



## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### The Busby Theatre

*By Thurman Shuller\**

One does not have to live in McAlester long before hearing someone remark, "They shouldn't have torn down the Busby Theatre." Very few oldsters remain who actually attended a stage performance at the Busby, but there still remains a mystique about the playhouse that was so prominent in the early days of Oklahoma statehood.

To understand how such a notable entertainment venue came to be, one must know something about the individual for whom it was named. Colonel William (Bill) Busby was never a military man. The title was given him simply as a mark of respect. He was born in New Jersey in 1856 to poor English immigrant parents.<sup>1</sup> The family soon moved to Kansas, where Bill grew to manhood with almost no formal education. Taking employment in Parsons, Kansas, with a man in the coal and grain business, he drew attention for his industriousness and aggressiveness as a young man on the move. At an early age he joined the Masonic order and remarkably quickly progressed to the thirty-third degree in the Scottish Rite. He was later elected mayor of Parsons.<sup>2</sup>

Busby's coal interests brought him to the Wilburton area of Indian Territory in 1895. He worked as a coal salesman for the mines operated by the Choctaw, Oklahoma and Gulf Railroad (later the Rock Island).<sup>3</sup> He was soon selling more coal than those mines produced, and he gradually began purchasing mines and selling his own coal. He expanded his ownership westward into the emerging mining town of South McAlester and soon became one of the biggest coal mine operators in Indian Territory. He eventually employed more than three thousand miners, making him a very rich and influential man.<sup>4</sup>

In 1903 he brought his wife and six children from Parsons, Kansas, to South McAlester. He built them the finest residence in town and for the next decade was McAlester's most prominent citizen.<sup>5</sup>

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*Colonel William Busby (from History of LaBette County, Kansas [1901]).*

Colonel Busby's interests soon extended well beyond coal mining. Although he lacked formal education and had no early training in culture, the arts, and the social graces, these all became very important to him as an adult. He was a physically imposing figure, standing six feet, three inches tall and weighing 250 pounds. He had a brilliant and perceptive mind, a gracious manner, a gift for making friends, and an enormous capacity for leadership. He could control, develop, and improve almost everything he touched. A few of the things he controlled and improved in South McAlester were a telephone system,<sup>6</sup> an electric light system,<sup>7</sup> and an interurban street railway system.<sup>8</sup> He also gave leadership to construction of the beautiful Masonic Temple, later becoming Grand Inspector General of the Scottish Rite for the whole state of Oklahoma.<sup>9</sup> He was presi-

dent of the local library board and was instrumental in getting a Carnegie Library building constructed in McAlester.<sup>10</sup>

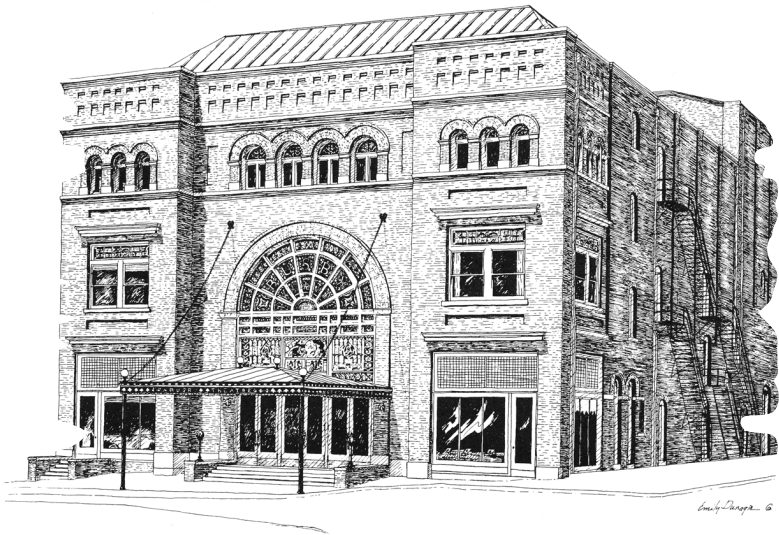
Two prominent buildings in McAlester bore his name, the Busby Hotel and the Busby Theatre. The hotel, which opened in 1905, was the finest in Indian Territory and the Southwest, furnishing great accommodations for travelers and also quickly becoming the young city's social center.<sup>11</sup> But the Busby enterprise about which old-timers spoke with so much pride was the Busby Theatre. The building was of such size and grandeur as to be completely unexpected in a small coal-mining town of about eight thousand at the time it was first being planned.

