

The Tabor Opera House

by Lucie Jenkins

The name of Leadville, Colorado, stands out in the annals of frontier history as a remarkable example of the mining boom town. With its population estimated as approaching thirty thousand, Leadville in the 1870's and 1880's was a lively settlement, full of colorful personalities. Perhaps the most colorful person to inhabit the town of Leadville during this period was Horace Austin Warner Tabor. Tabor, an easterner, came to Leadville after failing to prove up on a Kansas homestead. Once in Colorado, however, luck smiled on him. He struck a rich vein of silver in his mining enterprise, becoming a millionaire overnight. Tabor's generous and grandiose personality placed him in the center of Colorado society and endeared him to the hearts of the Leadville citizens.

Tabor's generosity, coupled with his desire to repay the town that made him millions, inspired him to build the Tabor Opera House. The opera house was an entertainment facility greatly needed in Leadville, for as one citizen recalls, "we had so much money to spend lavishly, and we had no fine entertainment."¹

The Tabor Opera House, built in 1879, reflected both the personality of Leadville and of Tabor. Constructed to be the "largest and best opera house west of the Mississippi,"² it was a welcome addition to the bustling mining town and was gratefully received by the entertainment-hungry citizens. A spectacular building, the story of its construction, theatrical productions, and visiting performers makes a fascinating history.

Horace Tabor chose as a site for his opera house Harrison Avenue, the main street of Leadville. Tabor contracted J. Thomas Roberts to build the opera house at a cost of thirty thousand dollars. Just three weeks before the opera house was to be completed, Thomas Roberts sold his share in the business and the building was finished by L. E. Roberts.³ The total time required to build the opera house was one hundred days, an amazingly short period of time considering the size and style of the building. The final cost of the building was seventy-eight thousand dollars, not including the price of scenery,

1 Evelyn E. Livingston Furman, *The Tabor Opera House: A Captivating History* (Leadville 1972), p. 34

2 Furman, p. 51

3 Furman, p. 51

furnishings, and other decorations.⁴ The difference between the original estimated cost and the final cost was probably due to Tabor's extravagant insistence on the very best. Tabor demanded excellence, and every new innovation in opera house design was implemented in the construction.

All supplies for the opera house were brought into Leadville by wagon, the railroad reaching only as far west as Webster, Colorado in 1879. Supplies were brought to Leadville over treacherous mountain roads, carried on the four stage and freight lines which ran between Webster and Leadville. There was also an additional line which ran from Canon City northwest to Leadville.⁵

The Tabor Opera House is a three story building constructed of stone, brick, iron, and Portland cement. The walls of the opera house are sixteen inches thick. The frontage of the house measures sixty feet, the length extends one hundred and twenty feet, and the height reaches sixty feet. The ground floor of the building was divided into two store sections. One section was occupied by Sands, Pelton, and Co., a men's clothing store, and the first store in Leadville to have solid glass windows. The other section of the store space was used by J. S. Miller, who used it as a drug store. In the rear of Miller's drug store was Phil Golding's saloon.⁶

In the front section of the second floor was Horace Tabor's living quarters. There were five luxuriously furnished rooms used by Tabor as both a residential suite and as office space. On the third story there were twenty-five sleeping rooms for visiting actors and a few more offices.

The theatre itself was a shining example of the best in opera house construction and furnishings. The auditorium was fifty-seven feet wide and sixty-five feet deep. The backstage area was thirty-four feet in depth and fifty-seven feet wide. The auditorium had a parquet and a dress circle, or balcony. The dress circle was reached by climbing a second flight of stairs and extended around the upper level of the auditorium in a horseshoe shape. The Tabor seated approximately eight hundred and eighty persons when it was completed.

And, as could be expected, the seating was the finest money could buy. Horace Tabor had Andrews and Company opera chairs installed. The chairs, patented in 1876, were the latest in theatre seating.⁷ They were made of ornate cast iron, gilded, and upholstered in red velvet plush. The Andrews Company chairs were unusual because they were movable. The seat would flip up to make a wide aisle and the arm-

4 Furman, p. 51

5 Furman, p. 51

6 Furman, p. 56

7 Furman, p. 56

rests were short to allow plenty of room for hoop skirts and portly gentlemen.⁸ At the time the Tabor was built, the majority of regional theatres seated their patrons in rows of straight-backed chairs, made of wood and with absolutely no padding.

