The rise and decline of the variety theatre in St. Louis, 1867-1896

John Russell David
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Follow this and additional works at: https://spark.siue.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://spark.siue.edu/etd/57

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at SPARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of SPARK. For more information, please contact magrase@siue.edu,tdvorak@siue.edu.
THE RISE AND DECLINE
OF THE
VARIETY THEATRE IN ST. LOUIS, 1867-1896.

by
John Russell David
Bachelor of Arts

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

Faculty of History in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University
Edwardsville Campus
(August) 1969.
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Graduate School

August 6, 1969

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION
BY John Russell David
ENTITLED The Rise and Decline of the Variety Theatre in St. Louis, 1867-1896.
BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF Master of Arts

Thesis Director

Faculty Chairman

Edw. 3/66
TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1

Chapter
I. THE GENESIS OF THE VARIETY THEATRE ................................. 5

The Black Crook Comes to St. Louis
The Significance of The Black Crook in St. Louis

II. THEATRE COMIQUE ......................................................... 23

Background
Program Fare
Minstrelsy and the Variety Theatre
The Variety Theatre in the Urban Setting
The Evil Influences of the Variety Theatre
Conclusion

III. PULITZER'S "RAID" .......................................................... 58

The Variety Theatres of St. Louis -- 1880
The Changing Attitudes of the Post Dispatch
The Crusade Against the Variety Theatres
Conclusion

IV. "LIQUOR, LICENSES, AND THE GREAT SHAME OF IT" ............. 95

Liquor Control in St. Louis
Variety Theatres Under Attack
Politics and Saloons: Corruption in St. Louis
The Decline of the Variety Theatre
Conclusion

V. VAUDEVILLE TAKES THE BEST FROM VARIETY ..................... 123

The Rise of Vaudeville
Conclusion

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................. 143

APPENDIX .......................................................... 150
INTRODUCTION

History was once defined by Frederick Jackson Turner as the biography of society in all of its departments. The use of greater leisure time together with the role played by entertainment in the development of American society are those aspects of history with which this study is concerned.

The objectives are threefold: first, to trace the growth of the variety theatre in St. Louis from 1867 to 1896; second, to analyze the reasons for the decline of the variety theatre; and finally, to explore how and why the saloon-oriented variety theatre, catering principally to a male audience, became a respectable form of family entertainment called vaudeville.

Though variety entertainment antedated the Civil War, it was the performance of the controversial play *The Black Crook* in the post-Civil War era which first displayed the public's growing appetite for a style of entertainment comprising many of the popular theatrical features of the period. The study opens with the performance of *The Black Crook* in St. Louis at Deagle's Varieties Theatre in April of 1867.

---

The variety theatre by the early 1870's had become a conglomerate of several popular entertainment forms: the circus, the minstrel stage, the sporting arena and the menagerie. It was the variety theatre's loose format that gave it unprecedented flexibility in adapting itself to the tastes of the period while reflecting the problems connected with its growing urban environment. It was the variety theatre that helped fulfill the need for our American types of characters as subjects for both humor and drama. The second chapter will be devoted to a history of one of St. Louis' most famous variety theatres in the 1870's, the Theatre Comique.

In the period from 1880 to 1896 the variety theatre and its environment became subjects of increasing concern for the reform-minded citizens of St. Louis. Liquor was the main source of revenue for the variety theatre. Entertainment became secondary as a means of income. The atmosphere of the variety theatre could run from the heights of genuine and hearty male laughter to the depths of ribaldry and debauchery.

The variety theatre had two main attractions: lady waiters and the wine-room. The female performers trooped to the wine-room after their "turns" to sit, talk and sell liquor to the habitues. Such places of business were regarded by many as "dens of iniquity," and were referred to as "dives" and "free and easies." Protests were made that the young of the city should be protected from the evil
Influences of such establishments.

In 1681 Joseph Pulitzer of the Post Dispatch launched a campaign to rid the city of these theatres. Though Pulitzer was not entirely successful in eliminating these "dives" from the city, increasing pressure was put upon the city's public servants to deal decisively with them. Ministers, Sabbatarian societies and the Women's Christian Temperance Union all joined in an effort to close them down. Though it is not entirely clear why many of these theatres continued to operate under such pressures, one can detect indications of political favoritism.

In 1891 the Newberry Law was brought to bear on the variety theatres in cities like St. Louis. The law forbade the use of musical instruments and performances by females in saloons. In 1895 the police raided the variety theatres. Many of the "dives" were successfully closed. However, the city's municipal police force was suspected of bribery when several of the variety theatres were forewarned.

The passage of new legislation and the pressures of the temper­ance movement were not solely responsible for the decline of the "free and easies." The downfall of the variety theatre was hastened by the movement of new theatres into the field of vaudeville.

The vaudeville theatre, unlike the variety theatre, was devoted to family entertainment. Vaudeville was designed by its creators to include such "worthy" qualities of variety entertainment as providing many acts for a low price of admission. Moreover, the vaudeville
theatre hoped to supply a sense of sophistication which its variety predecessor had not enjoyed. The promoters of vaudeville erected new palaces of luxury for the comfort and enjoyment of their customers.
CHAPTER I

THE GENESIS OF THE VARIETY THEATRE

The Black Crook Comes to St. Louis

Early in the summer of 1866 Henry C. Jarrett and Harry Palmer, world-famed managers and speculators, returned from Europe. They had been searching for some attraction which would gain the favor of American theatre-goers. After careful consideration, they had decided that a ballet troupe would be just the right drawing card. As Jarrett explained the venture sometime later:

Legs are staple articles, and will never go out of fashion while the world lasts. They top the list of the Beauties of Nature, and we will father an array of them that will make even the surfeited New Yorker open his eyes and his pocket and hold his breath in astonishment.¹

Upon their arrival in New York, Jarrett and Palmer made arrangements to present their ballet troupe at New York's Academy of Music. Before the production opened, however, the Academy burned to the ground, and the ambitious managers then contacted William Wheatley, manager and lessee of Niblo's Garden in downtown Manhattan. Jarrett and Palmer told Wheatley of the attraction they had secured in Europe

and offered him the opportunity to join them in the production of a spectacular drama, in which their ballet troupe would be introduced using the stage of Niblo's.

Once Wheatley had agreed to the proposition, the promoters planned to locate a manuscript which would satisfy their needs. Jarrett and Palmer desired a script containing a minimum amount of dialogue. The plot would simply act as "... a clothes line, as it were, on which to hang the pretty dresses, besides affording abundant opportunities for scenic display." The play was found when Wheatley was contacted by Charles M. Barras. Barras, a New York journalist and dramatic critic, had recently completed a manuscript entitled The Black Crook.

Charles Barras conceived the idea of writing The Black Crook in 1865. The ideas he incorporated in The Black Crook were not original; they represented a conglomerate of passages taken from operas, dramas, and comedies.

William Wheatley purchased the rights to The Black Crook from Barras for $3,000, intending that the several acts should merely form pendants for the brilliance of the ballet spectacles following each act. When the bargain was finally concluded between Jarrett, Palmer, and Wheatley, the former two gentlemen agreed to supply the company;

---

2 Ibid. p. 10.

3 Memphis Daily Bulletin, November 18, 1867.

the latter, the scenery and effects, carpenters, scenic painters, and costumers. The production cost what was then an unusual amount of $55,000, but the net profits of $660,000 in little more than a year easily compensated the investors for the play's initial costs. In the first few months alone, Barras garnered $60,000 in royalties from hopeful managers seeking to win fame and fortune with *The Black Crook* in their own hometowns.

The plot of *The Black Crook* was a mixture of the melodramas of the period, Goethe's *Faust*, and Weber's *Der Freischutz*. A rich count [Wolfenstein] falls in love with a poor girl [Amina], the fiancee of a starving artist [Rudolphe], whom he throws into a dungeon. In the meantime, the Black Crook [Hertzog] makes a pact with the Arch Fiend. For every soul this aging sorcerer delivers, he is granted a year of life. Hertzog then manages to tempt the imprisoned Rudolphe with tales of a buried treasure and a vision of his betrothed. Freed of bondage, Rudolphe sallies forth to acquire the treasure and to punish the Count. By accident he saves the metamorphosed Fairy Queen, who then becomes Rudolphe's guardian angel, helps him defeat the Count, and saves him from the Black Crook, who loses his pact with the Devil and is borne off to hell.

Neither the story nor the frequently trite dialogue was of much

---

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, pp. 325-374.
importance to the viewer. What made the play successful was its theatricality and its lavish production: cascading waterfalls, displays of fire, caverns, grottos, phantasmagorias of horror, brilliant transformations of color and lighting and most important of all, the ballet extravaganzas.

While the newspaper reviews praised the "magnificent spectacle" and pronounced The Black Crook a combination of "youth, grace, beauty and elan . . ."; they fulminated against a ballet troupe that wore " . . . no clothes to speak of." The New York Times added that "Such dancing has never been seen here; such unembarrassed disporting of human organism has never been indulged in before." The New York Herald was perhaps the most explosive in its editorial columns:

Nothing in any other Christian country, or in modern times has approached the indecent and demoralizing exposition. We can imagine that there might have been in Sodom and Gomorrah such another place and scene, such another theater and spectacle on the Broadway of those doomed cities just before fire and brimstone rained down upon them and buried them in the ruins.

Condemned by critics and theologians alike, The Black Crook was sought by managers everywhere who hoped to take advantage of the public's curiosity and taste for a brush with wickedness.

---

7 New York Times, September 12, 1866.
8 Ibid. September 17, 1866.
9 From a scrapbook of clippings concerning The Black Crook in the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.
One of the managers, successful in bringing The Black Crook to his city, was George J. Beagle of St. Louis, Missouri. In 1861, Beagle, a local saloon owner and one-time steamboat barker, became the sole lessee of the Varieties Theatre at Fifth and Market. The Missouri Democrat reviewed the theatre as the largest and most beautiful music hall in the world. Every evening the Varieties Theatre featured "Negro minstrelsy, ballet, opera, farce, dancing, singing, music pantomine, and instrumental music and in short, everything pertaining to the theatre, circus, opera and concert hall . . . . "

During the Civil War under Beagle's management the Varieties Theatre was recognized as an establishment where one could go at any time of the evening without waiting until the end of a long piece of entertainment. Every act was a "separate piece of entertainment." The theatre was complimented for its comfortable roominess, and for

10 St. Louis Globe Democrat, May 8, 1908. Steamboating, then at its peak often employed "barkers" for its various packet companies and independent steamers. Such men encouraged investment in and travel upon these vessels. George Beagle was reputed to have been one of the best in his trade.

11 Missouri Democrat, December 9, 1861.

12 Ibid.

13 Grant M. Herbstruth, "Benedict De Bar and the Grand Opera House in St. Louis, Missouri from 1855 to 1879" (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1954). A complete history of the Varieties Theatre both before and after George Beagle's management is found in this study.

14 Missouri Democrat, January 28, 1862.
offering nothing that was "stale, flat or objectionable." The Varieties Theatre was near the principal street railroads and transportation thoroughfares of the city.

Following the war Deagle made the decision to transform his Varieties Theatre into a legitimate playhouse. His success during the war had enabled him to accumulate the necessary capital for expensive performances and lavish spectacles.

On April 14, 1867 Deagle set in motion the arrangements for presenting *The Black Crook* in St. Louis. The Varieties Theatre was in a topsy-turvy state, and forty to fifty men were assigned the construction of a new stage. The old stage was torn away to accommodate the new machinery employed in the creation of *The Black Crook*’s many scenes of beauty and fantasy. An excavation of some twenty feet was made to store the necessary machinery used in *The Black Crook*’s presentation. Forty-five men were required to operate the equipment.

The *Missouri Democrat* described the scene:

> Everywhere are ropes and huge pulleys that creak and groan beneath the load of fairies and sea nymphs. Here the coral groves are raised from the bottom of the sea to soft Lydian airs . . . pulled by brawny arms.

Under the direction of the stage manager, Ben Sherwood, the men "worked like bees" toiling and perspiring in the flies and machinery.

---

15 Ibid.
16 *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, March 16, 1878.
17 *Missouri Democrat*, April 22, 1867.
In one section the newspaper reporter watched the operation of four huge wooden wheels resembling treadmills; in another area a huge sheet of plate glass, measuring ten feet in height and seven feet in length, was being lifted into place. The glass was to be used in the transformation scene along with real water rippling "in those caves where sea nymphs sleep."  

George Deagle announced to the newspapers that he would spare no expense in seeing that the people of St. Louis enjoyed The Black Crook as no theatre public has ever witnessed it. The new stage required 3,000 feet of lumber and was divided into small sections which could, it was rumoured, be changed for various scenes in less than one minute. Some 9,000 yards of canvas were required along with 11,000 feet of rope, 2,500 gas burners, 8 calcium lights, and tin foil and gauze costing over $4,500. One scene alone, the Transformation Scene, utilized 66 tons of iron and framework; when completed, the entire complement of sets and scenery weighed 110 tons.  

---

18 Ibid.  
19 Missouri Republican, April 25, 1867.  
20 W. J. Lawrence, "The Rise of Spectacle in America," Theatre Magazine, XXVI (January, 1917), 44. The transformation scene usually represented the ethereal world of heavenly spirits. The slowly developing stage scene was made up of gauze "rises" with ballet girls in picturesque poses upon pedestals. The scene then transformed itself into a Satanic blaze of underworld fires created by igniting chemical compounds offstage. The scene was first employed in Planchis' The Island of Jewels in the London Lyceum in 1848.  
21 Missouri Republican, April 25, 1867.
The wardrobe for *The Black Crook* was lavish. Beagle's only regret was that he could not obtain all that was requisite from American business houses. From London he purchased lame cloth, 150 pieces of gold and silver lame from Dedlock and Company. Sixteen burnished steel suits of armor for the production were manufactured in Paris. It was expected that the influx of greenbacks would easily repay Beagle for his reputed investment of $47,000.

On April 19, 1867 Beagle announced his intention to have his theatre patronized by the "best classes of our citizens." "Beer, cigars and improper characters" were banished from every portion of the house. The Rules and Regulations of the Varieties Theatre, dated 1867, are proof of Beagle's sincerity in reforming the operation of his theatre and in regulating the actions of his employees both on and off the stage.

The first performance of *The Black Crook* in St. Louis on the evening of April 24, 1867 was a huge success. The performance lasted until one o'clock the next morning. At the final curtain the capacity crowd rose to its feet, clapping, stomping, and shouting itself hoarse.

---

22 ibid.
23 ibid. In the age of P. T. Barnum any figure would be suspect.
24 ibid. April 19, 1867.
25 The Rules and Regulations of the Varieties Theatre from the David Theatre Collection dated 1867, is listed in Appendix I. Evidence is not available to substantiate the existence of a list of rules and regulations for Beagle's Varieties Theatre before 1867.
in praise of Beagle, Sherwood, and Thomas C. Noxon, the designer of The Black Crook's elaborate scenery.

Black Crook neckties and music shortly became the order of the day in St. Louis following the play's opening performance. A special notice appeared in the local press from an aspiring physician who informed his public "... that all those who are desirous of visiting these gorgeous spectacles, should first visit Dr. J. Lindoman and get their corns taken out at his office." Black Crook saloons were opened rapidly, and the Chicago and Alton Railroad announced that it would run a special train from Springfield to St. Louis in order to accommodate theatre patrons.

Meanwhile, other theatre managers in the city had already begun to exploit the wave of public enthusiasm surrounding The Black Crook. On May 18, 1867 Jake Esher presented a Saturday night burlesque on The Black Crook entitled The Black Book. Having recently opened his new variety theatre on the corner of Fifth and Franklin, Esher attracted capacity crowds who cheered his production. Esher made the price of admission to his theatre more attractive by giving away hams, linen coats, hats, two silver watches, a silver goblet, a photographic album and two dollars in greenbacks. Deagle's spirit of reformation

26 Missouri Democrat, April 25, 1867.
27 Missouri Republican, May 5, 1867.
28 Missouri Democrat, June 20, 1867.
captured Esher as well; he too resolved on the prohibition of smoking and drinking in his theatre.29

Fred Wilson, in his popular little minstrel house on Fifth Street, also produced a burlesque on The Black Crook entitled Hamlet in Black, while Ben De Bar, the veteran theatre manager in St. Louis, managed to produce a burlesque on The Black Crook which the Missouri Democrat promptly pronounced as "lamentably flat."30

By mid-May of 1867, both the Missouri Republican and Missouri Democrat complimented Deagle on the established success of The Black Crook. Unlike New York the response given The Black Crook by St. Louis was less critical. Deagle's Saturday matinees attracted both women and children, the "public having discovered that there was nothing to bring a blush to the cheeks of youth."31

The theatre receipts in St. Louis for March, April and May in 1867 bear witness to the popularity of The Black Crook. In a month's time the receipts of the Varieties Theatre quintupled.32

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Months</th>
<th>De Bar's</th>
<th>Varieties</th>
<th>Olympic</th>
<th>Wilson's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>$8,366</td>
<td>$10,858</td>
<td>$2,189</td>
<td>$4,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>$8,372</td>
<td>$5,004</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>$6,573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>$6,390</td>
<td>$25,945</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>$7,988</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid. June 1, 1867. The name of the burlesque on The Black Crook produced by Ben De Bar is not available.
31 Ibid. May 13, 1867.
32 St. Louis Dispatch, January 23, 1868.
The Significance of The Black Crook in St. Louis

The Black Crook's success has been attributed to its being the progenitor of what actress-critic Olive Logan called the "leg business." Unquestionably the appearance of the ballet dancers in flesh-colored tights did lead to minor social convulsions in several cities where The Black Crook was performed. Nevertheless, The Black Crook had not originated burlesque in this country, nor can it even be credited with being the first of the leg-displaying entertainments of which Miss Logan so disparagingly wrote. In 1851 and 1852 New York audiences were enchanted with the beauty of Lola Montez. St. Louis audiences were thrilled with the appearances of Kate Vance in her flesh-colored tights strapped to the back of a horse in Mazeppa, a popular equestrian drama of that day.  

---


34 Missouri Democrat, October 4, 1863. Miss Vance made frequent appearances as Mazeppa in St. Louis' Varieties Theatre. She appeared in that role again on February 4, 1864 and again on January 27, 1865 at the Varieties Theatre.
The Black Crook's claim to being the first musical comedy in America has also been disputed by modern scholarship. Its ballet was not the first substantial one in America, and neither the first to use an European company nor the first combined ballet and drama. 35

Much of The Black Crook's success must be attributed to its incorporation of specialty numbers within the context of a loosely constructed plot. These specialty numbers placed between the acts of The Black Crook provided diversions for the audiences as well as a refreshing touch of spontaneity. By November of 1867 Deagle added to The Black Crook a "Garde Imperial," one hundred and fifty children clad in French uniforms representing chasseurs, cavalry, Zouaves and a drum corps. By October of 1867 a New York production of The Black Crook added two new ballets and a mechanical donkey. In a Memphis production of The Black Crook in 1868, "olio" specialties were placed in the first scene of the third act. This portion of the play was generally changed at each performance. It was a variety show consisting of acrobats, song and dance men, a ventriloquist, and of course, the ladies' corps de ballet. Worked into the script as a show within the play the specialties bolstered the popularity of the spectacle with their varied offerings. 36 In a St. Louis production of The Black Crook some years...


later at the Theatre Comique, the play had been expanded to include a tight-rope performer, a trapeze act and a contortionist.  

The Black Crook with its vast array of variety entertainment answered to what could be called a permanent need of the human spirit, the desire for amusement without any contributory effort on one's own part. Conceivably, therefore, variety entertainment created a greater sense of relaxation than drama because of the spectator's more passive attitude. As one theatre critic analyzed the playgoer's desire for stage presentations in the post-Civil War era:

What he [the playgoer] wants is something to please his eye and tickle his ear, something to strangle his cares and cut the throat of his troubles, something to make him laugh and forget he has a note to pay tomorrow, with no money to meet it.  

Following the war many patrons of the Varieties Theatre deplored Deagle's frequent programming of tragedies and demanded presentations of a lighter vein. The Missouri Democrat complained: "We have been filled to bursting with blood and intrigue and crime." Along the same lines the Missouri Democrat requested that Deagle use his stock company for more comic productions: "Let no more Hamlets be foisted upon the St. Louis public."

---

37 Theatre Comique Programs, St. Louis Public Library Theatre Program Collection.
38 Whitton, "The Naked Truth!" An Inside History of The Black Crook, p. 32.
39 Missouri Democrat, October 7, 1867.
40 Ibid. October 15, 1867.
Similar demands in nearby cities were taking place during the post-Civil war period. A study of the New Memphis Theatre from 1855 to 1880 shows that both minstrel and variety performances in the post-war period far outweighed the number of serious dramatic presentations.\footnote{Faulkner. "The New Memphis Theatre of Memphis, Tennessee," p. 91.}

The Black Crook was symptomatic of the theatre's move in the direction of variety entertainment and its accommodation to a rapidly growing nation where people were in a hurry for short-cuts to pleasure. The inclusion of variety acts was merely the theatrical counterpart of literature's short story and the church's ten minute sermon. The Black Crook's plot certainly required no great span of deep concentration. Elegant writing was not a part of the play's appeal. Joseph Whitton, author of a book on the Black Crook, has written that stylish writing, with its "daintily picked words and smooth flowing sentences is all well enough in its place; but that place is not in the drama of this prosy, money-grabbing age."\footnote{Whitton, "The Naked Truth!" An Inside History of The Black Crook, p. 32.}

More importantly, The Black Crook hastened the growth of other variety theatres. Charles Krone, a long time resident and actor in St. Louis, noted that following the war, song and dance men began to invade...
the St. Louis stage in ever greater numbers. The success of The Black Crook had shown managers from coast to coast the great harvests to be reaped from a variety style of entertainment.