While other towns also had their entertainment emporiums, McAlester could truthfully boast of the finest and best-appointed opera house, not only in the Southwest, but in the South as well. Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Muskogee, and other of the larger cities had grand opera houses with appropriate decoration. In the territorial era, 1890–1907, important opera houses included the Overholser Opera House (Oklahoma City), Schiller Hall (Enid), and Brooks Opera House (Guthrie). According to historians of the subject, there may have been as many as twenty towns with opera houses in the territorial period.<sup>12</sup> In fact, however, the Busby Theatre was the finest south of Kansas City, and there was only one in that city superior to it.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the artistic beauty of McAlester's temple of the human arts, a Mr. Megan, of the Kansas City Scenery Company, which made specialty furnishings, scenery, and stage settings for theaters throughout the nation, said of the Busby, "It's a veritable dream."<sup>14</sup>

The Busby's understated exterior belied its interior elegance. Located at Second and Washington streets, the theater was an imposing, three-story, Classical Revival-style, brick building with white trim. The front was divided in three parts. The central part, which was recessed slightly, was made noticeable by an enormous arched window with divided lights. Multiple doors beneath the arched window allowed patrons to enter the lobby. Flanking the theater entrance were storefronts on the first floor. On all three floors, the windows had elaborate mouldings.

Inside, a breathtakingly elegant interior awaited patrons. The first-floor lobby sported frescoes and brass light fixtures. There was a similarly decorated first-balcony lobby. Further inside, the stage measured eighty feet wide and forty-two feet deep. It contained one hundred pieces of scenery and sixty-five sets of lines. There was an arrangement of every detail that goes into making a complete set-

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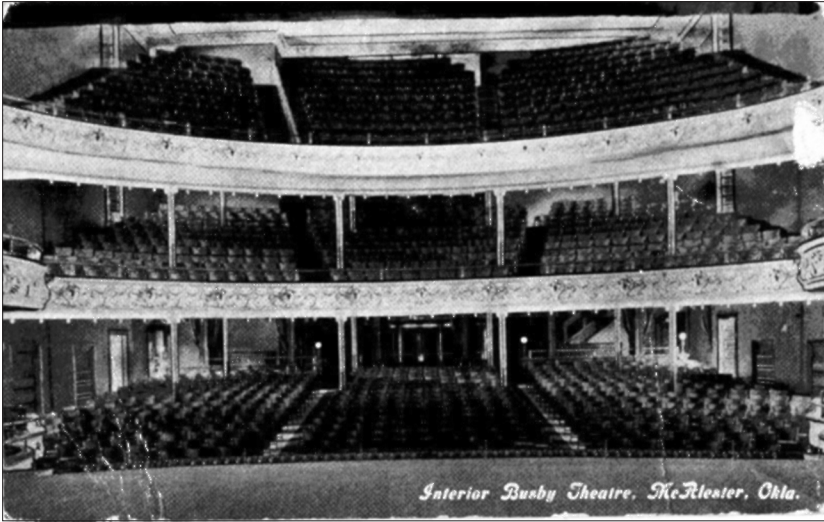


ting of the most elaborately planned plays. Drop curtains and settings represented a myriad of scenes. The electrical devices, switches, and lighting were strictly up-to-date, and all wiring was enclosed in conduits for safety.<sup>15</sup>

Art work on murals and frescoes on walls and ceiling had to be seen to be believed. The fresco work was as artistic as it was varied, from the deft touches of the brush that created the panel work to those finer and softer blends that were bodied forth in the figures representing the patron muses of Grecian art. Looking outward from the stage into the theater, one observed a huge seating area with a ground floor and two balconies. The seats were the most modern: there were 511 on the main floor, 424 in the second-floor balcony, 375 in the gallery, and 52 in six boxes, for a total of 1,362. The boxes, formed of arches supported by Ionic columns, were decorated with moulded friezes with foliage motifs and tiny faces, and the frieze continued around the wall of the lower floor. Under the stage, twelve dressing rooms offered the finest of appointments, as did the ladies' and gentlemen's rooms.<sup>16</sup> The Busby Theatre could accommodate any Broadway show that went on the road.<sup>17</sup>

Opening night was set for Friday, March 13, 1908, only four months after Oklahoma became a new state. The publicity had begun at least six weeks earlier. Albro B. "Bert" Estes, an Illinois na-

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*Above: Early-day view of the Busby Theatre's seating (Courtesy Thurman Shuller).  
Below: View of frescoes (OHS/SHPO photo).*



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tive, was a fortunate choice for general theater manager; he had excellent connections with the booking agents of the greatest and best-known performing artists and entertainers of the day. He could not have selected a more befitting feature for opening night than the comic opera called *Happyland*, which had been written especially to showcase the particular talents of the main performer, DeWolf Hopper.<sup>18</sup> Hopper is no longer known by present generations, but in those days he was at the zenith of his fame and popularity as a complete entertainer, much as Bob Hope is remembered. Hopper's show had had a very successful run on Broadway. He was the kind of performer who could appeal to common folks and equally well to the culturally sophisticated. The publicity leading up to opening night was extensive and widespread in surrounding towns.