Another seating innovation employed in the Tabor Opera House was incline flooring. Although today's theatre-goer expects the floor to slope upward toward the back of the house, such a thing was unknown in Colorado in 1879. When the Tabor was first built, its auditorium floor was level; however, a few months after the completion of the opera house, Horace Tabor received news of a new idea in theatre seating. Wanting only the best, Tabor had the whole floor ripped up and installed an inclining floor.

In the back of the balcony there were three rows of wooden benches. These were known as the "peanut gallery." If some theatre patron wished to eat or drink while attending a performance, he or she was sent to sit in the peanut gallery, for fear that the plush carpeting or the expensive opera chairs would be ruined if refreshments were allowed in the main seating section.⁹

Seating for distinguished guests and visiting dignitaries was provided by four large proscenium boxes, two on either side of the stage. The boxes were richly furnished and surrounded on three sides by plush velvet curtains. These curtains were to insure the privacy of Horace Tabor and his guests. The boxes were furnished, not with Andrews Company chairs, but instead, ornately carved wooden chairs with soft upholstery.

The interior decoration of the Tabor Opera House was elaborate and expensive. The color scheme was red, gold, white, and sky blue. The Andrews chairs were red and gold, as were most of the curtains and draperies. The aisles were carpeted in thick red plush carpeting, quite an extravagance in muddy Leadville. The walls and ceilings were handsomely frescoed. Near the center of the front section of the ceiling, above the proscenium arch was a painting of cherubs, flowers and ribbons.¹⁰

The lighting for the opera house was provided by gas. Horace Tabor was responsible for the founding of the gas company in Leadville, and the Leadville Gas Company opened for business just two days before the opening night at the Tabor. Coal was used to manufacture the gas. The coal was brought to Leadville by wagon from Canon City, at a cost of fifty dollars per ton.¹¹ The auditorium of the Tabor was lighted by seventy-two gas jets, and the stage was lighted

8. Interview with Theresa O'Brien, Leadville, Colorado August 11, 1973

9. O'Brien, interview

10. Furman, p. 57

11. Furman, p. 57

by a strip of thirty gas footlights. Large brass chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the wall fixtures had fancy glass spiral opaline shades.

As was necessary in Leadville, even during some of the summer months, the opera house was furnace heated and well-ventilated. It is not known what type of fuel was used to heat the opera house, but, because of the high cost of gas and coal, and because of the abundance of timber, it is believed to have been heated by charcoal.¹² One thing is certain, heat was essential, for as the citizens of Leadville enjoy stating, they have "nine months of winter and three months of poor sledding!"¹³

The stage of the Tabor was built to accomodate any stage production. It measured thirty-five feet by fifty-eight feet, and was rated as being the largest west of New York City. The floor of the stage inclined upstage six inches, a popular stage convention in those days. There was also a trap door in the floor of the stage which was put to good use by the traveling magicians. Rising above the stage sixty feet was the fly gallery, a huge open space used to suspend scenery that was not in use.

The scenery used in the opera house was as spectacular as the building itself. At the opening of the Tabor there were ten sets of hand painted, wing-and-drop scenery in stock. Commissioned to J. B. Lamphere, one of the outstanding theatrical artists of the West, the scenery was painted to achieve the most realistic effects possible, causing some of the drops to cost as much as one thousand dollars. Some of the settings portrayed in the drops included a mountain panorama, the Royal Gorge, a formal garden, a balcony scene (popular for Shakespearean productions), a New England kitchen, and a view of Leadville's Harrison Avenue as it looked in 1879.¹⁴

Over the years the opera house was to gain several more sets of scenery, but not by purchasing them. Occasionally theatre troops whose tours were financial failures would come through Leadville. Lacking the money for room and board, they would sometimes be forced to leave their ornate scenery behind as payment of their debts.

