lancasterians. Until recently, he headed his own advertising agency; retirement has given him even more time to pursue the civic duties which he and his family have always served. The following is his own account of his memories of the Fulton Opera House, and he has entitled this:

"Curtain Going Up"

The Fulton Theatre or the Fulton Opera House, as it used to be called, was not merely part of my education but was really a part of my growing up. In fact, I have no clear recollection of the first time that I settled in one of its seats and waited for the magic moment when the lights would dim, the orchestra stop playing, and the audience become silent in anticipation of the curtain going up.

First the plain curtain with its reassuring sign "Asbestos-Absolutely Fireproof" would reveal the second curtain, gayly painted with nymphs, flowers and clouds, which, as a small boy, I considered a masterpiece of art.

I was unusually fortunate for my father, Charles S. Foltz, was one of the editors and owners of *The Lancaster Intelligencer*, then an evening newspaper. The management of the theatre gave the newspapers a certain number of passes to each performance and



A view from "Peanut Heaven"

often my parents would take my sister and me or sometimes send us to the theatre alone. As my sister and I grew older we were expected the following day to put down on paper our comments and opinions of the play and the actors. Father would read them over, discuss them with us and sometimes use parts of our comments in the review in the newspaper.

In the early nineteen hundreds, before the first World War, all of the great actors and actresses went "on tour" and the Fulton was a regular one-night stand for the great names of those days.

It is interesting, I think, that I have a much more vivid recollection of the players than I have of the plays. I remember seeing John Drew a number of times but the only play I recall is *The Circle*. Ethel Barrymore, too, came season after season but I can only remember *The Twelve Pound Look*, which I think was coupled with *Alice Sit by the Fire*. Miss Barrymore had been a school mate of Mrs. William Brinton, who used to entertain her, but I was too young to be one of the elite of Lancaster who were invited to meet the star.

Across the footlights I fell deeply in love with Billie Burke (I remember none of her plays), until she was displaced in my affections by Vivian Martin playing *Peter Pan*. I remember the part David Warfield played in *The Music Master* but I do not remember the plot. George Arliss, Mrs. Fiske, Margaret Anglin, Ruth Chatterton,

Otis Skinner and William Faversham held me entranced but I think for me the actor, and not the play, was the "thing."

And yet, I am sure that the playwrights did their part by providing these great actors and actresses with great vehicles for their art. Barrie, Shaw, Ibsen, Pinero, and Rostand are names not to be forgotten.

One of my most unforgettable experiences was the time when Walter Hampden came here for a three or four day stand, "trying it on the dog," before he opened in New York. He was at that time a newcomer to the Shakespearian theatre and my parents, who had seen many of the "greats" gave my sister and me tickets to three performances. One of these was *Hamlet*. Curtain time was at 8:15. A little after midnite when the final curtain went down I knew why the plays of Shakespeare are not just "taught" in school but still played on the American stage.

It is interesting to remember that there were not more than 50 people in the house for *Hamlet* or either of the other two plays, and most of these 50 must have been "paper" as we were. The following week when Hampden opened in New York, he was a smash hit and on his way to become the leading Shakespearean actor of his era.

But the fare of the Fulton at that time was not made up entirely, or even mostly, of great names or great plays. These were the condiments and the dessert. Often, in fact usually, the play-bills advertised thrillers of the "10-20-30" variety but my parents, in their wisdom, didn't give me passes for those and my pocket money was too meager to be spent on *Billie the Kid* and the girlie shows.

Once on my birthday (I think I was about 10 or 11), my mother as a great treat took me and half a dozen of my friends to see a show which was innocuously titled *Buster Brown* after the funny-page character. It was terrible and loaded with off-color jokes, most of which went over my head but which were obviously embarrassing to my mother, especially as she had planned to give us the real thrill of sitting in a box (at about 75 cents a head, I imagine) where we were in full view of the audience who were enjoying the bawdy fun immensely.

On some occasions the Fulton was truly an "Opera House" and it was here that I heard my first opera *Rigoletto*. It may not have been the Met but I was not critical and thought it was great.

As the largest hall in Lancaster, The Fulton was put to use as an auditorium for various purposes. In 1909, when Dr. Henry Harbaugh Apple was inaugurated as President of Franklin and Marshall College, the ceremony took place there. The Academic Procession robed in the First Reformed Church and marched down Orange Street to Prince and the theatre. I was a ninth grade pupil in Franklin and Marshall Academy, and brought up the rear of the procession. Woodrow Wilson, then President of Princeton, who was

to deliver the inaugural address, marched at the head of the procession with the President of the Board of Trustees, William Uhler Hensel.