Anticipating the opening, many individuals, both ladies and gentlemen, spent weeks preparing. McAlester people paid thousands of dollars in order to secure suitable toggery for the occasion. The efforts had not been confined to seamstresses who were making gowns for the gentler sex. Tailors were kept busy for weeks making clothes for the men, and the hat stores did a good business in opera hats for men.<sup>19</sup>

On opening night people arrived in their fancy dress and jewels by all means of transportation, some by special train, some by the interurban, others walked. Some of the more socially conscious arrived by hansom cab or an occasional automobile. The lobby was filled with floral tributes to the opening of the grand new theater. Almost all seats were filled, with standees in the balcony.<sup>20</sup>

Hopper certainly was at his best that night. He was called before the curtain after the first act, and he made one of his characteristic speeches and wound up reciting "Casey at the Bat." He complimented McAlester on its acquisition of such a beautiful theater, the Busby Hotel, and the Masonic Temple. He stated that his company thought McAlester compared favorably with New York and Chicago. All the time he talked in that serio-comic way of his and kept the audience laughing. People who had previously seen Hopper on Broadway said they thought that his performance in McAlester was even better.<sup>21</sup>

After the performance a large number took dinner at the Busby Hotel. Elaborate preparations had been made to entertain the theater goers. It was evident by observing the crowd before, during, and after the show that this very first theatrical production had raised the artistic and social consciousness of the people of this





small, coal-mining town of McAlester to a phenomenal extent, just as Colonel Busby had hoped that it would.<sup>22</sup>

Over the years, when one inquired of older residents what they remembered about the Busby Theatre, they invariably mentioned *Ben Hur*. It was the chariot race they remembered best. Unquestionably, it was the most dramatic and spectacular of any show that ever appeared there. That was on November 16, 17, and 18, 1908, eight months after the theater opened, and only one year after statehood. Considerable effort and planning<sup>23</sup> went into the advertising<sup>24</sup> and out-of-town promotion<sup>25</sup> to fill a theater of that size for three nights and one matinee to see General Lew Wallace's great romance novel about the life and times of people living under the influence of ancient Rome. This was a most ambitious undertaking for the small town of McAlester.

The excitement began early on the morning of the arrival of the two special trains. The first was a train of ten sixty-foot baggage cars full of scenery, stage trappings, and machinery. The second was even longer, made up of six Pullman sleepers, two dining cars, four day coaches, and a smoking car to meet the needs of two hundred

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people traveling with the show. In addition to the actors, an orchestra, male and female dancers, and other support people necessary for such a monumental production, there were fifty stage hands and baggage handlers.<sup>26</sup>

There was no skimping on the performance or special effects just because it was a road show. The all-day preparation took on a circus atmosphere and was a show in itself. It was a marvel to watch the dexterity with which the fifty stage hands hauled and manipulated the heavy baggage and equipment through every door and opening in the theater. Men with trunks dodged between big pieces of scenery in a way that almost called for applause, and they did have a considerable audience. Keep in mind, this was long before mechanized handling equipment.<sup>27</sup>

To accommodate the audience, extra coaches were added to regularly scheduled trains, as well as were extra cars on the interurban from Hartshorne. The second night an extra train was run from Muskogee to transport five hundred passengers from the towns to the north. All downstairs tickets were \$2.00, the same for evening and matinee performances, except that school children were offered reduced prices for the matinee.<sup>28</sup>

Headlines on the day after the opening performance proclaimed that the show had even surpassed the advanced billing. It had to be seen to be believed. All the scenery, the lighting effects, the costumes, the orchestra, the male and female choruses, and the dancers were presented just as had been when the show opened to rave reviews on Broadway nine years before, and where many confirmed theater goers had returned again and again to see the show.<sup>29</sup>