The dressing rooms of the Tabor Opera House were as elaborate as the West had ever seen. Located below the stage, they were unusually spacious. The leading lady had her own dressing room on the stage left side of the area, and the leading man's room was at the opposite end. Between the two star dressing rooms were several smaller rooms for the supporting cast. The dressing rooms were fully carpeted and lavishly furnished with fainting couches and beveled glass mirrors. These accomodations become even more inviting when one

¹² O'Brien, interview

¹³ O'Brien, interview

¹⁴ Furman, p. 60

considers the dressing rooms offered by other frontier theatres. Some actors and actresses reported that often a piece of canvas hung up backstage to enclose a small area of privacy was the only dressing facility offered.¹⁵ Leading out of the dressing rooms was a small door which opened into the orchestra pit. There was a fifteen piece orchestra in the early days of the Tabor, and they were dressed in red and gold uniforms.

In the affluent days of Leadville, from 1879 to 1882, performances were grandiose and expensive. Horace Tabor again insisted on the very best for his opera house, and as a result, "each actor and actress ever to attain distinction in those days"¹⁶ came to Leadville. The Tabor Opera House was on the "Silver Circuit," and received plays from the Wallack, the Daly, the Madison Square, and the Union Square Theatres in New York. Leadville expected the best, and Horace Tabor never accepted a stand-in for any performer.

The actors and actresses who came to Leadville usually captured the heart of the town, but life was not always easy. A letter found in the opera house, written by one of the actresses, told of her stagecoach journey. In that one ride between Denver and Leadville her stagecoach tipped over six times! Another problem faced by the traveling actresses was gaining the respect of the more "proper" townspeople. As the child actress, who portrayed Little Eva in the Leadville production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, recalled,

I used to attend Sunday School in those days, and there would be one empty chair . . . on each side of me. You see, since I was a show girl, the other children were not allowed to sit by me.

Not all visiting actresses, however, suffered as these two did. It was a popular custom in Leadville to show appreciation of an actress's performance by throwing money onto the stage while she was taking her curtain calls. Many received showers of money from the free-spending citizens. It was reported that Gladys Robeson, a popular variety entertainer, received over five thousand dollars one night when H. A. W. Tabor and his business partner, W. H. Bush, rivaled for her attention. (Unfortunately for both Mr. Tabor and Mr. Bush, their hopes at being blessed by Miss Robeson's attentions met with little success, for she quite literally "took the money and ran!")

All the famous actors and actresses of the day played on the stage of the Tabor. In those days, when women's liberation was unheard of, the actors were called "wheels" and the actresses were called

15 O'Brien, interview

16 Furman, p. 62

17 O'Brien, interview

“heels.”¹⁸ Perhaps the most famous actress of the day to appear in Leadville was Anna Held. Miss Held was referred to as the “girl with the hourglass figure.” Anna Held reportedly had such a fancy wardrobe that she even wore diamonds on the heels of her shoes. Among the famous actors to appear on stage was Charles Hanford. Hanford was a great Shakespearean actor, who was extremely popular in Leadville, because, surprisingly enough, Shakespeare was Leadville’s favorite playwright. Hanford was evidently also very talented at impersonation, for he could “so cleverly impersonate a woman that even his friends couldn’t tell the difference!”¹⁹ Other famous personalities who appeared at the Tabor included Otis Skinner, Jack S. Langrishe, Mrs. Fiske, Lillian Russell, and Harry Lauder.

The theatrical companies which came to Leadville would spare no expense when it came to production costs. Entire trainloads of scenery and costumes would be shipped as far as Webster on the train, and carried to Leadville by freighter wagon. The stagehands went to great lengths to make every play as realistic as possible. During a production of *Ben Hur*, they even staged the chariot race using real horses. To achieve this feat, the stagehands built a huge revolving treadmill on which the horses ran, giving the effect of great speed.

