

The Construction and Opening of Pipestone's Ferris Grand Opera House

By Susan Hoskins, 2019

In 1898 A.D. Ferris, Mr. Hanson and Mr. Mackey owned adjacent buildings on the south side of the 100 block of East Olive Street. These three men entered into a partnership of sorts to move their existing frame buildings to other parts of town and build a two-story stone building across their three lots.¹ When this large stone building covering three lots had been built, then L.H. Moore was to put a second story on his "L" building which adjoined this project to the west. The first public mention of this plan was in July.²

By August it seemed Mr. Hanson had left the building project, probably selling his interest to Mr. Ferris. The building project was then referred to as an "enterprise" of Mr. Ferris and Mr. Mackay.³ The planned construction of a two-story stone building was again reported, the size to be 90'8" deep and 80' across.⁴ There were to be three large store rooms on the ground floor and living rooms or offices on the second floor. Work was to begin as soon as the lots were vacant, estimated to be August 10.

However, the contract for moving the existing structures was not let until days later, to local house mover Levi Clayton.⁵ The Ferris and Mackay buildings were moved to lots east of the Dyer House on Olive Street. These two were to be used as store rooms. The Hanson building was to be moved to the east part of town on lots near those recently vacated by L. Baker and fitted up as a residence. It was told that Levi Clayton had an ingenious way to move the buildings laying track and using rollers, he hitched the buildings up to his threshing engine which pulled them right along.⁶

In early September, Sioux Falls stone mason, F.A. Marvin had arrived in Pipestone to look after the stonework on "the new Ferris-Mackay Block."⁷ Under his supervision, stone cutters began work on dressing the stone for the front of the building.⁸

¹ Another Stone Block, *Farmer's Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 28 July 1898, p.6 c.5 p.4.

² Another Stone Block, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 28 July 1898, p.6 c.5 p.4. Another New Block, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 29 July 1898, p.7 c.3 p.2.

³ That New Block, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 4 August 1898, p.6 c.1 p.(b).

⁴ The Ferris-Hanson Block, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 5 August 1898, p.3 c.3 p.2.

⁵ No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 12 August 1898, p.3 c.4 p.3.

⁶ No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 12 August 1898, p.2 c.3 p.8. No title, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 18 August 1898, p.3 c.1 p.1.

⁷ No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 2 September 1898, p.3 c.3 p.7.

⁸ No title, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 8 September 1898, p.3 c.1 p.4.

It was not until October that Mr. Ferris began to talk “very strongly” of building an opera hall over his two store fronts on Olive Street.⁹ By that time he had already subscribed a “large number” of seats at \$5 each and was apparently planning this new hall to be 55’x92’ with a stage across the south end and a horseshoe balcony. This indicates that sometime in September Mr. Ferris and Mr. Mackay had parted ways with their building project. Mr. Ferris’ share of the project became two lots (including that formerly belonging to Mr. Hanson) and Mr. Mackay’s became one. [It is interesting that to look at the building facades today (2019,) it is noticeable that the ground floor is faced as one building and it is on the second floor that a division line becomes visible.]

During October, Mr. Ferris’ opera hall plans firmed up and became an “assured fact.”¹⁰ At some time Mr. Ferris had also drawn in a new partner, his daughter, Mittie Manuel. The newspaper reported two name plates, one over the “first” store room to read, “Ferris Block” and one over the “middle” store room to read “Manuel Block.”¹¹ The indication of “first” and “middle” would lead to the one on the other side, as the “third” or “last” which was apparently now out of the project and would become the Mackay Block.

In order to fund this opera hall project, besides the investment of his daughter, Mr. Ferris took it to the public and 15 people put up \$100 each to seal the public’s interest and support of this project.¹² The new opera hall was to have a fully raised floor, folding opera chairs and a balcony, as well as to be lighted by electricity, heated by steam and open for business by February! The center top was to be constructed of a large half circle which would contain the name “Ferris Grand,” which was what the new playhouse was to be known as.¹³

In October, L.H. Moore took over as superintendent of the building project.¹⁴ By that time Mr. Ferris must have already hired some staff, as Assistant Manager W.C. Briggs went to St. Paul to confer with the manager of the Metropolitan Theater regarding securing a company for opening night.¹⁵ Later that month, Mr. Ferris altered the building plans to enlarge the stairway by 2 feet, allowing for better ease of public access.¹⁶

By November the second story was laid, and staging and joists were raised for the partial third story.¹⁷ Several new workmen arrived from Sioux Falls, where the building season was winding down, and more were to come.

⁹ A New Opera House, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 7 October 1898, p.3 c.2 p.6.

¹⁰ No title, *Farmers’ Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 20 October 1898, p.3 c.1 p.7.

¹¹ No title, *Farmers’ Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 20 October 1898, p.3 c.1 p.7.