The play was presented in six acts and eighteen scenes, each one of which flowed into the next almost without interruption for three hours. The acting was great, the choruses and dancing, set to a graceful symphonic accompaniment, was superb. There were exciting episodes, such as the galley scene, with its hoard of chained slaves, and the sea fight. But naturally it was the chariot race that enthralled the audience, and it was the one feature that left the most lasting impression. Four beautiful, cream-white horses pulled each chariot at full speed around the stage as the panorama of the ancient amphitheater swept by. That scene was supported by nearly one hundred "supes" (supernumeraries or "extras") who had been engaged locally to serve as the hoi polloi to cheer the race.<sup>30</sup> As long as they lived, those local "supes" maintained "bragging rights" that they had once played in *Ben Hur* on the stage at the Busby.



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This show did pay dividends in the publicity and good will for the Busby Theatre and for the town of McAlester.<sup>31</sup> The company of *Ben Hur* considered the Busby Theatre one of the most modern, neatest, and best-appointed and best-managed in the country. The Busby Hotel also received its share of praise. Many members of the company expressed themselves to have fallen in love with the good people of McAlester. They reported that they had never had more attentive and appreciative audiences.<sup>32</sup>

In the memory of those who enjoyed attending performances at the Busby Theatre, nothing could compare with the drama of the chariot race in *Ben Hur* in 1908. However, mention was frequently made of a concert that was performed on April 14, 1914, by Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink. A widely known, international star, she was considered to be the greatest contralto singer of classical music in the world at that time, and her recordings, which were possessed by almost everyone who owned a gramophone at home, made her extremely popular.

The *grand dame* had arrived by train the morning of her concert,<sup>33</sup> accompanied by her youngest son, aged twenty-one, her accompanist, and a friend. She attended mass at the local Catholic Church and walked about town, visiting the beautiful new high school building and also the beautiful new Masonic Temple. In the afternoon she was honored at a reception given by the ladies of the Cecelian Club. This gracious Austrian-born lady had none of the affectations of the usual accomplished concert artist. At age fifty-four she had the appearance of anybody's mother. In fact, she was mother of eight children. She had a friendliness that attracted people to her.

Schumann-Heink's singing appealed to all classes of people.<sup>34</sup> She had the ability to inculcate love and reverence for the highest and noblest in the minds of educated critics, and no less was her ability to arouse the tenderest emotions in the heart of the musically unsophisticated. She could make a simple familiar song an experience. She had such power over an audience that she could make them feel like one big family to which she was singing in a whole-hearted way. She was considered a great opera singer with a careless opulence of power that could soar out over an orchestra, yet her favorite audience was at concert, such as at McAlester.<sup>35</sup>

This concert had been well advertised, and special trains had arrived from all four directions. The building was packed to overflowing, with standees in the balcony and chairs placed on stage. As she wormed her way through the crowd to center stage she was overheard

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to remark, "Would you please let a fat lady through?"<sup>36</sup> She complimented McAlester on the friendliness of the people and the beauty of the theater. Her singing was in top form, and as she sang, she smiled as if she was enjoying what she was doing, which she obviously was. One reviewer wrote, "She sang as though she had caressed each phrase into its place by persuasive and discriminating artistry, as though she took thought of every tone and so made it even and beautiful." Her encores were generous, and the audience filed out happy in the knowledge that they had seen, heard, and experienced the best that there is—right here in McAlester.

When Colonel Busby was planning his magnificent theater before the days of statehood, it was his dream that it would make McAlester the Southwest's cultural and entertainment center. It was his belief that information about the venue's opulence would spread among traveling artists and cause them to want to perform on its stage.<sup>37</sup> He further believed that the theater's reputation would be a drawing card for stimulating population growth and development of the city. It is interesting to examine the extent to which these dreams came true. In early 1913 he was predicting a population of twenty-five thousand within a year or two.<sup>38</sup>

The Busby Theatre did, indeed, develop the reputation throughout southeastern Oklahoma as the place to go to see and hear the very best of all the traveling attractions, and it did, in fact, cause McAlester to become recognized as the cultural and entertainment center.<sup>39</sup> The town's strategic location at the crossed tracks of the Katy and Rock Island railroads, about halfway between Dallas and Kansas City or St. Louis, made it convenient for shows to stop over for a performance. Colonel Busby's association with railroad authorities paved the way for arranging special trains. Manager Estes did a masterful job of coordinating schedules from all four directions when major attractions were featured. From the west special trains brought patrons from Seminole, Wewoka, Holdenville, Calvin, and Stuart; from the north, from Muskogee, Checotah, Eufaula, Canadian and Crowder; from the south, from Atoka, Stringtown, Caddo, Kiowa, and Savanna; and from the east, from Wilburton, Adamson, and Patterson. Extra cars were added to the interurban line serving Hartshorne, Haileyville, and all of the mining towns between there and McAlester. The railroad station was located only three blocks from the theater. These special trains, on occasion bringing as many as five hundred to seven hundred people, often arrived early, which benefitted the merchants, who appreciated the visitors' extra shopping time before dinner and the show. McAlester



was the state's only city that supported its theater with special trains.<sup>40</sup>

