

Curtain came down early on visiting theater troupe

Before the silent movies came along, Bloomingtonians were entertained by local amateur groups and visiting road companies of professional performers. A local promoter, Robert Harris, brought the companies to the Harris Grand Theatre.

He prided himself on the quality of the shows he booked into his theater, but there was one occasion in 1911 when he was probably rather embarrassed about a contract he had signed. The production was called *The Straw Man*, a "western melo-drama," which had received excellent reviews when the lead had been played by a William



Looking back

By Rose McIlveen

Faversham.

The new lead, Henry Burke, was highly touted by the producers, Messrs. Gilman & Company. In an advance piece carried by the Bloomington *Telephone* on Nov. 2, 1911, Burke was described as a man who had "achieved so enviable a reputa-

tion in western roles that he may be said to stand alone in the delineation of these types."

Continued the newspaper, "It is universally agreed that in the title role of this play he has found the most emphatic suitable medium for his remarkable talent since his appearance upon the stage. The accuracy of his portrayal together with the natural ability he brings to his work have united in producing an entirely new conception of pure American drama."

Having read the enthusiastic advance publicity release, which was treated as a news story by the *Tele-*

phone, members of the audience arrived at the Harris Grand expecting to be entertained. The evening was entirely different from what was expected.

Though the newspaper had touted the production, it was, in turn, unmerciful in criticizing what little the audience saw of the production. Incredibly, the first scene of the western melodrama was set at a military ball in England. Commented the *Telephone* reporter, "The stage decoration for this elaborate ball consisted of a couple of folding wooden benches which are given away by clothing stores as ad-

vertisements, and a tea table, while the costumes were the most miscellaneous collection of evening clothes ever been put on exhibition in Bloomington."

Warming to his subject, the reporter reviewer continued, "The less said about the ability of the company the better." He suggested that the audience on the main floor had acted with some restraint and perhaps expected their counterparts in the gallery to halt the production with hooting and whistling.

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