

Fred L. Reynolds

You've never heard of Fred L. Reynolds? No, he wasn't a lumberman or one of Muskegon's millionaires like Hackley or Pillsbury, he didn't have a city block downtown named after him like Mason or Rodgers but he was well known in Muskegon for many years and brought joy, laughter, excitement, and tears to many Muskegon residents in the late 1870's through the 1890's. So, who was he?



During the Civil War, Fred worked a civilian job in the Quartermaster General's office. After the war he traveled with General George Custer on an expedition to Texas, where the two men became good friends. He left government service in 1866 and returned to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he lived before the war. In 1867, he moved to Muskegon and became a clerk at H.D. Baker's book store (a successful business that operated in Muskegon on Western Avenue for 45 years). In 1870, he partnered with Adolph Bolza and they opened their own book store. He later bought Mr. Bolza out. In the store he sold gold pens, stationery, novels, magazines, newspapers, tickets, schoolbooks, other items of amusement, and wall paper.

In 1877, the Temperance Reform Association, who was having great success in the city at that time, decided to build a large building for their meetings, offices and library. It was located at Western and 2nd streets and took up that entire block. The building took 1-1/2 years to build and cost \$25,000 (\$509,998 in today's money). The staircase leading to the 2nd floor auditorium was 14 feet wide to accommodate groups of people ascending and descending it at the same time. The auditorium was large enough to hold 1,000 people. It was beautifully decorated with a stage that measured 28 feet by 63 feet, with three dressing rooms on the sides. The walls had been frescoed (painted in watercolor on wet plaster) with figures of Muses (goddesses of the various arts, such as music, dance, and poetry). It had fourteen changes of scenery and a beautiful drop curtain. It was first named the Temperance Reform Opera House but later called the Grand Opera Theatre. It was one of the finest in the State. It was meant to provide a wholesome alternative to the drunkenness and wild living that was prevalent at the time. And who do you think was the Manager of the Opera House for over 20 years...Fred L. Reynolds, that's who. At first, he was only able to get ordinary road companies here, but Fred soon developed a rapport with more noted theatrical producers and was able to bring in well-known performers. It was because of Fred that the people of Muskegon were being entertained in their own city by the best in American entertainment. After a time, the Temperance Association lost interest in the project and the Opera House was sold to a group of local lumbermen. With Fred as the manager, the Opera House was a success. The performances ranged from Shakespeare to Burlesque. Muskegon loved to be entertained, and Fred made sure they were. The most popular performances were the melodramas performed by touring companies consisting of well-known actors and actresses. Fred got to be good friends with many of them and gained a national reputation because of it. The most popular person to perform at the Opera House was Mme. Helen Mojeska, who always played to sellout crowds. In 1889, she held the House's box office record at

\$1,100 for a single performance. The most popular plays performed at the House were “Skipped by the Light of the Moon” and “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”. The Opera House also had musical performances. Famous musicians, such as, the Great Gilmore and John Philip Sousa played there. The Opera House was also known to have lecturers come and speak. You might recognize this speaker’s name - Susan B. Anthony. That’s right, Susan B. Anthony spoke in Muskegon!

While the lumber mills were still up and running (and the cash was flowing), the Opera House did quite well under Fred’s management; but when the lumber mills (and the income from them) diminished, so did the patronage. In 1911, the Opera House/Grand Opera Theatre, no longer in business, was sold to the Elks for \$25,000 - the amount it cost to build it in 1877.



In 1898, Fred and the Grand Theater Orchestra moved to the newly constructed theatre at Pere Marquette Park, known as Park Theatre. The Theater booked all kinds of vaudeville acts, especially those from the actor’s colony. The actor’s colony was a summer resort in Muskegon for many vaudeville performers. Unfortunately, Fred didn’t get to enjoy much time at the Park Theatre because he died the next year.

He was known as “the genial Fred”, meaning he was always friendly and cheerful. Besides being the manager of the Opera House for over 20 years and operating his book store for longer than that, Fred was also a ticket agent for the Crosby Transportation Co. and the Chicago & Grand Trunk Railroad, he was a partner in Reynolds & Leonard (a business that made bill posters), and served as Alderman for 2 years. He was a member of the B. P. O. E. (Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks) and the F. & A. M. (Free & Accepted Masons), and a charter member of the Knights of Pythias. At his funeral, the Elks acted as an escort and marched as a body at the head of the funeral procession. The service at the grave was conducted by the Elks according to the rituals of the Order.

Fred L. Reynolds was born in Rhode Island in 1842 to William and Rebecca (Lauyer/Lawyer) Reynolds. He married Caroline Gibson in Muskegon in 1870. They had four children: William, Grace, Rodney, and Fred Jr. Fred Sr. died of Bright’s disease in December, 1899, at the age of 57. Fred and all his family members are buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Muskegon.

So, now you know a little about who Fred L. Reynolds was...a husband, father, friend, and hard-working businessman who raised his family, served his community, and kept the people of Muskegon entertained for over two decades.

(Sources: Sketch of Opera House from Muskegon and It’s Resources (Muskegon Board of Trade); Findagrave.com; Ancestry.com; Street Names of Greater Muskegon (Mark Okkonen); Genealogybank.com; photo of Fred L. Reynolds from the Local History & Genealogy Dept. of Hackley Library photo collection.; Muskegon Chronicle; The Many Lives of Muskegon (Yates & Hornstein).