The theater also became responsible for social interaction among some of the local people. It became the fashionable thing to do to “dress for dinner,” dine at the Busby Hotel, and then step up the hill next door for an “evening at the theatre.” The Harvey House dining room at the Union railroad station also enjoyed a good reputation and a thriving business from the theater-going crowd. Ticket prices for several years remained relatively standard; boxes, if occupied, \$2.50; lower floor, \$2.00; front rows of balcony, \$1.50; remainder of balcony, \$1.00; gallery, 50 cents. A few lesser shows were \$1.50, top price. The price of a lower-floor ticket was more than a day's wages for most people in those days.

Colonel Busby's belief that the good word of pleased theater people would spread was also realized. Many of the top artists had a policy of not booking in cities that were smaller than forty thousand

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to fifty thousand, yet they did enjoy coming to McAlester. DeWolf Hopper, star on opening night, came back at least three times; some, particularly minstrels, almost annually returned. Several of the larger attractions came in as many as six to eight special railway cars, but most artists and performers came by regular passenger train and stayed, conveniently, at the Busby Hotel, where they were royally treated. A special convenience was a passageway that ran from the hotel to the stage area of the theater. The managers of the traveling companies were enthusiastic about the way they were treated. One of the theater trade publications had taken a poll circa 1911 among traveling company managers to rate American theaters on the following three points: (1) best equipped, (2) cleanest, (3) best managed. A theater in Vancouver, British Columbia, was rated first. The Busby Theatre in McAlester, Oklahoma, was rated second, which meant that it was rated highest in the United States in those three categories.<sup>41</sup>

Much of the theater's success, in addition to Busby's personal backing, must be attributed to the extraordinarily good management of Bert Estes.<sup>42</sup> He advertised widely in surrounding towns, particularly for the major attractions. A theater season usually consisted of more than fifty attractions. It was not unusual for two or more major shows to be scheduled in one week. On one incredible occasion in October 1913, Maude Adams, the most celebrated actress of her day, "flew" across the stage in *Peter Pan*, just as she had done countless times on Broadway, to much acclaim. She was followed on the very next night by Victor Herbert's *Naughty Marietta*, the most popular operetta on the road that season.<sup>43</sup>

The space previously given to the detailed description of the concert of Madame Schumann-Heink and to the production of *Ben Hur* is simply because they are the two best remembered and most talked about in subsequent years. Her contralto voice was more widely known in the hinterlands because of her records. However, the performance of the Italian opera singer Amelita Galli-Curci, the world's greatest coloratura soprano voice of her time, was just as grand. Several of the plays and musicals were just as extraordinary as *Ben Hur*, except for its spectacular chariot race. As one might expect, musical shows of some type were the most popular and best attended. To those who were thrilled by those memorable movie operettas of the 1930s featuring Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy, Alan Jones, Howard Keel, Mario Lanza, and others, it seems incredible that the previous generation of show-goers saw those same productions live and on stage at the Busby.