¹² The New Opera House, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 21 October 1898, p.1 c.3 p.2.

¹³ The Ferris Grand, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 21 October 1898, p.1 c.5 p.3(b).

¹⁴ No title, *Farmers’ Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 27 October 1898, p.7 c.2 p.13.

¹⁵ No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 28 October 1898, p.1 c.6 p.3.

¹⁶ Will be Appreciated, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 28 October 1898, p.1 c.5 p.2(b).

¹⁷ Onward and Upward, *Farmers’ Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 3 November 1898, p.6 c.2 p.3.

Contemporary newspaper articles indicated that the work was rushed on the Ferris Grand.¹⁸ Mr. Ferris had hopes of opening just after the new year on January 2nd. After a visit from the architect for final changes, a couple of the decorators had already been in, and Mr. Ferris had submitted the floor plan in order to get bids on folding chairs for the opera house. The roof was not completed until after November 11, 1898, and another week of work was expected before it would be bundled up from the elements.¹⁹

By November 17 the stone work had been completed.²⁰ At that time a large force of carpenters pushed to get the woodwork done. The building was still calculated to be ready for occupancy at the first of the year. On November 24 it was reported that a short dedication ceremony had been held where Mayor Nichols offered a short speech and the municipal band played from the balcony.²¹

In December, contractors Stair & Shipley got up a gang of six or seven carpenters to work on the interior woodwork.²² The lathers had a good start. The balcony had been completed and it was reported that the hall could fit about 1,000 seats.

The building was formally dedicated as the “Ferris Grand” on December 2, 1898.²³ Mr. Ferris had ordered the scenery and all the electric light fixtures were in from the Sosman & Landis Company of Chicago. There were to be 120 incandescent lights in the opera hall, and the latest opera hall appliances for regulating them. The electric light fixtures alone cost \$200 wholesale. A big dome in the center of the hall 30 feet above the floor, contained 25 incandescent lights. There were also 20 incandescent foot lights and 15 incandescent lights bordering the stage

Heating the building was also planned on a grand scale.²⁴ The heating plant installed in the basement of the Ferris Grand was designed to not only heat all of that two-story building, but also the “L” building and the Moore Block to the west as well as the Mackay Block to the east. By December 15, the heating plant was completely installed and had been started up.²⁵ It was reported to be one of the largest and most complete in the state. Steam from the basement of the Ferris Grand Block heated a total of four buildings.

By mid-December the plastering of the opera hall was in progress.²⁶ The material used was adamant and it was being applied by an employee of the manufacturer. The walls were to be finished in calcimine in appropriate shades and tints by G.T. Lancaster.

¹⁸ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 4 November 1898, p.3 c.1 p.2(b).

¹⁹ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 11 November 1898, p.3 c.1 p.13.

²⁰ No title, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 17 November 1898, p.7 c.3 p.2(b).

²¹ No title, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 24 November 1898, p.3 c.1 p.5.

²² The Ferris Grand, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 2 December 1898, p.1 c.5 p.(b).

²³ Ferris Grand, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 2 December 1898, p.3 c.2 p.1.

²⁴ Heat and Light, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 28 October 1898, p.4 c.3 p.2.

²⁵ No title, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 15 December 1898, p.7 c.5 p.5.

²⁶ No title, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 22 December 1898, p.6 c.2 p.5.

As had been long predicted, the Opera Hall did not open on January 2, 1899. In early January, it was still in the hands of decorator G.T. Lancaster and his assistants.²⁷ The new dedication date was February 1. The manager of the house, Mr. Smith, had been appointed, as well as the Ushers: Leon Smith was the head usher, Ralph Hart, Roy Smith, Frank Crandall, Earnie McDonald, Frank Stair and Burl Patten.

The stage scenery reached town by rail on January 9 and was put into temporary storage until the hall was ready to receive it.²⁸ The scenery and hangings weighed nearly a ton and a half.

The carpenters finished their woodwork in mid-January and turned the building wholly over to George Lancaster and his decorators.²⁹ At that time no visitors were to be admitted. The scenery installation was scheduled, and the chairs were expected to ship.

By January 26 the carpenters were done, however the contractor Stair & Shipley were to stay on until all the chairs were installed and fixtures complete.³⁰ In late January, Will Marvin cut the “Ferris Grand” name stone on the front of the building.³¹

In early February, the Opera Hall chairs arrived and immediately began to be installed.³² The uniform coats for the ushers arrived soon after.³³

On February 17, a local newspaper’s headline proclaimed the playhouse finished. The text of the article amended that to “practically” finished.³⁴ The seats were all in, draperies up, the scenery was working. When the carpenters were discharged, the steam plant was turned off. Still to complete was the connection of the electric lighting plant to the main lines of the Pipestone Electric Light company.

