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## Article Title: Band's Opera House, the Cultural Hub of Crete, 1877-1900

Full Citation: Douglas O Street, "Band's Opera House, the Cultural Hub of Crete, 1877-1900," *Nebraska History* 60 (1979): 58-76.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1979CreteOpera.pdf>

Date: 9/17/2014

Article Summary: Band's Opera House, at the corner of 13<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets in downtown Crete, was built in 1877 and was a hub of activity for the town. The building served many purposes throughout its life and was inventoried as an important historical site in Crete by the State Historic Preservation Office. This 1979 article moves through the history of the building and its many uses through the years.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: Charles W Band, Postmaster Bickle, George W Bridges, Oliver W Baltzley, D N Smith, Charles Little, Thomas Doane, Annadora Gregory, W S Walker, Adelaide Cherie, Camille Kinzey, E O Stebbins, Frank Lindon, Ray Norris, James Dawes, J H Craddock, Adolph Rozanek

Keywords: Band's Opera House; Crete Dramatic Club; *Saline County Post*; Crete Academy (renamed Doane College); The Crete Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows; Free and Accepted Masons; Knights of Pythias; Knights of 1776; Independent Order of Good Templars; Bohemian Reading Association; Band's Drug Store; New York Cash Store; Robinson Comedy Company; *Saline County Union*; Mrs Jarley's wax works; Andrews Opera Co; Monte Cristo Company; *Crete Globe*; Edison motion pictures; *Crete Vidette*; Cinderella Ballroom

Photographs / Images: advertisement for the grand opening of Band's Opera House, 1877; professional card for Dr Band from 1877; Mrs Laura E Dainty's performance advertisement 1879; drawing of the original Opera House; 1973 photo of the building housing a savings and loan business.

## BAND'S OPERA HOUSE, THE CULTURAL HUB OF CRETE, 1877-1900

*By Douglas O. Street*

It seems almost incredible that so fine a building with such a splendid Hall can stand today on ground so lately a part of [Jesse C.] Bickle's cornfield.

—*Saline County Union*<sup>1</sup>

The town of Crete, Nebraska, was officially chartered in 1871, and began to grow immediately. Buildings and businesses sprang up quickly; the Burlington Railroad opened a line between Lincoln and Crete; more people moved in. In the winter of 1877 Dr. Charles W. Band constructed a three-story opera house and named it for himself. Band's Opera House, the first brick building in Crete,<sup>2</sup> dominated the cultural and social activity of the town for nearly a quarter of a century, attracting dramatic troupes, star performers, circuses, and a host of assorted entertainers to this bustling trade center and college town. Civic dinners and fancy balls, public meetings, political rallies, and performances of the Crete Dramatic Club, were parts of the ever-changing program for the opera house.

The house began having financial troubles during the 1880s; audiences were not as large as before. After remodeling the hall in 1888, the new manager's hopes of better acts and bigger audiences never materialized during the drouth-depression 1890s. By 1900 the use of the opera house had changed somewhat. It became a place for high school dramatic productions, graduation exercises, and an occasional dinner. Used largely for commercial purposes, the building still stands today, having reached its centennial on November 29, 1977. In examining Band's Opera House during the first quarter century of its life we see as well the development of Crete.

In 1870 all that existed of Crete was a log cabin and post office, both the property of Postmaster Bickle. The surrounding rural area possessed a population of less than 10 people per square mile. One enterprising settler, seeing potential in this fertile land by the Big Blue River, opened a sawmill here as early as 1869. By the summer of 1870 he had competition

from George W. Bridges and his partner, Oliver W. Baltzley. By December of that year, Bridges and Baltzley had also opened a gristmill to complement their sawmill operation.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1870, it was learned that the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company would build its line through the northern quadrant of Saline County. Land speculation commenced. Bickle subsequently had his land holdings surveyed and platted, and on August 3, 1870, named the area Blue River City. Soon after the area was platted, the sale of lots began. While it appeared that Blue River City might become a flourishing community, another town was being formed on its perimeter. This town, dubbed Crete, was founded by D. N. Smith of the Townsite Company of the Burlington. Smith had originally bought 320 acres from the previous owners. Land prices soared as a fierce rivalry developed between the two settlements. Faced with the prospect that one or the other would lose out, Bickle, Smith, and the Townsite Company reached an agreement regarding the future of the towns. On March 7, 1871, Blue River City and Crete were consolidated by an act of the Nebraska Legislature into one city bearing the name Crete. Since Crete had been the name of Bickle's post office for three years, the Townsite Company deemed it appropriate to retain the name of the only legal building in the community. Hence, Blue River City became Crete, and the rivalry was at an end.

