

# Looking Back #12

## The Lewis Grand Opera House

by David L. Miles, Curator

Museum at Harsha House

Charlevoix Historical Society



The only known surviving photo of the original Lewis Grand Opera House facade

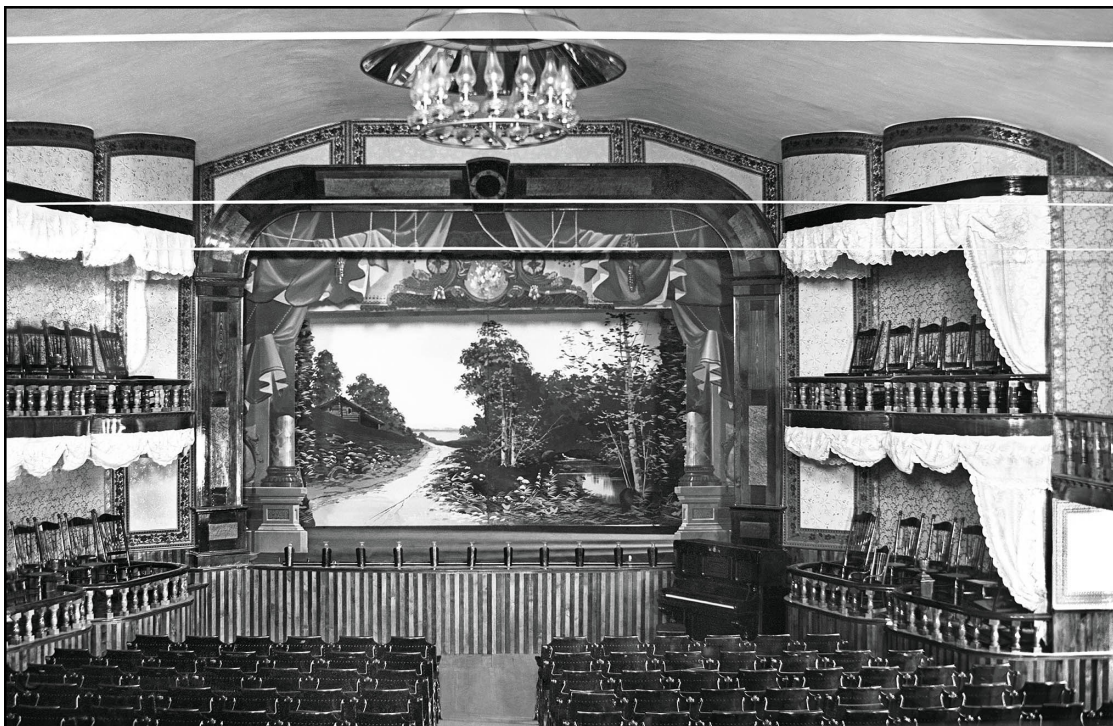
The Lewis Grand Opera House beside the lower channel bridge was constructed in 1889 by Levi Lewis, Charlevoix's first doctor, who arrived here in 1869. It was built at the insistence of his wife Esther, a strong-willed woman who had grown up with a cultural background. She found her new home, so isolated ever since she first arrived as a bride in 1871, to be, at best, a cultural desert. Like many similarly named ventures, it was called an "opera house" where probably not one opera was ever staged. But the stigma that could surround the word "theater," which was considered a rather scandalous profession at the time, especially for women, necessitated the other name to give it social and moral legitimacy. Traveling stage troupes, musicians, magicians, solo artists, snake oil purveyors, and other attractions filled the bills, plus high school graduations and many another local happening.

The building occupied the last northerly lot between Park Avenue and the lower channel, right next to the bridge. It stretched west 100 feet from a fifty-foot-wide façade. The second floor auditorium covered fifty by sixty-eight feet, with a twenty-two foot high ceiling. The latter's circular light fixture held sixteen oil lamps. The stage area was twenty-two by fifty feet, with a proscenium twenty-one feet wide and fifteen feet tall, flanked on each side by two boxes for those who could afford them. These contained maroon velvet curtains and gilded chairs, with flashes of gilt throughout the auditorium. Seating capacity: 700. There was even a 'gods' section at the very back top, next to the street, where a ticket might be procured for as little as a nickel. Average price was about thirty-five cents.



Left side commercial premises, here Mullen's clothing store. The central stairs up to the box office and auditorium appear at right. This area today is the outdoor deck of the Vue wine bar.