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Realizing that it is impossible in one short article to do justice to so many of the important performances at the Busby, the following can only be given as a sampling of some of the more important and best-known ones by name only, and the assortment does not even include many brilliant musical concerts and vaudeville acts and comics. Big musical shows that graced the Busby's stage included: Gertrude Hoffman, with company of seventy-five, traveling by private train consisting of Pullmans and baggage cars,<sup>44</sup> and Lillian Russell, a famous beauty of her day, in a show said to be the most expensive on the road that year (1913). Russell's entourage included a special train of eight Pullman cars.<sup>45</sup> The *Merry Countess* comprised sixty-five people, private Pullman cars, and two baggage cars.<sup>46</sup> *Everywoman*, advertised in 1914 as the largest musical and dramatic organization ever produced, comprised more than 150 people. It played in five countries.<sup>47</sup> The "big show" list included Irving Berlin's *Watch Your Step*.<sup>48</sup> Here are the titles of only a few of the operettas and light opera offered to audiences: *The Merry Widow*,<sup>49</sup> *A Modern Cinderella*,<sup>50</sup> *The Firefly*,<sup>51</sup> *Irene*,<sup>52</sup> Victor Herbert's *Angel Face*,<sup>53</sup> Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*,<sup>54</sup> Victor Herbert's *The Serenade*,<sup>55</sup> Victor Herbert's *Naughty Marietta*,<sup>56</sup> Victor Herbert's *The Only Girl*,<sup>57</sup> Victor Herbert's *The Princess Pat*,<sup>58</sup> *Blossom Time*,<sup>59</sup> *The Bohemian Girl*,<sup>60</sup> *The Prince of Pilsen*,<sup>61</sup> *Robin Hood*,<sup>62</sup> *Faust* (grand opera),<sup>63</sup> *Il Trovatore* (seventy people, with orchestra),<sup>64</sup> Gilbert & Sullivan's *R.M.S. Pinafore*,<sup>65</sup> and Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*.<sup>66</sup> Plays included *Bella Donna* (with internationally famous Russian actress Madame Nazimova, featuring almost as much scenery as *Ben Hur*),<sup>67</sup> *Peter Pan* (with Maude Adams),<sup>68</sup> *Jerry* (with Billie Burke),<sup>69</sup> *Mr. Antonio* (with Otis Skinner),<sup>70</sup> and *Abie's Irish Rose*.<sup>71</sup> At least fifteen to twenty different minstrel companies also appeared, some returning almost yearly, particularly Al G. Fields, who was a local favorite.

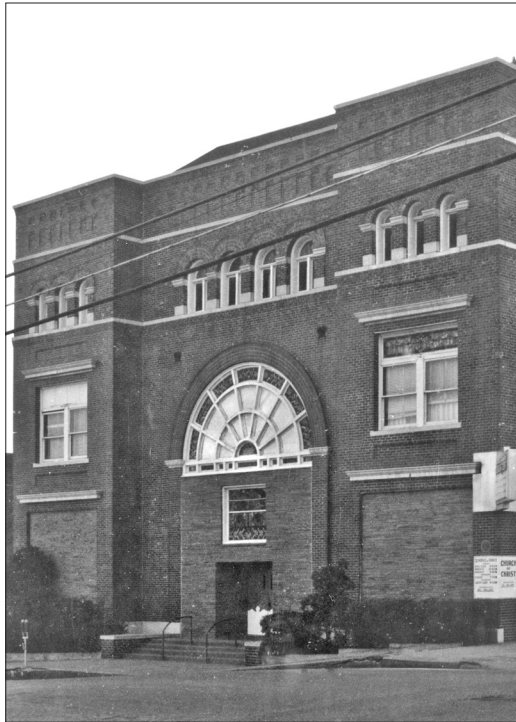
Tragically, Colonel Busby died in September 1913 at age fifty-nine, due to a carbuncle on his neck, complicated by diabetes.<sup>72</sup> After a big funeral service at the Masonic Temple, his body was shipped back to Parsons, Kansas, for interment. Within a year the entire Busby family had returned to Kansas.<sup>73</sup> When the Busby estate was finally settled, his assets were just about canceled out by his debts. In 1914 the hotel and theater buildings were sold at auction and were purchased by a St. Louis banker who owned the mortgages. Thus, they passed into nonresident ownership. Busby's wealth had been plowed back into McAlester enterprises rather than personally accumulated. He had been a citizen of McAlester

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for only ten years, from 1903 to 1913, during which time the population had tripled to about 12,600.<sup>74</sup> It never reached the twenty-five thousand that he predicted but stagnated at about fifteen thousand for the next three decades. One wonders what might have happened had McAlester had the benefit of his vision, enthusiasm, and financial support for yet another ten or fifteen years.

With A. B. "Bert" Estes as manager, the theater operation was little affected at first by Busby's death.<sup>75</sup> Out-of-town advertising and extensive articles about coming attractions maintained good attendance to shows booked well in advance. The schedule was not quite as full as in the earlier years, but it still offered good-quality shows. The year 1916–17 was a particularly good theater season, starting with the opera *Martha* and followed by musicals by Irving Berlin, George M. Cohan, and two by Victor Herbert. Before the end of that season Estes resigned as manager. The glorious era of the Busby was over, having lasted about ten years. Advertisements were reduced in size and were dropped in surrounding towns. Movies had been