The town expanded at a rapid pace. Within a year there were close to 100 buildings. On May 5, 1871, Charles Little began publishing the town's first newspaper, the *Saline County Post*.<sup>4</sup> An editorial on May 26, 1871, lists the following businesses: two hotels, two restaurants, one bakery, three general stores, one grocery, two drug stores, two tin shops, one agricultural depot, two blacksmith shops, one wagon shop, one shoemaker's shop, one harness store, one millinery store, one furniture shop, two billiard rooms, three saloons, one wholesale liquor house, one meat market, one flouring mill, one sawmill, and two livery stables—all completed within a year.

With the completion of the railroad line between Lincoln and Crete in June, 1871, the town and its commerce grew quickly. Crete became, with the completion of the Blue River bridge, a stopping off point and supply depot for immigrants heading west and a base of operations for expansion of the railroad. Many who were bound for the far West never made it beyond

the Big Blue River valley. German, Czech, French, and Belgian immigrants, impressed by the fertile farmland, became permanent citizens. Not all settlers came by chance; railroad companies induced colonies of Europeans and Americans in the East to acquire rich farmland around Crete.

Education needs, always of concern to a new community, were met first by grade schools, established to provide for the growing number of children. Soon afterward Thomas Doane, originally chief engineer for the Burlington Company, led a movement to establish a college. Crete Academy, a preparatory school and seminary, was created in 1871 as an initial step toward his goal. With help and financial backing from the Congregational churches of Nebraska, he established a Congregational college in 1872, erecting the first building on land he donated for the school. Renamed Doane College after its benefactor, the college was formally chartered on July 11, 1872, to promote a sound "evangelical, Christian education."

Social activity thrived as more people moved into the town. The Crete Lodge of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows had been established in May of 1871; a chapter of the Free and Accepted Masons was chartered a year later. As early as 1871, the town boasted its own band. Fourth of July picnics, baseball games, Masonic dances, and the "Grand Christmas Ball" were becoming established annual events. By 1876 the town had chapters of the Knights of Pythias, the Knights of 1776, and two lodges of the Independent Order of Good Templars. Reading societies and literary clubs were formed, most notably, the Bohemian Reading Association, the first Czech social organization in Nebraska. With inhabitants taking such an active part in social and intellectual growth as well as in commerce, it came as no real surprise when Dr. Charles W. Band, druggist and entrepreneur, announced in 1877 his plans to open an opera house.

Building activity in Crete during 1877—31 new buildings and over \$50,000 expended—centered on structures in the opera house block, which also included Band's Drug Store, New York Cash Store, IOOF meeting rooms, and office space for professional men. In 1877 there were as yet few opera houses in Nebraska. The hall in Crete was designed to rival the best facilities in Lincoln and Omaha, with which its management hoped to compete for high class entertainment.<sup>6</sup>

It is not clear how this impresario came to settle by the Big Blue, but it is certain that he became established in Crete early in 1871. A druggist who doubled as a practicing physician, he was probably not properly trained for the latter profession. Dr. Band, as he refers to himself in advertisements of the day, also bought and sold city and farm real estate. Whatever his background, he became prosperous. The estimated \$16,000<sup>7</sup> he invested in his three-story opera house block at 13th and Main Streets attests to his capital. As the day of the big opening drew near, the townspeople waited in anxious anticipation. A turn-away crowd showed up on Thanksgiving Day, 1877, at the opening of what was to become the social and cultural hub of Crete. The *Union* proudly announced the event:

OPENING OF THE BAND OPERA HALL IN MAGNIFICENT STYLE  
ON THANKSGIVING DAY

Dr. Band, after corresponding with the leading theatrical authorities in New York, has decided upon the Robinson Comedy Company to open his splendid Opera House to Crete and surrounding community; they will do so with the rich and appropriate play of *Rip Van Winkle*. This play is of a character to permit every citizen the privilege of participating in an event in which he feels a just pride. No city in Nebraska save Omaha and Lincoln, has an Opera House to compare with Dr. Band's. The building of this Hall from foundation to flag-staff, from cellar to the vast Hall and its rich appointments, its stage, choice scenery, beautiful chandeliers, all cost money, and a large pile of it, too. This investment is not for Dr. Band alone; it is for Crete and every citizen of Crete, for all will reap the benefit. . . . Those who have not seen the hall, and those who have, will be surprised and gratified as its appearance when lighted up and graced with all its adornments.

The tickets for the opening have been placed within the reach of all. And there will be a large audience. An excursion train will run from Beatrice—possibly one from Lincoln. Get your seats early.<sup>8</sup>

The opera house did indeed appear grand at its opening. Dr. Band apparently spared little expense in making it a showplace. The hall was upstairs, on the second floor of the three-story structure. Patrons climbed a single staircase to a landing where the ticket office was located. From the landing, they traversed a short staircase on either side of the ticket office to arrive on the main floor of the hall. If one wanted to sit on the balcony (seats cost the same price as those on the lower level), he climbed more stairs to the balcony, which sat directly over the ticket office and extended from side to side across the back of the hall. It would appear better to sit on the main level, however, where one would be closer to the podium. The balcony had an ornamental iron railing, apparently painted red, and the whole color scheme appears to have been red, brown, and gold.