Amidst the excitement accorded The Black Crook and its imitators, however, there were expressions of dismay and disgust. Some saw The Black Crook's success as a positive sign of society's decadence. America was in the throes of a cultural decline on the order of that of Greece and Rome. Others suggested that The Black Crook was the result of the growing laxity created by the "demoralizing tendencies of a great social convulsion." America was too preoccupied with things effeminate, the "concomitant of a national prosperity."^45

Though much has been made of The Black Crook's immorality, a more basic consideration of the play's significance was discussed in an article by the St. Louis Home Journal entitled, "Stage Literature of the 19th Century." The Journal conceived the problem of America's stage literature to be one not of immorality, but of an absence of an American school of comedy. The Journal argued that the public seemed to show no preference for immorality but "... will always reward

---

^43 Charles Krone, "Recollections of an Old Actor," Missouri Historical Review IV (1913), 224.

^44 Louisville Daily Journal, October 11, 1867.

^45 Ibid.
with its patronage what is talented and what is amusing." Therefore, the Journal continued, the public's taste was not at fault in patronizing The Black Crook and similar productions, but rather the neglect of the stage by American wits. Though county papers, lecturers, comic papers and daily journals applied themselves to humor, few efforts were being made to bring regional material to the stage. The Journal concluded that the American people attended immoral plays not because the productions suited them, but because they could get nothing better. In the future it was hoped that the stage would grasp the secret of Negro minstrelsy's success and "Let American types of character be the staple of entertainment."

On July 15, 1867 The Black Crook was presented for the last time at Deagle's Varieties Theatre after a run of well over eighty-three performances. Although thousands of people had flocked to St. Louis for the performances of The Black Crook, and although the receipts had been large, particularly in May of 1867, it was reported by the


47Barnard Hewitt, Theatre U.S.A. 1665 to 1967 (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 159-160. Recent scholarship has modified the view of this writer. By mid-nineteenth century American characters including the rural Yankee, the noble redskin, and the tough city lad were part of the dramatic scene. However, Hewitt noted that the theatre "... did not attract our best writers."

Missouri Republican that manager Deagle lost heavily in the venture. Perhaps the general business depression in St. Louis during the summer of 1867 may explain in part the failure of The Black Crook to bring Deagle complete financial success. The St. Louis Dispatch reported that the depression was so severe that even the gambling interests were suffering. Moreover, George Beagle presented The Black Crook during the hottest months of the summer; and attendance had suffered. Many stayed away from the city to harvest their crops, while some feared the outbreak of a city-wide cholera epidemic. A lack of patronage by the respectable classes who regarded the Varieties Theatre as yet unproven in its venture as a legitimate theatre may also explain Deagle's financial difficulties. Many of these classes preferred to enjoy a theatrical production uninterrupted by the munching of apples, the strewing of peanuts, and the shouting of "down in front" from the unrefined denizens of the hinterlands who occupied the gallery. Still others refused to attend any theatre, particularly a variety house, which was situated in a questionable area of the city.

---

49 Missouri Republican, July 14, 1867. One cannot with any degree of accuracy pronounce George Deagle's presentation of The Black Crook a financial success. Such a conclusion could not be made without reference to the original outlay of capital. That information is not available.

50 St. Louis Dispatch, August 15, 1867.

51 Missouri Republican, July 20, 1867.

52 St. Louis Home Journal, 1 (December, 1867), 4.
Despite these problems The Black Crook awakened in St. Louis, as in other cities, the desire for more spectacular productions, specialty or variety acts, and material celebrating American types of character. Solomon Franklin Smith, for years a talented actor and manager in St. Louis, wrote in his autobiography of the changes taking place in the city’s theatrical affairs:

In latter years the legitimate drama seems to have been crushed out by what may be termed Black Crookery and White Fawnery, consisting of red and blue fires, a fine collection of French legs, calcium lights, and grand transformation scenes. Negro minstrelsy itself, a modulated form of the drama, has had a hard struggle to maintain its ground, and has only done so by burlesquing the burlesques of the theatres. Theatres did I say? Where are the theatres? They seem to have nearly all vanished and in their places we have Academies of Music, Olympics, Varieties, Gaieties, Athenaeums, and Opera Houses.\(^{53}\)

The Black Crook and other well-known productions of a similar vein developed the habit of broadening or contracting their performances as specialty acts were made available. The success of these performances hastened the growth of entertainment exclusively devoted to variety performances. The popularity of these specialty acts in the post-Civil War period evolved into that popular entertainment form known as the variety theatre. By the early seventies St. Louis was to add yet another objectionable name to Solomon Franklin Smith’s list of so-called theatres, the Theatre Comique, home of the "variety business."

The summer of 1873 was a hot one for St. Louis. With temperatures soaring into the nineties there were few St. Louisians who wished to attend band concerts in Lafayette Park. Only Uhrig’s Cave was having a profitable summer business. One could always appreciate a cold glass of lager from the underground limestone caverns of Uhrig’s.

De Bar’s opera house on Market Street and the Olympic were being prepared for the fall season. Attendance at the Apollo, St. Louis’ sole grand opera house, was reported poor. Only George Deagle was doing a “fair” business in his new variety house on Sixth Street above Locust.

However, the weather was only partly to blame for the lack of theatre attendance. P. T. Barnum, the perennial circus favorite, entertained overflow crowds despite the hot summer temperatures and rumors of a potential cholera epidemic. In four days Barnum attracted eighty-seven thousand paying customers into his tents at Twentieth and Olive. Barnum admitted to published gross receipts of $50,000.

1 Missouri Republican, August 8, 1873.
2 Ibid.
The newspapers had been filled with stories of more police raids on the concert saloons at Chestnut Street and Fifth Avenue. Every Saturday evening one or more fights broke out at Esher's Varieties, and the police were finding it difficult to jail the violators of the law owing to the crowds in attendance. The Chestnut Street Varieties was also in "full blast," but had their "cappers" on the watch after Esher's "beer jerkers" were put under arrest. The females of these two establishments had been arrested and marched triumphantly by the police to the Chestnut Street Station. Shortly thereafter, however, the police released the "ladies" as the saucy maidens "... made the night hideous with their unearthly rendering of popular songs of the day."  

Jack Looney's Variety Theatre on Christy Avenue was the scene of the city's preparations for the long awaited boxing bout between Mike McCoole and Thomas Allen. Long a favorite "sporting man" of the city, Looney was selected to charter the steamboat Continental to carry the "sports," "bummers," "vags," "snoozers," merchants, lawyers and young "bloods" to a yet unannounced fighting arena somewhere south of the city on the Mississippi River.  

---

3 Missouri Democrat, August 24, 1867. The newspaper defined a beer jerker as "A loose woman employed in a beer cellar ... ."

4 Ibid. August 16, 1873.

5 Paul Magriel, "Missouri Prize-Fighting in the 1860's", Missouri Historical Society Bulletin, VIII (October, 1951), 15-16. Until the passage of a State Statute in 1874 making boxing a felony, Missouri was resort for the bare-knuckled heroes of the prize ring.
The much-heralded boxing duel commanded so much interest for the residents of the city that George Deagle's Variety Theatre offered a nightly cash prize for the best conundrum given on the subject. One leading contestant for honors posed this piece of artless speculation: "What is the difference between the referee in the McCoole and Allen fight and George Francis Train?" The answer: "One was Looney and the other is crazy." 6

With the air filled with the thrill of a circus and the heated arguments over the impending struggle between St. Louis' most famous gladiators of the ring, it was little wonder that the opening of a new theatre, the Theatre Comique, went off like "hot cakes." 7

The newest addition to St. Louis' theatres was a variety theatre with the air of a London concert hall about it. Located in the heart of the business district, the Theatre Comique, an imposing four-storied brick structure, had been redecorated for the occasion. The dress circle had been enlarged by advancing the old parquette to a level with it. 8 Six private boxes, three on each side of the theatre, were connected with the stage by narrow dark passageways. The boxes were provided with lattice screens for privacy and were designed for "... ladies and gentlemen who do not wish to be bothered." 9 A large and

6 Missouri Democrat, January 10, 1874.
7 Missouri Republican, August 23, 1873.
8 St. Louis Times, August 30, 1873.
9 Missouri Democrat, August 29, 1873.
handsome well-stocked saloon had been fitted up back of the office located near the entrance on the south end of the building. At one end of the saloon young girls dispensed the finest cigars while at the other, Lupe, a popular fruit vendor, supplied the freshest in popular delicacies.

The Comique's manager William C. Mitchell was busy preparing his theatre for its many coming attractions, and acquainting his doormen with the list of "deadheads . . . the 'bête noir' of all theatrical managers." Deadheads was a term used to describe the patrons of the theatre who were admitted free of charge. Theatre managers extended these complimentary passes to persons in a position to return the favor. Such individuals included newspaper reporters, railroad ticket agents and hotel managers.

"Billy" Mitchell, as his close friends knew him, was born in Evansville, Indiana in 1837. In the early years before coming to St. Louis, Mitchell was clerk and part owner of an Ohio River steamboat, the David White. Later he traveled down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans where he and his father became wholesale grocery dealers. However, when a river boat burned laden with cotton on consignment to Mitchell, his fortune was virtually wiped out. Mitchell

10 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 28, 1878. Mitchell estimated that for every two thousand paying customers there were twenty-five "deadheads."

11 Ibid.
came to St. Louis a comparatively poor man. Around 1870 Mitchell be-
came associated with Ben De Bar in the Opera House on Pine between
Third and Fourth Streets. 12

The Theatre Comique had had a proud legitimate heritage. The
building had been erected in 1850 by John Bates of Cincinnati and was
owned by him until his death in 1853. After Bates' death Ben De Bar
leased the theatre and the adjoining dwelling on the west. Under De
Bar the theatre enjoyed its finest hour. 13

Many stars trod the boards at the old theatre. Among the celeb-
rities of yesteryear were Charlotte Cushman in Mag Merrilies, John
Wilkes Booth, Maggie Mitchell in Franchon, Tom Connors, Ristori, James
Anderson, Edwin Adams, James E. Murdock, Charles Kean, James Wallack,
E. L. Davenport and the Ravel Family. 14

By 1870, however, the westward drift of the city away from the
river left the Pine Street theatre run-down and dingy. In rainy
weather the narrow street and pavement fronting the theatre was often
to blame for the spoiling of a fine dress or opera cloak. The Missouri
Democrat inquired:

Have you ever noticed the influence of surroundings
on one's behavior? Put the rude and illiterate in
elegant surroundings and they will be subdued. 15

12 Ibid. August 31, 1878.
13 St. Louis Globe Democrat, December 10, 1880.
14 Missouri Republican, December 10, 1880.
15 Missouri Democrat, February 23, 1870.
The Missouri Democrat concluded that St. Louis would always welcome fine theatres as the beauty of a building's architecture helped refine men's manners, elevate their morals, and slow the tobacco-chewing patron's urge to begrime his environment.16

II

Program Fare

As early as seven o'clock in the evening crowds entered the Theatre Comique for a night of entertainment. Following the orchestra's overture, the curtain rose. The chairman moved quickly to his official position in an elevated cushioned seat facing the audience, a table before him labeled Private. On either side of his rostrum, the chairman had designated seats of honor for his friends. After blandly smiling at one or two acquaintances, he produced a carefully sorted batch of paper usually having little to do with the performances. After a light tap on a gong and a brief word with the stage manager, the chairman announced the first act through a speaking tube.17 The crowd then began to come to some semblance of order. William Mitchell's large corps of white-uniformed waitresses made their ways through the aisles answering requests for refreshments.

16 Ibid.

The bills of the shows averaged anywhere from twelve to fifteen numbers and lasted into the morning hours. The first part usually ran about forty-five minutes. Next came the olio which included variety acts of every description: song and dance acts, comic skits, jugglers, acrobats, afterpieces and the closing ballet numbers.

At the opening of the show all the performers, including the girls of the wine room, sat on the stage until the conclusion of the first part. The girls were usually costumed alike, in dresses with bright sashes and red or blue stockings. Sometimes they were in a semicircle, perched on swings or posed with fans or parasols. The interlocutors in white-face sat in the center of this semicircle, and two black-face comics occupied the ends. Jokes and ballads were sung, all of which was designed to allow the audience time to drift into seats.

The Theatre Comique's standard bill opened with a sketch followed by a vocalist, called a serio-comic, who generally sang some innocuous

---


19 The wine room served as a place where the male customers were entertained privately by the girls. The wine room girls, though they appeared on stage in the opening, were not always performers.

20 Carl Wittke, Tambo and Bones, A History of the American Minstrel Stage (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), p. 139. The interlocutor and end men were adopted by the variety stage because they enjoyed so much popularity as a standard part of the minstrel show. The interlocutor served both as an announcer and "straight man" for the black-faced end-men.
verse about the beauties of nature. This description of one serio­
comic was captured by a reporter amused by the antics following her 
performance:

Her ditty about flowers completed, Miss Varcoe secured 
her applause by throwing a button hole bouquet to the 
audience the best of which was favored, not to say 
flavored with a special kiss. The bouquet is thrown 
as far as possible toward the chairman, for whom it 
is of course intended and if any presumptuous elf should 
try to appropriate the favor, Mr. Rouse [the chairman] 
rises, stern of countenance, awful of voice and demands 
that it be restored to its lawful recipient. 22

The purpose of the single performer was to give the stage hands 
an opportunity to reset for a full stage performance of acrobats or 
jugglers. 23 The rest of the first part was made up of assorted spe­
cialty acts. The acts might include a champion jig performer, banjo 
artist, magician and several serio-comics. 24

Just prior to the second part of the night's festivities inaug­
urated by the orchestra's overture, a special feature of the Theatre 
Comique's program was presented, the ballet. The Theatre Comique's 
ballet was the product of its Maitre de Ballet, forty-year old Sig. J. 
P. Cardella. Cardella, an Italian, had been in training for the 

21 A. B. Walkley, "The Triumph of Variety Entertainment," The New 
Review XLI (October, 1892), 509.
22 London Music Halls, "New York Dramatic Mirror V (February, 
1881), 2.
23 Gilbert, American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times, p. 38.
24 Theatre Comique Programs.
ballet since the age of twelve. He prided himself on his attendance at the Theatre La Scala, a government training school in Italy, reportedly one of the finest of its kind in Europe. Cardella, however, bemoaned the fact that America had no comparable ballet schools except its theatres. He frowned on the American girls who left their six to eight dollar-a-week paying factory jobs for the ballet stage. The American girls expected to be dancing in starring roles in less than a week or two. Frequently, the ballet was simply used by the females to get a chance at a speaking role in a theatrical production and to become an "actress." Once the speaking role was won by the young hopeful, Cardella continued, "they many times botched the job pretty badly." The number of young ladies appearing in the ballet was from twenty to thirty, depending upon the demands of the particular production. Requests for ballet girls often appeared on the printed programs of the Theatre Comique.

25 Missouri Democrat, May 13, 1867.
26 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 27, 1878.
27 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Theatre Comique Programs.
The ballet was presented in a full stage setting with eye-catching program titles such as "Uriella or the Demon of the Night," "Grand Ballet Infernale-Les Compagnes du demon-Entrée," "Polka Diabolique," "Warriors of the Sun" and "Queens of the East." 32

By 1874 the Theatre Comique incorporated the French can-can to conclude the ballet. Billy Carroll's Varieties had first introduced Aline La Favre, queen of the can-can, to St. Louis in 1870. It was said that Miss La Favre assumed postures that drove men mad and sent them "yelling like demons from the theatre." 33 The can-can was followed by an Amazonian march by the members of the ballet parading around the dress circle. In addition to the white coryphees used in these spectacles, the black female population of St. Louis found brief employment as Nubian slaves in the Amazonian marches. 34

After the first part came to a conclusion there was a brief intermission taken up with a demand for more drinks, the discussion of local politics and bets on the coming boxing events.

Intermission completed, the orchestra began its overture opening the second portion of the program. Specialty acts were the principal features of the variety theatre, and the Theatre Comique could boast of some of the most unusual performances.

32 Ibid.
33 Missouri Democrat, February 12, 1870.
34 Ibid. December 23, 1873.
Senyah and Liola were a fast trapeze act whose most exciting feat was to swing from the theatre's gallery to the stage with one partner upon the shoulders of the other. J. B. Johnson was designated a "Champion Swimmer." He had attempted a channel swim in 1874, unfortunately without success. Johnson claimed the world's underwater breath-holding title of three minutes. Rel Muab was dubbed the "Russian Mystery, and Veritable Human Salamander." His introduction appeared in bright multi-colored lettering and was filled with a liberal dose of good-natured hokum:

In his astonishing Performances, in which he totally defies the laws of Human Nature, Bites off Red Hot Iron Bars, the pieces so bitten off, when presented to the Audience immediately after, are found so very hot that they cannot be touched. Drinks Boiling Oil, 200 degrees Hot, Stands with faked Feet on a Red Hot Iron Plate, and many other equally astonishing Acts ...  

Herr Schultze was billed as the "Man of a Hundred Faces," who, it was said, gave convincing impersonations of such notables as: George Washington, Bismarck, Napoleon, Lincoln, Disraeli, Moltke, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. An enterprising showman with an eye for exploiting national politics in an election year, Schultze expanded his repertoire to include Samuel Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes.
Mile. D’Omer was programmed as a female boxer. She executed the “unparalleled feat” of walking a mile on stage in eight and one-half minutes. Finally, most entertaining was the appearance of a beefy one thousand pound dance troupe: five young ladies ranging in weight from one hundred and seventy-five pounds to two hundred pounds.

III

Minstrelsy and the Variety Theatre

The variety theatre was a by-product of many forms of entertainment including Negro minstrelsy. During the Civil War the techniques of the minstrel theatre, the first part, the end-men and interlocutor, became standard features of a variety house business. In 1861 Esher’s Bowery Theatre at 259 Broadway, the progenitor of the variety business in St. Louis, announced a program which included a female minstrel band, Negro minstrels, funny sayings, songs, dances, operatic gems, burlesques and afterpieces. The Canterbury Theatre on Sixth and Green Streets advertised Negro minstrelsy along with "ballet,

---

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 St. Louis Republic, June 16, 1891. In 1863 Jacob Esher and Joseph Kline Emmet traveled along with General McNeil while the latter was in Missouri. The two showmen produced minstrel shows for the troops and smuggled an estimated $17,000 back to St. Louis in empty whiskey barrels. Emmet later became a $50,000 a year star in New York.
Minstrelsy continued as a leading feature of the variety houses in St. Louis until the opening of Fred Wilson's new opera house of minstrelsy shortly after Lincoln's assassination. From 1865 until 1869 Wilson operated his minstrel house at the corner of Fifth Street and Pine. Wilson catered to the family audience, generally the families of the respectable classes. He advertised his theatre as a "Temple of Refinement and Respectability," and it was considered "... essentially a ladies house."

Though Wilson made every effort to insure his theatre's success, by the spring of 1869 he was in serious financial difficulty. Lotteries were used by Wilson to pump up his business. Eight hundred dollars was given away in nightly drawings with fifty dollars additional at matinees. These figures are particularly revealing when one considers that the average first-class minstrel troupe of eighteen in the late 1860's grossed about eight hundred dollars in weekly salaries. Together with Wilson's weekly rent of eighty-three dollars paid to Joseph Weil, a local resident in the dry good business, 

---

42 Missouri Democrat, April 20, 1865.
43 St. Louis Home Journal, II (March, 1868), 4.
44 Ibid.
the costs of insurance, upkeep on the theatre and the salaries of theatre personnel other than performers, Wilson was having trouble making ends meet.

The dwindling popularity of St. Louis' only minstrel theatre can best be understood by consulting local press reviews. The St. Louis Home Journal warned that:

... there is continual demand upon the Minstrels for novelty, both of actors and places. The finest jokes, the most humorous sketches, the broadest farces, will have their day, and then pall upon the public ear, nor is St. Louis so great a city that it can rely upon its floating population to fill its theatres ... and the consequence is that reliance must be placed upon the regular inhabitants. For them novelties are absolutely needed, and if they do not get them, they will not come.