It must have been around that time that I went to see *Ben Hur*, which I am sure was the most remarkable performance from the standpoint of size of cast, mechanical equipment and amount of scenery which ever played at the Fulton.

As I recall it, the play opened with the Wise Men, complete with live camels. It progressed all through the hazards and adventures of General Lew Wallace's great book, including the interior of the Roman galley with the galley slaves chained to their benches and tugging at their oars until the pirates came aboard and finished off the Roman soldiers. In a trice the stage was converted into a tossing sea of blue canvas with Ben Hur and the Roman general clinging to a bit of timber.

Shortly after, the stage became the Circus Maximum and there were Ben and his rival, each driving a chariot team of four horses getting nowhere at a gallop on a treadmill which rumbled and roared and shook the very walls of the theatre. Ben Hur's horses were,



Statue of Robert Fulton in a Niche High Above the Marquee

of course, snow white (the "goodies") and his rival's were coal black (the "baddies"). On the backdrop the interior of the Circus Maximus was whirling from right to left, most realistically reproducing the impression of the passing scene.

And then the wheel came off the rival's chariot and the curtain came down and I breathed again, partly because I knew that Ben Hur had won and partly because I could hear the treadmill slowing down and knew the horses had not gone straight thru the old stone walls of the theatre. It was truly "colossal" and I still think it was the most amazing thing I ever saw at the Fulton.

A few years later a show called *The Round-up* was billed. As the name implies, it was a western, complete with cowboys, Indians, and blue-clad soldiers. The regular cast was supplemented by several score of "extras". Many of these were Franklin and Marshall College students who were paid, I believe, a dollar for their services and charged nothing for their fun. Paint, feathers, and tomahawks turned half of them into Indians with little coaching necessary. The other half, dressed in blue uniforms, were equipped with Bannerman muskets and plenty of blank cartridges. They provided the climax of the rescue just as the hero was about to die a horrible death. They filled the Fulton with noise and the smoke of battle. Of course, many Indians and a few blue-coats had to die and the Franklin and Marshall students threw themselves into their parts with great realism. One of them draped himself, head-down, over the edge of a cliff, but found this position most uncomfortable and before the battle was over and the curtain down, he came alive and walked off the stage. I was disappointed.

When I was in college, the Green Room Club put on one show each year and since the college had no theatre or even an auditorium, the club rented the Fulton for a night. There was no faculty advisor or director in 1917 but two alumni, Bill Raub and Eddie Keffer, coached us and did very well considering the limited talent available. The play was *Strongheart*, a rather sappy script with the scene laid on a college campus, not nearly as sophisticated or well done as the present Green Room offerings. Even the female parts were played by F&M students to the huge enjoyment of their fellows. Walter Prein played the title role. I had a minor part, my one and only experience behind the footlights. It was rare fun.

The University of Pennsylvania "Mask and Wig" came up from Philadelphia every year and stole our girls for the night.

After the first World War, the Fulton continued to operate with occasional road shows, stock companies and some local talent. "Elsie Janis and her Gang" gave the folks at home a taste of the sort of entertainment she had been patriotically peddling to soldiers in the rest areas overseas. Elsie, a light and charming bit of vivacity, was a friend of Hale Steinman's and her "Gang" was typical of all the men we had known when we were in the army. It was a nostalgic evening.

Ashmead Scott, whom everyone knew as "Scotty", ran a stock company for a number of years quite successfully both before and after he opened his summer theatre at Mt. Gretna with Margaret Mansfield as his leading lady. Their performance of *Seventh Heaven* at the Fulton was particularly well done.

The Lancaster Drama Club, with Scotty, Fergus Reddie and Darrel Larsen as directors, put on several shows every year for awhile, digging up local talent which did some very good plays remarkably well.

The Great Depression of 1930 put an end to the Golden Age of the Fulton Theatre as I remember it. The advent of the "talkies" contributed, of course. Modern stars of the theatre and screen are no longer willing to undertake the exhausting work of touring the country on one-night stands as the great actors and actresses of the past used to do. Nor are there theatres in most cities where they could play. The old stage crews which handled the scenery and lights have disappeared. Outside of Philadelphia, Boston, New York and Chicago there are only a small scattering of cities where a proper theatre has survived.

The Fulton Opera House is one of them. I hope that there, again, we may hear the ushers saying "Curtain going up!"