Winter 2021

The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 30:04: Winter 2021

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This story begins at the end, when the lights at the Knickerbocker went dark. There were no more showings, no more movies, no more dancers, no more actors or popcorn or laughter or tears. As news of the COVID-19 pandemic crash-landed in Holland in early March 2020, the famous Holland theater had to shutter its doors. At first, only the film screenings for the rest of the week were cancelled. That week turned into months, as the virus continued to spread and the entire world was forced to stay home and social distance to “flatten the curve” and curb the spread of the coronavirus.

PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS, the signature marquee outside the theater read. Then, later, as the news got worse: PLEASE WEAR A MASK.

Locals and tourists alike may have wondered what place a long-time local theater had in offering health advice to downtown Holland. The answer lies in the theater’s history, which is inextricably tied to the history of Holland and by extension America itself. Throughout the last hundred years or so, the Knick has been there through every major historical event, shift, or celebration Holland experienced. The theater has changed owners, had different names, and changed its offerings to reflect the cultural pull of different periods, but it has never stopped striving to be an excellent source of entertainment for the Holland community. Its story—like all good stories—is one of tragedy, triumph, and resilience.

The story of the Knick begins where it ended—at the marquee. Workers began building the new theater in 1910, and were on track to finish and open what would be the fifth largest building in Holland by early 1911. Then, on February 24, 1911, the first tragedy struck the Knickerbocker. One of the owners, popular Hollander Tieman Slagh, was finishing the new marquee when he fell “28 feet with a large electric sign on which he had been working.” Slagh’s back was broken, and despite the best efforts of three local doctors, he died mere minutes after the accident. Conrad Smith, who was with Slagh, was hit by the sign as Slagh fell, and crushed the index finger of one hand. It must have been a horrific accident to witness on what was likely a busy morning in the growing downtown of the city. Even more tragically, Slagh died across the street from his brother Bert’s general store, and the doctors brought him there to try and save his life.

Holland mourned Slagh intensely; his funeral at Third Reformed Church “was one of the largest that has been held in Holland for years.” Slagh was an important figure in Holland, as along with his brother he was considered responsible for the “up-building of the business end of East 8th St. where he constructed a row of some of the most handsome buildings in our city.” He had built another popular theater in a different part of Holland and had been looking

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The past year’s pandemic has been difficult on all of us in different ways. The Joint Archives of Holland is still closed to the public, and working remotely with researchers and student research assistants has become our new normal. We are looking forward to the day when researchers are allowed back in our reading room, discovering new and exciting pieces of their research topic. Until then, we will continue to help researchers, as we are able, via email at archives@hope.edu.

Former student research assistant and Hope College alumna Aine O’Conner wrote this issue’s article as the pandemic unfolded in America. It reflects on 100 years of the Knickerbocker Theatre being part of the Holland community during the good times and bad, and gives us hope that the good times are not far away.

Until we see each other again, stay well.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

From the Director

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Tragedy, Triumph and Resilience (continued from page 1)

forward to the opening of the Knick. He left behind not only these two theaters but his wife of 22 years, Alice, and 8 children. While much of Slagh’s original construction has been updated, his ideas that Eighth Street could be a bustling city center, and that this new center would need entertainment, remain, and Hollanders owe him a debt of gratitude.

When Slagh died, the new theater was left in limbo. Originally scheduled to open just days after Slagh was killed, the final constructions were delayed, and the building languished. It was not until November 3, 1911, that the Knick finally opened under a new manager, Mr. J.C. Agnew. The theater, the Holland City News reported, “is a model of its kind and inside and out is most beautiful indeed.” From the beginning, the Knickerbocker made a promise to provide quality entertainment to the Holland community. Many Holland parents were apparently thrilled that the new theater would offer “clean” and “pure” entertainment for their children; after all, a theater in Evanston had decreased “arrests for drunkenness” by forty percent!

Accordingly, the first play to come to the Knick was Brewster’s Millions, based on a novel by Indiana author George Barr McCutcheon. The play follows Montgomery Brewster, a young man who must spend a huge sum of money in order to inherit even more money from his recently deceased grandfather. Although everyone believes Brewster to be an immoral man because of his luxurious spending habits, he actually displays strong moral and Christian fiber, and ends up fabulously wealthy with the woman of his dreams. The biggest attraction of the play, though, was the staging. A full yacht appeared on stage in one scene, made possible by the Knick’s new large stage. No other theater in the area, the Holland City News boasted, could have put on such a play. The Knick, it seemed, was well on its way to smashing success.