Novelties, however, altered the peculiar appeal of the traditional minstrel show. By 1871 the Missouri Republican bitterly complained:

In former times an attempt was made to delineate the African character and set forth in a manner and language those peculiarities for which our sable brother is remarkable. Whatever artistic attractions there were in the business lay in this direction, but it has long since been abandoned, and nothing of the Negro remains except the counterfeit complexion. The music, vocal and instrumental, is the music of the white man and not black; the dialect has not the slightest flavor of the plantation, and the jokes are such as pass current among the rapid young fellows of our own race, and never could find lodgment in the thick skull of Ethiopia ... Let the bogus African warblers wash their faces and throw away their wigs, for they bear no more resemblance now to Amendment Number 15 than to the heathen Chinee.47

46 St. Louis Home Journal, II (November, 1868), 4.
47 Missouri Republican, May 28, 1871.
In the last half of the nineteenth century the change in minstrelsy became a topic for innumerable magazine and newspaper features. In an article written for the *St. Louis Republic* three of St. Louis' favorite old-time minstrels, George Thatcher, Carroll Johnson, and Billy Rice, spelled out the reasons for the "decline of the minstrel show." The explanations given by the old-timers suggest an unmistakable relationship between the decline of the minstrel stage and its absorption by the variety stage.

George Thatcher believed that minstrelsy received its "death blow" the day Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Thatcher did not mean that in freeing the Negro Lincoln opened up to him the stage as a means of livelihood to the exclusion of the white man, but rather that when the Negro was freed, he ceased being an object of special interest. The romance attached to the Negro of the plantation life was dimmed. The North, or the non-slaveholding states, had been the home of the black-face entertainment, and Northerners knew little of the Negro except what they had read. To see him on the stage was a novelty, but when the Negro began to migrate North, the minstrel show conflicted with the reality of the black man. Subsequently, in order to keep the minstrel show alive, new features which did not strictly belong to the tradition of minstrelsy were used to infuse life into

---

*St. Louis Republic*, July 16, 1899.
The old days of minstrelsy had seen Dan Bryant and Dan Emmett attempt to present the Negro on stage as they had found him in the cabin, on the levee, or in the cotton field. Now managers, Billy Rice explained, were employing multi-colored satin costumes in their minstrel productions. White wigs were worn by the minstrel performers to enhance the show. Songs and dialects having little to do with the Negro were added to the minstrel performances. The growing popularity and influence of the variety theatres made it imperative for minstrel companies to use similar formats in order to hold their audiences. Japanese jugglers, club swingers, and even a singing and dancing soubrette were included in the olio. In the opinion of Thatcher, it was variety and later vaudeville that gave minstrelsy its crushing blow. It would only be a question of time before people no longer would pay a dollar and a half to see a minstrel show. The public could attend a variety theatre for less and see the minstrels' best features in addition to a host of other amusements.

Minstrelsy's appeal came from its expression of a common pioneer experience. Its melodies followed the treks of Americans in their westward migration and colonization. A minstrel song, Stephen Foster's "Oh Susannah," became the rallying cry for the new conquests of the

---

49 Ibid.
American pioneer. But minstrelsy lacked the capacity to change with the growth of urban society as the elements of its popularity were rooted in early nineteenth century rural America. Variety entertainment was far better adapted to the restiveness of urban America and the desire of its city folk for constant novelty.

Since the minstrel show was a wholly masculine affair, it was faced with the competition of the variety theatre and other forms of musical comedy where the patent attractiveness exerted by the members of the more fascinating sex held sway. While the minstrel shows often included material that was suggestive, they could never exploit feminine beauty. Female parts in sketches were performed by male impersonators. Middle-class America preferred to forget the sexuality of the Negro.

The waning of minstrelsy as a definite entertainment form did not

54 Wittke, Tambo and Bones, p. 124.
56 McLean, American Vaudeville as Ritual, p. 29.
The Theatre Comique and other variety theatres were popular because they adapted themselves so quickly to the fads and fancies of the period. In 1874 St. Louis had more than its share of fortune-telling


59 Ibid.

60 Theatre Comique Programs.
establishments. In part this fascination for the world beyond was generated by a new cult, the Eternalists. From northern Ohio, the cult was described as a compound of Spiritualism, Gnosticism, and Brahminism. Only a few days after the publishing of an article on the Eternalists, the Theatre Comique offered an entire "spook show" complete with "dark seances" under the direction of Professor Otto Burbank.

With news of the frontier and Indian parlays making headlines, the variety theatre lost little time in bringing its customers the flavor of the West. In 1874 George Deagle's Varieties Theatre on Sixth Street above Locust presented an exciting melodrama entitled The Frontier featuring Frank Fayne and Clara Butler. The production was complete with trick shot demonstrations and death combat exhibitions. Fayne managed to fight off several Sioux chieftains. At the conclusion of the play, Fayne spiced his show with the awarding of a Mexican pony and ten prairie dogs which he admitted were "... of no positive value, more than having a nice pet to bite you now and then."63

In the fall of 1873 the Theatre Comique presented a program few boxing enthusiasts would forget. Crowds entered the Theatre Comique

61 Missouri Republican, December 20, 1874.
62 Ibid.
63 George Deagle's Varieties Theatre Programs, Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, Gundlach Collection.
to watch Tom Allen take his benefit\textsuperscript{64} prior to the upcoming battle with Mike McCoole. The theatre was cramped from pit to dome, the stairs leading to the galleries groaned with the weight. So many cigars were being smoked that whispers were heard throughout the auditorium that another Chicago conflagration might begin in St. Louis' own Theatre Comique.\textsuperscript{65} Rotten eggs were smuggled past the watchman into the gallery by young boys. They hoped to deliver some good shots at their favorite's opponent. Larry Harrigan, the ubiquitous Chief of St. Louis' detective force, was on hand to watch for any of his "light-fingered friends." The steamboat interest was represented by Captain Billy Keeffe who vainly tried to discover the whereabouts of the coming battle. The tenting season completed, many of the circus performers were in attendance along with prominent businessmen of the community. The latter, the Missouri Democrat explained, were "ashamed to be seen there."\textsuperscript{66}

In addition to its boxing benefits and exhibitions, the Theatre Comique served as a wrestling arena in 1876. Carteron and Rigal

\textsuperscript{64}Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion to the Theatre (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101. A benefit is defined as a performance of which the financial proceeds, after deduction of expenses, are given to one, or at the most two, members of the performing company.

\textsuperscript{65}Missouri Democrat, December 3, 1873. The Varieties Theatre in St. Louis donated an entire evening's proceeds to helping those left stranded by the destruction.

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid. October 25, 1873.
competed for a $1,000 purse in the best of a three fall Graeco-Roman contest. Unfortunately, Mitchell had to stop the fight after three hours to conform to the midnight closing law. 67

The Theatre Comique also presented circus performances. In 1876 Deagle's Varieties Theatre entertained the Great Southern Circus under C. W. Noyes. The stage of Deagle's theatre was removed and a large ring put in its place. Such a crowd was attracted that Manager Deagle was forced to turn people away. 68

The variety theatre's stage program was frequently expanded to include entertainment in which the audience could participate. At a benefit given for Harry Noxon, the Comique's treasurer, the following events were planned for the evening's festivities: a greased pole climbing contest, foot races across and around the stage, a new hat to the most popular man in the house, 69 a silver medal to the best clog dancer, a silver cup to the best jig dancer, a silver coaster to the best amateur boxer, a gold breastpin for the best original conundrum, a live pig to the man with the biggest feet, 70 a cake walk for the colored folk, a tart eating match, and prizes for the dirtiest and best-dressed newsboy. 71

67 *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, February 9, 1876.
68 Ibid. January 17, 1876.
69 Ibid. February 9, 1878.
70 Ibid. January 26, 1878.
71 Ibid. January 11, 1878.
The evening's entertainment was concluded "by an afterpiece or closing drama." It was performed by the variety personnel of the theatre. At best the afterpiece was a makeshift for resetting the stage or for gathering all the performers on full stage, a bit of theater technique that endures today.

The variety actors that performed in the afterpieces were glad to play in them as they received "preference." This meant that as a legitimate producer traveled across the country looking for talent, a good performance by a variety actor in an afterpiece might mean an opportunity to play dramatic roles on the legitimate stage. By the nineties the performances of afterpieces declined rapidly. The development of vaudeville accentuated the clever performer. Often these vaudeville artists rebelled against being recalled to the stage along with performers they considered less talented than themselves.

The afterpieces, or the description of their contents appearing in the programs of the Theatre Comique, offer us a valuable insight into the amusement topics of the day.

Local politics captured the bulk of attention by the nameless

---

72 Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion to the Theatre, p. 284. The eighteenth century English theatre saw the introduction of afterpieces. Afterpieces were short comedies or farces. In the variety theatre they were improvisations upon current topics of conversation.


74 Ibid. p. 50.
creators who wrote and often performed the afterpieces. Of some fifty theatre programs preserved by the St. Louis Public Library, well over half of the programs contained afterpiece titles suggesting concern with local political and social events. A few of the titles reveal the range of interests which occupied the attention of the variety theatre patron: The Fat St. Louis Alderman, St. Louis Detective, The Two Aldermen, 1974, St. Louis 100 Years Hence, Crime in the Streets, The Starving Poor in St. Louis, De Saloon on De Levee, Scenes in Four Courts, and St. Louis by Gaslight.

Following local politics in number were themes dealing with particular ethnic groups. The following serve to indicate the variety of groups treated by the sketches. The themes also suggest which ethnic groups received the most attention in accordance with what was felt would be popular in St. Louis. Largest in quantity were sketches dealing with some phase of Irish life, more specifically, Irish involvement in the political arena. Irish titles included: O'Toole's in Court, Elected to Office or the Irish Justice, O'Toole's Troubles in America, An Irishman's Strategem, and Irish' End Ambition. The Irish were usually portrayed as fiercely patriotic, such as "Barney Fagin, a true

75 Theatre Comique Programs. Afterpiece scripts are not available for study.

son of the Emerald Isle;" or as well-meaning strongmen, who occasionally get out of hand such as "Hercules O'Flanigan, an enemy to all law and order." 

Following the Irish sketches in quantity were themes involving some phase of German life. German titles included: Dutch Justice or the Can Can Arrested, The Persecuted Dutchman, and Dutchman in Turkey. Germans were portrayed as simple but solid citizens who became unlikely heroes in desperate situations. Germans were also cast as arbiters of trouble as in the afterpiece entitled, Red Dick, Terror of the Plains, featuring Hans Schmidt, a "Peace Commissioner." 

The German character was followed closely by themes dealing with the Negro: Mischievous Nigger, The Black Aristocrats and The Colored Congressmen. Negroes were generally portrayed as adult domestics or field hands. The domestics were portrayed as honest individuals as in Milt G. Barlow's Old Black Joe, or deceptive and untrustworthy as in the afterpiece, The Haunted Dutchman, featuring "Pete, a dishonest colored domestic." The adult Negro was described as "mischievous, funny, or odd." On the other hand Negro males appearing as children were described as intuitive in their sense of duty as in Milt G.

---

77 Theatre Comique Programs.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
Barlow's Juba, "a small black boy full of comprehension." Negro boys were portrayed as passionately loyal to their masters and a credit to their race as in the afterpiece entitled Red Dick, Terror of the Plains, in which Pete was a "black boy with a white heart." In the review of the Theatre Comique programs none contained mention of a Negro female as a subject of interest for an afterpiece. It would appear that the female Negro was a poor topic for the comedy of the variety stage which was based upon the perpetuation of certain racial stereotypes. Minstrel shows were not sincere and truthful imitations of Negro life. Their burlesques were partly to blame for the continuing use of Negro males as topics for ridicule.

Following ethnic themes the most plentiful titles concerned themselves with some aspect of romance, a topic usually portrayed, as the titles suggest, in a nostalgic or comic fashion. Titles included:


Finally the afterpieces were concerned with national politics,

---

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
85 Theatre Comique Programs.
particularly the problems surrounding Reconstruction, the conduct of Congress, Grant's Presidency and the disputed election of 1876. The titles were: Civil Rights or How the Old Things Work, The 43rd Congress or the Salary Grab, Who is President? and Grant Versus the Office Seekers.

From a study of the Comique's theatre programs one gained the impression that many of the sketches and afterpieces presented in this variety house reflected an increasing concern, though primarily humorous, with the problems of the city: its politics, ethnic groups, and general welfare.

V

The Evil Influences of the Variety Theatre

Like many of the variety theatres in the 1870's the Theatre Comique was the scene of fancy dress balls. While the dress ball celebrating the Festival of Shrove Tuesday in 1874 at the Theatre Comique may well have been the harbinger of the official Veiled Prophet Balls in St. Louis, the composition of the theatre's guest list could scarcely be regarded as a very distinguished predecessor for what has become a high spot in St. Louis' social season.

---

86 Ibid.
87 His Mysterious Majesty, the Veiled Prophet's Golden Jubilee MBS, Missouri Historical Society of St. Louis. The official date for the first Veiled Prophet Ball was 1878.
88 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 17, 1874.
The Missouri Democrat reporter for the occasion believed that the Theatre Comique's ball would long be the topic of conversation with the queens of "social evil." The pit of the Theatre Comique had been elevated to a level with the stage, furnishing space for an estimated two hundred couples. The ball was proclaimed by the management as the forerunner of a series of yearly festivities such as were carried out in "... Memphis, New Orleans, and other Southern cities ...".

The theatre had been decorated with a profusion of small American flags, a curtained dais occupying the rear of the stage where the King and Queen of the Carnival were to be seated. At the stroke of twelve the curtain was drawn. The royal party descended from their thrones and paraded around the stage, accompanied by the Theatre Comique's eleven piece brass orchestra. It was reported that a gambler from Jefferson City served as Master of Ceremonies.

Many of the disreputable women in attendance were distinguished by their places of residence. The newspapers preferred to leave their names out of print. George Washington and Martha were represented by a Sixth Street madam and her "star boarder." A Christy Avenue veteran came as a schoolgirl. The Missouri Democrat suggested that, "She will have to skip back a good many years before she can rope anyone with such a device." A Poplar Street lady was costumed as a Quakeress,

---

89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Missouri Democrat, February 18, 1874.
but her disguise was termed "too thin." A three hundred pound doorkeeper from Green Street came dressed as a haystack with a pole for a hat. She was described as looking like a "weeping elephant." Madame Leonard, the keeper of the most notorious and exclusive assignation house in the city, appeared in a green dress that a night or two previous adorned the person of an ex-United States Senator's daughter.92

In a private box the Chief of Police looked to the registration of every woman in attendance. The Missouri Democrat inquired, "Are they all registered in the doomsday book of the Health Office?"94

Manager Mitchell proudly announced that two to three hundred of St. Louis' best were present in the theatre, but the Missouri Democrat added after a more careful inspection that, "an opera glass of fine magnifying powers failed to bring them in sight."95

From the opening of his theatre Mitchell assured patrons that his theatre would have "Gentlemanly Ushers and Police in Attendance."96 By November of 1873 Thursday evenings were designated as Ladies' Nights. Smoking was prohibited. A single ticket admitted both a lady and her

92_ St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 17, 1874. The Post Dispatch was the only local newspaper to print the names of the guests in attendance. Angry letters appeared the following day from residents who claimed that they were not present.

93 Ibid.

94 Missouri Democrat, February 18, 1874.

95 Ibid.

96 Theatre Comique Programs.
escort. By November 14, 1873 Mitchell acknowledged that attendance for
Ladies' Night had been poor. Nevertheless, Mitchell continued the
practice of Ladies' Nights. On Saturday afternoons he requested that
no drinking be permitted in the dress circle.97

While matinees continued for women and children, men comprised the
bulk of the audiences at the Theatre Comique as the evening perform­
ances included both drinking and fraternization with the "beer
jerkers." Hoping to attract all classes, Mitchell kept his programs
free from "indecent and vulgar viticisms."98 Proof of Mitchell's
effort to maintain a respectable theatre is found in a legal document
involving Mitchell and a young actress, Belle Hewitt. Mitchell hired
Hewitt on July 1, 1879 for a period of eight weeks. According to the
terms of her contract with the Theatre Comique, Hewitt "... under­
took to abstain from intoxication and vulgarity ..."99 Subsequently,
she violated the rules agreed upon in her contract. Hewitt was found
guilty of "disorderly and riotous conduct as to unfit herself for the
performances of her part in the play ..."100 Unfortunately for the
management of the Theatre Comique, the establishment was plagued with
two murders, resulting in severe criticism of the theatre's reputation.

97 Missouri Democrat, November 16, 1873.
98 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 16, 1876.
99 William C. Mitchell and A. Sprague vs. Belle Hewitt, St. Louis
Cir. Ct., 1879.
100 Ibid.
Mabel Hall was a young English ballet dancer brought from London to the Theatre Comique in St. Louis by Tito Cellini, Maitre de Ballet. Edgar Moore, a young waiter in a nearby restaurant, became infatuated with the young dancer. Ben De Bar described Miss Hall as one "of the most outrageously indecent dancers he had ever seen." But Mitchell described her as a "very handsome girl," who attracted a good deal of attention, and was frequently called upon to drink wine with the patrons. After a period of time elapsed, Miss Hall no longer enjoyed Moore's company. It was then that her frustrated admirer shot her to death. Though the defense tried to prove that Moore had inherited a predisposition to insanity from his maternal grandmother, he was convicted. Fortunately for Moore, his life was spared by Governor Phelps. Moore was committed to life imprisonment. In commenting upon the Governor's decision, the Post Dispatch added, "He [Moore] had, before being decoyed into the Comique, where his baser passions were excited by personal exhibitions . . . and maddened with frequent potations of bad whiskey, borne an exceptional character . . ." The Missouri Republican suggested that the murder trial, together with Moore's plea of insanity, contributed to the variety theatre's poor public image. The Missouri Republican supported the widely held notion

---

101 Missouri Republican, March 9, 1876.
102 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 6, 1876.
that variety entertainment was inherently evil.\textsuperscript{103}

The variety theatre was considered evil in its influence and, as some suggested, cursed by the spirits. In the restaurant adjoining the Theatre Comique, scene of the murder, St. Louisians spoke of the blood stains that could not be erased from the floor's walnut paneling. After authenticating the spots as those of Miss Hall's blood, the Post Dispatch asked:

\begin{quote}
Here is a question for theorists, and if it can be determined that the blood of a murdered person is indelible while that of a simple wound from accidental causes is not, no further proof of Divine curses will be needed.\textsuperscript{104}
\end{quote}

Unfortunately for Mitchell another murder took place in the Theatre Comique shortly after the conclusion of Edgar Moore's trial. The theatre's bouncer Billy Weiners was murdered. Mitchell hoped people would choose another site for their slayings in the future.\textsuperscript{105}

\section*{VI}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In 1876 Mitchell renewed his lease of the Theatre Comique. The yearly rental on the theatre was $10,000. The lease also included the ground floor occupied by William Gleason, the popular saloon keeper

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Missouri Republican, January 28, 1877.
\item \textsuperscript{104} St. Louis Post Dispatch, August 27, 1877.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Missouri Republican, January 25, 1877.
\end{itemize}
who had played host to such famous men as John Wilkes Booth, Edwin Adams, Artemus Ward, Edwin Booth and Mark Twain.

If Mitchell's Theatre Comique was doing well, George Deagle's Varieties Theatre was not. By March of 1876 Deagle's Varieties was under new management. W. O. Allen and Ben Dodge reopened the establishment under the name Adelphi Theatre. On March 17, 1876 J. Holmes Grover, Jr. opened the Adelphi in a play entitled The Boy Gambler.

By September of 1876 Deagle lost control of the property lease. The city claimed the lease had been improperly drawn. By March of 1877 the Missouri Republican reported the dismantling of the Adelphi Theatre. The theatre was replaced with a livery stable. In a nostalgic farewell to the old variety house the Missouri Republican wrote:

It had been a hospitable, free and easy sort of place, where elderly gentlemen who are too closely watched at home, could see the play, drink their beer and smoke their cigars all at once whenever they happened to be out for an evening. They could even obtain access to the green-room by taking a little trouble to learn the ropes and lavish a few dollars on the damsels who disported themselves therein. But the atmosphere of the place was bad, and when a man went out a villainous odor of stale smoke and bad breath clung to his clothes and stuck in his hair and beard even after he had forsaken the haunts for his family. However, if family men had kept away from the place when it ran, it might have been running still, for the school board would never have

107 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 18, 1876.
108 Missouri Republican, September 13, 1876.
found out of their own accord that theatres were immoral places. With Deagle’s theatre closed, there remained in 1877 only one first class variety house, the Theatre Comique, and three lesser houses, Looney’s on Christy Avenue, Esher’s on Fifth Street and a new but short-lived theatre, the Novelty Theatre. The Novelty Theatre, managed by J. W. Decker, was a product of both the legitimate and variety stages. The Novelty Theatre, located at 1009 Morgan Street, boasted a company composed of a “first and second Irishman, lady vocalists, Negro stump speakers, male and female song and dance act, a Dutchman, a banjo player and a female Negro impersonator.” Besides these variety theatres there were three legitimate houses in St. Louis: De Bar’s Grand Opera House, the Olympic and the Apollo.

On April 29, 1879 the Theatre Comique was sold under a first deed of trust amounting to $40,000 held by the estate of George Fales, an investor from Philadelphia. The selling of the Theatre Comique was disputed by Ben De Bar’s widow. Mrs. De Bar claimed a dower interest in the property. Manager Mitchell also contested the terms of the

110 Missouri Republican, September 2, 1877.
111 Benedict De Bar to George Fales, Deed of Trust, Recorder of Deeds Office in St. Louis, Missouri, Book No. 596, June 20, 1878, pp. 116-117.
112 St. Louis Globe Democrat, May 4, 1879.
Mitchell claimed that De Bar had consented to lowering the annual rent of the Theatre Comique from $10,000 to $8,000. The agreement was not committed to paper as De Bar wished to acquire a larger loan on his property. The matter continued to occupy the court's attention until a destructive fire sealed the theatre's fate on December 10, 1880.

