

## *Now Appearing in Downtown Holland: The History of the Knickerbocker Theatre*

by Geoffrey D. Reynolds

What do an elephant, Blackstone the Magician, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt have in common? They've all appeared at the Knickerbocker Theatre in downtown Holland. Built in 1911, the Knickerbocker, located at 86 East 8th Street, has hosted a great number of events—from vaudeville acts in the 1920s and 1930s to rock concerts in the 1980s. In the early days, dancers, orchestras, elephants, magicians and Chatauqua plays all graced its stage. While serving as Secretary of the Navy, Franklin Delano Roosevelt even gave a speech there.



The Knickerbocker, as it was named and carved upon its face to this day, was reportedly built for \$30,000 by local businessmen Tieman Slagh and Arend Smith. It was the fifth building along the south side of East 8th Street to be built by Slagh. "Holland's New Playhouse Whose Name Stands for the Very Best Among Dutch People," read the headline above the photograph of the Knickerbocker Theatre in December 23, 1910, local newspaper. It was followed by

a large paragraph describing the theatre as one of the important building improvements for that year "for the welfare of the city and the people in general," even as the workmen continued to prepare it for an early 1911 opening date. This new three-story building, made of brick and stone, replaced

one that had burned years before at an unknown location.

The name Knickerbocker translates to the "best in life" and was used by author Washington Irving in his writing. True to its meaning, the owners of the Knickerbocker offered what they thought was the best

in entertainment for the Holland community. It was reported to have 1,000 seats, with a perfect view of the stage in every one of those seats. The responsibility of bringing entertainment to the venue for the first year was to be shouldered by a committee made up of members of the Board of Trade, an earlier version of today's Chamber of Commerce. Whether this ever took place is up to speculation.

*(continued on page 2)*

In September 1911, the theatre was leased to Charles E.

## **From the Director**

as the renter. He promised to return to stage shows of old only and had the place refitted and redecorated for his customers. One of his promised plays was *The Price She Paid*, a drama, and new plays were presented every two days for a paltry 15 and 25 cents, depending on the seat you chose. Ogden also reintroduced movies to the venue that starred actors like Jack Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. It also appears that Ogden closed the theatre during the summer months of 1918, but opened again in September for more vaudeville acts. Unfortunately, the worldwide flu epidemic of 1918 forced all theatre owners, churches, and gathering places in the city to close their doors until the sickness left town. But with the exit of the flu that fall also went another manager. The factory owners were the most upset when the theatre closed since it was the only amusement that they could promise laborers who came to Holland to work.

In February 1920, a push was on by local boosters to purchase the theatre from the Michigan Trust Company for \$15,000. But public ownership was not in the making and the Trust eventually leased the building to the Regent Theater Company of Grand Rapids. Their intention was to show movies. Under their tenure, they made improvements that included a new pipe organ, upholstered seats, and proper ventilation. Local man "Vaudie" Vanden Berg, Jr. was placed in charge as manager. In October 1920, Secretary of the Navy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, paid a visit to its stage and proved to be a highlight for this theatre's lackluster past. But soon, motion

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