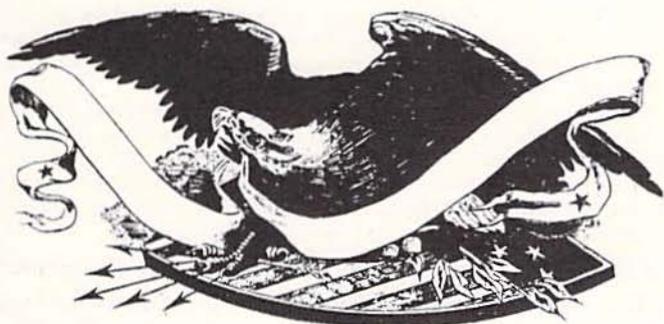
The hall comfortably seated 700 to 800 spectators for a performance.<sup>9</sup> There were certainly close to that number in attendance on opening night. When the winter chill was in the air, as it seems to have been on that Thanksgiving evening, the hall would be warmed by 14 large stoves, seven on the north side and seven on the south. Three ornamental columns on either side of the hall added to the decoration.

Perhaps the most spectacular decorations in the opera house were the chandeliers. Evidently there were a number of them, just how many is no longer known, positioned the length of the room. They were highly ornamental, gold in appearance, and grand in size. Each contained 24 lights and cost \$250. The stage itself was on the west end of the room. It was small by modern standards. There was an ornamental proscenium arch, the height of which can only be surmised. The ceiling was close to 15 feet in height and, according to Dr. Annadora Gregory who witnessed performances in 1904, the stage was elevated about five feet off the main floor. The arch would have been low but adequate. In keeping with the pervading interior color scheme, the arch was probably done in hues of red, gold, and brown.

There was a single door on either side of this west end of the hall from whence performers made their entrances. The stage was outfitted with a drop curtain painted with some type of landscape (Dr. Gregory remembers the one in 1904 as being a scene of "misty hills and trees"); possibly it rolled up into the top of the proscenium arch. It is obvious that an ample number of painted sets and scenery pieces enhanced the stage section. Beyond the main wall on the south side of the room were the dressing rooms for performers, as well as accessways to the meeting areas upstairs. Dr. Band meant the opera house to last for a long time. Some walls are nearly three feet thick. It is no wonder that the solid old building is still here after 100 years.

Let us now turn our attention to the opening itself: The curtain went up Thanksgiving evening, November 29, 1877, on the Silas Robinson Comedy Company of Lincoln in a production of the old favorite *Rip Van Winkle*. It is amusing that Dr. Band, "after corresponding with the leading theatrical authorities in New York," chose an amateur group from Lincoln to inaugurate his opera house. When one considers the low caliber of the performance, it is questionable that he was too careful about quality.

# GRAND OPENING!!



## BAND'S OPERA HOUSE!!

Will be a blaze of beauty on

### THANKSGIVING NIGHT,

### Robinson's Comedy Company

Will put upon the boards the famous Comedy

### RIP VAN WINKLE!!

*The grand opening of Band's Opera House was advertised in the Saline County Union, November 29, 1877.*

The critic for the *Saline County Union* observed:

The Opening.—[In] Spite of an intense cold day and the condition in many families on account of sickness among children, a large and respectable audience assembled at Band's beautiful Hall to witness its opening. The Robinson Comedy Company of Lincoln performed *Rip Van Winkle* very well, considering all things; Mr. and Mrs. Robinson and the two Misses Mullen did remarkably well and saved the piece, for the other performers were not well up in their parts, missing their cues sometimes, and requiring considerable prompting. But everybody was disposed to be pleased and the satisfaction was very general.

Mr. Robinson came before the curtain and gave Dr. Band due credit for the enterprise that has given Crete so splendid a Hall; he said that where one town like Crete could boast such a Hall another like it could not be found and thousands had none, adding that so fine a room would draw the best class of entertainments to Crete. The opening would have been improved with some music, but the expected band from abroad did not come.<sup>10</sup>

Silas Robinson and the Mullen sisters were nicely reviewed in spite of the obvious lack of virtuosity and professionalism exhibited by others of the cast. Robinson, as *Rip Van Winkle*, was evidently impressive in his role. He handled himself well and even drew some tears from the audience for his convincing portrayal of the old *Rip* being recognized by Minnie, after he was awakened from his long sleep. Says the same reviewer: "Robinson would make a fortune on the stage, but we understand he has something better—he has taken to types. So that we may remind him of the scene between the great Macedonian and Diogenes: 'If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes.' We don't mean to hint that printers are so poor they have to live in a tub—not always."

