

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

The Elks Hall and Theater was built in 1898 by the B.P.O.E. The ground floor was used as a club room by the members.

Tuscaloosa benefited greatly from the Elks Theater and it was sometimes called the social and cultural center of Tuscaloosa for it was a very complete and modern theater building.

Fortunately, due to being on the main line of the AGS Railroad connecting New York and New Orleans, Tuscaloosa was located on a good theatrical circuit, being able to book some of the best theatrical shows on the road.

As a usual unwritten rule it was the custom of the best musical shows on Broadway to play the first year exclusively in New York with the copyrighted music or score not offered for sale by music houses or publishers with the hope it would encourage the public to see the show in person. After a successful season in New York the next year frequently saw one or more road shows touring the large cities. Sometimes a volume of the musical numbers were offered for sale at the performance.

Our local theater manager, Mike Barker, was usually good and alert in booking many of the best shows that were on the market. There were musical shows, drama, Shakespeare, vaudeville, minstrels, ballets and local shows. For several years the Farley Moody Post No. 34 of the American

Legion put on the "Legion Follies" under the direction of Dr. Carl Carmer that proved to be high grade entertainment.

For a few years I reserved the two seats that I considered the best in the house for the entire season subject to cancellation within 24 hours of performance. Later I joined the theater orchestra (bass fiddle) which gave me a better seat than the "bald head row."

The "Seven Keyes to Baldpate" and the "Cat and the Canary" are two thrillers I'll never forget.

But the shows I liked best were the light operettas, sometimes called musical comedies, most of which were presented here during the period of 1900-1930. Many of these operettas are included in the list below which contains the approximate date of their appearance and the title of a popular song in its score. Some have been made into movies. Several were brought to Tuscaloosa at the Elks Theater.

Resume of light operettas:

Babes in Toyland (1903), Toyland; March of the Toys. Merry Widow (1905-1907), Merry Widow Waltz. Mlle Modiste (1905), Kiss Me Again. Red Mill (1906), Moon Beams; Because You're You; Beautiful Isle of My Dreams.

Naughty Marietta (1910), Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life; Italian Street Song; Tramp, Tramp, Tramp the Boys

are Marching.

Chari (1912), Roses Bring Memories. Chocolate Soldier (?), My Hero. Blossom Time (1921), Song of Love. Rose Marie (1924), Indian Love Call; Rose Marie. Student Prince (1924), Golden Days; Deep in My Heart; Drinking Song.

Desert Song (1926), One Alone; Desert Song. Vagabond King (1925), Song of the Vagabond; Only A Rose.

Show Boat (1927), Old Man River, Make Believe. Roberta (1933), Smoke Gets in Your Eyes. No, No, Nanette (?), No, No, Nanette.

The Elks Hall and Theater was bought by J.P. Burchfield in 1916 for \$16,000. It continued as a theater for some time until converted into the Alta Apartments. The elaborate front with columns has been removed.