

Belle Mehus City Auditorium

Bismarck was brimming with civic pride the evening of January 19, 1914, when the Belle Mehus City Auditorium first opened its doors. Designed by local architect Arthur Van Horn and built by Bismarck Construction Co. for about \$35,000, the handsome brick and stone structure was the cultural showpiece for a small town that only 40 years earlier had been little more than a collection of saloons and bawdy houses, and where horse-drawn wagons could still be more dependable than newfangled automobiles on the mostly unpaved streets.

Design of the building was originally to have gone to a Minneapolis architectural firm, but when their bid came in at more than \$80,000, the city commission turned to Van Horn, one of North Dakota's leading architects at the time. The money was raised through a special bond issue. Van Horn, who founded the architectural firm now known as Ritterbush Associates, designed a number of downtown buildings, most notably the Kensington (Prince Hotel), which was originally known as the Van Horn Hotel.

The opening night gala featured Reginald DeKoven's popular operetta, "Robin Hood," conducted by the composer. Starring in the role of Maid Marian was soprano Bessie Abbott, a one time regular at the Metropolitan Opera who had made recordings with the likes of Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti, and who was now then billed as "America's Greatest Lyric Soprano."

Although ticket prices were as high as \$18 for a box seat, an enormous sum in those days, the house was sold out. Ticket demand was so great that the privately owned Bijou Theatre ran an advertisement urging people to try the Bijou if they couldn't get tickets to the new auditorium. Special transportation was arranged to bring theater-goers from Mandan, and elaborate parties were thrown at the McKenzie (Patterson) and Grand Pacific Hotels.

From all reports the opening night was a great success. Mrs. W.F. Cushing, wife of The Bismarck Tribune editor, wrote "It was a brilliant assemblage, one of which Bismarck, Queen of the Slope, has every reason to feel proud."

In addition to its physical beauty, the auditorium was blessed with superb acoustics, and famous visitors were pleased to find their art could be heard perfectly even in the furthest seats. Musicians who have performed in the auditorium included such legendary figures as violinist Fritz Kreisler, Joseph Szigeti and Isaac Stern; sopranos Geraldine Farrar and Beverly Sills; contraltos Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Marian Anderson; tenor Jan Peerce; baritones Leonard Warren and Nelson Eddy; bass Jerome Hines, and pianists Emmanuel Ax and Joseph Lhevinne. Will Rogers told stories; Ethel Barrymore played in "The School for Scandal," and Al Jolson did a vaudeville routine here. Two of the greatest ballerinas of the century --Anna Pavlova and Dame Alicia Markova -- have danced on the auditorium's wood stage.

Theatrical productions, most apparently by visiting companies, seem to have provided much of the fare for the auditorium in the early years. Bismarck audiences saw The Mikado, Peg O'My Heart, Blindness of Virtue ("a play every father, mother and young girl should know"), Follow Me, and other stage productions just before and during World War I. D. W. Griffith's now-classic film, Birth of a Nation, was shown in the Auditorium on January 12, 1916.

Not to be outdone by musicians and entertainers, politicians have also found the Belle a useful venue. President Woodrow Wilson tried to drum up support for the League of Nations from the auditorium rostrum in 1919; and a future president--John F. Kennedy-- also put in an appearance here, as did presidential hopefuls Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy.

In 1931, the City Auditorium together with the adjacent, then-brand new, World War Memorial Building, housed the State Legislature after fire had destroyed the Old State Capitol.

Most importantly, however, the Belle has been a showcase for local talent. Over the years, the Community Players, the Little Symphony and its eventual successor, the Bismarck-Mandan Symphony Orchestra, and countless school productions have enriched our community beyond measure.

In the 1920's and '30's, local productions by the Community Players included The Dover Road, The Bohemian Girl, When Chimes Rang, Stolen Money, Her Husband's Wife and The Night of January 15th. The last-named

was taken to the State Penitentiary for a performance in which the "lifers" among the inmates played the jury.

Bismarck's own Music Man, Clarion Larson, produced and directed a number of musicals in the auditorium. He also conducted the Little Symphony and led his first performances of Handel's "Messiah" there. He would eventually conduct Handel's oratorio for 65 consecutive years.

Following World War II, use of the auditorium declined. The movies and television provided new forms of entertainment, and groups like the Community Players and eventually even Civic Music went out of existence. Local theatrical productions were now staged in newer school auditoriums which had modern stage machinery and adequate room for sets and costumes. In the meantime, Bismarck was not giving the aging structure the care it deserved. The original box seats and much of the ornate trim were torn out. By the 1940's and '50's, the once elegant auditorium had become downright seedy and something of an embarrassment. The Bismarck-Mandan Symphony Orchestra and its audiences often had to put up with a noisy obbligato provided by the heating system. There was even talk of demolishing the building.

Fortunately, clearer thinking prevailed with 65% of the populace approving a \$2.4 million renovation in 1996. This included expansion of both audience and backstage facilities along with the restoration.

Lead by "Friends of the Belle" Chair Susan Lundberg, she went on to raise an additional \$100,000.00 when bids came in at \$2.5 million. Leading contributors were General Motors, with the influence of former Bismarcker and GM Vice Chairman, Harry Pearce and David Davis, a life-long supporter of the arts and the brother of former N.D. Governor John E. Davis.

The auditorium has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and now shines with all its former glory. Renamed in 1989 in honor of the much-loved music teacher, the Belle Mehus City Auditorium is again opening its doors, this time as Bismarck's arts showcase for the 21st Century.