Play reviewers sometimes reveal more about a performer by praise than by a poor review. It is interesting to look at what the *Union* said about the Mullen Sisters:

The Sweet girls who took the parts of Minnie and Heinrich in *Rip Van Winkle* are daughters of a very respectable family in Lincoln. As theatricals they are not "to the manner born," but are private amateurs. It will surprise those who heard them go through their parts so remarkably well to learn that the youngest sister was never on the stage before and the elder one had gone through her part but three times before. This evinces uncommon talent; they were entirely unembarrassed and at the same time models; their voices were good and clear, and actions entirely graceful and natural. . . . We believe those clever sisters are not attracted toward the stage, otherwise we are tempted to say they possess a perilous gift.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of all that went wrong—including a "no-show" by the band, the general sickness of townsfolk, the wintery evening, and the lack of professional talent—Crete seemed satisfied that its impressive opera house could attract more capable talent than the Robinson Company. Proud of their new opera house, Crete citizens were willing to pit it against any like

structure in the state. W. S. Walker, writing on December 24, 1877, for a later edition of the *Saline County Union*, expressed the feelings of many townspeople:

Last week I found Crete in almost every respect a much better town, than when I left it a year ago. Many new and substantial buildings have sprung up. . . . Prominent among the many improvements in the business portion of the town is the Opera House just completed by Dr. Chas. Band. It is an elegant structure and will compare very favorably with the one in the Capital City. . . . Crete may be proud of her Opera House, and Dr. Band justly deserves the many encomiums passed upon him for his enterprise in erecting this edifice. Till long after this generation shall have passed away, it will doubtless stand a proud monument to the untiring energy and persevering spirit of its enterprising builder.<sup>12</sup>

From its earliest beginnings, citizens of Crete were keenly aware of their social and educational needs. Reading societies, oratorical clubs, and a number of lodges founded in these early years acted as major outlets for social pleasure. The community's first formal dances had been held in a barn owned by Mr. Bickle for lack of a more suitable site. Now the people of Crete had a magnificent, spacious facility for nearly any kind of social gathering. It is little wonder that Dr. Band's opera house soon became the social hub of the town.

Band's Opera House was utilized for nearly every type of function. It was a meeting hall able to seat politically minded townsfolk and naturally became the forum for airing vital community matters. Speakers, orators, and "elocutionists" appeared. One of the latter, Mrs. Laura E. Dainty, gave readings during the early years to large crowds. The newspapers praised her diction and hand gestures, saying little about the content of her offerings. The Congregational Church used the hall when an especially pertinent sermon or special service was given in order to accommodate more parishioners. Traveling "physicians" packed the house, selling the latest elixirs designed to cure a variety of ills. Dr. Band, himself a druggist, must have been agreeable to such practitioners.

The temperance movement had an enthusiastic following in Crete during the 1880s, and many a talk on the evils of the bottle, both from local advocates and traveling temperance leaders, echoed from the upstairs hall. Gubernatorial and congressional hopefuls and candidates for lesser offices brought their campaigns to the hall during election years.

There were regular musical entertainments. Bohemian bands, which had flourished in Crete from its beginning, were now more popular than ever. The town by 1880 also boasted of its

municipal cornet band, which graced the opera house stage over the years. A proliferation of bands and orchestras of other types, not to mention individual performers, appeared regularly in recital. The annual fireman's ball around Christmas became a tradition, and the masquerade ball usually was held in early January. Newspaper accounts note that both events were always well attended. Harvest balls and Christmas pageants were staged by the townsfolk, the proceeds usually going to charity.

There were on occasion more imaginative entertainments. A newspaper announcement on February 2, 1879, requested a large audience at the opera house to view "Mrs. Jarley's wax works." No reviewer commented on the number and quality of its effigies. Churches and fraternal groups found its facilities ample for the typical small-town dinner:

The greatest novelty of the season will be presented at the Opera House next Tuesday evening, February 5th, by the ladies of the M. E. Church, in the form of a Japanese Tea Party. A supper will be served to the hungry by young ladies and gentlemen in full Japanese costume, and tea and coffee may be drunk from Japanese cups. Only thirty-five cents will be charged for the supper, while to each guest who partakes will be presented a cup and saucer as a souvenir of the occasion.<sup>13</sup>

The Czechs put on a variety of dramatic productions over the years, involving the entire county in their performances: operettas, concerts, and recitals. It was obvious that they hoped to maintain their old-world heritage as well as enrich the cultural life of Crete. There is even a record from 1887 that they intended to stage a children's theatrical production in Czech. One of their early performances was a three-act tragedy:

Bohemian Theatre—At Band's Opera House, Feb. 22nd. "Monika, or Twelve Years in Exile," a tragedy in three acts. A similar story to the "Weener" in Lord Byron's works. Good amateur actors selected from the whole County. Good music and costumes are spoken for. The net profits will be donated to the "Benevolent Society" of Crete. Curtain will raise at 7:30 sharp. To conclude with a Grand Ball. . . . The Wilbur Band will furnish the music for the occasion, and Mr. Hokuf as a violinist is the peer of any man in this section.<sup>14</sup>

