

Pearl Opera House: Phantom of the Flint Hills

Alta Vista, Wabaunsee County, Kansas
1880s-1970s



Figure 1. Pearl Opera House in 1910.

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This study traces the introduction of an opera house to the small town of Alta Vista, Kansas and follows it until its closing. This highlights the role of the theater and its importance to the town. I used collections at the Wabaunsee County Museum, historic photographs, interviews, newspaper accounts, and field work to the old opera house.

The lights dim. A hush falls over the audience. Anticipation builds as people wait for the curtain to move. Finally, the curtain scrolls up, the show starts, and the audience applauds. Just like many people worldwide who experience these emotions while attending a performance of an opera, theatre show, or any form of live entertainment, the same can be said for people in small towns attending them. In the early decades of the 20th century, the people of Alta Vista, Kansas, experienced many of the same emotions as they attended shows in their own little theater, the Pearl Opera House.

The Beginning of the Town

The town of Alta Vista in southwestern Wabaunsee County was founded in 1887. It did not always have the name “Alta Vista,” though, as it was previously named “Cable City” after the man who brought the railroad, the Rock Island line, to town.¹ After the land had been surveyed, Mr. Cable announced that a depot would be built there, and the people living in the area were so thankful for it, they decided to call the new town “Cable City”. However, in March of 1887, the name was changed to Alta Vista as Mr. Cable declined the honor of having the town named after him.² Some of the earliest settlers to Alta Vista included Isaac Johnson, Ross and Robert Cooper, L.J. Woodard, H.H. Bailey, the Alexander brothers, and Union Thomas.³

¹ “**Alta Vista Clippings Notebooks**” at Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.



Figure 2. A photograph of the main street view in Alta Vista in 1887. SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

As shown in Figure 2 above, Alta Vista's main street in 1887 looks more like a dilapidated and run down place than that of a town on the verge of development. However, soon after, more businesses would move in and be built on the main street, making way for the installment of the Pearl Opera House.

The Start of the Opera House

By 1910, Alta Vista had almost five hundred people, a hotel, two banks, four churches, a newspaper, and a lumber yard.⁴ Yet it did not have a town hall, public gathering place, or theater. Early settler Union Thomas and his wife Rachel Thomas decided to build one. In 1904, they constructed the large, square opera house from native

⁴ *Polk's Kansas State Gazeteer and Business Directory*, 1912.

limestone and named it “Pearl” after their son.⁵ The actual opera house, or theater, was located on the second floor of the building, with the first floor having two separate stores, one a meat market that was also owned by Union Thomas.⁶ The other half was being rented out and used as a general store.⁷ The two street level stores were separated by a graceful curving stone archway.⁸ When the Pearl Opera House, also sometimes referred to as the Pearl Theater opened in 1904, it had cost Union Thomas \$9,000.⁹

The opening Friday night in the theater, October 21, 1904, featured Victor Lee, a magician, as the entertainment; he would also perform Saturday night.¹⁰ On the first night, there was difficulty in getting the crowd seated, as there was only one usher, and many of the people did not fully understand the way that the seating worked. Another problem they faced was many people not buying their tickets until the evening of the show.¹¹ All of this is to be expected from residents who had never had a theater in their town before and did not know exactly what they should do when attending a show. However, by Saturday night, things were running much more smoothly and both showings by the magician were successful. The crowd on Friday night was estimated to have reached over 300 people with Saturday not having quite as many. The show was said to have had “no old worn-out tricks, but new and difficult feats of magic.”¹²

⁵ **“Pearl Opera House”** *The Alta Vista Journal*, Sept. 30, 1904.

⁶ **“Union Thomas’ Meat Market”** *Wabaunsee County Directory and History*, 59.

⁷ **“Centennial, Alta Vista, 1887-1987: 100 Years,”** 34. Copy available at Hale Library Special Collections. Kansas State University.

⁸ The stone archway has since been filled in. Interview with Janice Swallow, December 13, 2015.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ **“Opera House Opened,”** *The Alta Vista Journal*, Oct. 28, 1904.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.



Figure 3. A photograph showing Pearl Opera House as it appeared in 1910. Note the ornamental, triangular inscribed sign on top of the building. Note also the horse and buggy hitched to the left and the carefully-planted trees. SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.



