

# Oldtime theater action recalled

By JANE CULLEN

Several weeks ago, at lunch with Claire McNamara, Cappi Quigley and Patty Grand, conversation turned to "the old days" — not theirs, but of the town.

One of the questions was about old theatres — old to them meaning, "Was the Strand once the Merced"? The answer was yes and then it went back to the Strand — but get it from the late Corwin Radcliffe.



For the young and newcomers, Radcliffe was of an Illinois family of newspapermen who came to Merced in 1894. The next year he purchased half interest in the Merced Sun, for 24 years published under the firm name of Radcliffe Brothers. (His brother, C.D., who died in 1919, settled in Colusa in 1888.)

On May 1, 1925, Radcliffe sold the paper to the McClung brothers, who merged it into the present Sun-Star.

From 1922, first on the Sun and later on the Sun-Star until his death, Radcliffe conducted a daily column under the heading "Rad's Ramblings." It was on the back, editorial page of the newspaper and often was the first page read in Merced households each evening.

An accurate and interested historian, "Rad" produced one of few definitive histories of Merced which remains a major source book. Rereading his columns in old issues, it is amazing how apt facts and figures are to life here today, a good 35 years after his death.

"Rad's Ramblings" for Feb. 11, 1938 was about "Merced Playhouses of the Old and New Day." It read:

"With the opening of the splendid new Strand Theatre at 17th and N streets tonight, the memory of this oldtimer harks back to Merced amusement houses of an earlier day.

"The first theater or hall was built soon after the town was established, probably in 1873, when Merced was a year old. It was called Washington Hall, a two-story frame structure on Main Street between the present location of the Banks and Bedesen Market (where Merced Floral now is) and the Sterling (where Kino's Restaurant now is). There was a store on the lower floor and upstairs the hall. When the county seat was moved from Snelling late in '72, the

records of the various offices were kept in two places — Garibaldi Hall, now the Freitas building at 16th and L (long-since a parking lot) and Washington Hall. This arrangement continued until the dedication and occupancy of the courthouse in 1874.

"Other halls in the seventies were Levinski's at 17th and M streets (now the Hotel Merced corner) and Barney Grogan's hall on the north side of 17th, where the McGinnis store now is (now Record Rendezvous). These latter halls, including Garibaldi's, were the scene of occasional entertainments, but Washington Hall was the main place for shows.

"In 1884, Leeker's Hall came into the picture. This was a frame stable on M Street, on the corner of the alley between the present City Hall and the Shafter Building. It was converted into an "Opera House", the stalls serving as the private dressing rooms. A stage was built at one end with a series of benches rising to the ceiling at the other which served as a gallery.

"There were some sterling attractions in old Leeker's Hall. Dan Sully played there more than once, and Ward and James presented "Julius Caesar." Believe it or not, we were in the cast of this production. Ward played Marc Anthony. James had the character of Brutus and Charles Herman had the role of Cassius. Kathryn Kidder was in the cast. You know in "Julius Caesar" you must have a mob scene. The "mob" was a foursome of Merced roughnecks of the nineties — Art Scofield, Fred Tretheway, Eustace Wheeler and this scribe. We stood on a mound common to livery stables at the rear of the stage and formed the mob which was about to tear Brutus or somebody to pieces as Marc Anthony extolled the virtues of the murdered Caesar.

"Leeker's Hall continued to house Merced's theatrical offerings from the time it was opened, Feb. 2, 1884, with a performance of the comedy company of Albert and Allister, until about 1907, when R. Bancroft remodeled the old Lewis building on Main Street, now the Montgomery building (now called Cowboy Corner) into what was called the Barcroft Opera House. This served as Merced's theater for a number of years. Marjorie Rambeau appeared there in "Merely Mary Ann" in person. Merced had not yet gone movie.

"In 1912, J.V. Spough erected a corrugated iron theatre on L Street, where Jack Hill, Paul Kopf and Dick Ham now carry on, calling it "The Orpheum." (It isn't recalled what this business was; in any event, it is now a city parking lot.) It was there we saw our first movie. The theatre was a moving picture venture. Senator LaFollette spoke from the Orpheum stage in his candidacy for the presidency. The Orpheum was destroyed by fire a year or two after it was opened.

"C.H. Douglass appeared on the Merced amusement horizon in 1915. He erected a moving picture theater on 17th, adjoining the Troy Laundry (this would be the southwest corner of 17th and M) which he called the Elite and which served until 1920 when he opened the then-new Merced Theatre. During a part of this time, R. Kaehler also operated a small picture theatre in his

building on 17th which was later remodeled into the Bear Drug Store (just about where Brunelli's stands today).

"During this period between the Leeker's Hall regime and the building of the Douglass Merced Theatre, and following conversion of the Lewis building into the Barcroft Opera House, there were several moving picture enterprises, more or less short lived. Sol Shockley (the same man who had the popcorn wagon and registered voters) and Marion Hawkins at one time were running rival movie houses across the street from each other. Hawkins had the Barcroft Opera House and Shockley had his show running where the Sun-Star is now established (now the Wine Cellar).

"The Merced Theatre was opened by Douglass and his brother-in-law, Francis D. Egan, March 2, 1920. It was considered then a beautiful theatre and it had a beautiful opening in the presentation of the operatta, "Maytime." Other sterling "road shows" appeared at the Merced — Guy Bates Post in "The Masquerader," Violet Heming in "Three Faces East," and Kolb and Dill several times.

"The Merced Theatre was taken over by the Golden State chain in 1924, and in 1931 they erected the beautiful "New Merced Theatre" at 17th and J streets which stands as one of the most attractive playhouses in the interior of California.

"In December of 1936, the old Merced Theatre which had been renamed the Strand was destroyed by fire, and now on its ashes rises the new Strand, modern to the last degree both inside and out.

"The new Strand corner, previous to its occupancy by Douglass with his Merced Theatre of 1920, was a vacant lot. It was close in to town and was a favorite location for tent shows and what not. We recall one summer — the Sun office was nearby, across the street — a merry-go-round operated on the corner and they had a droning, coughing, music box arrangement which the Sun declared editorially ought to be suppressed cause it sounded like a one-lunged Reo (a very sporty old roadster). One of the most notable events ever happening on the corner was a Chatauqua address by William Jennings Bryan who spoke to a crowded tent."

There you have a complete history of theatres and movie houses in Merced from its founding until 1938. Rad did not do the old, then New Merced Theatre full justice by merely saying it was "one of the most attractive playhouses in the interior of California."

Clearly he was more attracted to the old Leeker's Hall and his performance there "on a mound common to livery stables." It's understandable but he might have mentioned those dreamy clouds that drifted across the ceiling of the New Merced — a marvelous distraction when scenes on the screen got too gory.

The left hand side, downstairs, was the place to sit on a Saturday afternoon, but it had to be ahead of the balcony, so the clouds could be watched during tense moments of "Tarzan and the

Apes." It should be noted there was no refreshment stand in the lobby — if a soda was had, it was next door, which meant leaving the theatre. After spending 10 cents to get in, who had a nickel for a coke?



(EDITOR'S NOTE: Jane C. Cullen was a member of the original Merced County Historical Society board of directors and remains actively interested in local history.)

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