

“Every time I pass the Academy Theatre my memory goes back to the days of travelling road shows and local amateur theatricals and minstrel days were “the order of the day” ”. The gentleman making the comment was Albert E. O’Neill of Oshawa, well remembered as a Lindsay boy whose parents lived at the north east corner of King and St. David Streets. As he later remarked “I was an east ward boy and proud of it”.

In an outstanding career in the field of education Dr. O’Neill is probably as best known as the former principal and dean of Oshawa Collegiate and Vocational School, a position he retired from a few years ago.

One of the marks of tribute paid to this man was when a new school in the Motor City was named the O’Neill School. He graduated from the Lindsay Collegiate Institute, graduated with honours from Queen’s University, Kingston, had two terms on the teaching staff at North Bay, then on

the staff of Parkdale Collegiate in Toronto, and two important positions on the London Board of Education.

Interesting and somewhat adventurous sidelines of endeavour in his early youth was the time he spent on the editorial staff of a weekly newspaper in the days when the publication included a weekly and daily editions. On the editorial staff at the time were Allan Gillies (publisher), Leonard D. Nesbitt, R. Butler, and Ford Moynes (editor).

Then came the day when Canada entered World War 1 and soon after Albert O'Neill donned the uniform to do his best for King and country, plus the cause of democracy and freedom.

Continuing his comment regarding the Academy Theatre, Mr. O'Neill said "I vividly recall the time when this fine building was known as the Academy of Music, for I was one of the stage hands, when we did everything from sweeping the cob-webs off the walls "down in the dungeon", in the orchestra pit, off the heavy and cumbersome drop curtains, and in the dressing rooms — even carrying the water to the actors and actresses.

Those were memorable and impressionable days, the days of the Marks Brothers, Guy Brothers Minstrels, when the productions included East Lynne, Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Bonnie Brier Bush, Down on the Farm, Floradora, Mutt and Jeff, Pinafore, Prisoner of Jenda and many others.

The former Lindsay boy was caught off guard when he was encouraged to recall the days of yore at the Academy Theatre. "I often heard my father and others tell the story of how a man was killed when he attempted to walk a tight wire from the top of the Academy Theatre to the top of McConnell's Royal Hotel. The man fell and the crowd was horrified and shocked. The stunt drew crowds to the Theatre but there was an air of gloom over the audience".

"I remember when I was a stage hand at the theatre and the Marks Brothers, Bob and

Ernie, were star actors. One stunt was known as the "burning slide" and the "slide of fire". A wire was extended from the window of the theatre, up in the props and drops, to a livery barn across Kent Street east. It was a rather steep slanting wire. A local young man named "Chippy" Duke was hired for the job and did it well. It took nerve. Duke was wrapped up in a padded suit, wore a baseball catcher's chest protector, and also some sort of material over which some inflammable material was sprayed.

The crowd assembled below, Duke took his place, caught a small stick of wood in 'his teeth, the torch was lit, the suit set on fire, and the young man stepped into space. At the lower end of the wire stood two men with a rope, and they stopped the performer from crashing into a wooden cross-bar.

It was a crowd pleaser. One night Ernie Marks was feeling good and decided to be the body of flames. His brother rushed out to stop him, but it was too late. Ernie Marks was

all aflame when he suddenly realized there was no one at the bottom to stop his body from crashing into the cross-bar. He let go with his teeth however when fifteen feet from the bottom and dropped into a large mud-hole. There were plenty of mud holes in Lindsay in those days.

"Many years later", added Mr. O'Neill, when I was in Oshawa, the same Ernie Marks ran a moving picture house. He soon recalled the episode when I told him I happened to be a thrilled by-stander. Incidentally Ernie's son also named Ernie is a successful lawyer practising in Oshawa.

"Another east warder named Elias Perrin of St. Peter Street joined Marks Brothers and did some stage work. Perrin married Arlie Marks then changed his front name to Lindsay Perrin, and for years was known as Jim Perrin".

The visitor from Oshawa brought to memory another interesting story in connection with Main Street, the day when a stunt man actually crawled up a brick wall on the north side of Kent Street. Another thriller was when a visiting man in need of funds attempted to walk the slack wire from the Town Hall to the present Grand Hotel. He fell but was not seriously injured, but a young woman watching fainted.

A gentleman named Fred Burke was manager of the Academy Theatre, and this manager had trouble one time with the famous "Doc" Kelly of Banyan fame, who was referred to in this column a short time ago.

The big showman advertised to give away a gold watch in a lucky draw, but when the draw was made the watch could not be found and was alleged to have been stolen. Kelly had difficulty in controlling the audience that night, but he still sold many bottles of Banyan, the cure all medicine.

Mr. O'Neill was in a reminiscent mood and had many memorable stories, all of which will have to remain for future telling. His philosophy on the

educational programme of today and the ills of the world in general is another interesting story.

Mr. O'Neill is a brother of Miss Olive O'Neill. R.N.