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Barton Opera House

By 1889, Fresno had a population of around 11,000. Agriculture was the biggest industry, with wine grapes, wheat, and cattle as the largest ag contributors. Among the largest wineries was the Barton Vineyards (owned by Robert Barton). Located roughly between McKinley, Belmont, Cedar and Chestnut avenues, Barton Vineyards was each year exponentially expanding its production of grapes and wine.

The new town included 33 saloons and five second class theatres. Of the theatres, two were regularly booked. The Riggs, which was actually an armory building owned by Charles Riggs, and the Fresno Opera House, some called it the Fiske Opera House, owned by J D Fiske. Previously, it had been known as the Grady Opera House. Neither of those "theatres" was a real theatre, thus they were called "second class" theatres. What does that mean? It means that the theatres didn't have a rigging system. There was no way to secure scenery or backdrops and "fly" them in the method that was traditional at the time. As a result, no "First Class" touring company would stop there. Because if their play depending on scenery, they couldn't use it.

The Riggs theatre also was notorious for not raising the curtain on time. For an 8 pm performance, it was not uncommon for the curtain to finally raise at 9 pm. By 1891, the Riggs Theatre filed for bankruptcy, and finally became a livery stable, which should attest to its quality as a theatre.

The Fiske Opera House was little better. JD Fiske himself was a bit of a trouble maker and had many run-ins with the law and other people. He had a history of fraudulent

real estate dealings in the east, and those didn't stop when he came to Fresno. He bought the Grady Opera House and didn't seem to care about its upkeep. In the fire marshall's report of June 23, 1889, Fire Marshall Cummings reported, "I made a cursory examination and got out as fast as I could. The whole building is liable to fall in at any moment. The building has no foundations, the walls are cracked and crumbling beyond repair, and the gallery is sagging and barely strong enough to support its own weight." He forbade firefighters from entering the building in the event of a fire.

There simply wasn't a modern, spacious, and safe theatre venue for events, business meetings, and theatrical performances of the kind required by a growing and glorious city like Fresno.

Robert Barton sought to give Fresno exactly what it needed. On September 29, 1890, he presided over the grand opening of the Barton Opera House. At 8:15 the orchestra began playing, demonstrating the near perfect acoustics of the theatre. The Fresno Expositor noted that "it was the most brilliant assemblage ever seen in Fresno" who gathered for the opening that night.

Built on the corner of J and Fresno Streets, the theatre encompassed two structures. The theatre proper was built without thought to expense. The exterior walls of the Barton Opera House were constructed of brick, granite, sandstone, and terra cotta. The main entrance to the theatre opened onto Fresno Street. It had a portico above the main entrance, which was topped with a balcony. The Dress Circle floor contained five large dressing rooms and management offices for the theatre.

The seating area for the theatre was designed by CK Kirby, a prominent theatre designer of the time. It was described as nearly perfect. Every seat could see the entirety of the stage easily. The house seated 1500 people. Three

levels and seating was of the highest quality. The ceiling was covered with beautiful frescos.

The other structure was “Armory Hall” which was to house the local National Guard Company. The lower floor of Armory Hall was entered from J Street, and had commercial business offices on the first floor. The second floor was home to the large hall for grand galas and public events. It was described as “one of the finest on the Pacific Coast.” It had a seating capacity of seven hundred. It was connected to the Dress Circle Floor of the Barton Opera House, and had ladies and gentleman’s parlors and dressing rooms, which were lit by incandescent light and had hot and cold running water. Both structures could be cleared easily, with many exits provided, in the event of fire.

As was typical of the time, the theatre came complete with ready-made backdrops featuring river scenes designed by noted theatre scenic designer WT Porter. He also created several stock scenes for the theatre, including a fancy chamber, a gothic chamber, a kitchen, a prison, a dark woods, a light woods, a mountain pass, a garden, etc. These would be used as scenery by theatre companies who perhaps didn’t carry scenery with them, but need just a stock scene.

There were 13 dressing rooms backstage, all carpeted with running hot and cold water. The theatre also boasted a lighting system with 1542 incandescent lighting fixtures, 600 more than any other building west of the Rockies, except the California Theatre in SF.

For 23 years it was the major palace for performing arts in the Central Valley. Over the years such prestigious names as Lillie Langtry, Lionel, Maurice, and Ethyl Barrymore (Drew’s Great Uncle’s and aunt), Sara Barnhardt, John Phillip Sousa, and many more high caliber actors and musicians played the Barton Opera House

Ultimately, the building would fall into disrepair, but was renovated as a vaudeville house in 1914. It became a motion picture house for a while, and was last known as The Hippodrome. Most of the building was later torn down, but about half of it still remains today as part of another building, on the corner of Fresno and Fulton Street in Fresno.