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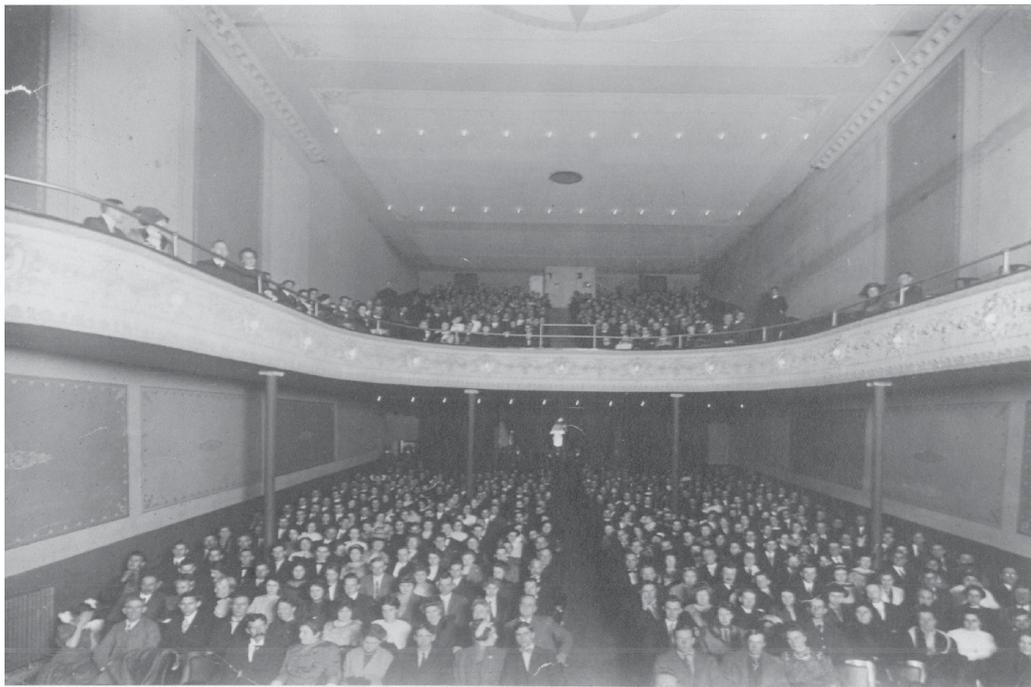
Volume 16 Number 1

Spring 2006

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.

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From the Director



For some time now, I have been appearing bi-weekly on the Red Kingman Show, which is one of the programs offered by WHTC, Holland's hometown station on the AM dial. I must admit that I like the chance to talk on the air to WHTC's listeners twice a month. It allows me to talk about Holland area history with Kingman, who seems genuinely interested and very attentive. I especially like it when his listeners give us feedback. One listener said via e-mail, "I enjoyed your talk on the radio this morning—you have a way telling stories that make us really care about them. I always look forward to Thursday mornings in the car." I get similar feedback from the *Holland Sentinel* column I write, which appears about twice a month. One column features the always interesting History Mysteries, where I submit a photograph about which very little is known. By Monday morning calls and e-mails are flooding in to us with identifications and stories about the image. That is always fun and informative.

The historical articles I write are created to inform the reader more than beg for answers. Maybe, at least, the reader is thinking more now than they were before about a historical event, person, or place. One such place is the Knickerbocker Theatre, which is the subject of this issue. After you read it, I hope that you visit the theatre more, think about its history as a building, and also about its place in Holland history.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

The History of the Knickerbocker Theatre (cont. from page 1)

However, the Board put up \$3,000 to rent the theatre on its scheduled opening night, March 1, 1911. That date was never kept as tragedy struck the Holland community.



Tieman Slagh,
1911

Days before the planned opening date, co-owner Tieman Slagh was killed by a 28-foot fall while hanging the electric sign of the newly completed theatre. Some townspeople took this as a sign that the Knickerbocker was not condoned as a Christian place of entertainment and Slagh was being punished for his indiscretion. The theatre remained dark, and unopened, until September of that same year.

In September 1911, the theatre was leased to Charles E. New and John C. Agnew of Evanston, Illinois, by the Michigan Trust Company, the administrator of the Slagh estate. Evidently, this change in ownership took place because Smith and the widow Slagh could not continue to hold ownership in it. The new renters promised that they would offer the "right kind of shows that will elevate the taste and offer clean, wholesome amusement to the population of the city." Once again, in October, the Board of Trade put up the money to buy out the theatre for its opening performance of the Brewsters Millions Company, scheduled for November 3. This time the theatre did open, and without tragedy. Unfortunately, the renters could not make the new theatre profitable and, by November 1913, the theatre was once again under new management, but still owned by the Michigan Trust Company. The new manager, J. W. Himbaugh, took over the theatre and was the one responsible for introducing moving pictures, known as "talkies," and a better heating plant. Theatrical shows were also shown, but only sporadically.



The Knickerbocker Theatre in 1911

Two years later, in 1915, the theatre was again under new management, but the owner remained the Michigan Trust Company. This time New Yorker A. Berlin promised that he would bring entertainment that Hollanders had been asking for, and he did with the very first show, *The Christian*. Unfortunately, even the first play did not save him, as he had decided to keep the theatre open every day, including Sundays. This did not sit well with the people of Holland and soon the theatre was closed. In 1916, the bank decided to end its ownership of the theatre and attempted to sell the theatre property and the homestead of Tieman Slagh's living widow, Alice, to the highest bidder. It did not sell until much later.

In November 1917, the theatre once again saw activity under the new management of Frank G. Ogden, who also served



Vaudeville act from the early days

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 pictures took over as the entertainment of the day—and night.

Three years later, in March 1923, the building lease changed again, this time to a Mr. Buis, a local upholsterer and mattress manufacturer. Under his management, the theatre continued to show two new movies per week, host plays, political speakers, and vaudeville, as well as high class music and dancing acts. The building’s name was changed to the New

Holland Theater. On December 24, the theater opened with *The Courtship of Miles Standish*. By March 1924, Buis filed for bankruptcy after spending \$8,000 on renovations. The young theatre was sold to the Carley Amusement Company in 1926, and some years later, the building, by now the Holland Theater, became part of the gigantic Butterfield chain of theaters.

Little is know about the theatre from that time until 1949, when improvements in the form of an addition to the front were made under the Holland Theater name. Eventually, electronic home entertainment, such as television and videocassette recorders (VCRs), as well as multiscreen cinemas, took their toll on downtown theatres. The Knickerbocker’s sister theatres, the Park and the Strand, soon went out of business. Butterfield Theaters owned the theatre up until 1985, when it was purchased by Goodrich Theaters. Goodrich spent \$300,000 on renovations before selling the 355-seat venue to Hope College in 1988 for just under \$200,000, as part of the Riverview Development Project.

After the theatre was donated to the college to serve as a multi-purpose facility, it was given a new life under the management of Phil Tanis, a 1987 Hope graduate and former Holland city councilman and mayor, who became the theatre manager in early 1988. Tanis began the film series we enjoy today. Reka Jellema followed him in 1990, when she oversaw a \$75,000 renovation of the front of the building to look like the 100 East 8th Street building, which was also owned by Hope College.



The Knickerbocker Theatre as it appears today

Today, the Knickerbocker plays a major role in Hope College’s cultural offerings through lectures, art films, concerts, assemblies for students, faculty and staff, and a variety of musical and stage performances throughout the year, under the capable leadership of its current manager, Erik Alberg.

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Holland's East 8th Street business district before the construction of the Knickerbocker

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