The Crete Dramatic Club was established in 1878 as an adjunct of the Independent Order of Good Templars, a temperance organization which thrived in Crete during the 1880s. Proceeds from performances often went to charity. The club did much to boost interest in the arts by involving prominent citizens in productions. The plays were adequately performed, many times exhibiting a higher level of professionalism than the road-show talent. A review in the March 21, 1879, *Saline County Union*, gives an idea of one performance:

Last Monday night a full house greeted the Crete Dramatic Club. They placed on the boards for the first time in this city the celebrated Irish play, "Colleen Bawn." It was especially appropriate since it was presented on the evening of St. Patrick's Day. It was a sort of serio-comical play, and was conducted so as to keep the audience both interested and entertained. The music consisted of a piano, violin, cornet and baritone. . . . Where all the actors did so well it is hardly fair to specialize, though we think it is but an act of justice to say that Mr. Couch as the Hunchback, and Miss Fuller in the character of the "Colleen Bawn," performed their parts admirably and worthy of special mention. They represented the most difficult characters and acted their parts in a manner which would attract attention in a troupe of national reputation. The receipts of the evening amounted to \$65.

In 1881 proceeds from "Hide and Seek" went for flood relief; a check for \$100 was sent to help yellow fever victims in the South; and benefits were staged to help the poor of Crete.

The club repertoire was interesting and varied over the years. Actors were not afraid to tackle formidable dramatic works like Shakespeare's *Othello* (in 1884) or *Merchant of Venice* (in 1896). Other theatrical attempts included: *The Millionaire's Daughter*, *The Lady of Lyons*, *Lost in London*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. The Crete Dramatic Club flourished into the 20th century and in the early 1900s offered such productions as *Quo Vadis* and *Faust*.

One of the first traveling companies to entertain in Crete was the Plunkett Dramatic Troupe. It opened in Crete on April 25, 1878, and performed *Fanchion*, *Lost in London*, and *Caste* on successive nights. Since Crete was easily accessible by train as a

<p><b>Chas. Band, M. D.</b> DEALER IN Drugs, Medicines, &amp; <b>CHEMICALS.</b> PAINTS, OILS &amp; VARNISHES. Stationery, Wall Paper, Window Shades. FANCY AND TOILET ARTICLES.</p>
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<p><b>BAND'S</b> <b>OPERA HOUSE,</b> Friday Evening, April 25th, <b>Mrs. Laura E. Dainty,</b> THE CELEBRATED READER "How the Old Horse Won the Bet," "CHRISTMAS IN THE QUARTERS," And many others new and old. Tickets for sale at Band's Drug Store.</p>
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A professional card for Dr. Band appeared in the Saline County Union, December 13, 1877. . . . Mrs. Laura E. Dainty advertised her appearance at the Opera House in the Saline County Union, April 18, 1879.

stop on the Omaha-Lincoln-Hastings mainline of the Burlington, Band's Opera House could attract productions not available to out-of-the-way-towns. During some weeks two companies would perform back to back. The Forbes Dramatic Company moved into Band's House for a two-day stay in December of 1879. According to the December 12 *Saline County Union*, the company consisted of "sixteen first-class artists, . . . playing an entire new version of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' written and arranged expressly for this company, in six acts; with new scenery, new properties, new paraphernalia, new faces, etc. It is the most complete organization traveling."<sup>14</sup> This company also incorporated a performance of *Black Diamond* into its offering before leaving Crete. On Valentine's Day, February 14, 1884, *Only A Farmer's Daughter*, starring Adelaide Cherie and Camille Kinzey and a part of its original New York cast, played Band's Opera House for what must have been one of the theatrical highlights of the year.

In the summer of 1888, the interior of the hall, under Manager E. O. Stebbins, was completely remodeled in time for the fall season. A detailed record of what was done still exists. The ceiling of the building was repainted a light blue, augmenting the newly installed eight ceiling panels. In keeping with the new color, the three columns on either side of the hall received a blue background, on which fresco work was painted. Between these columns were more panels, diamond-shaped, each panel covered with a distinctive pattern of gold wallpaper, giving them a luxurious appearance. A full-band border covered the wall panels and blended with the ceiling work. All of the woodwork and iron pillars were painted an "iron green" color, replacing the original red and brown. The west end had a good-sized panel on either side of the proscenium, on which presumably were painted some kind of frescoes, for the account states that these panels were "strikingly appropriate to the noble profession of those who will appear upon the stage to delight a Crete audience during the coming season."<sup>16</sup> The proscenium arch was refurbished in shades of gilt, red, and black. The scenery had been retouched, the older and more worn flats being replaced with new ones, and the dressing rooms remodeled. When the season of 1888 arrived, it opened in an opera house remarkably changed from the season past.