When the building opened on Tuesday, May 28, 1889, it had two flanking street level commercial areas, either side of the central entry stairs up to the box office and auditorium. Both were twenty by 100 feet in area. On the left, Alex Rosenthal's dry goods, carpeting, and clothing emporium. He would later move to Petoskey where Rosenthal became one of northern Michigan's most reputable and respected merchants. The store by the channel was occupied by the Charlevoix Cigar Manufacturing Company, both as a retail section up front, with the production of cigars taking place behind the scenes in the rear.



The auditorium. Illuminated by sixteen oil lamps near the ceiling



Two more views of the auditorium, the stage above decorated for a high school graduation, class motto "Through the Harbor to the Ocean"



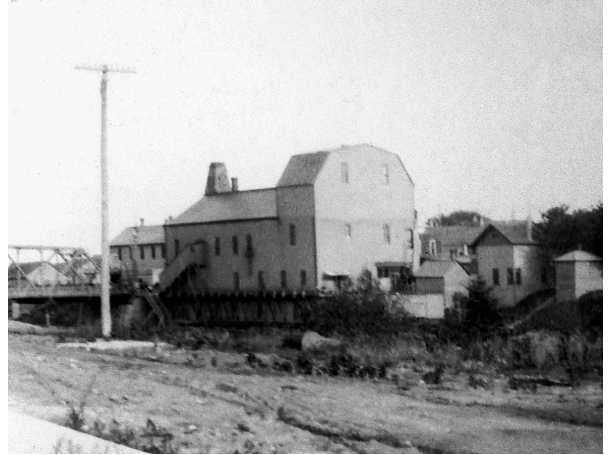
Here the circular oil lamp ceiling fixture is gone, replaced by hanging electric bulbs. Electricity arrived in Charlevoix in 1892.

The auditorium presented tearjerker melodramas of the era, such as "Orphans of the Storm" and the ever popular "Uncle Tom's Cabin," plus a few operettas. With the chairs removed, it could function as a dance hall, even a basketball court. During one game, it was reported that the ball sailed out an open window and landed in the channel, from where it had to be extricated, dried off, and returned to duty. After the turn of the century, when the new sensation of cinema began to edge out stage productions, it became a nickelodeon.

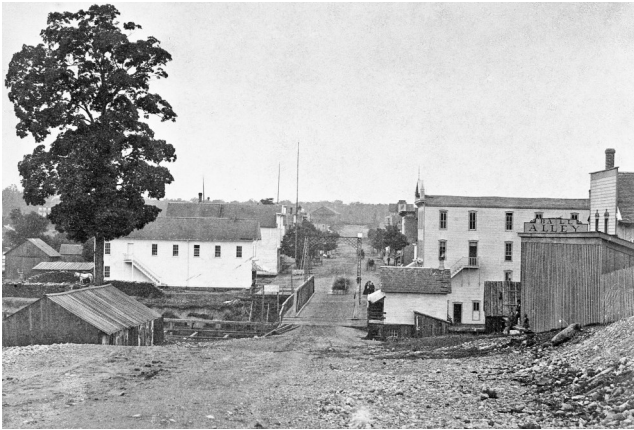
## Six Views of the Opera House



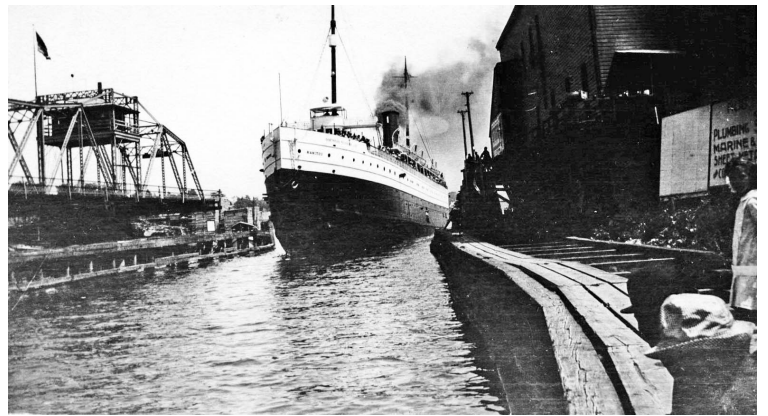
At center, seen from the northeast overlooking the Charlevoix Lumber Company, now the Edgewater Inn complex



From across the channel, with a new flies (backstage) enlargement. Somewhere along the line the opera house lost its façade cupola.