Manager Mitchell was in the East on business at the time of the theatre's destruction. The management of the Theatre Comique had been left in the hands of William H. Smith, an experienced theatre man.

Nothing attracted as much attention as a fire did in St. Louis. The alarm was given from Box 41 on Pine Street at 12:50 A.M. It was not long before the blaze brought dozens of spectators out onto the ice-covered streets. Several amateur firemen entered the Theatre Comique's storage rooms. In an effort to control the blaze, the contents of the rooms were cast out the windows to the excited crowds below. Pine Street was littered with old bandboxes, stovepipe hats, umbrellas and daggers which had been reddened the night before with the gore of melodramatic villains.

The Theatre Comique had seen some of the finest names in the

---

114 George Fales vs. John G. Priest and William C. Mitchell, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1878.

115 Theatre Comique Programs. Smith opened the Varieties Theatre in San Francisco around 1856. It was here that Smith introduced Lotta Crabtree. In 1880 Smith came to St. Louis where he assumed management of the Theatre Comique.
entertainment field trod its boards. Among the favorites enjoyed by St. Louis theatre lovers were May and Flo Irwin, George S. Knight, Otto Burbank, and Denman Thompson of The Old Homestead fame.116

Together with its Mardi Gras Balls, the Theatre Comique and other variety theatres of its class combined the world of the circus, the minstrel stage and the sporting arena. Along with its presentations of ballet extravaganzas, melodramas, farces, and good-spirited audience participation programs, the Theatre Comique represented the kaleidoscope of amusements that made it the "spice of variety."

116 Missouri Republican, December 10, 1880
CHAPTER III

PULITZER'S "RAID"

The Variety Theatres of St. Louis—1880

Upon his return to St. Louis after an absence of twenty-one years Mark Twain reflected:

The city seemed but little changed. It was greatly changed, but it did not seem so; because in St. Louis, as in London and Pittsburgh, you can't persuade a new thing to look new; the coal-smoke turns it into an antiquity the moment you take your hand off it.

To a stranger some years later St. Louis was admired for the "things that set it apart from other cities, not for the things by which it sought to rival them." To the taunts of those "rash speculators" from Chicago that she was the most "countrified city of its size in the world," St. Louisians replied defensively, "there are many things that it is not, but there are also many things that it is."

By 1880 much of St. Louis was different. New economic impulses


3 "Countrified," The Spectator III (January, 1883), 449. The Spectator was a local periodical concerned with literature, music and the theatre in St. Louis.
were at work. The levee, once teeming with the activity of rivermen, now was shadowed by Eads Bridge, its ornamental gaslights signalling a new era of improved trade, increased travel accommodations and enlarged rail intercourse.

The eclipse of the Mississippi's importance by the railroad saw the city move westward from the river's banks. The levee streets, Front, Main, Second and Third, once the main business arteries of St. Louis, were now half-deserted. Since the bridge had rendered the ferrying of freight and passengers obsolescent, the harbor district had begun to take on a very slovenly appearance filled with a large Negro population. Though one still could catch glimpses of old Frenchtown in the district east of Fourth and south of Olive, the original business district of the city was composed of narrow streets, old warehouses and slum quarters.

It was during the period from 1870 to 1880 that Fourth Street enjoyed its most prosperous days as the retail shopping center of St. Louis. By 1880, however, the center of trade was shifting, and in 1881 William Barr and Company moved several blocks westward, a move at that time considered a daring step.

---


5 *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, January 6, 1880.

Beyond Fifth to Twelfth was a solidly built district filled with burgeoning business and industry, scattered boardinghouses and drab residences. This district was also host to beer halls, gambling dens and brothels known by such names as "Wildcat Chute," "Castle Thunder," "Clabber Alley," and "Cross Keys." As business saw fit to move west to this new district, so had the variety house.

While there had been only one variety house in 1880, the Comique, there were four in 1881: the Canterbury Theatre on South Sixth Street between Spruce and Poplar; the Globe Theatre midway between Sixth and Seventh Streets on the south side of Morgan Street; the Crystal Palace on Seventh and Elm; and the Alhambra located at Seventh and St. Charles.

The appearance of these houses, however, was different from their predecessors. Both the Comique and Deagle's Varieties had been large roomy structures and were, for their day, well-ventilated and comfortable. These "new" variety theatres were small, poorly ventilated and noted as much for their saloon attachments as for their entertainment program. The Comique's stage measured sixty feet in length by thirty feet in width. Its seating capacity was roughly nine hundred and thirty including the parquette, dress circle, family circle and gallery. Deagle's stage measured sixty-one feet in length by thirty-eight feet in width, and the auditorium seated a capacity crowd of twelve.

In 1876 Deagle's Varieties was converted into a livery stable.
The "new" variety theatres seating between one and two hundred were simply large second-story rooms containing a bar, a stage measuring six feet in length by three feet in width, space for dancing, tables, chairs, a balcony and a few wine-rooms. All of the managers of the "new" variety houses were prominent saloon keepers: Captain Decker of the Globe Theatre, Jack Egan and Jim Gropper of the Canterbury Theatre, George Fresch and Hugh Barton of the Crystal Palace and Jacob Esher of the Alhambra.

Once the variety theatre was host to the ballet and as much the home of the theatrical spectacle as the legitimate houses. Stage scenes were presented that belonged to the same class of labyrinthine scenery and profuse female beauty of which The Black Crook and The Green Hunstman were representatives. Some of the variety performers went on to become the biggest money-makers in the legitimate theatres.

The new variety theatre or "honky-tonk" was simply an elaborate saloon fitted with stage entertainment. However, there had been an increasing demand placed upon the resources of variety talent by the large number of plays and musical comedies being written. The least talented or "ham fats" became part of the new variety saloons, while

---

8 Missouri Democrat, February 21, 1875.

9 Jennings, Theatrical and Circus Life or Secrets of the Stage, p. 396.

10 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 10, 1881.
the more talented variety performers became a part of a growing entertainment business catering to the family audience called "fashionable vaudeville" or just vaudeville. Unlike the variety saloons, the vaudeville theatres permitted no smoking or drinking. As the profits for variety saloons depended primarily upon liquor receipts, performances were designed to keep the audiences in the theatre as long as possible. With the advent of vaudeville, theatre managers relied upon paid admissions for their income, and programs with a definite length were set. Audience turnover was more important to the later vaudeville show than to its variety-saloon precursor.

As liquor was the chief staple of the honky-tonk, every effort was made to speed its consumption by the patrons. The customers of the variety house were primarily males: clerks, salesmen and young boys. Women were used both as entertainers and as hustlers. Often the girls were not girls at all, but female impersonators. They dressed as chorus girls and were used as decoys to encourage men to buy drinks.

Between acts the impersonators would "work the boxes" by visiting with the customers or sitting on their laps in an effort to increase

---

11. Jennings, Theatrical and Circus Life or Secrets of the Stage, p. 396.
the liquor receipts. Sometimes when an impersonator lingered too long, discovery and a free-for-all ensued.  

In many variety theatres two sets of girls were used. One group acted as performers while the other group "worked" the boxes. More often than not, the women would have to double as performers and hustlers. Usually the "chair sweater," as she was called, sat in the first part and was assigned nothing else but to wear short skirts and display her limbs. After the first part she "worked" the customers for drinks.  

Women made an average of $5 to $8 a week and were allowed 15% to 20% on all drinks they induced men to order. Drinks were priced at two to a dozen times the usual rates. If the "chair sweater" could not make anything in the boxes, she went to the audience and did some "spotting" for anyone worth "striking." Later, if she were enterprising, the variety actress would attempt to sell her photographs to the men. Apparently she was sometimes successful as "even an honest granger now and then buys one, just to show around the grocery." 

Following the show, patrons might have drinks in the theatre's wine-rooms if they were "mashed" over a particular performer. In the wine-rooms the girls attempted to "play" their admirers. Later the

---

14 Ibid.

15 Jennings, Theatrical and Circus Life or Secrets of the Stage, p. 403.

16 St. Louis Post Dispatch, April 28, 1895.

17 Jennings, Theatrical and Circus Life or Secrets of the Stage, p. 404.
variety actress arranged for a room with the aid of a proprietor from a nearby lodging house.  

The lot of the women of the variety theatre was a difficult one. Many were older than their admirers. Ada Patterson, a reporter for the St. Louis Republic, recalled for her readers a description of the variety theatre’s "soiled doves."

No generosity of rouge could hide the deep creases of the flesh that spoke of the flabby muscles. She wore a green cheesecloth Mother Hubbard, confined by yards of cheap yellow ribbon and in the folds or gown, at the throat there was a cluster of violets. The pure blossoms seemed sadly out of place.  

Flaming gas jets lighted the street fronting the variety theatres. On the balcony of the Globe Theatre overhanging Sixth Street the orchestra played selections before the show. In the glare of the light the place lost some of its dinginess. A reporter describing the box office wrote:

... there was a rudely boarded up box office with a grimy little window. A pale man, wearing a small cap with a green visor, blinked at us. He thrust two yellow tickets through the inch-wide opening in the window and drew in two dimes with grimy fingers.  

The ticket, usually a discolored yellow pasteboard, bore the printing: The Wide Awakes, Admit One.  

---

18 Ibid. p. 409.  
19 St. Louis Republic, April 4, 1897.  
20 Ibid.  
21 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 10, 1881.
honky-tonk was ten cents. The first drink as you entered the saloon-theatre acted as your admission fee. The placards on the wall invited patrons to imbibe, and some proprietors used signs to remind them of their responsibilities. The following Ten Commandments of James E. Edwards Fourth Street Opera House, a variety house in 1883, was characteristic:

**READ MY 10 COMMANDMENTS**

1. When thirsty thou shalt come to my house and drink.
2. Thou shalt always keep my name in memory and not forget all others in the same business.
3. Thou shalt honor me and my Bartender so that thou shalt live long in the land and continue to drink at my house.
4. Thou shalt raise thy voice in praise of my goods, so that others may know where to go to get good goods.
5. Thou shalt not destroy or break anything on my premises else thou shalt pay for double its value.
6. Thou shalt not raise thy voice in vulgar song, nor they feet in gaiety.
7. Thou shalt not dare to pay thy bills in bad money, nor ever say "chalk" or "slate."
8. Thou shalt not steal from me, as I need all I have and more too.
9. Thou shalt not expect too large glasses, for the landlord must live on the profit.
10. After eating and drinking at my house thou shalt pay me promptly, for the landlord never likes to "chalk" especially to poor customers.

Jas. Ed. Edwards

The auditorium of the small variety houses was reached after passing through a yellowed canvas door weighted appropriately with the
familiar beer bottle. The floor of the hall was covered with sawdust, filled with old rickety chairs, a large sheet iron stove placed at one end or in the center of the theatre. The stages were small and there was little or no scenery excepting the drop curtain.

That drop curtain was a study in discord. There were palms as no denizen of South America ever saw in his wildest dreams, and there was a house of alleged Moorish architecture, whose proportions and finish would have staggered any Saracen of olden times or Turk of new.  

The orchestra sat before the drop curtain on the floor. Ordinarily small, the orchestra consisted of a piano, flute, violin and drums, all used to accompany the tobacco-chewing "actresses" as they did their "turns." Drums were an especially desirable fixture for the variety theatre orchestra. The drummer furnished cymbal crashes for the antics of the comics and played long rolls for the acrobats and aerialists.

In St. Louis theatrical orchestras of the eighties were pronounced "abominable," even in the best theatres. The reasons cited for lack of excellence were either "niggardly expenditure" by the theatre managers or careless management by the musical directors employed by the theatres. Nevertheless, one should consider the demands upon the variety musician before rendering a final verdict upon his talents or lack of them.

---

23 St. Louis Republic, April 4, 1897.
24 Ibid, p. 60.
25 Ibid, p. 60.
Improvisation was the key to the variety musician's success. The variety and minstrel singers seldom knew one note from another and constantly had new arrangements made for them. The variety musician played selections at a moment's notice for singers who had no more idea about music "... than a calf has of religion." The variety musician could "fake" a song in any given key. The performer usually sang his material and the musician followed the melodies as best they could, "feeling" their way to the end. Music cues were incessant, and it required a solid background of harmony, counterpoint, and form to keep pace with the antics of the variety-vaudeville performer. Most of the variety musicians had experience in minstrel shows and circus performances. Among the most prominent musicians during their period from St. Louis were: Benjamin Vogel, George R. Olney, Frank Delucie, and August Genthert.

The variety performers were a hard-working lot. Sensitive to criticism, they admitted that the variety theatre was never intended as a Sunday school annex or "post graduate course in theology." Unlike

26 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 1, 1888.
27 Ibid. A typical variety-hall musician could play a huge repertoire of clogs, reels, hornpipes, sand jigs, and walk-arounds from memory.
28 Ibid.
29 Gilbert, American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times, p. 32.
30 St. Louis Post Dispatch, February 1, 1888.
their vaudeville heirs, the versatile variety performers were required to perform in specialty numbers as well as afterpieces and the closing can-can. Tommie Wallace, a female entertainer at Esher's Alhambra, received $20 per week for her performance. She could do a "split," sing a song, affect eleven different characters including a Negro woman, Negro man, "boy coon," old maid, dude, Chinaman, Jew, German, Irishman and an aged Negro man. With morning rehearsals and matinees every day including Sunday, Miss Wallace reminded the visiting reporter that she was proud to be a Roman Catholic who attended Mass every Sunday.  

The variety theatre employed many talents in an assortment of roles designed to effect a single pleasing night of entertainment. A St. Louis citizen who had not been to a variety show in several years compared the differences between variety and vaudeville performances in this way:

> There was always a tender spot in my heart for the variety show that your up-to-date vaudeville had never been able to touch. It has always seemed to me that the variety show bears the same relation to the vaudeville performance that a well-regulated, geometrically designed quilt does to a crazy-patch affair. The vaudeville thing is a strange and wonderful collection of individual players - here today, and there tomorrow - each striving, it seems, to be first on the programme, so that no one may have a chance to get to the audience first with the limited stock of business which is supposed to be shared in common by all vaudeville performers. In the regularly organized company of variety show the acts are carefully picked with a view of dovetailing together into one pleasing performance, where there is no chance of a purple dress being followed by a purple dress, or any one being obliged to cut an act.

---

31 Ibid. August 9, 1896.
This evaluation of the variety theatre was romanticized. The reality of the situation was quite different.

II

The Changing Attitudes of the Post Dispatch

Regard for the variety house in the late 70's and 80's was something less than flattering. Surrounded by dens of prostitution, scorned for its nightly blood-curdling border dramas, the variety theatre became a conversation piece for concerned parents and religious leaders. The variety theatres also became targets for St. Louis' newest evening journal, the St. Louis Post Dispatch. Joseph Pulitzer, editor and owner of this newspaper, was the first to make use of the variety theatres in a new kind of journalistic sensationalism bent on reform.

Laxity by local law enforcement agencies permitted many of the theatres to operate without saloon or theatrical licenses. Professional prostitutes were employed as "actresses" and beer carriers in defiance of local ordinances. Minors were served intoxicating liquors despite the protests of parents. These and other violations of the city ordinances had been allowed to go unpunished. Even the police commissioners were laughed at by the local press as they made their

32 St. Louis Republic, September 10, 1899.
nightly inspections throughout the city. These nightly perambulations of the disguised commissioners became a topic of great hilarity for the press. Journalists delighted in warning the "yawning" policemen of the commissioners' nightly schedules and manner of dress:

If a policeman should see a form like that of an ancient woman, with brass spectacles on nose, crooked cane in the left hand, and head concealed under the awning of a dilapidated 'shaker,' he had better pause before going into a beer saloon . . . for it might be Mayor Thomas.33

In advising the local constable of his responsibilities in such situations, the Missouri Democrat suggested that he "put his nippers on him and lock him up in the calaboose."34

By 1881 many felt that the city no longer could afford to be tolerant of the variety theatre's frequent evasions of the local city ordinances. Editorially, the Post Dispatch began to build its policy as a crusading newspaper. In so doing the newspaper became a middle-class journal whose interests lay in protecting the community from the ambitions of organized vice and malpractices of the wealthy.35

Joseph Pulitzer represented the changing attitudes of the city. His role as police commissioner in 1871 educated him to the evils present in the city. Few aspects of the city's inside life escaped him. A friend remembered Pulitzer's frequent visits to Four Courts,

33 Missouri Democrat, May 25, 1865.
34 Ibid.
There were times when the Police Board was in secret session, and not infrequently on those occasions the door would be softly opened and a pale, spectacled face would intrude itself on the privacy of the session with the inquiry, 'Any news?' followed by the rough but good-natured cry, 'Get out of here,' and a hearty laugh at the persistence of the inquisitor.  

In the late summer of 1880 Pulitzer offered himself as a Congressional candidate for the Democratic nomination from the Second District, one of two districts assigned to St. Louis. The Second District represented a cross-section of the city: the tough river wards along the levee, downtown business, middle-class neighborhoods, and the Eighteenth Ward, one of the most respectable in the city.  

If a candidate desired a Congressional seat from the Second District, the politically erudite advised all prospective office-seekers to do business with the Dark Lantern, an informal cabal of city committeemen, ward bosses and lawyer-politicians. This influential group controlled Democratic politics in the Second District, and though the group recognized no single boss, a blacksmith named Edward Butler was deemed the politician most likely to succeed. In 1880 the riverfront boss was just beginning to clamp a grasp upon the pulse of St. Louis' political heartbeat. It would not be long before every St. Louisian...  

---


37 St. Louis Post Dispatch, July 20, 1880.
would refer to Butler as the "Village Blacksmith, Boss of St. Louis." Though there remains some disagreement as to the amount of the fee Pulitzer paid the Dark Lantern, there exists some unanimity of opinion that a fee was most certainly paid. The election went poorly for Pulitzer as Butler, pressured by St. Louis' local oligarchs, switched votes to Pulitzer's political rival. Local oligarchs regarded Pulitzer's potential alliance with them as unappetizing in light of his apparent zeal for crusading. On the night prior to election, Butler and his cronies blanketed the Second District giving orders to political aides to shift their votes from Pulitzer to Thomas Allen, a leading railroad man in St. Louis and a friend to "organized Capital ...."

The results tabulated the following day found that Pulitzer had received fewer than one thousand votes to Allen's four thousand. In Butler's First Ward there was no other ticket except Allen's. The Post Dispatch commented briefly on the results: "All is vanity-vanity of vanities, saith the editor as he contemplates politics ...." No longer encumbered with political ambitions Pulitzer turned his full attentions to journalism; his aim, to acquire mass circulation and

---

39 Rammelkamp, Pulitzer's Post Dispatch, 1878-1883, p. 151.
40 St. Louis Post Dispatch, September 22, 1880.
41 Ibid. September 24, 1880.
readership by appealing to the ordinary citizen. Pulitzer's "raid" on the variety theatres was prompted by his knowledge of the public's insatiable thirst for the sensational. However, one cannot help speculating that Pulitzer's "raid" also represented a kind of personal vendetta against the local gambling and saloon interests of the Second District, Butler's home ground.

The term "raid" used in this context was employed by the Post Dispatch as an attention device to attract the eyes of its readers. Pulitzer's "raid" did not carry with it the force of law, nor was it accompanied by any violence or coercion.

The "raid" by Pulitzer and his chief editors began late Sunday evening, January 9, 1881. The following afternoon the Post Dispatch exploded:


Criticism of the honky-tonks was not new nor had the Post Dispatch under Pulitzer been the first to launch a verbal campaign against the variety houses. Both the Evening Dispatch and the St. Louis Journal had

---


43 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 10, 1881.
used the revelry surrounding the variety halls as copy to revive their drooping circulations. While their editorials in the spring of 1878 were not pursued with the vigor of Pulitzer’s later crusade, some of the invectives were hot enough to warrant a full scale war on the two newspapers by the proprietor of the Tivoli Theatre, a small variety establishment on North Fifth Street owned by Rudolph Kornberger.

Embittered by the rough treatment he received at the hands of the Dispatch and Journal, Kornberger employed his theatre programs to castigate the “impotent literary wretches, who are gaining a miserable and fraudulent [sic] existence by claiming to publish daily newspapers under the titles of the Journal and Dispatch . . . .” Kornberger continued:

It is plainly evident to me that the editors of the Journal and its tail-piece, the Dispatch, are non compos mentis, and deeming it my imperative duty as a good citizen, I call for a commission De lunatico enquirendo to determine whether or not it be safe to allow such men their liberty. In the lunatic asylum, very soon visitos [sic] will be pointed to the poor wrecks that brought the Journal and its tail piece so low. ‘Owls’ the warden will say ‘bad cases’; have to keep them in straight jackets nearly all the time and the visitors will pass away with a sympathetic look at the miserable upon whom the hand of fate has set is [sic] seal.

Early mention of the variety theatres in the Post Dispatch preceding Pulitzer’s raid was a mixture of curiosity and humor. In October of 1880 an article appeared entitled simply “The Canterbury.”