In September, 1888, the Andrews Opera Co. opened the

theatre season with two comedies, *Naval Engagement* and *Uncle Josh*. When Stebbins took over the job as manager in 1887 he made a special effort to upgrade the talent. Diminishing attendance was a problem for which he had no immediate answers. He commissioned the Monte Cristo Company with Frank Lindon for a three-day run, October 29, 30, and 31, and recommended it through the columns of the *Crete Globe*:

In order to give the theatre goers of Crete an opportunity to see a strictly first class performance, I have made a contract with Frank Lindon's Monte Christo Co., for three nights performance. . . . In order to get this company to come to Crete I was compelled to give them a cash guarantee for the engagement. . . . These plays are as fine as anything produced on the American stage and are presented by a company first class in every particular, with new, special scenery and new stage effects. Although the expense I will be to in bringing this company here would justify an advance in prices of admission, yet I will not vary from the regular house prices. Admission 50 cts., Children 25 cts. No extra charge for reserved seats. E. O. Stebbins, Manager, Band's Opera House."

The company performed the three stage pieces, *Monte Christo*, *Damon and Pythias*, and *The Duke's Motto*, to packed houses, which included viewers from Wilber and other surrounding towns.<sup>18</sup> The *Globe* remarked that the cast contained "the best actors we have ever seen in this city," and the company opened immediately afterward on November 1 in Lincoln.<sup>19</sup>

However, toward the middle of the 1890s, attendance waned again, no doubt affected by the faltering economy and drouth. One of the better road companies to play Crete in that decade, the Boston Opera Company, fell victim to a lack of enthusiasm and support. The promotional advertisement was promising, and the group, like the Monte Christo Company, came with a good reputation:

The Boston Opera Co., at Band's Opera House on September 12, 13, and 14, is an organization of high merit. This company embraces such well known successes in comic opera as Miss Beatrice Rhinehart, prima donna; Goldie Reinhart, contralto; . . . Messrs. F. A. Wade, comedian; Geo. Shady, character comedian; . . . These artists, with their strong chorus, give an entertainment that cannot be surpassed by any company doing comic opera. That this excellent company will be greeted by crowded houses is an assured fact.<sup>20</sup>

The "crowded houses" were not to materialize; there were small audiences, far below the anticipation of the management.

A disgruntled citizen writing, in the *Crete Vidette* after the "Lost in London" Company had played to a dismal crowd at the hall, had this to say about the state of theatre in Crete:

The "Lost in London" Company that played here last week, and "The Noss Jollieties," coming Wednesday, Feb. 17, were booked at the Lansing Theatre, Lincoln.

The manager of that house objected to the companies playing in Crete, his argument being that if it were known in Lincoln that such a company would play in so poor a show town as Crete, it would hurt the business in Lincoln. There is no excuse in the world for Crete having such a reputation. With possibly one exception, there has not been a poor show in the house this year, and yet the rule is that the audience is very small. A town the size of Crete, with a population as well to do, and as intelligent as this, can well afford a nice audience for the companies that come, as their visits are not too frequent. Think of this matter and count how many times you have been to a show in the last year. Remember that a good show town is quoted from coast to coast, and a people liberal in their patronage of theatrical attractions thus produce an advertising medium for their town that is unequalled.<sup>21</sup>

This citizen gave a valiant effort to awaken public spirit, but to no avail. By 1897 Stebbins had stepped down from managerial duties and Ray Norris took his place. Norris appears not even to have been as fortunate as Stebbins in making a go of the house. In an unpublished letter from the collection of Dr. Annadora Gregory, dated "Crete, Nebraska, 2-1-1897," Norris writes to "Mr. A. D. Johnston, Cheyenne, Wyo." regarding his financial predicament with the opera house:

Dear sir;—When deed of the Opera House here was made over to Mr. Whipple I believe the futures were placed in a bill of sale separately. A bill of sale for the piano was given to E. Brong and made out to him. Does it not rightly belong with the other fixtures and have you no way of getting him to turn it over? The house is not a good paying investment *with* the piano, but *without*.

The house was definitely not a moneymaker, and it was fated never to improve.

A representative sample of troupes playing Crete, in addition to these previously discussed, included: the Gleason Theatre Company; Fischer's Cold Day Company; McMillan's Opera Company; the Colson & Ousley Company, acting *Rip Van Winkle* (a version better received than that of Robinson 15 years earlier); John Dillon, "one of the finest actors Chicago has produced," in *The New States Attorney*; the Jay Ray Comedy Company; and the "Lost in London" Company. The turn of the century witnessed Robert Downing on the stage in *Paris in 1793*, and the Camilia Martin St. George Theatrical Company.