The next few years brought a wide variety of shows to the Knickerbocker. Vaudeville comedy, religious plays, local shows, and concerts were all common showings. Some of the most popular performers were the Alvarado Players, who came to Holland several times and performed a series of plays, and local singers. There remained a fixation on having only “high class entertainment,” with the Holland City News writing a year after the theater opened that only “lovers of clean entertainment” attended. When the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914, and especially once America entered the war in 1917, shows with a patriotic flavor began to appear in the Knick’s repertoire. In May 1918, the Knick showed “The Battlefronts of France,” short movies made by the
National Archives of Allied Actions on the Western Front. The News wrote, “[The films] show you in a quiet, impressive manner just what the German and Allied Armies are doing… you see the actual invasion of these French and Belgian cities with the arrogant Huns goosestepping down the street.” The showing was clearly meant to inspire the buying of Liberty Bonds (government loans bought to raise money for US soldiers in the First World War) and was by all accounts an inspiring and moving show. “The Battlefronts of France” was also representative of a new trend at the Knickerbocker, the “moving picture.” These would become increasingly popular as the years continued.

It would be disingenuous to write that the Knick only put on shows that would still be considered popular or morally upstanding today. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, minstrel shows were often held at the Knick. These shows often depicted caricatures and racist stereotypes of Black Americans, and many featured white actors in blackface. It is important to note that the Knick and Holland were in no way the only places doing minstrel shows, and the shows were valued as entertainment in the context of a time when racism was not defined in the same ways as it is today. It is more important to note that the depictions in minstrel shows were deeply hurtful to Black Americans then and now, and cannot be separated from the systemic racism that persists today and relies on history as well as hate to perpetuate itself.

Another popular offering were the “baby competitions,” held in the first three decades of the twentieth century. At these competitions, also known as “better baby contests,” infants and toddlers were judged according to average growth measurements to determine the healthiest or “fittest” baby. While this sounds adorable, the competitions actually had more sinister overtones. Many historians argue that these competitions, which spread across the country rapidly beginning in 1911, were manifestations of the popular eugenics movement that took off in the United States at the same time. In “Making Perfect Children” (Ultimate History Project, 2019), Rachel Louise Moran found that “the Illinois Medical Association… justified the contests as a response to the ‘deterioration of American stock.’” There are no such explicit phrases in ads from the Holland City News for baby contests, but they were certainly following a trend. Like every place, Holland does not have a purely moral history, and these types of shows at the Knickerbocker offer an uncomfortable but crucial lens through which to learn our history.

The Knickerbocker enjoyed success for its first few years of operation, but fell on hard times in the late 1910s. By that time, the flu pandemic had ricocheted across the world, and Holland was feeling its effects. The city went into lockdown for several weeks in October and November 1918, something modern-day Hollanders can now relate to with a much deeper intensity than ever before. The State Board of Health closed all public places, including theaters, and the Knick had to close “just as the manager had a company of players organized to play Grand Haven and Holland.” This manager, a Mr. Ogden who had taken over the Knick several years earlier, became sick with the flu himself—as did many of his local actors. Finally, Ogden left town, leaving his ownership of the theater behind after “considerable hard luck.” The future of the Knick was unknown. The Holland City News wrote, “the Knickerbocker should be kept going—for this is about the only meeting place in the city of any size suitable for public meeting.” Furthermore, “we need good, wholesome amusement for a large class of people who wish to make Holland their home.” The theater stayed closed through the end of the year, and the search for a new manager continued.

While the theater’s fate continued to be a question mark, there were still events in the space over the first few years of the 1920s. Most significant of these came on October 18, 1920, when then Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt came to Holland to campaign as a possible vice president candidate. Holland had long loved Roosevelt’s famous relative, former president and affiliated member of the Dutch Reformed Church Theodore Roosevelt, and welcomed the young politician wholeheartedly. The Holland City News wrote after the speech, “Mr. Roosevelt made a fine impression. He is a quiet man, with few of the trappings of the professional politician… He spoke straight from the shoulder, devoting all his time to a discussion of the League of Nations, and no one could doubt his absolute earnestness.” Little did the city...
know they would be greeting the earnest man as America’s president a mere twelve years later!