---

44 Rudolph Kornberger’s Tivoli Theatre Programs, Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, Gumblach Collection.

45 Ibid.
reporter after his visit to this variety house concluded that "as long as there is a constituency that demands a Canterbury there will be a Canterbury." When the reporter inquired if the women in the manager's employment could sing, the manager replied candidly that a good many could drink better. Only the appearance of a ten-year old child brought forth a trace of remorse from the reporter who remarked, "One would imagine that some household darling had been spirited away and forced to this business by a cruel taskmaster." The reporter added joyfully, "... she willprobably grow up to become a serio-comic."

It was in December of 1880 that the Post Dispatch evidenced a growing concern for amusements within the reach of the working classes. With the building of the New Alhambra Theatre the newspaper feared that the variety-saloons would "nourishnow like a paw-paw patch... ." Nevertheless, the Post Dispatch seemed gratified that the Alhambra's new residence on St. Charles at Seventh Street was being financed by J. M. Thompson, a "capitalist," and Secretary for the Union Depot Company. The newspaper sympathized with Thompson's philosophy that healthy amusements were a product of man's environment. cramped and defective theatre conditions only furthered the demoralization of its patrons. The newspaper trusted that Thompson's investments in variety theatres

46 St. Louis Post Dispatch, October 23, 1880.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. December 10, 1880.
would continue and his financial assets used to improve bagnios 
"... for the accommodation of the lower orders and loose classes." 49 However, when Thompson announced that the Union Depot Company had decided to abandon its plans for a new Depot in St. Louis, a cause which the Post Dispatch had championed for some months, the newspaper expressed its indignation with the financier. The newspaper was surprised that a man receiving rental fees from the lessees of the Alhambra could be experiencing financial difficulties. 50 Subsequently, the newspaper questioned Thompson's Christian ethics in permitting his theatre to be united with a saloon where the working classes would be corrupted. Moreover, the Post Dispatch drew a distinction between an amusement which was socially acceptable [vaudeville] and that which was not [variety].

There can be no special harm in a well-conducted vaudeville, furnishing healthful amusement to working people at cheap prices, but the ordinary concert hall as we find it in this city is but a sort of vestibule of hell. 51

Distinctions such as these were not easy to draw. The newspaper admitted that the "theatrical is second only to the theological in range. You pay your money and you take your choice in either." 52

---

49 Ibid. December 16, 1880.
50 Ibid. December 24, 1880.
51 Ibid. December 28, 1880.
52 Ibid. January 10, 1881.
Nevertheless, Pulitzer made the distinction; the legitimacy of the
variety house was no longer a matter St. Louisians would continue to
ignore.

Pulitzer and his editors had visited the Globe Theatre on Morgan
Street run by Captain J. W. Decker. "Cheap and Nasty" was Pulitzer's
first mental reflection as he and his editors glanced around the hall,
their nostrils choked by the heavy fumes of cigar smoke. The auditor-
ium of the theatre had been created by removing the interior of an or-
dinary store. Both sides of the hall were bordered by brick walls. At
the far end of the auditorium loomed the stage, towards which the floor
dipped sharply. The stage was cramped permitting leeway for both the
flies behind and boxes in front. The boxes tapered back to the wall
allowing for a clear view of the stage from the parquette. Along two
sides of the hall and across the back was the "tier," a wide gallery
generally packed with young boys. Downstairs an older element predomi-
nated composed largely of a few laboring men and a "knot of the heavy-
jawed, short-haired, smooth-faced fraternity, who talked about the gang,
wanted to know 'what the racket was,' and if you [could] 'get in on
it.'"53 Though the Post Dispatch acknowledged that the Globe was not as
evil as it had been in the past, its principal objections were that the
theatre's influence was demoralizing upon young boys while furnishing a
rallying site for unsavory characters.

---

53 Ibid. January 10, 1881.
Following their visit to the Globe, Pulitzer and his men made their way through the darkened streets to the Canterbury Theatre only a few blocks away. The Canterbury had taken the place of a swimming bath which had flourished five years earlier on South Sixth Street, between Spruce and Poplar. The theatre's constituency was deemed so vile that the mere contemplation of them was worse than a "Globe Democrat special of a Texas rape." The proprietors Jack Egan and Jim Gropper had been in the restaurant and saloon business, the former being the private bartender for the infamous Jack Looney. The principal objection to the Canterbury was that its niggardly price of admission permitted young minds to be crippled by the cheap sensationalism of the theatre's blood-curdling melodramas.

Next Pulitzer and his vice-seeking editors moved a short distance to the Crystal Palace located at Seventh and Elm, once the site of Krueger's Garden, a German beer garden. The Crystal Palace was run by George Fresch under the management of Hugh Barton. The interior of the Palace resembled those of other variety theatres but boasted of a cement floor covered with tan bark, an absorbent of sound as well as spilled liquor. The Palace's audience, the Post Dispatch commented, was of the "low-cut collar, wide-bound coat style and the female portion is of undoubted prostitutes." The performance at the Crystal

\[54\] Ibid.
\[55\] Ibid.
Palace was filled with "dirty jokes." Pulitzer did not elaborate.

The final theatre visited by Pulitzer was the Alhambra, managed by the Esher brothers and financed by J. M. Thompson. After making reference to Esher's previous "disreputable" place of business on Fifth Street, the newspaper claimed that the Alhambra's wine-room was designed to ensnare the unsuspecting bucolic visitor. The unlettered rustic would be overwhelmed by his urban cousins "attired in very scant clothing," who "displayed their physical attractions in the worst manner." 56

In summary, the principal objections directed against the variety theatres by the Post Dispatch were: their pernicious influence on the young males of the city, their creation of congregating sites for the unsavory, and their contribution to the waxing prostitution trade. 57

III

The Crusade Against the Variety Theatres

The defense offered by the variety theatre managers, feeling confident that there were worse places, was that their places of business had never been advertised as Sunday schools. Moreover, the managers argued that some form of cheap entertainment should be provided for the
poor, a line of reasoning the Post Dispatch found difficult to refute. With the lines of argument drawn, Pulitzer decided to investigate the legal requirements requisite for the operation of a variety theatre.

The newspaper pointed out to the uninformed that operating a variety theatre required both dramshop and theatre licenses. The city ordinance under Section Three Chapter Thirty-Seven spelled out the requirements for a dramshop license. Applications for a license were to be submitted to the City Collector. No license could be issued until a majority of the taxpayers on the block where the saloon was to be located signed the petition for a license. Every petition was renewed annually. In cases where the Collector expressed doubts concerning the applicant's moral character or the genuineness of the signatures on the applicant's petition, the application was forwarded to the Board of Police Commissioners. If the Police Commissioners affirmed the genuineness of the signatures upon the petition and approved of the applicant's moral character, the license could then be issued by the Collector. However, if the Collector was not satisfied with the Police Commissioners' endorsement, he could carry the matter to the City Council or Mayor. The applicant was also required to give bond to keep his saloon orderly, and not to dispense any intoxicating liquor to persons under the age of eighteen without the consent of a guardian, master or parent.  

58 St. Louis, Missouri Revised Ordinances, Chapter XXXVII, Section III, 1881, p. 768.
With regard to the theatrical license, Section Thirteen of Chapter Thirty-Seven of the city ordinances applied as a check upon improper conduct. As in the application for a dramshop license, the prospective theatre manager was required to present a petition to the City Collector signed by a majority of the taxpayers on the block where the theatre was to be located. The Collector was also authorized to investigate the applicant's moral character.59

Not content with simply printing the ordinances as a reminder to the law enforcement agencies, the Post Dispatch sent a reporter to the Collector's office to investigate the legality of the licenses held by the four respective variety theatres. The deputy at the Collector's office claimed that licenses could be exhibited only upon request by the courts. Pursuing the issue, the reporter inquired if there had been remonstrances against the Canterbury and Alhambra theatres. When the clerk answered in the affirmative, the reporter asked what procedure had been used by the Collector's office. The clerk answered that whenever there had been a protest against the issuance of a dramshop license the Collector's office sent an inspector through the block gathering the names of all householders. A householder was described as one who cooked, ate and slept in the district, though not necessarily a property owner. The Collector's office then compared the names of the householders with the signatures on the petition to see if a majority of the

59 St. Louis, Missouri Revised Ordinances, Chapter XXXVII, Section XIII, 1881, p. 814.
householders were willing for the petition to be granted. A similar process was in effect for the granting of a theatrical license. When the reporter was finally given access to the petitions, he noted that the Canterbury's list contained an estimated one hundred "misses." On its colorful rolls were listed such names as "Birdie, Sadie and Lilly." The Post Dispatch hinted that Bagan and Gropper were obviously in "solid with the landladies of the locality." 60

Although the newspaper had heretofore accepted paid notices from the variety theatres, it now piously informed the public that its columns would not be used to perpetuate immoral institutions. Under "Moral Lessons" the Post Dispatch justified its new course of action:

In making war on the gambling dens and Variety Halls we are not actuated by a desire to create a journalistic sensation. We fight . . . [these] shams and frauds because we believe it to be right. There is nothing Puritanical, close or illiberal about the Post Dispatch . . . but there are certain fixed principles of morality which it is the duty of every public journal to maintain. We believe that the prosperity and moral health of St. Louis could be advanced by the suppression of gambling and the regulation of Variety Shows . . . . 61

The Spectator believed that such exposures were good journalism, but doubted if any immediate reform of the variety theatres would be forthcoming. 62 Undaunted, the Post Dispatch continued to pursue the

60 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 11, 1881.
61 Ibid.
variety house, issuing a plea for other St. Louis newspapers to unite against the evils besetting the city. The newspaper promised rich harvests of reform action if only the morning journals would stand by the Post Dispatch "in its fight against Satan." Calling upon Bishops Ryan and Robertson, Pastors Goodell, Schuyler, Snyder, Boyd and other prominent clergy of the city, the newspaper urged the initiation of daily two hour sermons on the evils confronting the city. Within a matter of weeks the newspaper announced that many of the church women of the city, together with several prominent members of the clergy, had vowed to close all places of Sunday evening amusement, including the "low dives and nasty theatres."

The circulation of the Post Dispatch increased from 9,300 to 12,000 daily copies in the first two months of 1881. Pulitzer's campaign against the variety theatres electrified the city. While some of the newspaper's exposures developed into genuine crusades, the element of sensationalism was never out of sight. Sensationalism frequently runs the risk of arousing the more orthodox elements of society. The war on the variety theatres was to be no exception.

In an attempt to head off the Post's aspirations for a monopoly on

---

63 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 13, 1881.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid. January 31, 1881.
moral crusading, the *Globe Democrat* seized the opportunity to set aright the "unnecessary agitations" promulgated by the newly formed Ladies Society for Sunday Amusements. Since the *Globe Democrat* envisioned itself as St. Louis' "Great Religious Daily," the paper felt bound to defend society against the illiberal policies of its rash competitor.67

The *Globe Democrat* argued:

The attempt of certain church people to close the theatres will be deprecated as a harmful and unnecessary agitations ... Even the assertion that our cheap and nasty places of amusement corrupt the youth of St. Louis is one which is open to question, as it is very possible that if they were not amusing themselves in that way the youth of St. Louis would be amusing themselves in worse ways.68

Even the powerful German press entered the fray, fully aware that many of their subscribers' businesses and beer gardens might suffer from actions planned by the local female Sabbatarians:

The hypocritical Sunday parsons, who, at the head of the praying sisters, seek to introduce Sunday compulsion in our midst, ought to precede the others by closing their own places of business. The theatrical pieces performed on their stages bristle with denunciations and condemnation of those of different faiths, and are inconsistent with the example of that great philosopher who made love thy neighbor the cardinal point of his teachings.69

Embarrassed, the *Post Dispatch* tried to diplomatically slow the

67 Walter B. Stevens, "The New Journalism in Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* XVIII (October, 1923), 63.

68 *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, February 2, 1881.

69 *Westliche Post*, January 16, 1881.
female Sabbatarians’ enthusiasm. The newspaper suggested that the
ladies were misinterpreting the paper’s invitation. It admitted that
the variety houses were "Low but Legal," and simply pandered to low
tastes. Pressured by critics who believed that the Sunday closing
law was being used indiscriminately to close all reputable businesses,
the newspaper finally admitted that "... the places of public enter-
tainment that are not demoralizing in their tendencies should not be
closed ... on Sunday evenings."\textsuperscript{71}

Through March of 1881 the \textit{Post Dispatch} set aside several columns
daily for a listing of the variety-saloons and gambling dens along with
the ordinances applying to their regulation. Above each of the columns
in black over-sized letters the question was posed: "Where are the
Police?"\textsuperscript{72} Lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the city’s
police department was clearly evident. There were those who believed
that local constables might spend their time more profitably protecting
young ladies from the "mashers" outside local church doors.\textsuperscript{73} Others
believed that the police were plainly inept:

\begin{quote}
Last Saturday night a St. Louis woman throttled a hoodlum
robber and held him till the police came. Such heroism
is common to St. Louis women, but it is something extra-
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{St. Louis Post Dispatch}, January 11, 1881.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Ibid.} February 7, 1881.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.} March 1, 1881, March 5, 1881, March 7, 1881.

\textsuperscript{73} "Hornet Stings," \textit{The Hornet III} (February 4, 1882), 4.
As to the reform of the variety theatres, The Hornet advised the Police Board to utilize its "latent energies towards the extermination of hoodlumism, instead of using their strength to wrestle with professional tumblers . . ." 75

In the late spring of 1881 the campaign against the variety theatres began to wane. However, the Post Dispatch continued to question why local police allowed the theatres to remain open. The answer was obvious. The licenses of the variety theatres would not expire until the late fall of 1881. But the variety house became newsworthy following the murder of a young boy near the Canterbury's "school of vice." 76 Young Billy Louderman was shot and killed by Patsy Early, a seventeen year old messenger boy for the Missouri Pacific railroad. The newspaper cried for an end to youth's corruption by the variety house and the abolition of that philosophy which preached that "vicious classes" were better off corralled in the variety houses than left outside to roam the streets. 77

In November the Post Dispatch in bold headlines gave notice that the infamous Globe Theatre at last had succumbed to the newspaper's

74 "Hornet Stings," The Hornet III (February 11, 1882), 7.
75 "Hornet Stings," The Hornet IV (April 1, 1882), 4.
76 St. Louis Post Dispatch, August 15, 1881.
77 Ibid.
"onslaught." Perhaps the newspaper's printed exposure of the Globe's indiscretions were responsible for the theatre's closing. Nonetheless, local authorities shut down the theatre's operation when Manager Decker attempted to continue his establishment without a dramshop license. As the Globe and Canterbury were now in court, the newspaper aimed its guns at the Crystal Palace and Alhambra theatres, the latter managed by Jacob E. Esher.

Jacob Esher was born in Philadelphia around 1822. A brawny, cigar-smoking German, Esher and his brother John had operated a lumber yard in that city. In 1857, after accumulating sufficient capital, the brothers came to St. Louis by way of Chicago. An eminently respectable man among the "substratum of society," Esher was one of St. Louis' first variety theatre managers.

After losing the Bowery Concert Hall in 1865 to a fire, Esher leased the old St. Louis Museum and Opera House on Fifth Street between Franklin and Wash. However, the Museum's career was short-lived. It closed down in 1867 as a result of a stockholders' quarrel. Esher converted the Museum into a saloon and theatre. The Museum was renamed Theatre Comique, but a fire destroyed the theatre after only a few months of operation.

---

78 Missouri Democrat, September 19, 1866. The Museum was built in 1866 for $250,000. One floor was devoted to a theatre, and two large halls were devoted to curiosities.

79 Benjamin Vogel vs. The St. Louis Museum Opera and Art Gallery, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1867.
Following this disaster Esher opened a saloon on Olive Street despite some heated opposition by the local taxpaying residents in the block. By 1871 he had moved to a large storeroom and basement at No. 114 North Fifth Street. Esher called his new establishment a "public opera house and beer saloon." Records of the St. Louis Circuit Court reveal that Esher was constantly in violation of one city ordinance or another from the time he began to operate in St. Louis as a theatre manager and saloon keeper.

Like all men of his class he was noted for his jewelry, his "bull's eyes sparklers," one or more of which always shown resplendent on his shirt bosom. His marital life seems to have reflected his worldliness as he was charged with bigamy. During the seventies his variety theatre on Fifth Street was a frequent target for police raids, but few of the visitations resulted in any serious slowing of business. Seldom was Esher himself ever the victim of legal action although his female beer jerkers were repeatedly prosecuted.

Since the campaign on the variety houses had begun, Pulitzer had let it be known that Esher was a favorite of both the Mayor and Police

---

80 Jacob Esher vs. Joseph Weil and John H. Craig, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1874.

81 Record Books of the Circuit Court, Criminal Division, St. Louis, Missouri, Book No. 9, 1856-1858, p. 621, 660, 667; Book No. 10, 1859-1860, p. 407; Book No. 13, 1864-1866, p. 345.

82 Louisa Esher vs. Jacob E. Esher, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1884.
Board. Other variety theatre managers did not enjoy Esher's legal immunity as they did not pay "high rental to a highly moral and influential citizen [J. M. Thompson] as the Esher brothers do . . . ." Despite Esher's claim that he had abolished his wine-rooms, excluded toughs, and prohibited the admission of "lewd women," the Post Dispatch praised the non-signers of Esher's circulating petition. Esher predicted that if the newspaper's criticisms continued in spite of his admitted reforms, he would personally "do up Pulitzer." On the eve of license renewal, Esher invited several of his cronies as tough as himself to accompany him to the office of the Post Dispatch so that they

83 St. Louis Post Dispatch, November 23, 1881.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid. November 26, 1881.
might witness his performance. At the time, Pulitzer happened to be conversing in front of his business office. He was looking out of the window as the burly dive-keeper began his vocal attack. As one reporter remembered the confrontation:

But his [Escher's] burst of indignation was a summer breeze competing with a Kansas cyclone. Mr. Pulitzer had the loudest voice on the Mississippi, and his flow of words came like Niagara. After describing the disgrace Usher [sic] was to St. Louis, he started for Usher who was armed. Usher lost no time in getting away but promised to see Pulitzer again. He never did.

In December of 1881 Mayor Ewing sought to establish a distinction between proper and improper variety shows in a new ordinance aimed at outlawing only indecent performances. In the meantime, the Mayor favored issuing licenses when the law had been complied with. After three months of deliberation Mayor Ewing and City Collector Hudson decided to renew the variety house licenses on the following conditions: first, that no variety house would continue to operate a wine-room within the confines of the theatre; second, that no minors be allowed in the theatre unaccompanied by parents; finally, that no liquor, beer, wine or other intoxicating drinks of any kind could be passed around the audience by waiters or others in the theatre.

---

87 Ibid. Stanley inaccurately reported that the variety theatre manager was Usher. The St. Louis Business Directory lists no Usher for the year 1881, only Jacob E. Escher.
88 The Hornet III (December 24, 1881), 4.
89 St. Louis Post Dispatch, December 31, 1881.
By January of 1882 the newspaper reported that the managers of both the Crystal Palace and Canterbury theatres had agreed to the measures outlined by Mayor Ewing. A visit by a Post Dispatch reporter found the Canterbury's entertainment, "Cheap but Chaste," The theatre contained no young boys and no females. The stage performances were found to be "clean," and the wine-rooms closed.\footnote{Ibid. January 10, 1882.}

Despite these ostensible reforms the Post Dispatch was not convinced of the sincerity of the variety theatre managers. The newspaper predicted: "Every manager will sign the conditions with a cold-blooded predisposition to pay not the slightest attention to them . . . ."\footnote{Ibid. January 7, 1882.} Through the period of turmoil Esher remained silent on the application of the Mayor's new measures to his theatre. It was rumored Esher had vigorously protested the acceptance of the Mayor's conditions by other variety house managers.\footnote{Ibid. January 10, 1882.}

Esher's Alhambra theatre continued its operation in full force. Esher had met the Mayor's conditions by placing his saloon facilities in an alley adjoining the theatre. The law had been complied with and other managers followed Esher's example. The Hornet summed up the results of the paper's efforts:

---

\footnote{Ibid. January 10, 1882.}
We would like to see men and women perfectly good and beautiful to behold, but for a brief season we did not really expect to gaze upon the burnt cork minstrel walking around with angels' wings on. There are many things in a great city that will not down at the bidding of the iconoclast, and among these are the variety slums.93

IV

Conclusion

Throughout the campaign against the variety theatre, the Post Dispatch never recommended the outright prohibition of liquor from the theatre. The newspaper supported regulation of the variety house saloons, but defended itself against charges that it advocated outright prohibition of liquor. Its policy favored State handling of temperance matters without Congressional intervention. The newspaper believed that a bill to prohibit liquor would never succeed in becoming a law for Congress "might as well be asked to put a stop to cigarette smoking, tobacco-chewing, and other unclean habits as to be petitioned for a national prohibition law."94

While the Post Dispatch championed the right of the working classes to a cheap form of amusement, the environment surrounding the variety theatre appeared to be an insoluble problem. The paper could bring pressure to bear on men like Thompson to keep his theatres places of

93 The Hornet III (December 24, 1881), 4.
94 St. Louis Post Dispatch, December 16, 1881.
elevating moral influence, but it could not elevate the morality of the patrons themselves.