Though the theatre business fluctuated during the last years of the century, one type of traveling show always drew a crowd—the circus. Circus shows traversed the plains of Nebraska during the latter decades of the century, stopping frequently to entertain the people of Crete and outlying areas. Usually when a circus came to town it used its own tents, but on occasion Band's Opera House housed specialty acts or provided

additional exhibition areas. The Robin's Great American and Rentz's German Allied Shows appeared in Crete as early as 1876. In June, 1879, the city was treated to the Anderson Company's Monster European, Asiatic, American, Arctic, and Antarctic World's Menagerie and Great International Champion Challenge Circus. This show, according to its advance billing, boasted "the mightiest confederation of living lessons and moral and mirthful amusement Earth has ever known." Van Amburgh and Company's Great Golden Menagerie and Circus found its way to Crete in April of 1880, a month ahead of yet another grand show—W. W. Cole's Circus, Menagerie, Aquarium, and Congress of Living Wonders. Cole's show took advantage of the extra space offered by Band's Hall to exhibit his "Living Wonders." The hall overran with curious spectators eager to gaze upon Captain M. V. Bates, and his wife, advertised as "the tallest man and woman on Earth," each billed as 8 feet tall.

A full picture of the activities carried on in Band's Opera House during the last quarter of the 19th century would not be complete without mention of politics. Then, as now, politics contained an entertainment factor as well as its more serious side—the governing of society. Though it became increasingly difficult to draw crowds for a play or recital, people flocked to head their political leaders or to rally for a "cause." During elections regular stage entertainment was interrupted by election returns "read from the stage as soon as received."<sup>22</sup> And there was no single admission charge, only a hall rental fee taken care of from party treasuries. When ex-Governor James Dawes spoke there to a Republican rally on June 2, 1894, an overflow crowd showed up. Large pictorial advertisements in the Crete newspapers advertised it for two weeks in advance. A rally held October 26, 1899, in honor of a Major Warner of Missouri elicited a similar response. Any time a political figure of some stature was engaged to speak in Crete, he could be assured of a crowd of vociferous townspeople to respond to the issues of the day.

Shows continued to play in Crete into the early 1900s, but they were less frequent than before. The Dramatic Club still gave performances, many well attended. Doane College, though usually keeping to itself as far as interaction with the city was concerned, on occasion used the building for performances.



*A drawing of Band's Opera House appeared in History of the State of Nebraska by Alfred T. Andreas (Chicago, 1882) . . . Since 1973 a savings and loan business has occupied the building.*



Crete High School used the facility for class plays and commencement exercises. But the glory days of Band's Opera House were over. There are valid reasons for this decline. The 1890s were years of financial chaos. During the several years that followed, many other businesses failed. Crete residents had little inclination to enjoy or pay for opera house entertainment.

In addition, the opera house was 20 years old in November of 1897. Even with the new paint job nine years earlier, it was not the show place it once was. Other buildings were constructed in the town suitable for many of the activities which heretofore had taken place at Band's. The Congregational Church had been the only other meeting hall in town of any size, but now there was a YMCA building where many gatherings were held. Gallagher Hall, the Union Club (suitable for smaller meetings), the City Hall, and McCargar's Hall, all new in the 1890s, were available for town activities. A Chautauqua Society had been established in Crete in 1881, but it did not move to its new facilities, the Assembly Grounds (at present Tuxedo Park), until the late 1880s. Band's Opera House was no longer the only place in town for indoor entertainment.

The opera house also lost bookings and patrons after 1900 because of the popularization of the automobile. Theatregoers no longer had to depend exclusively on their own community for entertainment, and with Lincoln only 25 miles away, they could visit that city and take in a variety of amusements. Why should a company make a stop in Crete, where audiences were consistently small, when they could play in Lincoln, confident that persons wanting badly enough to see their shows would drive the distance.

Even earlier there were signs of changing times: In August of 1898, Band's Opera House had tried to adjust to the newest entertainment medium, the movie, and thus retain its audience. For two nights it became a cinema palace, exhibiting the first Edison motion pictures seen in Crete:

A grand moving picture and talking machine entertainment will be given in the opera house at Crete, Friday and Saturday, August 19-20. Life size, life like moving pictures will be projected by powerful condensed light onto a screen of over 100 square feet of surface, and these will be supplemented by the wonderful Talking machine. This is strictly a high class entertainment of the latest musical selections, etc."

The venture seemed successful. Many people came to see this emerging wonder of a new age. However, it was almost two years (on June 6, 1900) before the proprietor of Band's again

put on a moving picture entertainment, this time under sponsorship of several local churches. The showing lasted an hour and a half and cost the spectators 25 cents—35 cents for a reserved seat. The *Crete Vidette* reported the entire program of film shorts for the evening:

Defending the flag, hot firing—Sinking of a Spanish torpedo boat in naval fight off Santiago, showing firing of heavy guns, explosion, and sinking in deep water—Armed soldiers scaling high wall—Cuban ambush—Pack mules approaching battle line, Santiago—Admiral Sampson's flag ship, New York, firing guns in naval parade.—Return of troop "C," Brooklyn—Amusing farm scene—Lively boating scene, Milan, Italy—Thrilling cavalry charge—French cavalry swimming the River Soane—Beautiful cascades in Alps, near Geneva, Switzerland—High diving, Milan, Italy; very exciting—Flags of all nations in bright colors, old glory very conspicuous; stirs American hearts—President McKinley and escort—Storm in mid-ocean, taken from deck of steamship—Trained horse and his rider—The little mischief—Fraudulent beggar chased by police—Fast trains, Fire scenes, pillow fights, etc., etc.<sup>24</sup>