Another example of realistic effects was the set for a sea adventure production. The stage floor was covered with a sheet of heavy canvas, on which waves were painted. However, mere painting alone did not achieve the desired effect. As a result, the stagehands were ordered to lie down under the canvas and bump their heads up and down, giving the effect of a rolling ocean. From this description it is easy to understand why most productions required at least twenty-five stagehands.²⁰

Legitimate theatre was not the only medium of entertainment on stage at the Tabor Opera House. Harry Houdini, the famous magician, performed there during one of his tours of the West. One spectator remembered, “I saw Houdini drowning in a bottle—the lights went off and on, and eventually he came running down the aisle.”²¹ Other entertainment included boxing matches featuring John L. Sullivan, Jim Corbett, and Jack Dempsey. Circuses played inside the Tabor because it was too cold for the exotic animals to perform outside. John Phillips Sousa and his band gave a concert at the opera house, not to mention scores of other orchestras and bands.

18. Furman, p. 71.

19. Furman, p. 78.

20. Furman, p. 78.

21. O'Brien, interview.

One notable event at the opera house was the lecture given by Oscar Wilde. His lecture was entitled "The Practical Application of the Aesthetic Theory to Interior House Decoration, with Observances on Dress and Personal Ornament."²² Imagine the reaction of the rough miners of Leadville to the esoteric speech. Wilde, however, later won the respect of the townspeople and miners, but not because they experienced a latent realization of the worthiness of his lecture. Rather, the respect of the miners was gained when they treated Wilde to a drunken excursion to the bottom of the Matchless Mine. During this escapade the booze flowed freely, and the miners discovered, to their great surprise, that Wilde could hold his whiskey as well as, or better than, any man among them. Wilde's reputation was then secure.

Along more somber lines, the Tabor was often used for funerals. Two of the most famous funerals were those of Charles Vivian (founder of the Elks Club) and John B. "Texas Jack" Omohundro, a close friend of William F. Cody. The Tabor was also a popular location for high school graduations. The graduation ceremonies were quite long and elaborate, even though many of the graduating classes numbered less than three persons.

No matter what the occasion the performers at the Tabor Opera House always played to packed houses. The cost of a ticket is thought to have been approximately \$1.50, or 50¢ if the patron wished to sit in the peanut gallery.

The one exception to the tradition of full houses occurred, strangely enough, on opening night, November 20, 1879. The opening night performance was a Jack S. Langrishe production titled *A Serious Family*. Large crowds were expected, but as curtain time drew near, there were only a handful of people in the audience. The reason for the small crowd was discovered when it was noted the town law enforcement agency was hanging two horse thieves just two blocks away. In the rough and ready town of Leadville a hanging would draw a larger crowd than a play on any night.

Horace Tabor's opera house was a truly welcome addition to the town of Leadville, Colorado. It stimulated business and brought a sense of permanence to what had previously been a rowdy mining camp. Today, the Tabor is still a welcome part of the town, and it has a large attraction to visitors in Leadville. Perhaps the greatest reason for the Tabor's appeal is its atmosphere. Unlike many historic buildings, when one visits the Tabor he is free to wander throughout the old building unaccompanied. Because of this freedom, he can genuinely experience the sensation of re-living the past, a sensation

²² Furman, p. 63

not often experienced when visiting the majority of sterile, carefully roped off historic monuments.

The appeal of the Tabor can also be credited largely to two women, Mrs. Evelyn Furman and Mrs. Theresa O'Brien. Mrs. Furman, the owner, has spent her life working to rennovate the Tabor. She has also done extensive research and her book, *The Tabor Opera House: A Captivating History*, is a complete history of the Tabor. It is from Mrs. Furman's book that most of the factual information for this paper has been gathered.

Mrs. Theresa O'Brien, a lifetime resident of Leadville, is also a charming addition to the Tabor Opera House. A marvelous storyteller, she is the official "tour guide" of the opera house. Mrs. O'Brien remembers the earlier days of the Tabor and will recount fascinating personal experiences to the willing listener. The source of many of the anecdotes in this paper, her stories of seeing Houdini, Teddy Roosevelt, and countless others onstage at the Tabor bring its history to life. These two women, the historic building, and its glorious past all make a visit to the Tabor both a pleasurable adventure and a valuable learning experience.