The newspaper believed that men like Esher would have continued success in the city despite the protests of the community's more respectable elements. Esher's kind thrived because of the variety theatre's deplorable constituency. The "disreputable classes," the Post Dispatch decided, were primarily the Negroes who occupied large portions of the city and frequented the variety houses.

Author Julian Rammelkamp in his study of Pulitzer's Post Dispatch wrote that the Post Dispatch "... mobilized the middle class elements of St. Louis into a dynamic movement of reform, "and was a "... warm friend of the weak and oppressed." While the Post Dispatch was often a champion of the rights of the ordinary man, one should not presume that its "middle-class" sympathies extended to the Negro as Rammelkamp suggests. In protesting against the variety houses the newspaper referred to the theatres as "disreputable nigger houses." Esher's theatre, the Post Dispatch noted, was in a nest of "colored houses of notoriety." Moreover, the newspaper moaned, the Crystal Palace was in

---

95 Ibid. February 24, 1882.
96 Rammelkamp, Pulitzer's Post Dispatch, 1878-1883, p. 303.
97 Ibid. p. 85.
98 St. Louis Post Dispatch, November 30, 1881.
an area occupied by people whose ways "are as crooked as their hair is kinky." 100 If reform of the variety theatres was to take place, either the theatres would have to remove themselves from the areas inhabited by the Negro, or the Negro would have to be excluded from the theatres, or both.

The Post Dispatch achieved its major objective, the increase of circulation. The newspaper exposed the problems involved with providing a respectable form of amusement that was inexpensive. However, larger forces were in the wind that would legislate variety entertainment out of the saloon. In the end variety became respectable by changing its name to vaudeville, an amusement unblemished by the environment and evils that had plagued its predecessor.

100 Ibid.
CHAPTER IV

"LIQUOR, LICENSES, 
AND THE GREAT SHAME OF IT"

Liquor Control in St. Louis

Following Joseph Pulitzer’s purchase of the New York World and his subsequent move to that city, the Post Dispatch, though no longer conducting a vigorous campaign against the variety houses, included them in its coverage of the broader question of liquor control in St. Louis.

Early in the spring of 1883 the State legislature was approached by the Commercial Club with a bill which would authorize communities like St. Louis to raise the annual charge for liquor licenses from $120 to $1,000. This proposal, which became known as the "high license" bill or Downing Plan, was designed to rid St. Louis of its worst saloons. The bill also contained a Sunday closing clause. The Post Dispatch estimated that one-half of St. Louis’ eighteen hundred saloons would disappear, but that the current revenue of $200,000 per annum would double. The legislation would curb establishments like the variety house which had

1 James Cox, Old and New St. Louis, A Concise History of the Metropolis of the West and Southwest with a Review of Its Present Greatness and Immediate Prospects. (St. Louis: Central Biographical Publishing Co., 1894), p. 24. The Commercial Club was an organization which sponsored programs of economic and civic reform in St. Louis.

2 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 25, 1883.
continued to serve minors and which particularly concerned the newspaper. The Post Dispatch moaned that the city was plagued with establishments permitting liquor to be sold freely to twelve year old boys.³

Though the Downing Bill was strongly opposed by the Saloon Keepers' Association, an affiliate of Ed Butler's local Democratic machine, the bill was approved and signed into law. The greatest handicap of the bill was a provision which required enabling legislation by local governments before the law would take effect. St. Louis' House of Delegates, the lower house of its Municipal Assembly, was originally filled with liquor interest advocates, and when the high license proposal came before the Assembly the chances for its success seemed dim.

Despite the appeals of the Post Dispatch to bring out the "respectable vote" in the Council, the saloon interests increased their strength. But the newspaper's campaign had some effect. The Council, the upper house of the Municipal Assembly, passed a watered-down bill setting a fee of $500 for establishments selling hard liquors, although it retained the old $120 charge for beer saloons.⁴ The newspaper believed the bill was better than nothing, and supported it. After considerable pressure, the House of Delegates was prevailed upon to pass the measure.

The conversion of the saloon-packed House of Delegates did not

---

³ Ibid. March 1, 1883.
⁴ Ibid. June 30, 1883.
impress the Post Dispatch. The suddenness of the Delegates' move from hostility to acquiescence in the high license proposal was suspect. In fact, saloon keepers expected to make use of the retention of the $120 beer license as a screen behind which hard liquors would be dispensed. Many of the saloon proprietors openly made plans to frustrate the law enforcement agencies. In an interview with a Post Dispatch reporter one saloon keeper proudly displayed his trick faucets; a twist to the right gave beer, a twist to the left produced whiskey.\footnote{Ibid. July 9, 1883.}

To make matters worse Governor Crittenden was persuaded by his St. Louis friends to appoint Dan Kerwin and other politicians affiliated with Ed Butler to the city's police board. This move put the saloon interests beyond the pale of the law. The saloon keepers had triumphed, the consequence of the rising potency of machine politics.\footnote{Ibid. July 10, 1883.}

The saloon keepers had wisely seen that the Downing Bill with its odious Sunday closing clause would be ineffective in St. Louis. Moreover, when Governor Crittenden announced that he intended to enforce the Sunday closing clause to the letter, the Post Dispatch accused him of wrecking the high license drive while playing into the hands of the saloon interests. As in Pulitzer's campaign two years earlier, the question of a Sunday closing clause diverted the reform interests away from a proper course of regulation. The Downing Law had, the newspaper
complained, become a "mere pack horse for Sabbatarian fanaticism."  

In the legislature of 1889, however, rural Missouri prohibitionists were able to pass another law. Proposed by Dr. Frank Newberry (Dem.) of Madison County, it barred the use of gaming and musical instruments in dramshops. The law also forbade sparring, boxing, wrestling and cock-fights from the saloon. Finally it prohibited the use of billiards, pool, bowling, cards, dice and other games of chance in the saloons and cheap variety theatres.

The new law came as no surprise to the saloon interests. The St. Louis Republic regarded the law's passage as a miracle. State Senator McGinnis, representing the saloon interests, worked hard for the bill's defeat. Some of its provisions were regarded by the opposition led by McGinnis as jokes. In order to kill the measure an amendment had been attached to prohibit billiards and pool tables in saloons. It was expected that the amendment would lead to the bill's death in the House of Representatives. For a time the bill was morgued in a House committee, but Dr. Newberry skillfully managed to bring the bill out for a vote on the floor of the House near the close of the legislative session. The bill was then passed by the House and Senate and signed by the Governor. The Newberry Bill became a law on August 22, 1889.

7 Ibid. July 9, 1883.
8 Missouri, Revised Statutes, (1889), I, 1050.
9 The St. Louis Republic, August 22, 1889.
The Newberry Law was intended to limit the activities of the cheap variety houses or free theatres along Sixth Street in St. Louis, and in other sections of the city where houses of ill-fame were numerous. Unfortunately, the dice provision was side-stepped by some saloon keepers who substituted marked lima beans for the forbidden dice and gave the customers a glass from which to shake them. Coffee beans were employed by others in an attempt to evade the law. Musical instruments continued to be used by many of the variety house managers. Despite a slight revision of the dramshop law approved by the Governor on April 20, 1891, the saloon-fixtured variety theatres continued to evade the law.

II

Variety Theatres Under Attack

By January of 1889 there were estimated to be twelve hundred saloons operating in St. Louis with only five hundred of this number having a valid liquor license. As liquor licenses were granted for six month periods, the re-application by the saloon keeper and variety theatre manager often involved examination of their petitions and moral characters. In an article entitled "The Collector is Firm," the Post Dispatch revealed in mid-January that Collector Sexton had received

10 Ibid. November 2, 1889.

11 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 16, 1889.
liquor license applications from a number of saloon keepers, including the king of the variety house managers, Jacob E. Esher. Despite the objections of Esher's attorney and other legal counsel, Collector Sexton asked the Police Board for an investigation of Esher. Sexton referred the matter to the Board as there was some question concerning the variety manager's moral character and the genuineness of the signatures placed on his petition for renewal.12

By the 21st of January most of the reports regarding the moral character of the saloon keepers were received by the Collector's office. The report concerning Jacob Esher's moral character was one of the noticeable exceptions. However, by the following day the report on Esher was received by the Collector. The contents of the report contained incriminating evidence concerning Esher's place of business:

He [Esher] runs a saloon in connection with a low variety theatre which is frequented by thieves and thugs. After the show, the women who take part in the vulgar performance on the stage mingle with the audience and solicit drinks, which are drunk at the bar and in the wine-room connected with the theater. The wine-room is the resort of men of all ages and classes... all of which is allowed and witnessed by Esher.13

By January 23, 1889 seven of the infamous variety theatres had been closed, but Esher's theatre was not among those mentioned by the Post Dispatch. It appeared that Esher was making every effort to hold on by

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid. January 22, 1889.
political, social and financial pressure. The Post Dispatch noted:

Men whose positions in the community would seem to compel them to support the collector in his refusal to grant licenses are pleading with him in favor of two notorious dive-keepers. 14

Though Esher was subsequently arrested for employing prostitutes as beer carriers and taken to Four Courts, he was immediately released on bond and granted a continuance. The release of Esher brought a cry of outrage from the Post Dispatch, the perennial battler against the variety theatre:

There are howls of indignation when Anarchists insist upon the abolition of all law, and yet with the consent of the laws' pillars, dive-keepers are permitted to nullify all law adopted for their regulation and suppression. 15

As the continuance was granted until the thirty-first of the month, Esher went to work to stave off Collector Sexton's efforts to close him down. Nathan Frank, the Congressman-elect from the Ninth District, called on Sexton. Frank promised Sexton that Esher would reform his theatre if the license were granted. Frank argued that Collector Hudson, Sexton's predecessor, had followed this procedure, and that Sexton should observe this precedent. When questioned about his conduct in the case by a reporter from the Post Dispatch, Frank replied that his plea on Esher's behalf was made not as an attorney or Congressman, but

15Ibid.
as an "interested citizen." Still another of Esher's confidants informed Sexton that his election had been financed in part by $500 contributed by Esher. Collector Sexton retorted with some discretion, "If Jake Esher spent $500 or 500 cents for me, he did it without my knowledge or consent."17

The abuse heaped upon Esher became so intense that other variety theatre managers began using Esher's theatre as a measuring stick to demonstrate their purity. T. V. Day, manager of the Palace Theatre at Seventh and Elm, invited all to investigate his theatre. "He wanted to see the man who would say his place was like Esher's."18

Though the end of the month came and went, Esher was granted a further continuance. The Post Dispatch stormed:

The great shame of it ... Esher, notorious as he is, produced a wonderful list of men who are admitted into respectable houses to speak for him, a Congressman, a cashier of a well-known bank, and other business men.19

As the letters of recommendation were on file, the Collector was urged by the Post Dispatch to make public the names of the men who had endorsed the applications for saloon licenses.

Upon the advice of his attorney Esher petitioned for mandamus against Collector Sexton. Esher's attorney, Chester H. Krum, argued

16 Ibid. January 26, 1889.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid. January 28, 1889.
19 Ibid. February 4, 1889.
that Esher had submitted the proper petition on July 4, 1888 and had it signed by a "majority of the assessed taxpaying citizens . . . ." At the time, Krum continued, Sexton had voiced no qualms about the petitioner's moral character. Moreover, Esher had paid the money required for the license according to the demands set forth in the city ordinances, $250 for city purposes and $25 for the state. Further, the license was to have remained in force for a period of six months from its original date of approval. On January 4, 1889, Krum concluded, Esher had applied for a renewal, but Collector Sexton "in violation of his said duty aforesaid . . . and in disregard of the rights and privileges of said petitioner . . . refused to grant a license . . . for the unexpired six months of said year ending July 4, 1889."21

In his decision Judge L. B. Valliant declared that the State Supreme Court, in the case of the State ex rela vs. Meyers, Section 5438 of the Revised Statutes had been interpreted in the following manner: if the petition accompanying the application for a liquor license contained the names of a majority of the taxpaying citizens of the block and the petitioner was found to be a man of good character, then the Collector had the discretion either to grant or refuse the license. However, if the petition contained the names of two-thirds of the taxpaying citizens and the applicant's character was adequate, then the

20 Jacob E. Esher vs. H. Clay Sexton, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1888.
21 Ibid.
Collector had no discretion and must issue the license. Since Esher had only a majority of the taxpaying citizens affixed to his petition, the city collector had the discretion to grant or refuse the giving of the license. Valliant, the presiding judge in the case, further stated that the Revised Statute said nothing about the petitioner being entitled to an automatic renewal of his license at the end of the six month period. Therefore, "each license is a separate grant for six months, and no more ..." The writ of mandamus might only be used to compel an officer to perform his duties in cases where he had no discretion. The writ, Valliant concluded, could never be used to control an officer in a matter where the law had entrusted him to exercise discretion or judgment.

Nevertheless, Krum believed that Esher's case was being made an example supposedly "in the better interests of society." Collector Sexton had overstepped his bounds as Collector as he had nothing to do with the conduct of saloon keepers. In an interesting plea for reconsidering the Court's decision, Krum argued that morals could not be legislated:

It is for him [Collector] to collect the revenue. To pose as a protector of the morals of the public is merely to assume functions which neither the Statutes

\[22\] Ibid.
\[23\] Ibid.
\[24\] Ibid.
of the State, nor the ordinances of the City give him, in any respect whatsoever.\textsuperscript{25}

As to the discretionary powers of the Collector, Krum found the wording of the city ordinances quite clear in the matter. If the Collector had no doubts about the moral character of the applicant and the genuineness of the signatures upon the petition, then it was his sworn duty to issue the licenses. If, however, the Collector had reservations about the moral conduct of the applicant, then the ordinances stipulated that he refer the matter of morality to the Police Board. If the Police Board disapproved of the applicant's moral character, then the matter could be referred to the Council in session, or to the Mayor. Krum had argued wisely in this plea as Esher's case would have been handled more gently by the liquor interests in both the Police Board and City Council. As to the Mayor of St. Louis, Edward A. Noonan, (1889-1893), no more scandalously corrupt administration could have been in existence in any metropolitan area. His administration was, "strewn with disgraceful acts."\textsuperscript{26} Though the \textit{Post Dispatch} predicted that Esher's back would be broken, his business continued to function as usual.

\section*{III}

\textbf{Politics and Saloons: Corruption in St. Louis}

The election of Henry Ziegenhein as City Collector of St. Louis in

\textsuperscript{25}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{26}\textit{The Spectator XI} (November 19, 1892), 4.
1889 allowed the saloon interests of the city to dominate the political scene.

After serving in the City Council and State legislature, Ziegenhein, a contractor and builder by profession, unsuccessfully ran for City Collector in 1885. He was a victim of the defeat which overtook the Republican party in that year. In 1889 Ziegenhein was again nominated for Collector on the Republican ticket and elected by an overwhelming majority of votes, despite the victory of Democrat Edward Noonan as Mayor.

Noonan's victory was regarded by the Post Dispatch as "the result of a spontaneous uprising of the party masses against the dictation of bosses . . . a triumph over the party machine . . . ."27 However, the Post Dispatch recommended caution in appraising the overall significance of the results of the election. The newspaper reminded St. Louisians that only the future could prove whether or not the results at the polls had made the people triumphant over the growing power of Ed. Butler, St. Louis' city boss.

If these Noonan votes are bummets, criminals, hoodlums, divekeepers, and denizens of the slums, then is Democracy not only dead in St. Louis, but rotten, and this the Post Dispatch is not prepared to admit.28

Time would demonstrate how painfully accurate the speculations of the Post Dispatch were in 1889.

27 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 28, 1889.
28 Ibid.
Ostensibly a Democrat, Ed Butler was never really a partisan, though he did manage to operate within certain party boundaries when it suited his purposes to do so. Under the guise of conventional party labels Butler's bipartisan political organization was always in a position to manipulate the sentiments of the voters to suit its designs.

I. H. Lionberger, a Democratic politician in St. Louis during the 1890's, recalled Butler's strength in controlling both sides of the political fence.

Without his assistance no ordinance could pass and against his opposition none could pass, and his influence seems not to be at all diminished by a change of party.

When his Democratic enemies succeeded in nominating and electing Edward Noonan as Mayor in 1889, Butler undermined him by building up the Republican machine of the City Collector, Henry Ziegenhein. Though Butler had enemies in the Democratic party, it should not be assumed that Noonan and Butler were also combatants. When Butler asked that his son James be appointed to the position of City Attorney, Noonan graciously consented. The Post Dispatch often spoke of City Attorney James


30 Ibid.

31 I. H. Lionberger, Glimpses of People and Manners in St. Louis, 1870-1920, Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, pamphlet, 34.

Butler, the "midnight defender of gambling dens against police raids."  

It was not long before Ziegenhein acquired a favorable reputation among the brewing interests of the city. It was rumored that Ziegenhein would assume a petition for a liquor license was allowable if it had not been opposed by the taxpayers on the block, though the law required in theory that the names on the petition be compared with the names on the tax assessment lists. When the signers were found insufficient, the saloon keepers with the assistance of Collector Ziegenhein managed to find subtle methods of interpreting the legal requirements for the holding of a liquor license.

In January 1892 the Post Dispatch outlined for its readers one of Collector Ziegenhein's more unorthodox methods, "lilliputian lots," to enable saloon keepers to acquire their liquor licenses. If, for example, thirty-nine of forty taxpayers on a block were opposed to the operation of a saloon in their block, the saloon proprietor merely subdivided his property into forty one-foot lots, presented his friends with deeds to the one-foot square plots, and then completed his petition for a liquor license with the needed majority of signatures supplied by his friends. The Post Dispatch frequently ran cartoons depicting "Gulliver" Ziegenhein caught in the snare of his "lilliputian lots" clutching beer mugs in both fists.

33 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 21, 1892.
34 Ibid. January 8, 1892.
35 Ibid. April 2, 1893.
Not a secretive man, Ziegenhein was openly frank when asked about his laxity in enforcing city ordinances in North and South St. Louis, both heavily populated German sectors of the city. He remarked casually:

I don’t require a renewal of the saloon license south of Market Street. The Germans don’t know what it is to object to a saloon. They must have their beer. And up in the part of town where my friend Bensiek lives the people would think a remonstrance was the man in the moon. They don’t know what one is.\[36\]

Ziegenhein’s autocratic practice of issuing or withholding liquor licenses had earned him the title of “Czar,” and the Post Dispatch decided to crusade against the discretionary powers of the Collector.

In a series of scathing exposes the Post Dispatch printed stories of saloon keepers whose licenses were assured by the Collector though they were in violation of the city ordinances. In light of the revelations made public by the Post Dispatch surrounding the peculiar business practices employed by Collector Ziegenhein’s office, the City Council decided to investigate the matter. The Council requested Ziegenhein to explain his procedures in issuing liquor licenses.\[37\]

Following the Collector’s message to the City Council, the Post Dispatch was startled to report that Ziegenhein’s explanation was accepted as satisfactory. Despite the total of 720 violations of the

\[36\] Ibid. February 19, 1892. John Bensiek was a saloon keeper and member of the City Council.

dramshop ordinances with an estimated loss of $500,000 per annum to the city's revenue, the Collector was found blameless.38

The Post Dispatch revealed that the Council's President Cyrus Walbridge (Rep.) engineered the endorsement of Ziegenhein's report to the Council. It was rumored that Walbridge's acceptance of Ziegenhein's report was supported by Ed Butler. In exchange Ziegenhein would pledge his support to Walbridge in the Mayoralty race of 1893.39

Though the Council investigation became a dead-letter issue, the evidence against Ziegenhein was damaging enough to warrant a grand jury investigation of the Collector's office. On March 16, 1892 the Post Dispatch reported that Mrs. F. H. Ingalis, local W.C.T.U. President, sought a grand jury indictment of six variety saloons.

Mrs. Ingalis and a committee of W.C.T.U. workers had visited six of St. Louis' most infamous variety theatres. Their report complained about the abbreviated costumes worn by the variety actresses. More importantly, the ladies of the W.C.T.U. championed the working rights of those depraved women. Astounded that the actresses were paid only by percentage on the number of drinks they solicited, the W.C.T.U. was further dismayed to discover that the variety "ladies" received no salary at all if drinks were not sold. The W.C.T.U.'s avowed crusade to abolish the liquor traffic seems, in this case, to have taken a back

---

38 St. Louis Post Dispatch, January 27, 1892.
39 Ibid. April 6, 1892.
seat to the more pressing matter of equality of working rights for women. Enraged as much by the working conditions of the variety actresses as by the temperance question, the local chapter of the W.C.T.U. in St. Louis undertook the task of attempting to close the infamous variety theatres. The proprietors moved against were Frank Pierson, Bryand Freely, John Summerville, Charles Frey, George M. Spence, Louis Thompson, Hugo Zeller and Jacob Esher.

In the meantime, the Post Dispatch announced that the move to indict Ziegehmein for violations of the city ordinances was not going well. Assistant Circuit Attorney William Zachritz, a Ziegenhein confidant, announced his intention only to assist the Grand Jury upon legal questions, not to become an independent researcher in the case. The newspaper ran lists of witnesses in its daily columns who claimed knowledge of the Collector's failures to enforce the law.