Times had changed; a new century had begun. The opera house, now almost 25 years old, had seen better days. Crete was growing—and with the growth came new and better facilities. Band's House became known as the Crete Opera House in April of 1901. In 1904 the management attempted to counter "certain groundless rumors . . . that the opera house was not safe when a large crowd was in it" by hiring Lincoln architect J. H. Craddock to examine the building. According to the *Crete Vidette-Herald*, Craddock "declared the building entirely safe and one of the best and strongest built old buildings that he had ever examined."<sup>25</sup>

In 1907 the building was extensively remodeled:

The room was tastily and prettily papered and painted, three hundred new folding chairs put in, and new electric lights placed. In the gallery lights were also placed, the seats solidly fastened to the floor, and both exits fitted for use. Here the public may secure desirable seats and have a splendid unobstructed view of the stage. On the stage a large amount of work has been done. The opening has been enlarged more than five feet, an entire new lot of scenery put in—drops, sets, etc., and the whole floor will be at the disposal of the actors, for the dressing rooms are off on the side in the new part. The entire place is fitted with a thorough system of electricity, is sanitary in every way, has wash stands, water closets and fire protection.<sup>26</sup>

Despite these improvements, road shows came to town more and more infrequently and by 1910 the hall was used principally for high school plays and an occasional production by the Crete Dramatic Club, still in existence. The business district had been built up around the opera house. Gradually the old structure faded into the background of early 20th century Crete.

In 1929 Adolph Rozanek purchased the opera house block. A drug store was operating in Dr. Band's old corner quarters,

and two commercial enterprises occupied the remainder of the first floor. Rozanek gave new life to the building when he remodeled the second floor opera house section and called it the Cinderella Ballroom. A glazed dance floor and mirrored pillars enhanced the popular entertainment center. In the mid-1930s regularly scheduled dances were suspended as unprofitable due to the depression. For a few years Dr. Band's old opera house again seemed to have outlived its usefulness. But in 1938 Rozanek remodeled the first floor of the building, excluding the drug store section, into a movie house called the Times Theatre. The exterior of the building was stuccoed and an illuminated marquee was added. Band's building again became a vital part of the community. The Times Theatre, a social center on weekends, continued to operate for nearly 30 years.

The opera house still stands at the corner of 13th and Main Streets in downtown Crete, its pre-1930s appearance substantially altered. A savings and loan business purchased the building in 1973 and installed a modern door and windows in the old drug store area. Today the future of the building is questionable, the present owners having plans for a new facility at the site. However, Band's Opera House block has been inventoried as an important historical site in Crete by the State Historic Preservation Office, which would like to see it included in a Crete historic district.

Gazing up at Band's Opera House, a building that has had such an important role in the development of Crete, one is reminded of remarks made by W. S. Walker a century ago: "Till long after this generation shall have passed away, it will doubtless stand a proud monument to the untiring energy and persevering spirit of its enterprising builder." After 100 years, it has indeed.

#### NOTES

1. *Saline County Union* (Crete), November 29, 1877.
2. Alfred T. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1882), II, 1,346.
3. Gregory, Annadora Foss, *Pioneer Days in Crete, Nebraska* (Lincoln: State Journal Printing Company, 1937), 32-33. Much of the background information on Crete and Saline County is taken from Gregory's book.
4. *Ibid.*, 38-39. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1,344.
5. Gregory, *Pioneer Days in Crete*, 90-91.
6. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1,346.
7. Some estimates ranged as high as \$20,000. *Ibid.*

8. *Saline County Union*, November 28, 1877.
9. Andreas, *History of the State of Nebraska*, 1346.
10. *Saline County Union*, December 6, 1877.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, January 3, 1878.
13. *Crete Globe*, January 31, 1884.
14. *Saline County Union*, February 21, 1879.
15. *Ibid.*, December 12, 1879.
16. *State Vidette* (Crete), August 23, 1892.
17. *Crete Globe*, October 25, 1888.
18. *Wilber Republican*, November 1, 1888.
19. *Lincoln Daily News*, November 1, 1888.
20. *Crete Vidette*, September 8, 1892.
21. *Ibid.*, February 11, 1892.
22. *Beatrice Daily Democrat*, November 1, 1888. Advertisements for the Monte Christo Company's November, 1888, Lincoln engagement also stated: "Election telegrams will be constantly received and read from the stage for the edification of the audience." *Lincoln Daily News*, November 1, 1888.
23. *Crete Vidette*, August 18, 1898.
24. *Ibid.*, May 31, 1900.
25. *Crete Vidette-Herald*, November 3, 1904.
26. *Ibid.*, September 26, 1907.