Figure 4. A photograph showing the Pearl Opera House as it appears today in 2015. Across a century, the ornamental sign, trees, and stone archway have all disappeared. Photo by author.

As seen in Figures 3 and 4 above, a lot has changed in Alta Vista since 1910 but the original building constructed by Union Thomas still stands.

Entertainment Coming to Alta Vista

With the addition of an opera house to the community, whole new opportunities for entertainment opened up. Not only could rural people from all over the county go to the theater to see live shows, but people could also now see entertainment from all over the world in the form of film. Doubling its role as an opera house, the Pearl also began showing films shortly after its opening.¹³ One of the town's favorite acting duos to appear was Francis Ford and Grace Cunard. Francis Ford and Grace Cunard were some of the most popular film actors of the early 1900s and wrote, directed, and starred in many films and serials together.¹⁴ The Pearl showed many moving pictures starring the two of them including serials, which were short episodes, comparable to a television series today. In 1915, one of the Ford-Cunard productions shown was called "The Broken Coin." It must have been a huge draw, for it ran at the opera house every Thursday night for fifteen weeks until the series was over.¹⁵ Another serial shown was "The Adventures of Peg O' The Ring." In 1916, it also ran every Thursday for 15 weeks.¹⁶

¹³ "**Alta Vista Clippings Notebooks,**" at Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

¹⁴ Robert Birchard, "**The Adventures of Francis Ford and Grace Cunard,**" *American Cinematographer*, 1993.

¹⁵ "**The Broken Coin,**" *The Alta Vista Journal*, Dec. 16, 1915.

¹⁶ "**The Circus is Coming,**" *The Alta Vista Journal*, Nov. 16, 1916.



Figure 5. A picture showing an advertisement for a moving picture to be shown at the Pearl in 1916. SOURCE: *The Alta Vista Journal*, Nov. 16, 1916.

As shown in Figure 5 above, the town of Alta Vista was always very excited to be showing a moving picture starring two of the most popular actors of that time. Ads for the movies were often large in their local newspaper.¹⁷

¹⁷ "The Campbell's are Coming," *The Alta Vista Journal*, Nov. 16, 1916.

Local Productions

Along with moving pictures and different traveling acts that would come to the Pearl, local theater was also performed there. School productions as well as other local performances would be held in the opera house. As seen in Figure 6 below, in 1919, the play “Arizona Cowboy” was performed by local talent and shows the cast in costume on the stage at the Pearl.



Figure 6. A photograph showing the cast of a local production called “Arizona Cowboy.” Just visible above the stage may be part of the old, printed canvas scroll-down curtain.
SOURCE: Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

The cast as seen in Figure 6 in the back row (from left) are: Bill Kahle, Gene Moon, Liliash Fisher, Henry Cory, Joe Waters, Ona Stice Phillips, Mary Hyde, Helen Hesser Nelson, Fred Hesser, Josephine Waters, and Elmer Kahle. The front row includes: Darrel Kiger, Daisy

Kiger Collier, Sam Fisher, and Dr. Kiger.¹⁸ The play “Arizona Cowboy” was performed to a full house.¹⁹

The Many Different Uses of the Pearl

While the Pearl Opera House was originally built as an entertainment space for shows, throughout the years, it has seen many different uses. When it was first opened in 1904, Union Thomas tried to book a different traveling company each week. Yet other activities such as social dancing and even roller skating have been held in the Pearl.²⁰ Other activities in the theater include movies, fashion shows, town meetings, commencement exercises, and even basketball and wrestling.²¹ In Figures 7 and 8 on the following page, advertisements for both a skating rink and a wrestling match are shown as they were featured in the local newspaper, the *Alta Vista Journal*. These ads help to illustrate how important the opera house was to the town and how often community members were in it. In an interview with Janice Swallow, a former resident of Alta Vista and daughter of Bob Smith, one-time owner of the old opera house building, she stressed how important the Pearl Opera House was to the people of Alta Vista and how it was a place that held the community together.²² Her father, Bob Smith, was the owner of Smith’s Sundries, which was a store in the bottom part of the theater. Janice said the Pearl was

¹⁸ “**Alta Vista Clippings Notebooks,**” at Wabaunsee County Museum and Historical Society, Alma, Kansas.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Carol Swenson, “**A History of Alta Vista, Kansas,**” 1968.