On March 30, 1892 the Post Dispatch reported that William Zachritz's indictment of the six variety theatre managers, drawn at the request of the Grand Jury, was pronounced defective by the State's attorneys Orrick C. Bishop and Ashley C. Clover. The original resolution drawn by the W.C.T.U. had accused the variety proprietors of being in

40 Women's Christian Temperance Union. Minutes of the Tenth Annual Meeting (Springfield, Missouri, 1892), p. 105.
41 St. Louis Court of Criminal Correction Record Book for 1892, Municipal Courts Building in St. Louis, Missouri, pp. 20-21.
42 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 17, 1892.
violation of Section 964 of the city ordinances. This section stated that a keeper of a dramshop should not employ "lewd women," or any woman having the reputation of a prostitute, as carriers of beer or as singers and dancers. The indictment drawn by Zachritz stated that the proprietors had employed women to serve liquor, not that women acting as singers and dancers were serving liquor.

Furious with Zachritz's ineptitude, the Post Dispatch recommended that he be dismissed from his job as Assistant Circuit Attorney. On April 4, 1892 the newspaper revealed another surprising development in the case of the variety house proprietors.

If the indictment drawn by Zachritz were quashed by the Court, then he would be embarrassed by his failure to draw up a suitable legal document. Recognizing his problem, Zachritz proceeded to arrange an agreement with Chester Krum and John Martin, attorneys for the variety theatre managers. Zachritz requested both Krum and Martin not to ask for a motion to quash the indictment on the grounds that it was defective. Instead, he advised them to let the cases come to trial. He assured the attorneys that their clients would be safe.

In the Court of Criminal Correction the Prosecuting Attorney for the State was S. S. Bass. The Post Dispatch revealed that Bass was also

43 St. Louis, Missouri Revised Ordinances, Chapter XXV, Section CMLXIV, 1887, p. 788.
44 St. Louis Post Dispatch, March 30, 1892.
45 Ibid. April 4, 1892.
the law partner of John Martin, defense counsel for the variety theatre managers. As the trial began it became clear how Zachritz hoped to accomplish his designs. Through an agreement reached by the attorneys, Zachritz took the place of S. S. Bass as the State's Prosecuting Attorney. John Martin then called for the cases to be tried on the facts. What followed this motion was surely a travesty of the law as witnesses were produced by the prosecution [Zachritz] who could not verify that the saloon keepers owned saloons, much less employed women. The trial concluded: lawyers and witnesses broke into open laughter. 46

The investigation against Ziegenhein was dropped by the Grand Jury, and the Post Dispatch congratulated Zachritz for his efforts in steering the Grand Jury "around the political reefs." 47 As for a bill which had been introduced in the Council calling for an end to the Collector's discretionary powers in the issuance of liquor licenses, the Liquor Dealers Protective Association and Ed Butler saw to it that the bill died a quiet death. 48

As the election of 1893 neared, the Post Dispatch continued to remind St. Louisians of Ziegenhein's and Walbridge's "comic opera" of 1892. A cartoon showed the two candidates pulling a large ox-cart entitled "bad records." Included in the cart were rolled-up contracts

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid. March 16, 1892.
48 Ibid.
labeled "railroad franchises," "garbage contracts" and "wildcat saloons." 49

Despite the efforts of the Post Dispatch to convince St. Louisans to cast their votes for Meyer Bannerman, Democratic candidate for Mayor, Cyrus Walbridge was elected Mayor and Henry Ziegenhein re-elected as City Collector. Unfortunately, the Post Dispatch concluded, "... the people of St. Louis felt that a vote against the Democratic party was also a vote against Butler." 50

The Post Dispatch had not been alone in protesting against Collector Ziegenhein's management of the Collector's office. As the State was entitled to $59 every year from each saloon license granted, the police census of 1892 showing 719 unlicensed saloons pricked the legislators' curiosity. The fight against Ziegenhein by the Post Dispatch had not been without effect. The victorious Collector was Republican, but the legislature of Missouri was in the hands of the Democrats. By an act approved on March 17, 1893 the Governor appointed an excise commissioner for the City of St. Louis. The new commissioner was to have exclusive authority over the granting of dramshop licenses. He was to be paid by fees, and the expenses for maintaining his office were to be drawn from these fees. Furthermore, petitions were to become a part of the public

49 Ibid. April 3, 1892.
50 Ibid. April 6, 1892.
The new excise commissioner was appointed on June 21, 1893. The first man selected for the office was Nicholas Montgomery Bell, a Democrat, and for many years to come a power in the arena of local and national politics. An imposing figure with white hair and close-cropped mustache and beard, Bell came to his new position with authority and conviction.

IV

The Decline of the Variety Theatre

The attempt to control the variety houses through legislation had been only partially successful. Though the Newberry Law had been in force since 1889, Dr. Frederic Wines, director of a United States sub-committee investigating urban liquor problems, discovered numerous examples of laxity among law enforcement agencies in St. Louis. With respect to the Newberry Law's prohibition of games and other amusements from the dramshops, the law was "flagrantly disregarded." The great majority of saloons furnished their patrons with card tables. Many saloons had billiard and pool tables. A number of variety theatres boasted of pianos and other musical instruments. Though the city

---

52 St. Louis Globe Democrat, September 1, 1931.
ordinances stated that wrestling was prohibited from saloons, Wines noted that a large placard announcing a match between a man and woman was placed outside a popular variety theatre. Moreover, variety house managers were employing lewd women as singers and dancers upon their stages in defiance of a city ordinance.

The breakdown of police authority in the variety theatre raid of 1895 revealed that St. Louis' law enforcement agencies, like those in other growing cities of America, were not yet above suspicion.

The raids on the variety theatres were to commence at 10:30 P.M. Six sergeants, together with twelve detectives and eighty patrolmen dressed in plain clothes, were directed to keep watch over the following variety theatres: the Winter Garden, the Gem, Comique, Red Onion, Palace, and Kessler's Wine Room. At the appointed hour, the police were to enter the theatres and make their arrests if the law were being violated.

When a police officer entered the Red Onion at 721 North Sixth Street, the announcer cried, "Keep your seats, gents, it's all part of the show." However, one ambitious fellow decided to climb on top of the wood-burning stove in the middle of the smoky hall to gain a better vantage spot for the activities. Unfortunately, the stove crashed to the floor as the poor fellow tried to make his ascent, and the noise of its crash coupled with the advent of the police led one excited soul to

---

54 St. Louis Post Dispatch, April 21, 1895.
yell "scrap." The audience, hearing the cry, turned from the stage show to what must have been a far more promising source of entertainment. As the crowd made a mad rush to the spot, the police drew their pistols but were overwhelmed by the throng of humanity. The officers eventually had to brandish their clubs to restore order to the theatre.55

When the officers entered Esher's theatre, most of the audience ran for the streets. The avenues surrounding the theatre were soon filled with "men and boys impartially mingled as to complexion . . . ." In the variety theatre it was reported that "the color line had not been closely drawn in the arrangement of seats."56

Many of the male inhabitants of the theatre had been so engrossed in their amorous pursuits inside the theatres' boxes that they had completely ignored the policemen's entrances as well as the border dramas being enacted on the stage. Huddled into "hoodlum wagons," the girls were driven briskly to the district police stations. Several girls reportedly broke into song, and a number of disgruntled theatre patrons succeeded in making the arrests more difficult by casting stones at the police as they drove through the streets with their tawdry cargoes.

The raids had been engineered by Assistant Police Chief Reedy. In a lengthy communique to the Police Board, Reedy explained that he had personally undertaken the investigation of St. Louis' "free and easy"
theatres upon Chief Harrigan's absence from the force. Heretofore, Reedy continued, he had been satisfied that the variety theatres were immoral, but he decided to gain some positive evidence. A detailed report from a police subordinate revealed to Reedy that the keepers of the variety theatres depended upon liquor receipts for their financial success. Moreover, professional prostitutes were masquerading as actresses.

The raid was not carried out with complete success. Following the raid and the arrest of one hundred men and women, the Police Board's executive session announced that two Police Captains and eleven sergeants had been transferred to other districts. Two detectives were reduced to patrolmen and assigned to beat duty. In addition, one sergeant was heavily fined and a patrolman dismissed from the force. The meeting of the Police Board revealed that several of the variety theatres had been forewarned of the raids by the arresting officers.\(^57\)

In an effort to excuse the sloppy performances of the arresting officers, Police Commissioner John Lee explained that the transfers had been made in order to "shake up the department at least once a year as it bettered the service." He added, ". . . a policeman too long in one place makes too many friends."\(^58\)

When Chief of Police Harrigan arrived in St. Louis, he requested

\(^{57}\) Ibid. April 24, 1895.

\(^{58}\) Ibid. April 21, 1895.
that Excise Commissioner Nicholas Bell revoke the liquor licenses of the proprietors in question. The *Post Dispatch* hoped that Harrigan's request would "stir him [Bell] from his lethargy in the matter of licensing the free and eases."  

Hoping to prod the Commissioner into a quick decision, the newspaper sourly complained: "If the chair on which Excise Commissioner Bell sits were a log, the Commissioner would make a first rate bump . . . ." Several days later the *Post Dispatch* blushingly admitted that Commissioner Bell was required by law to give at least five days' notice before acting upon the filing of charges. In the meantime, Bell's office dispatched an investigating officer to the theatres in question. The officer's report substantiated the accuracy of the charges. He reported that the sale of liquor was being solicited by "lewd women," professional prostitutes, "... some of whom masquerading as actresses, their acting consisting of exposing as much of their bodies as possible, singing smutty or suggestive songs, and being party to or making indecent remarks."

Next Bell informed the proprietors of the variety theatres to submit a statement of facts that they could swear to. He suggested that if these theatres were found to be houses of prostitution with the act of prostitution being performed within their confines, the ordinances of

---

59 Ibid. April 24, 1895.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid. April 28, 1895.
the city would render their licenses null and void with the Police Court having the power to declare that fact.

Not wishing to be outdone in this campaign against the variety theatres by the Post Dispatch, the St. Louis Republic reported that the police department's "spasm of reform" was on the downgrade. The theatres continued to practice their debauchery while enhancing their "gilt-edged" reputations. The Republic sympathized with the "unfortunate" women forced into the prostitution trade for lack of other opportunities, but the newspaper defended the interests of the poor hapless male, an easy prey for the "female blood-suckers." With horror the Republic reported that at Esher's theatre, "A generously developed colored woman seated on the lap of white-necked-tie young dude did not appear to be taken amiss." 63

The variety theatre proprietors were in no mood to simply allow Bell to enforce the provisions of the Newberry Law without a fight. When Robert Carleton, proprietor of the Winter Garden, was questioned upon the character of women who came to his variety theatre saloon, he replied, "How can I tell the character of the outside women who come here?" 64 Other variety theatre managers suggested that the beer gardens also be prosecuted. Like the variety theatres, the beer gardens

62 St. Louis Republic, April 28, 1895.
63 Ibid. April 29, 1895.
64 Ibid.
provided liquor and musical entertainment for their customers. The variety theatre managers hoped to demonstrate that legislators were not in a position to legally distinguish between moral and immoral entertainment. Nevertheless, Commissioner Bell insisted the police use their power to regulate the variety houses.

V

Conclusion

By May 6, 1895 the variety theatres were quiet. The *St. Louis Republic* reported that only three had had the nerve to open their doors for a performance. Many of the variety theatre performances had been "toned down," and several of the theatres had replaced liquor with soda water and soft drinks. The *Post Dispatch* suggested that the closing of the variety theatres would bring some hardships to the police and city officials who had obtained free cigars and drinks from the shrewdly indulgent proprietors. However, the newspaper hinted sarcastically, "... the respect and confidence of the public is really worth ... more than either free drinks or free passes."66

On May 12, 1895 the *St. Louis Court of Criminal Correction* heralded its first conviction under the Newberry Law. The *Post Dispatch* reported

---

65 *St. Louis Republic*, May 6, 1895.

66 *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, May 4, 1895.
that the law had been "... upheld at last." Despite the creditable argument for the defense by ex-Mayor Edward Noonan that America should, like Europe, recognize the necessity of affording laboring classes a form of elevating and moral amusement, Robert Carleton of the Winter Garden was fined $10, and his liquor license removed for a period of two years.

The conviction of variety house manager Robert Carleton might have seemed insignificant at the time, but the implications of the case were far-reaching. First, females could no longer be employed as actresses in saloons. Secondly, musical instruments were removed from the saloon by the provisions of the Newberry Law. The foundations of the variety theatre's appeal, women and musical instruments, were threatened.
The Rise of Vaudeville

Because of the laxity prevailing in under-staffed law enforcement agencies, the variety theatre weathered the storm of criticism by both the press and the public. The theatre's contention that the working man was entitled to a cheap form of amusement strengthened its resistance to such pressures.

Nevertheless, convictions of illicit saloon operations grew more numerous. Variety theatre managers were forced to find more subtle methods of evading the prohibitive features of the Newberry Law. But legislation was not the most significant factor in the passing of the variety theatre. The real agent of the variety stage's destruction was time. With the passage of years there emerged a new breed of enterprising theatre managers. These men hoped to exploit a more refined form of variety entertainment, vaudeville.

The origin of the term vaudeville has been the source of much speculation. One widely shared theory holds that the term vaudeville originated in a little French village in Normandy in the valley of the river Vire, name Vaudevire or Val-de-vire. Oliver Basselin, a poet and composer of songs, lived here in the fifteenth century. He strolled
throughout the valley introducing his songs in plays. The term vaudeville was thus given to all such songs. Later the term was applied to the entertainment in which the songs were introduced.¹

Nomenclature admittedly was loose and often misleading, but the term vaudeville had come into widespread use during the decades following the Civil War to describe in a general way, variety entertainment. M. B. Leavitt claimed to have been the first to employ the term in 1880 to describe his "Gigantic Vaudeville Stars" while on tour.² However, in 1872 H. J. Sargent was reported to have organized his "Great Vaudeville Company."³

During the nineteenth century the traditional vaudeville of the French theatre, a pastoral story line with musical interludes, was revived for polite audiences. However, there does not seem to be in the accounts of Benjamin Keith or F. F. Proctor or any of the other early managers of institutionalized vaudeville any precise form for the vaudeville show.⁴

Under the French regime early St. Louis dramatic history is vague as to whether vaudevilles and melodramas were performed by the companies

² Leavitt, Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, p. 189.
⁴ McLean, American Vaudeville as Ritual, p. 19.
leaving New Orleans for the unknown regions of the Upper Louisiana, as the territory around St. Louis was then called.\footnote{The Dramatic History of St. Louis, St. Louis Home Journal II (January, 1868), 2.} Early historians of the dramatic scene in St. Louis did not consider these companies worthy of being admitted into the "veritable and exact chronicle" of theatrical history.\footnote{Ibid.}

During the seventies the managers of Theatre Comique and Deagle's Varieties referred to their theatres as "vaudeville-variety" houses. The opening of the Peoples Theatre in 1881 advertised the best "variety-vaudeville" performers. The Standard Theatre owned and operated by Ed Butler featured both legitimate and "vaudeville" performances. In 1884 George McManus, a veteran theatrical manager, opened the Casino Theatre at 23 and 25 South Fourth Street. With prices set at 15, 25 and 50 cents, the Casino's program was called the "best that had ever been heard at a vaudeville theatre." Nevertheless, through the eighties the terms vaudeville and variety were used so interchangeably that no real distinction could have been intended between the two terms. However, the advent of more elegant theatres featuring vaudeville exclusively, advanced the notion that vaudeville was a more refined form of entertainment than variety.\footnote{The Columbia Theatre in St. Louis at Sixth and St. Charles completed in 1898 was typical of the new theatres which featured "refined vaudeville" exclusively.}
By the nineties a more apparent shift in verbal emphasis from the term variety to vaudeville definitely took place. Variety transformed itself into modern vaudeville. The transition was an important one. Recognizing that there would be a far larger audience for variety entertainment if it were decent, a new generation of producers was determined to rescue variety from the ill-repute into which it had fallen. They desired to elevate variety entertainment to "a high plane of respectability and moral cleanliness." 

The man credited with having provided the first "clean" variety shows free from vulgarity was Tony Pastor. An astute showman, Pastor reasoned that if he cleaned up his performances he could double his audience by attracting respectable women patrons and their escorts. His first clean variety show on October 24, 1881 at his Fourteenth Street theatre in New York was a success. However, Pastor did not realize that he had set a pattern for family entertainment.

The entry into this profitable field of entertainment by B. F. Keith and F. F. Proctor brought about further expansion of vaudeville. The former introduced the continuous performances at his Boston theatre in 1883, and a decade later F. F. Proctor adopted it at his New York Pleasure Palace.

More importantly, both Keith and Proctor assured their customers

---

9 Gilbert, American Vaudeville, Its Life and Times, p. 121.
that acts would be free of all vulgarity. The following notice was a

You are hereby warned that your act must be free from
all vulgarity and suggestiveness in words, action, and
costume, while playing in any of Mr. "----"'s houses,
and all vulgar, double meaning and profane words and
songs must be cut out of your act before the first per­
formance. If you are in doubt as to what is right and
wrong, submit it to the resident manager at rehearsal.
Such words as Liar, Slob, Son-of-a-Gun, Devil, Sucker,
Damn, and all other words unfit for the ears of ladies
and children, also any reference to questionable streets
are prohibited under fine of instant discharge.\textsuperscript{10}

Finally, the advent of dramatic and operatic artists on the vaude­
ville stage attracted the attention of patrons from the legitimate thea­
tre while adding new respectability to the vaudeville theatres.\textsuperscript{11}

In St. Louis, Col. John D. Hopkins became the Midwest's most suc­
cessful imitator of the two legendary vaudeville theatre managers, Keith
and Proctor. Called Colonel by courtesy, Hopkins was born in Georgetown,
Virginia. He spent a good portion of his early boyhood in and around
Washington, D. C. His father Andrew Jackson Hopkins was stationed in
the nation's capital while serving as a veterinary surgeon with the U.S.
Army.

Following the war Hopkins returned to Washington, D. C. Here he
was employed as a stage assistant in several of the capital's finer
theatres. But as conditions in Washington were unsettled following the

\textsuperscript{10} Royle, "The Vaudeville Theatre," 487.

\textsuperscript{11} "The Origin of Continuous Vaudeville," \textit{New York Dramatic Mirror},
XLI (December 24, 1898), 95.
war, Hopkins moved his wife and family to Providence, Rhode Island. In Providence, Hopkins embarked upon his first vaudeville venture. After running a local playhouse for several years in Providence, he decided to go West.  

Beginning as an understudy for Benjamin Keith at the People's Theatre in Chicago, Hopkins raised that theatre to one of the best in the city. Hopkins recalled his experiences in Chicago as "the real beginning of my career of ownership."  

Though Hopkins had achieved a world-wide reputation as a backer of pugilists, he could have easily passed as dean of an English cathedral, provided, of course, he discarded his handsome gold watch chain and diamond stickpin. Tall, with more than a slight tendency to rotundity, his "ventral protuberance and fine adamantine face" were excellent Police Gazette supplements. His balding head covered by an immense hat, Hopkins' presence outside any theatre exuded confidence and respect.  

In April of 1894 he leased Pope's Theatre, an old legitimate house in St. Louis, from John Havlin and Oliver Hagan. Hopkins hoped to win St. Louisians to a theatrical novelty which had already captured the

---

12 Leavitt, Fifty Years in Theatrical Management, p. 190.
14 St. Louis Republic, August 23, 1896.
15 Reedy's Mirror, IV (December 30, 1894), 4-5.
16 New York Dramatic Mirror, XXI (April 21, 1894), 11.
fancy of Easterners, continuous vaudeville.

The appearance of continuous vaudeville explains a great deal about the rise of vaudeville. Managers began testing new techniques for attracting theatre audiences. The traditional notions of what represented a "good" theatre were transformed. Perhaps one of the characteristic facts of the gilded age was the theatre's conquest by business enterprise. The cost of management, the expansion of the market with the rise of new cities, and the increased opportunities for profit "conspired to place theaters like newspapers in the hands of men economically competent."  

Opportunism had inspired continuous vaudeville's first experiment in 1885 under B. F. Keith. Of course there had been continuous performances before Keith, but they had been of a different character. In the dime museums, for instance, the show had been continuous, but the audience was "dumped out" every hour, and a new crowd allowed to enter. The system developed by Keith and imitated by Hopkins allowed the individual to enter the theatre and sit through every performance from 1 to 11 P.M.  

In one instance a woman and her daughter entered Pope's Theatre at one o'clock and remained there until the husband brought snacks for their dinners at six o'clock. The family after finishing dinner


18 St. Louis Post Dispatch, April 21, 1895.
stayed on for the evening show.\(^{19}\)

At first Hopkins' continuous theatre was looked at by some critics as a "museum freak."\(^{20}\) His policy of having specialty numbers performed between each act of the drama was regarded as impairing the efforts of the resident stock company. Some patrons complained that actors had no chance to develop their characters when the story line was broken by the antics of jugglers, animal acts and magicians.\(^{21}\) However, the *New York Dramatic Mirror* advised actors that their professions were not in any real danger from the encroachment of the stage by animals and vaudeville performers:

> Pessimists have short memories. There is nothing to be gained by deploring the present craze for the unusual in the theatre . . . As to the dancers, tumblers, strong men and quadrupeds, they will always have their place in the general economy. But they will not steadily have places in the theatre.\(^{22}\)

Nevertheless, the *Mirror* was concerned about the country's craze for the continuous performances. The continuous performances were, the *Mirror* complained, diverting patronage from the genuine variety halls and creating congregations of idlers in theatres across the country. In short, vaudeville was demoralizing the dramatic tastes of Americans and

\(^{19}\) *Ibid.* July 31, 1898.