*The Busby  
Theatre in  
later days  
(OHS/SHPO  
photo).*





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shown intermittently for several years, though the Busby was not really adaptable to motion pictures. Even boxing matches were programmed. Al Jolson was a major attraction in 1921,<sup>76</sup> but it was a financial fiasco because the lower-floor ticket prices were raised to \$5.40, which McAlester patrons refused to pay. Only a few dozen of those seats were filled, but there was standing room only in the balcony. Jolson was stunned, but he gave his usual great performance. Those prices were never tried again.<sup>77</sup>

As years passed, sometimes the theater season did not start until after January 1, but still some notable shows were booked. John Philip Sousa performed to wild acclaim in 1922.<sup>78</sup> In 1925 *Abie's Irish Rose*,<sup>79</sup> the record-breaking Broadway comedy, played to a full house for four performances and returned a couple of years later for a single performance. Another highly acclaimed attraction in 1927 was the operetta *The Student Prince*,<sup>80</sup> which many consider the greatest of all musical productions, its main feature being a men's chorus of sixty trained voices. Two years later, in April 1929 the performance of the *Minstrel Vanities of 1929*,<sup>81</sup> which "contained a chorus of local singers," was the last show at the Busby as a legitimate theater. After only twenty-one years McAlester's claim to be the cultural and entertainment center of southeastern Oklahoma had come to an end.

For three years the theater building stood vacant except for an occasional scheduled meeting. Less than a month after that final closing, the stage was robbed of some of its finest scenery, valued at about twenty thousand dollars.<sup>82</sup> Several years' taxes went unpaid, and the building became a liability to its St. Louis owner. In 1932 it was sold to the McAlester Church of Christ for the token price of twenty-five hundred dollars.<sup>83</sup> A great deal of money was spent remodeling it for use as a church, and it became one of Oklahoma's finest Church of Christ buildings.<sup>84</sup> The congregation used it until 1979, and then they moved into a newly constructed church building. Other church congregations temporarily used the Busby.

From the time the Busby building came under out-of-town ownership it was not properly maintained, and the small church congregation was unable to do so. When the First Baptist Church purchased it in 1979,<sup>85</sup> both seller and buyer knew that the wooden roof was rotten and in very dangerous condition. They theorized that the building could not be used for any practical purpose and should be razed in order to make room for needed church expansion and parking space.

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There are several reasons why the Busby Theatre, despite an auspicious beginning, had such a short life. Colonel Busby died after only five and one-half years, and the absentee owner had no interest in the building. Development of the motion picture industry destroyed live entertainment in small towns everywhere, and the decline of the coal mine industry caused loss of population in the surrounding towns and communities.

As long as that theater building stood, it was a reminder of something very special to McAlester. However, the memory has rapidly faded. When it became public knowledge that the historic old Busby Theatre was to be torn down, a group of public-spirited individuals made an effort to raise money to preserve it. The amount that was raised fell far short of the fortune required for such a project. The building was then leveled to accommodate the proposed church expansion. The elegant space that was once allocated to 1,362 seats, where patrons of the arts enjoyed the finest live entertainment to be found in America, is now a concrete slab demarcated for forty parked automobiles.

### ENDNOTES

\*Dr. Thurman Shuller, a graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Medicine, served for five years during World War II as a Flight Surgeon with the Eighth Air Force in the European Theater of Operation. After his military service he was a pediatrician with the McAlester Clinic for forty-one years. In retirement he has enjoyed local historical research and writing and has served as president of the Pittsburg County Genealogical and Historical Society. The drawing on page 352 was used by permission McAlester artist Emily Dunagin.

<sup>1</sup> *McAlester (Oklahoma) News Capital*, September 25, 1913. The article was written by Henry F. Robbins for the *St. Louis Globe Democrat* after Busby's death.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Busby Buys Control of Osage Company," *South McAlester (Oklahoma) Evening News*, March 23, 1903.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *South McAlester (Oklahoma) Capital*, February 9, 1905.

<sup>7</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, September 25, 1913.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* See also H. Roger Grant, "Electric Traction Promotion in Oklahoma," in *Railroads in Oklahoma*, ed. Donovan L. Hofsommer (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1977), 95–105.

<sup>9</sup> Baird Martin, "Undisputed Leader in City," *McAlester News Capital*, May 1, 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Martin, "Multimillionaire Financed Much of Library," *McAlester News Capital*, May 27, 1969. See also Tanya D. Finchum and G. Allen Finchum, "Celebrating the Library Spirit: A Look Back at the Carnegie Libraries in Oklahoma," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 79 (Winter 2001–2002): 454–75.