From the Michigan Avenue hill at Dixon Avenue, looking south. The windowed opera house is at right.



From the channelside revetment's wood walkway, the large dark building at right, as the mighty passenger liner *Manitou* leaves Round Lake



Rear view, at center, from the Park Avenue water tower, 1920s. The *Manitou* sits at dock directly in front of it.



From the west along the channel bluff as the large passenger steamer *City of Charlevoix* leaves for Chicago

## The Lewis Grand Opera House Remembered

“If it was raining after school, more than once we would avail ourselves of secretly getting into the Grand Opera House that Dr. Lewis had built almost hanging over the channel at the south end of the bridge. Back in those days, no one had heard of water pollution and when the opera house was built, there was a corner chute at the west end of the building over the river. After any show in the opera house, all of the sweepings of gum wrappers, peanut shucks and Cracker Jack boxes would be swept down the sloping front to this corner, where a trap door would permit the whole mess to float away in the river.

“By knowing just how to climb on the channel revetment timbers, we discovered that one could get up into the opera house and explore all its cavern-like interior, with the sloping floor and seats in the back part of the building. Also there was the high loft, with the intriguing maze of ropes, pulleys and tracks for the changing of scenery, and the winding stairway to the dressing rooms. The mysterious environment had possibilities for some of the wildest dreams of imagination. The walls in the artists' dressing rooms were covered with autographed pictures that didn't mean very much to us at that age. The star's dressing room was larger than the others. Originally Dr. Lewis had his professional offices on the second floor of the street end of the building. He moved his offices to his new residence on Lewis Street in 1898. The front offices in the opera house were well shunned by us because we might be observed from across the street. However, the back offices and storeroom offered exciting adventures.” Excerpted from the unpublished memoirs of Earl A. Young, Charlevoix's noted builder in stone

“When there was a good show on at the opera house, we boys used to get in by climbing a telephone pole out in front and crossing over into an open window to the theater. Never got caught in the act.” From *A History of Bridge Street and Harbor of Charlevoix* by Peter “Don” Campbell, best friend and classmate of Earl A. Young

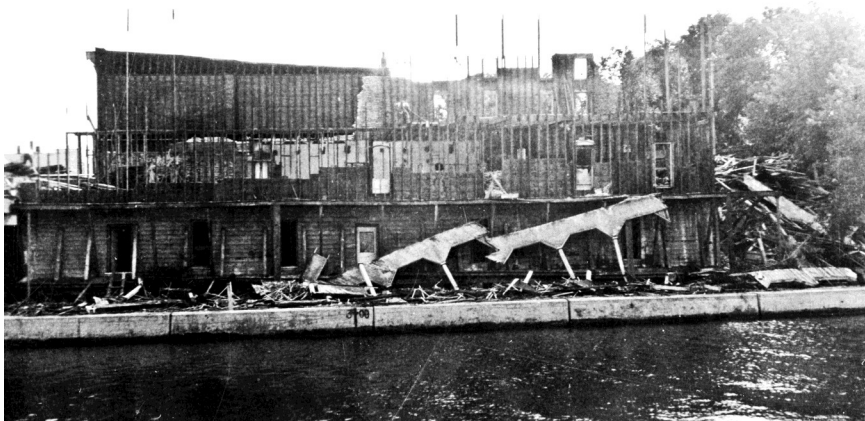
What was the fate of the opera house? After Dr. Lewis's death in 1920, the building was purchased by Salem Mussalem, said to be either Egyptian or Lebanese, who always wore a fez. He turned the auditorium into an Oriental rug emporium and bazaar, then turned the rest of the two upper floors in what he called the Alhambra Hotel. Safety galleries were constructed along the channel and west end. The façade was covered in dark red brick, hence the meaning of the word "Alhambra," Arabic for "red castle." Both hotel and business were open only over the tourist season. Finally, a mere wobbly shadow of its former splendor after World War II, the opera house/hotel had to be demolished in 1947 to make way for the current lower channel bridge, which opened in late June of 1949.



Left: the red brick façade of the Alhambra, with the hotel's safety galleries shown on its channel side



Right: the hotel seen from across the channel. Compare this to the "new flies" photo above.



1947, and demolition to make way for a badly needed new bridge