\(^{20}\) *Reedy's Mirror*, IV (September 2, 1894), 10.

\(^{21}\) *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 21, 1895.

\(^{22}\) "No Cause for Alarm," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, XXXII (September 22, 1894), 8.
corrupting the reputations of those legitimate theatres which had adopted a vaudeville program. As to the longevity of the continuous performances the Mirror unwittingly concluded: "... there can be no permanency in any form of amusement that is not born of a normal demand by the public."  

Undaunted by such gloomy prognostications, men like Hopkins were determined to make vaudeville a successful entertainment form. Hopkins made it clear that vaudeville was his business: "I am not here for a day, not to live on the reputation of the past, but of the present, now in the making." To insure success he made it plain that his theatre would be open all year round; the price of admission 10, 20 and 30 cents. Anticipating large crowds, he promised artists of the finest quality. The dignity of the legitimate actor may have been a serious thing, but the dollar was also an important consideration. In fact, the advertising acquired by the dramatic actor's association with vaudeville performances oiled the door for the actor's return to the legitimate drama at an increased salary.

---

24 Ibid.
25 Reedy's Mirror, IV (September 2, 1894), 10.
By the summer of 1894 vaudeville companies were consistently playing the Standard, Hagan, Havlin and Pope's theatres. In July of 1894 the newly-opened roof garden atop the Union Trust Building at Seventh and Olive advertised continuous performances. Continuous entertainment was from 8 P.M. to 11 P.M., and manager Percy Denton of the Union Trust promised that there would be nothing in the performances either vulgar or "grossly suggestive."  

Manager Lew Parker of the Highlands, a popular entertainment resort for St. Louisians in the late nineties, found that few people appreciated how difficult it was for managers to keep out words like damn, liar and slob from a vaudeville performance. Variety actors, Parker complained, had the most trying time in adapting to vaudeville, as their performances in the variety theatres were filled with obscenities. Nevertheless, manager Parker pledged publicly that every act, gag, song and gesture would be screened for offensiveness. In Parker's opinion it was the careful control over programming and content that made vaudeville the "favorite form of amusement." Even the performers were aware of vaudeville's new moral tone. The Post Dispatch felt that the improved moral tone of the stage and especially the vaudeville stage was exemplified in the case of Maud Courtney, a singer at the newly built Columbia Theatre. Not only was Courtney a church-goer, but she

28 St. Louis Post Dispatch, July 30, 1894.
29 Ibid.
lived with her mother at a respectable hotel and performed in the theatre only long enough to do her number.  

Vaudeville was achieving respectability. The managers of the St. Louis theatres made known their intentions to keep their theatres and their entertainment free from any connection with the low variety houses. In an interview with a reporter for the St. Louis Chronicle, James J. Butler, manager for the Standard Theatre and President of the Empire Circuit, advocated a more systematic booking arrangement between the theatres of the Empire Circuit. This arrangement would help the Circuit maintain high quality acts. Butler also recommended that a secretary be appointed to inform the respective houses in the Empire Circuit of every "vaudeville act" playing the reputable theatres in cities across the Midwest. Butler hoped that the organization and others like it could "expel all variety actors who play the dives."

In December of 1894 the St. Louis Variety Actors decided that their organization should protect theatre managers from insiders and outsiders who might commit breaches of etiquette. Moreover, the Variety Actors Association proposed that all amateur prize fights and performances by infamous women be removed as dramatic attractions. Respectability had become a saleable commodity and theatrical success, a survival of the "cleanest."

---

30 Ibid. October 9, 1898.

31 St. Louis Chronicle, January 8, 1894.
By October of 1894 reports flooded the columns of St. Louis' local newspapers with rumors of local capitalists seeking to take advantage of the vaudeville craze by building new theatres. Though few of these plans came to fruition, the locations discussed for these new theatres were to be "far enough out to bar out the tough element . . ." and the Negroes. At least one manager of a vaudeville theatre had restricted seating for Negroes to a penned-off section of the house. Ollie Hagan, manager of the Hagan Theatre, in response to criticisms of his policy of seating Negroes in the balcony of his theatre replied that Negroes paid less than 1% of his expenses. The balcony of the Standard Theatre according to William Noonan, a frequent theatregoer in those days, was known as "nigger heaven." Vaudeville had become respectable by confining the "undesirables" to a restricted area.

With freedom from vulgarity, the absence of liquor, and the ban upon Negroes, vaudeville began to be distinguished as a form of entertainment from the stigma surrounding the variety theatre. Though the Presbyterian Church still regarded vaudeville as a "questionable" amusement, the vaudeville managers' elimination of obscenity and profanity, characteristic of the variety house, made the performances suitable for

32 St. Louis Post Dispatch, October 28, 1894.
33 Ibid. October 30, 1895.
34 William Noonan, private interview, St. Louis, Missouri, April, 1968.
the American family as a group. The traditional religious objections to the wasting of money upon amusement were undermined by the 10-20-30 cent admission prices characteristic of the continuous houses.

Though vaudeville began to prosper, problems continued to plague the variety house. Following the murder of Benjamin Frank Lamar in Esher's Gaiety Theatre, Reverend Frank Tyrrell of St. Louis' Central Methodist Church paid a visit to the infamous den. Reverend Tyrrell complained that the language of the variety theatre was abominable, a sure sign that the spirit of Cain was dominant in human hearts. The "laissez-faire" atmosphere prevailing in the variety house needed, in the words of the Reverend, to be opposed by the "spirit of Christ." In his opinion the variety theatre had infected both visitors from the rural hamlets as well as the impressionable young boys of the city. In order to correct the evils of the variety theatre he strongly urged that the variety theatre's alliance with the saloon be broken once and for all.

With the increasing pressure brought by police raids on the variety theatres, the deaths of Jacob and Lizzie Esher, and the rising star of

---

35 Synod of the State of Missouri for the Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the Synod of the State of Missouri for the Presbyterian Church, Carthage, Missouri, October, 1893.


37 St. Louis Post Dispatch, October 3, 1897.
vaudeville's success, the variety business was on its way out. William Esher, Jacob Esher's son, predicted an end in sight for the variety theatre: "We're dead in this town. We've got too much sense to try to open."  

Though the variety business continued to operate in St. Louis outside the fringes of the law well into the first decades of the twentieth century, the Post Dispatch saw the success of the variety theatre by 1896 as a "thing of the past."  Albert McLean in his book American Vaudeville as Ritual has suggested, variety entertainment by 1915 began to lose its "distinctive identity" and became either the modern burlesque show or a replica of the vaudeville theatre.  As one writer described the change from variety to vaudeville:

It was a confused and horny and tawdry era in which the first burlesque shows took shape, side by side with variety entertainment. But while variety became vaudeville and aligned itself with talent, burlesque became itself and aligned itself with dirt.  

As distinguished from the circus, minstrel shows and menagerie, the variety theatre catered almost exclusively to males. The variety theatre was never able to capture or hold the family audience. Enterprising variety theatre managers like George Deagle and William C.

---

38 Ibid. October 22, 1897.

39 Ibid. May 17, 1896.

40 McLean, American Vaudeville as Ritual, p. 30.

Mitchell made overt invitations to both women and children, but the presence of liquor and the use of the wine-room prevented the cultivation of any permanent family trade.

The death of variety was also a product of St. Louis' building bigger and more fashionable theatres. These theatres offered new and more comfortable surroundings while promising their patrons the best in variety entertainment. All represented attempts to capture the mass audience. The managers of these theatres acknowledged that the secret to business success lay in providing family entertainment acceptable to the middle class as well as the general audience. This entertainment was removed from the city's centers of vice. This entertainment would cater almost exclusively to white audiences. This form of entertainment, comprising the elements of the circus with its animals and clowns, the minstrel show with its blackface entertainers, and the variety theatre with its spirit of good fellowship, was vaudeville.

II

Conclusion

The period following the Civil War was characterized by the growth of urban populations. Supplied with more leisure, the by-product of improved industrialization techniques, the heterogeneous urban populations created a demand for a variety of amusements. Like many cities throughout the country, St. Louis fitted this description in the period from
The opening of The Black Crook at Deagle's Varieties Theatre in 1867 accelerated the trend of St. Louis' theatres in the direction of variety entertainment. Though The Black Crook was not a variety show, it had become the custom of such productions to work specialty acts into their scripts on an experimental basis. In time this variant in amusement employed by the producers of The Black Crook became a standardized form of amusement. The variety theatre emerged as a popular diversion. Its model was followed by managers in St. Louis and by other variety theatres throughout the country.

The Black Crook shall always be remembered as a production of superb scenic effects and ballet extravaganzas. More importantly, The Black Crook awakened the public's desire for more productions featuring American characters and their virtues.

The opening of the Theatre Comique in 1873 provided St. Louis with variety entertainment as swift moving as the city it served. Together with unusual novelty acts the afterpieces performed by the Comique's variety actors and actresses supplied its patrons with a social awareness, though crude, of local and national concerns.

The afterpieces of the Theatre Comique featured minority caricatures. Caricatures of Germans, Irish, Chinese and Negroes were the most common. These performances were comical but exaggerated. The distorted representations of both Negroes and immigrant groups upon the variety stage suggests an ethnocentric pattern. Evidence makes it clear that
Negro caricatures were based upon the dissimilarities rather than the likenesses of Negroes to Caucasians. Profits were acquired by the variety theatre by conforming to popular beliefs, not by opposing them. Popular myths about Negroes and immigrant groups existed and were accepted uncritically by artists; these myths entered into their artistic creations, and were strengthened and perpetuated by artistic repetition.

In time the variety theatre encountered Puritan morality, a continuing influence upon the social thought of America. Puritanism demanded that amusement serve socially useful ends. With its liquor trade and prostitution the variety theatre did not meet these standards. The poor reputation of the variety theatre became an issue of increasing concern to the citizens of St. Louis. Along with garbage disposal, municipal corruption and street lighting, amusement became a social problem.

The reform of the variety theatre proved troublesome. First, involvement between variety theatre managers and corrupt local officials complicated the efforts of reforming elements. Second, unlike European countries enjoying government censorship, the American stage had developed with little interference by government agencies. Lacking precedents for what constituted theatrical morality and/or immorality, local authorities in St. Louis, prodded by the circulation-minded Post Dispatch, resorted to periodic raids upon the variety theatres. The conflict between variety theatre managers and city officials in St. Louis
challenges the cliche describing the social life of the last decade of the nineteenth century as "the gay nineties."

Americans have traditionally sought pleasure as a diversion from business, but there has usually been a class of enterprisers who have made pleasure a business. Tony Pastor, B. F. Keith, F. F. Proctor and John D. Hopkins recognized that variety entertainment could be profitable if made respectable. The decline of the variety theatre was the result of both more effective legislation and the success enjoyed by the more respectable vaudeville theatres. But to conclude that vaudeville represented a step in the direction of progress obscures the positive contributions of the saloon-fixtured variety theatre.

The variety theatre was a popular institution of the working classes of the city. It met their demands for certain necessities. Hedged in on every side by laws, the variety theatre persisted in existing and flourishing. Several needs were satisfied by the variety theatre saloons.

The variety theatre provided working classes with leisure hours apart from their squalid living conditions. It offered a general atmosphere of freedom for discussion, and in short was the clearing-house for the common intelligence. For all of its lessons in corruption and vice, the variety theatre was a social and intellectual center.

For the large floating population of the city whose homes were in the streets or cheap lodging houses, the variety theatre's saloon was practically the only basis of their food supply. The saloons could
supply food in abundant quantities because of competition between St. Louis' large brewing companies. These companies owned a large number of saloons in the city.

The variety theatre assisted men in finding work. The laboring man out of employment knew that in some saloon he was likely to find at least temporary relief. The variety theatres often employed claquers to cheer the efforts of its performers.\textsuperscript{42}

The saloon facilities of the variety theatre furnished many people of the city with the only available toilet conveniences. It was not until the Housing Investigation of 1903 in St. Louis that the building of outside privies was prohibited.\textsuperscript{43}

The wine-rooms of the variety theatres were not always used for immoral purposes. It was not uncommon for the family to come here on cold nights to save fuel and light. Where else could a respectable young woman entertain her suitors when her family's single room served as kitchen, dining-room, parlor and bedroom?\textsuperscript{44}

The entertainment provided by the variety theatre, though cheap and vulgar, at least satisfied the working man's longing for amusement.

\textsuperscript{42} Buel and Dacus, \textit{A Tour of St. Louis or, the Inside Life of a Great City}, p. 412. A claqueur was a person hired to applaud performers.

\textsuperscript{43} Ruth Crawford, \textit{The Immigrant in St. Louis} (St. Louis, Missouri, 1916), p. 19.

\textsuperscript{44} Royal L. Melendy, "Saloon in Chicago: I.," \textit{The American Journal of Sociology}, VI (November, 1900), 300.
With the decline of the variety theatre and the rise of vaudeville, one might expect the latter to capture the former's business. However, the St. Louis Post Dispatch predicted that the transference of loyalties from variety to vaudeville would not be accomplished immediately, if ever:

The death of the old variety performance may have a tendency to elevate the stage all along the line. But writers of the variety theatre catered to the mentality of a mighty concourse of people, whose powers of appreciation are as far below legitimate vaudeville as some people's powers of appreciation are below grand opera.⁴⁵

Vaudeville in St. Louis achieved respectability and success by placating the religious sensibilities of its middle-class patrons, removing liquor and by segregating Negroes within the theatre. The whole question of race and theatre policy in St. Louis is an area requiring further exploration.

Amusement in America should continue to merit the historian's attention. The examination of this field of inquiry supplies yet another fragment of man's commentary upon himself and his social relationships.

---

⁴⁵St. Louis Post Dispatch, May 17, 1896.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Bibliographies


Manuscript Collections

David Theatre Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

Gundlach Theatre Collection, Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis.

Manuscript Collection of Miscellaneous Articles Concerning The Black Crook, New York Public Library at Lincoln Center.

Theatre Program Collection, St. Louis Public Library, St. Louis, Missouri.

Unpublished Materials


Public Documents

Benedict DeBar to George Fales, Deed of Trust, Recorder of Deeds Office in St. Louis, Missouri, Book No. 596, June 20, 1878.

Louisa Esher vs. Jacob E. Esher, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1884.

Jacob E. Esher vs. Joseph Weil and John Craig, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1874.
Jacob E. Esher vs. H. Clay Sexton, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1888.

George Fales vs. William C. Mitchell, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1878.


Missouri Revised Statutes, 1889.

William C. Mitchell and A. Sprague vs. Belle Hewitt, St. Louis Cir. Ct., 1879.

Record Books of the Circuit Court, Criminal Division, Book No. 9, 1856-1858; Book No. 10, 1859-1860; Book No. 13, 1864-1866. Municipal Courts Building in St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis Court of Criminal Correction Record Book, 1892. Municipal Courts Building in St. Louis, Missouri.

St. Louis Revised Ordinances, 1881, 1887.


Newspapers

Louisville Daily Journal, 1867.

Memphis Daily Bulletin, 1867.

Missouri Democrat (St. Louis, Missouri), 1861-1875.

Missouri Republican (St. Louis, Missouri), 1866-1880.


St. Louis Chronicle, 1894.

St. Louis Dispatch, 1867; 1868.

St. Louis Globe Democrat, 1879; 1880; 1881; 1908; 1931.
St. Louis Post Dispatch, 1874-1898.

St. Louis Republic, 1889; 1891; 1895-1897; 1899.

St. Louis Times, August 30, 1873.

Westliche Post (St. Louis, Missouri), 1881.

Periodicals

The Hornet. St. Louis, Missouri, 1880-1883.

New York Dramatic Mirror. 1881; 1894; 1898.

Reedy's Mirror. 1894.

St. Louis Home Journal. 1867-1868.

The Spectator. St. Louis, Missouri, 1880-1892.

Other Contemporary Sources

Interview with William Noonan, Doorman for the American Theatre, St. Louis, Missouri, April 10, 1968.

Synod of the State of Missouri for the Presbyterian Church, Minutes of the Synod of the State of Missouri for the Presbyterian Church, Carthage, Missouri, October, 1893. Union Theological Seminary, New York City, New York.

The Veiled Prophet, His Mysterious Majesty's Golden Jubilee, Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, 1878.

Women's Christian Temperance Union, Minutes of the Women's Christian Temperance Union Tenth Annual Meeting, Springfield, Missouri, September 30-October 3, 1892.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Books


Buel, James W. and Dacus, James A. A Tour of St. Louis or, the Inside Life of a Great City. St. Louis: Western Publishing Co., 1876.


Articles


APPENDIX
1. Gentlemen, at the time of rehearsal or performance, will not wear their hats in the Green Room, or talk vociferously. The Green Room is a place appropriated for the quiet and orderly meeting of the company, who are to be called thence, and thence only, by the call boy, to attend on the stage. The Stage Manager is not to be applied to in that place, on any matter of business, or with any personal complaint.

2. The call for rehearsals will be put up in the Green Room, or usual place for such notices, previous to 9 o'clock in the evening, and no plea that such call was not seen will be received. All rehearsals must be attended. For absence from each scene, a fine of twenty-five cents; whole rehearsal, five dollars.

3. Ladies and gentlemen, prevented by indisposition from attending rehearsal, must give notice to the Prompter BEFORE the hour of beginning.

4. If any Performer shall be unable, from illness, to appear at night, the written certificate of a respectable Physician, must be sent to the Manager at least four hours before the commencement of the performance. Any neglect of the above will empower the Manager to cancel the engagement.

5. In all cases of sickness, the Manager reserves to himself the right of payment or stoppage of salary during the absence of the sick person.

6. Any person appearing intoxicated on the stage, or unable from that cause, to perform their duty in any department, shall forfeit a week's salary, and be liable to be discharged.

7. Performers, Musicians, or Employees, absenting themselves from their duties in any department of the Theatre, without consent of the Manager, shall forfeit such sum as shall be deemed equivalent to the offence.
8. A Performer introducing his own language, or improper jests not in the author, or swearing in his part, shall forfeit one dollar.

9. Every gentleman engaged in the Theatre shall provide himself with such silk or cotton tights and stockings, wigs, feathers, swords, shoes and boots, as may be appropriate and necessary to the costume he is wearing. If the costume be of the present period, the whole of it must be provided by the Performer.

10. Performers taking benefits must first submit their programme to the Manager for approval, and will not be allowed to accept of auxiliary aid without his consent. Benefits can be announced only two days in advance (unless by consent of the management). For a breach of this rule the party will forfeit all claim to the benefit.

11. No person permitted on any account to address the audience, without the consent of the Manager. Any violation of this article will subject the party to forfeiture of a week's salary, or discharge by the Manager.

12. A Performer refusing a part allotted him or her by the manager, (not conflicting with his or her engagement,) will forfeit his or her salary during the run of the piece, and on any night of its representation during the season, and be liable to be discharged by the Manager.

13. A Performer rehearsing from a book or part at the last rehearsal of a new piece, and after proper time has been given for study, forfeits one dollar.

14. A Performer restoring what is cut out by the Manager, will forfeit one dollar.

15. Performers will not be allowed to go into the audience part of the Theatre, during performance, without the consent of the Stage Manager.

16. No intoxicating drinks of any kind will be allowed on the Stage, in the Green Room or Dressing Rooms.

17. No member of the Company will be allowed to introduce any person behind the scenes, into the Green Room or any of the Dressing Rooms, without the consent of the Stage Manager.

18. All dresses will be regulated and arranged on the morning of the performance; and no appeal will be permitted against the decision of the Stage Manager.
19. No Prompter, Performer or Musician will be permitted to copy any manuscript or music belonging to the Theatre, without permission of the Manager, under penalty of fifty dollars.

20. All persons engaged in this Theatre must keep the Stage Manager advised of their place of residence.

21. The Leader of the Orchestra, Master Carpenter, and all heads of departments, are required to make weekly reports to the Stage Manager of all offences against these Rules and Regulations, and he in turn will report to the Manager.

22. Any member of the Company having a complaint or request to make other than pertains to the business being transacted on the Stage at the time, must do so in writing, and leave it at the Box Office, addressed to the Manager.

23. Any new rule which may be found necessary shall be considered as part of these Rules and Regulations, after it is publicly made known in the Green Room.
Vita Sheet

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Name John Russell David Date of Birth August 5, 1939

Local Address

Home Address 911 Salem Way
Ellisville, Missouri 63011

Note the Colleges or Universities Attended, the Years attended, the degree earned, and the Major Field.

Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri 1957-1962, Bachelor of Arts, History

If you have had any special honors or awards, please note them here. If not, go on to the next item.

Thesis Title (Include name of adviser)

The Rise and Decline of the Variety Theatre in St. Louis, 1867-1896. Dr. Herbert Rosenthal, Adviser

If you have published, please note the articles or books at this point.