²¹ *The Alta Vista Journal*, July 19, 1917.

²² Interview with Janice Swallow, December 13, 2015.

AROUND! AROUND! AROUND!

We will open a SKATING RINK on
Monday Night, March 2
 at 7:30 p. m. in PEARL OPERA HOUSE

Roller skates is all the rage in all adjoining towns. Why need we take a back seat when we have such a fine room. We purchased a fine line of skates, all sizes. 10c admission to hall will be charged. Those wishing to skate will be charged the usual fee, 15c. Free admission opening night. Rink will close promptly at 10 p. m. Open 3 nights each week, Monday, Thursday & Saturday nights from 7:30 to 10 p. m. Everybody invited. Bring your ladies; the best of order will be maintained. We will have three experts from Herington to assist those wishing to learn.

UNION THOMAS, Mgr.

Figure 7. A clipping from a newspaper depicting an advertisement for a skating rink to be held in the Pearl. SOURCE: *The Alta Vista Journal*, Feb. 28, 1908.

WRESTLING MATCH
 AT THE
PEARL THEATRE
 Alta Vista, Kansas

Saturday, July 21st, '17

| | |
|---|---|
| Lewis Hoffman of ONAGA, KANSAS Weight 155 lbs | John M. Hyde of ALTA VISTA, KANSAS Weight 150 lbs |
|---|---|

Both Men are in Splendid Condition.

The match will start immediately after the Chautauqua program in the Afternoon.

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Ring Side Seats | 35c |
| General Admission, Adult | 25c |
| Children | 15c |
| Ladies Free | |

Figure 8. A clipping from a newspaper Depicting an advertisement for a wrestling match to be held in the Pearl. SOURCE: *The Alta Vista Journal*, July 19, 1917.

often used as a movie theater in the 1940s through the 1960s as well as a place for teen dances. When the teen dance era was in full swing, Janice felt that the opera house was returned to its original use – music and performances for rural people.²³ Another interesting detail about the Pearl that Janice remembers is the curtain. While most theaters have the typical red velvet curtain, the Pearl had a scroll-down curtain. Not only is this rare

²³ Ibid.

for a theater, but the curtain, most likely made of heavy canvas, had ads printed on it as well.²⁴

Seeing the Pearl Today

Going into the opera house present day was a surreal experience. With theatre always being a huge passion of mine, it was very exciting researching this opera house and being able to actually go into a place that has such a rich history. Although the theater closed in the 1970s and most everything from the original theater days had been torn out or sold, one important element still remains: the stage. Upon first entering the large upstairs space, it is quite apparent that it used to be a theatre. There is a generous cutout for the audience to view shows with stairs on either side of the stage leading to what would have been the wings. Though the Pearl was built in 1904, the stage, floor, and ceiling, while worn down some, are as they were when it first opened, which is incredible. Standing on the stage and looking out to where the audience would have been, I could feel the history and excitement that the building holds. While looking around both the outside and the inside of the building, one aspect became apparent: Union Thomas had left his mark. Not only had Union changed the lives of so many people who lived in and around Alta Vista by broadening their world and giving them a space for leisure and entertainment, he physically left his mark in the place as well. As seen in figures 9 and 10 on the following page, his name can be clearly seen on both the outside of the opera house and on the inside, on a beam above the stage.

²⁴ Ibid.



Figure 9. A photograph showing Union Thomas' name on the outside of the Pearl Opera House. Photo by Jessica Tucker. December 2015.



Figure 10. A photo showing the names "Union Thomas" and "Alta Vista, Kansas" written on a support beam above the stage inside the Pearl. Photo by Jessica Tucker. December 2015.

Whether an opera house was built in a town of 400 or 400,000, it had the ability to make a difference. A "Saturday night theater" brought an isolated rural population closer together and helped to create a sense of community. That is exactly what Pearl Opera House, now 112 years old, has done for the town of Alta Vista, Kansas.

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