

PAST, PRESENT and PROPOSED No.5

One cannot go to the State of Texas without visiting San Antonio to see the Alamo, the cradle of Texan independence from Mexico. I'm sure most of you will have seen the film with John Wayne, highly romanticised but based on historical fact. From February 23rd until March 6th 1836 the mission San Antonio "The Alamo" was besieged by the Mexican army, estimated at 2,500 troops. After a ninety minute battle all 189 defenders were killed, only the women, children and servants being spared. Perhaps nowadays we think of these men as American but among these Texan settlers were men from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Germany, Denmark and one from Poland. All that remains of the original mission are the church and part of the walls of the convento, (now the Long Barrack Museum). The church was begun in 1744 but never completed. Across the open plaza and street in front of the church, through windows in the pavement can be seen the ruins of the stockade buildings, amongst them the room where James Bowie was supposedly killed. To anyone planning to visit San Antonio I would recommend two things. (1) Take a local tour The Mission Trail; this will give some idea of what the Alamo must have looked like. (2) Visit the Alamo as soon as it opens to avoid the noise and the crowds. Later, after my visit, in the souvenir shop I saw a small photograph of the San Antonio Grand Opera House, from the Daughters of the Texas Republic Library. As the library is nearby I went to see if I could find out more about this opera house as I knew there wasn't one now in this city. It is here that I must record my thanks to the very pleasant ladies, the custodians of the library, who went out of their way to provide me with enough photos, prints, newspaper clippings, to form the basis of this article.



SAN ANTONIO - THE GRAND OPERA HOUSE

Before 1886 the citizens of San Antonio had a number of small theatres and halls for their entertainment, but the then members of the San Antonio Club decided that a combined opera house and club rooms would be an asset to the city. The company was formed

and their charter filed on January 12th 1886, the capital stock being placed at 150,000 dollars, a considerable sum for that time. The site chosen running along Crockett Street and fronting onto Alamo Plaza had seen previous entertainment. It was here that John L. Sullivan gave exhibition bouts to the delight of the fans of bare fist fighting, where a pretty girl in tights walked a tight rope above the tent of a one ring circus as an outdoor attraction and where a Dr Hartley used to hold his medicine show and also pull teeth. Of the many plans that were submitted those of McElpatrick and Son of St. Louis were chosen and work began on the 1st August. Now the race was on. Contracts had been signed for the opening performances in December. In a little less than five months the building was completed.

The length of the combined opera house and club rooms was 237 ft; that of the opera house alone was 115 ft with a width of 67 ft and a height of 78 ft. The main frontage was of a dark red brick decorated with terra cotta, stone and galvanized iron. From the Plaza entrance you stepped into a corridor 18 ft wide running the length of the building, decorated with frescoes. From this you entered a vestibule 16 ft by 18 ft with the main box office; this in turn led into the foyer which was separated from the auditorium proper by curtained arches. As the floor here was higher than the stage it gave an excellent view of the parquet, parquet circle, circle and boxes. At either end of the foyer staircases led to the dress circle and balcony. As was usual the gallery had its own entrance and box office and was completely cut off from the rest of the house. The interior was finished in cherry wood grained to imitate mahogany.

One of the requirements of the building committee was that comfort should take precedence over all else. The capacity audience of 1,500 found the seating in all areas (except in the gallery where it was just a wooden bench), very comfortable. The chairs were of solid oak and were wider than normal seating by two inches centre to centre. They were in antique and natural finish and were bolted to the floor, whilst the space between the rows was wide enough to allow late comers to take their seats with no trouble. The upholstery was of mohair plush imported from

Europe. Those in the parquet were a deep blue, in the parquet circle, crimson and in the dress circle, old gold. The seats and backs of the chairs in the balcony were of perforated wood. All the seats were provided with a hat, coat and umbrella rack. There were eight boxes reached by a private staircase. These were furnished with elegant chairs in the Venetian style upholstered in silk plush, while the front of the boxes were hung with lace curtains and lambrequins.

Instead of the usual one large chandelier the house was lit by three dozen small chandeliers together with wall brackets. The stage 64 ft by 40 ft was equipped with the most upto date stage machinery and lighting; it had at least eighteen sets of scenery and could fly sets to a height of 60 ft. Some of the artists had dressing rooms behind the boxes reached by a staircase from the stage while others where in rooms beneath the stage. A special feature was the encore door in the proscenium arch. Invisible to the audience when closed, it allowed the artist's to take curtain calls without having to crowd through between the stage curtain and the arch. In the centre of the proscenium arch was a bust of Shakespeare supported at either end by the figures of Comedy and Tragedy. The stage curtain was painted with a scene of a Moorish palace and garden with thirteen figures representing Beauty and Booty before a Moorish Court.

The opening night was the 20th December 1886 with a performance of Donizetti's Lucrezia Borgia given by the Emma Abbott Grand Opera Co., with Emma Abbott* in the title role.

Opera was heard at the Grand at least until World War 1 but eventually became more of a theatre for dramatic performances. It was here that the good citizens of San Antonio heard James O'Neill as the Count of Monte Cristo, Joseph Jefferson as Rip Van Winkle, and Edwin Booth (brother of the infamous John Wilkes) as Hamlet. However like so many old theatres it lost its true place in operatic history, becoming a Variety Palace and was later given over to films. It was here that moving pictures were shown for the first time in San Anotonio and it was here that the first talkies were heard. Soon the large purpose cinemas were being

erected and slowly the beauty of the Grand faded. It underwent many changes before becoming derelict and was eventually demolished in 1948.

Some time after my visit to San Antonio I was leafing through an old book about Lost America. A half page article about the Grand Opera House caught my eye. It ended with this one line: "the Grand was opened in 1886 by the two foremost artists of the day, Miss Emma Abbott and Miss Lucy Borgia.

* I hope to write about Emma Abbott in another Newsletter.

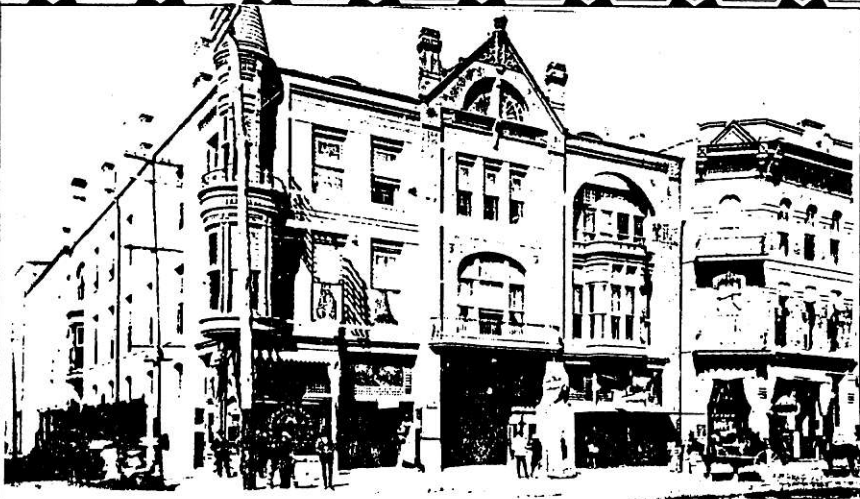


FIGURE 141. Grand Opera House, San Antonio (1886). From *Art Work of San Antonio, Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library, San Antonio.*

Located on a prominent site facing Alamo Plaza, near the Menger Hotel, this was a fine building with a typical facade. The front was balanced about the grand entrance, but a charming turret and an oriel window, along with a variety of patterns of openings, created an asymmetrical composition. A wide diversity of types of decorative features provided additional interest.