Bridge St. E/Church St (2)

It was now time, they felt, to try to forget some of the pain and the horror. These opera centres flourished further with the economic upturn of the Roaring Twenties which meant — for many — good wages and a "good time" to begin seeking pleasurable entertainment, whether it be illegal cocktail parties or sporting around in a new high-powered car or whiling away the time in an environment of musical enchantment.

It was a period of time encouraging them to seek and have fun, fun and more fun.

The opera house was said to have been built on an incline to allow patrons of approximately 1,300 seats in the auditorium and the galleries an undisturbed view of the stage, which measured 37 feet by 50 feet. In a flurry of activity and perhaps with more than a slight anxiety, one can imagine the entertaining individuals waiting for their turn on the stage in the dressing rooms and a large hall located in the basement of the building.

Alternative to live entertainment available to the community, at the time, were the silent movies of the turn of the century. Screen idols like Clara Bow, Tom Mix, Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino won the hearts of post First World War American and Canadian audiences.

By early 1920s, silent films became a new art form. These movies however did not threaten the existence of the opera houses — the latter had too much to offer with menus of vigorous sights and sounds that could invoke a range of emotions in the audience. But then came serious competition in the form of 'talkies' when Al Jolson sang "My Mammy" in "The Jazz Singer" — a primarily silent film with musical sound segments in October 1927.

At this point, the silent movies had begun to die a slow death. Sound started to take over as the new reigning king of the moviegoers' hearts as they wanted to hear tap-dancing, machine-guns, and emotional outpouring of love from the lips of the silver screen's most beautiful and romantic couples.

The advent of the talkies began to seriously affect the attendance at the opera houses everywhere and Belleville's own was no exception.

Shows at the Griffin Opera House were soon struggling to attract audience. Eventually, it lost its audience and was finally forced to close its door in the late twenties and in the process, shutting down an important musical era of culture and entertainment in this region.

Eight-five-year-old Belleville resident Jessie Cunningham recalled, as a child living on Alexander Street in the city's East Hill, seeing the building in the process of being torn down.

"My parents would not let me and my brother go near the building. It was a grand old building that sort of looked like it had seen better days," she observed.

"I remember my parents talking about what went on there in the past but they said they never went in there. It was too expensive for them."

Leo Gauthier, another city resident, grew up on Pinnacle Street in a house that was beside the Hotel Quinte and recalled seeing the building as a young teenager.

"I remember playing in there with my friends once in a while. It was abandoned by that time. I also remember seeing a piano in there. It was huge inside and I would say pretty much in good shape," said Gauthier.

The old brick building stood on the location for few more years before being reduced to rubble in 1933.

From its days, when it was considered as one of the best show towns between Toronto and Montreal and a must-stop spot for top opera companies, the opera house became another victim to changing artistic tastes and technology.

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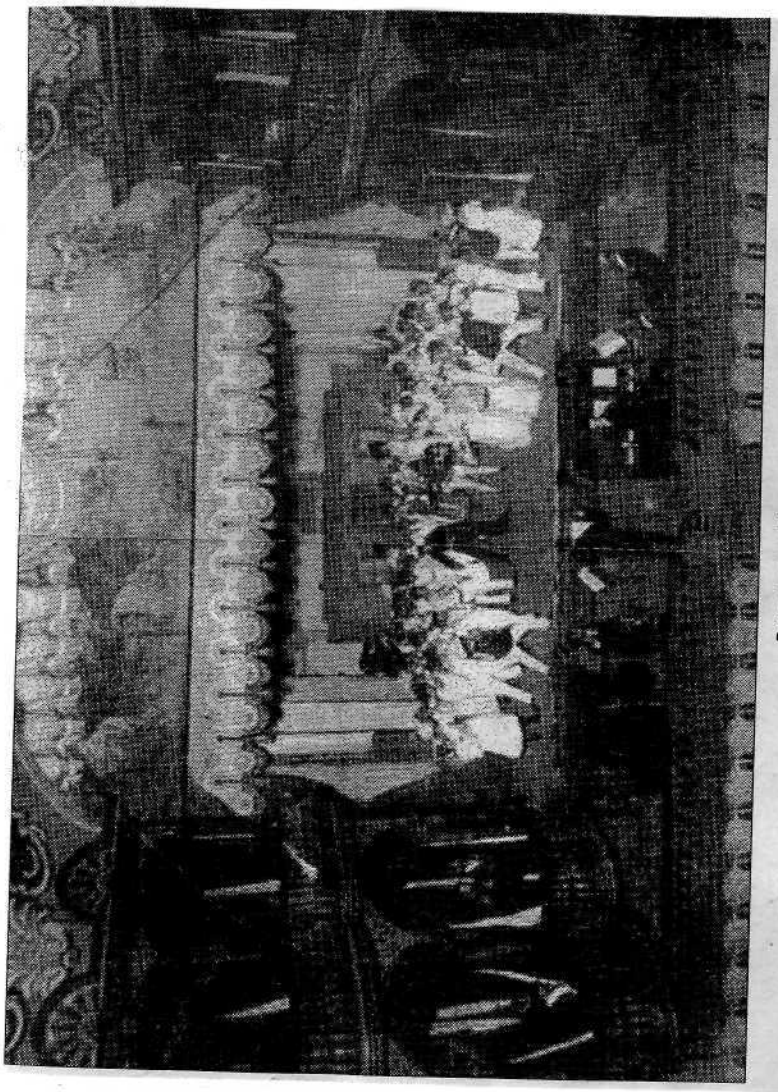

SUBMITTED PHOTOS
Daisy Lyric Club performs H.M.S Pinafore at the old Griffin Opera House. The photo, submitted by Bill Wills, was taken around 1900.

Intell, April 23/05 P.D2