In 1923, a champion finally came forward for the Knick. Mr. Gerrit Buis, a local upholsterer, spent about $5000 to improve and re-open the theater, which would be re-christened “The Holland.” There was an emphasis on vaudeville comedy and the ever more popular “moving pictures.” This was still several years before “talkies,” movies with sound, were commercially available, but the demand was still high for silent films. Also popular were local stories like George Getz, a World War I veteran who visited Africa and took short films to show Hollanders, many of whom had never seen an image of animals like giraffes and lions. Every so often, other offerings appeared—including a popular “style show” where women modelled new dresses—but for the most part, movies had taken over the theater. Three years after Mr. Buis’ improvements, ownership of the theater changed hands again, this time to a Mr. Carley who made The Holland one part of his new amusement company. The local shows seem to have been mostly lost after this ownership change, with the focus on films featuring actors like Claudette Colbert, Bette Davis, and Charlie Chaplain. Like many other theaters, The Holland remained popular and successful during the worst years of the Great Depression. It began to compete not only with other theaters like the Strand (closed in 1931) and the Colonial (now Park Theatre), but theaters further away in Grand Haven and Grand Rapids. As the twentieth century wore on, The Holland continued to provide the “high class entertainment” it had always promised.

By the time the United States entered World War II after the 1941 attacks at Pearl Harbor, The Holland theater was a staple of Holland life. Regular ads ran in the Holland City News for new movies and acting troupes. As the war began to take over American life, The Holland responded with rousing patriotic rallies and events. Most significant were the “War Bond shows,” when the theater would host various offerings that encouraged Hollanders to purchase War Bonds (similar to the Liberty Bonds of World War I) and help the war effort. Three nationally popular movies “premiered” at The Holland before their official release, so that people could purchase War Bonds in exchange for viewing the film. At the premiere of Destination Tokyo, a 1943 film starring Cary Grant, The Holland offered people the chance to “dedicate the bond to one of Holland’s fighting men.” They did this by placing “a large poster of the theater’s seating arrangement in the theater lobby... names of the soldiers honored by bond purchases will appear in the spaces designated as seats.” The theater also held variety shows to raise money and awareness for buying War Bonds. At one show featuring the Hope students who were part of a national military training program known as the Army Specialized Training Program, the theater helped raise over $22,000 in War Bonds. When the war ended in August 1945, no one in Holland could deny that the theater had done its part to help the city help the country win the war.

In the post-war years, offerings at The Holland continued to evolve. There were celebrations at the theater of everything from barbershop quartets (including Holland’s own “The Four Stars”) to 4-H. Movies continued to be the main attraction, however, and in 1954 a Cinemascope, new “widescreen
technology” which made it easier for films created with new lenses to be played at old theaters, was installed. Hollanders got a laugh out of the title of one movie, which happened to play during the height of Tulip Time—Wake Me Up When It’s Over. By this time, a large chain at the time called Butterfield Theatres owned The Holland, which made it difficult for local shows or events to use the space. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, fewer and fewer mentions of the theater appeared in the Holland City News, and almost none refer to something other than a recent movie. The theater had, against all odds, managed to stay open for over half a century, but it had given something up. The local flavor of The Holland had been lost along the way.

All of that would change in 1988, when Hope College acquired the theater. It got back its original name, but almost from the start became known as simply “The Knick.” In 1988, Hope’s newspaper The Anchor wrote that the theater would “rejoin the ranks of other theatres who pay homage to classic and art cinema.” This emphasis still exists in the annual Knickerbocker Film Series, which showcases significant films that do not often appear in mainstream movie theaters. Hope students and Hollanders alike appreciate the “cultural dynamic” (as the Knick’s website says) the theater brings to the city. Another important aspect of the Knickerbocker is its relationship to Hope. Thousands of students have participated in or witnessed events like the All-College Sing, Dance X, H2O and Striketime dance companies, IMAGES, the Critical Issues Symposium, the Big Read, Visiting Writers Series, Hope College Concert Series, and many others at the Knick. The theater is an icon of downtown, welcoming new students each year and beckoning tourists to explore new shows and events that they otherwise may not have been able to see. Tieman Slagh would be proud, witnessing a bustling Eighth Street marked indelibly by the Knick’s marquee.

The Knickerbocker Theatre has been through a lot. From opening in tragedy to helping win wars to changing owners, still the little theater refuses to wilt. Even though the lights at the Knick have once more gone dark, even though in these inexplicable times it is more powerful for the Knick to tell Hollanders to wear a mask than to come to a show, the theater is a reminder that Holland has gotten through every hard time before this—and will continue to make it through for a very long future.

Aine O’Connor graduated from Hope College in 2020 with a degree in English and History. She is currently studying Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, with plans to become an academic librarian.
Early vaudeville production at the Knickerbocker Theatre, n.d.