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<sup>11</sup> “Brilliant Opening of Busby Hotel,” *South McAlester Capital*, December 21, 1905.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the history of early-day Oklahoma’s entertainment varieties and venues, see Susan Booker, “Did They Really Sing Opera in the Opera Houses? Public Entertainment in Oklahoma and Indian Territories, 1895–1907,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 81 (Summer 2003): 132–53, Kay Brandes, “Theatrical Activities in Oklahoma City from 1889 to 1964” (M.F.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1965), and John P. Sinopoulo-Wilson, “The History of Vaudeville Theater in Early Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889–1930” (Ph.D. diss., Union Institute and University, [Cincinnati, Ohio], 1997). For the shift from opera houses to movie theaters after 1907 Oklahoma statehood, see Doris Hinson Pieroth, “The Only Show in Town: Ellen Whitmore Mohrbacher’s Savoy Theater,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 60 (Summer 1982): 260–79, and Helen Brophy Geary, “After the Last Picture Show,” *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 61 (Spring 1983): 4–27. The latter deals with the career of movie theater owner Lawrence William Brophy and his ventures in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

<sup>13</sup> “Busby Theatre,” *McAlester (Oklahoma) Daily Capital*, February 12, 1908.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; “Busby Theatre,” National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form,” March 1979, National Register Files, State Historic Preservation Office, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The Busby Theatre was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in December 1979 (NR 79002022).

<sup>16</sup> “Busby Theatre,” *McAlester Daily Capital*, February 12, 1908.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> “Busby Theatre Opened,” *McAlester Daily Capital*, March 14, 1908.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “Final Date Approved for *Ben Hur*,” *McAlester News Capital*, October 29, 1908.

<sup>24</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, November 11–19, 1908. There were large daily ads.

<sup>25</sup> *Hartshorne (Oklahoma) Sun*, October 29 and November 12, 1908; *Kiowa (Oklahoma) Chronicle*, October 29 and November 12, 1908.

<sup>26</sup> “Circus Atmosphere on Arrival,” *McAlester News Capital*, November 16, 1908.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> “Rave Reviews After First Performance,” *McAlester News Capital*, November 17, 1908.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, November 19, 1908.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, April 17, 1914.

<sup>34</sup> Mrs. J. W. Perry, *McAlester News Capital*, April 11, 1914.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Baird Martin, interview by Thurman Shuller, July 22, 1988, notes in possession of the author. Martin was a local historian and feature writer for the *McAlester News Capital*.

<sup>37</sup> *South McAlester Capital*, February 13, 1908.

<sup>38</sup> Henry P. Robbins, *McAlester News Capital*, September 25, 1913.

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- <sup>39</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, November 24, 1913.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, November 29, 1913.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, October 21, 1913.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, October 28, 1912.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, December 22, 1913.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, December 15, 1913.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, October 20, 1913.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, January 27, 1914.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, November 9, 1916.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, December 17, 1908.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, November 5, 1915.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, January 3, 1914.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, January 12, 1921.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, February 16, 1922.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, December 6, 1909.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, December 30, 1916.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, October 29, 1912.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, November 30, 1916.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, January 6, 1917.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, December 30, 1925.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, January 17, 1913.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, January 28, 1913.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, November 19, 1915.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, November 4, 1909.
- <sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, March 23, 1914.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, March 25, 1914.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, November 13, 1920.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, March 2, 1914.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, October 28, 1912.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, April 12, 1915.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, April 10, 1917.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, November 16, 17, and 18, 1925.
- <sup>72</sup> Dr. E. N. Allen, Busby's personal physician, quoted in the *McAlester News Capital*, September 13, 1913.
- <sup>73</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, March 6, 1914.
- <sup>74</sup> *McAlester City Directory*, 1914–1915.
- <sup>75</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, October 21, 1915.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, March 17, 1971.
- <sup>77</sup> Baird Martin, interview by Thurman Shuller, September 25, 1989, notes in possession of the author.
- <sup>78</sup> *McAlester News Capital*, January 22, 1922.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, November 17, 1925.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, February 17, 1927.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, April 5, 1929.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, April 8, 1929.

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<sup>83</sup> Pittsburg County, County Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Book D123, p. 435, December 27, 1932.

<sup>84</sup> "Opera House Now Church," *McAlester (Oklahoma) Daily Democrat*, July 31, 1976.

<sup>85</sup> Pittsburg County, County Clerk's Office, Deed Records, Book 479, p. 500, November 19, 1979.