A meeting was called by A.D. Ferris and attended by 50 subscribers of subscription tickets.³⁵ They met at the playhouse, toured the facility and discussed the opening night attraction. It was decided not to open with home talent, but with a first class traveling show.

Meanwhile, the rental portions of the building were filling up. There were two separate store-fronts on the first floor which had been fitted out with an arch built between them. The first tenant was R. Rosenthal.³⁶ He was already been operating out of the “L” building and planned to expand into the west room in the Ferris-Manuel Block. The arch which had been built between

²⁷ The Ferris Grand, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 6 January 1899, p.3 c.5 p.1.

²⁸ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 13 January 1899, p.3 c.3 p.2(b).

²⁹ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 20 January 1899, p.3 c.6 p.5.

³⁰ Opera Hall Complete, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 26 January 1899, p.3 c.2 p.3.

³¹ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 27 January 1899, p.1 c.1 p.2.

³² No title, *Farmers’ Leader* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 2 February 1899, p.7 c.1 p.2(b).

³³ No title, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 3 February 1899, p.3 c.4 p.5(b).

³⁴ Ferris Grand, Pipestone’s Handsome New Playhouse Finished, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 17 February 1899, p.4 c.2 p.2

³⁵ The Opening Night, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 17 February 1899, p.7 c.3 p.1.

³⁶ More Room, *Pipestone County Star* (Pipestone, Minnesota) newspaper, 20 January 1899, p.1 c.5 p.(b).

the two Ferris Grand store-rooms was to be filled in and a new arch built to connect the west store room with the “L” building. Mr. Rosenthal planned to have his dry goods & clothing in the new room and his grocery department out of the “L” facing Olive Street. In March, Mr. Rosenthal was fully moved in to his new store room on the west side of the Ferris Grand, and the east storefront remained vacant.³⁷ Doctors A.H. Brown and W.A. Brown moved into their new office quarters in the second floor of the Ferris-Manuel Block, renting the entire suite of four rooms.³⁸

Pre-opening excitement gripped Pipestone. D.W. Smith, a jeweler, ordered in an order of opera glasses which he offered for sale at a reasonable price.³⁹ The ticket office at the Ferris Grand opened Saturday evening at 5:10 pm to a line of about forty people waiting.⁴⁰ Sales were brisk for about 30 minutes and then slacked off until the \$2.50 tickets went on sale at 7:00 pm. The ticket office closed at 9:45 pm having sold about one third of the house.

The grand opening for the Ferris Grand Opera House finally came on March 8, 1899 with the “Great New York Comedy Success,” *A Hired Girl*.⁴¹ The doors were thrown open at 7:30 p.m. and the theater was filled by 8:00. The opening overture was given at 8:15 by the Ferris Grand Orchestra, directed by H.W. George. Mr. F.L. Janes then appeared on stage before the curtain to give a short speech dedicating the hall and presented Mr. Ferris with a basket of cut flowers. Between the first and second acts, Manager Smith presented the lead actor, Mr. McCarty with a peace-pipe.⁴²

Box C was occupied by Mr. & Mrs. A.D. Ferris, Mr. and Mrs. Philo Ferris and Charles Manuel who had just arrived in town for the opening, and Box A was occupied by a “jolly group of traveling men.”⁴³ The attaches were all in uniform. The ushers wore blue coats trimmed with gold braid and the letters “Ferris Grand” on the coat collars. The water boys were uniformed with white duck coats and aprons.⁴⁴ Fred King officiated as stage manager, assisted by Fred Gilmore on the stage and Clarence Aldrich in the curtain gallery.⁴⁵

About 40 people traveled into Pipestone on the branch train for the opening show at the Ferris Grand Opera House.⁴⁶ The railroad ran a special train back after the show as far as Slayton.

³⁷ No title, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 2 March 1899, p.8 c.3 p.2.

³⁸ No title, *Farmers' Leader (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 2 March 1899, p.8 c.3 p.(b).

³⁹ Opera Glasses, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.3 c.3 p.9.

⁴⁰ The Opening Sale, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.4 c.1 p.2(b).

⁴¹ A Hired Girl, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 3 March 1899, p.7 c.3 p.1.

⁴² Grand Opening, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.2 c.1 p.2

⁴³ A Hired Girl, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 3 March 1899, p.7 c.3 p.1. No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.3 c.3 p.16.

⁴⁴ A Hired Girl, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 3 March 1899, p.7 c.3 p.1.

⁴⁵ A Hired Girl, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 3 March 1899, p.7 c.3 p.1.

⁴⁶ No title, *Pipestone County Star (Pipestone, Minnesota)* newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.7 c.1 p.3(b).

As for the show, *A Hired Girl* was not given very good reviews. It was said to be a succession of specialties barely held together by a plot.⁴⁷ It was grudgingly acknowledged to be a fine show for what it was, but apparently the citizens of Pipestone wanted more. It is not clear in the newspaper reporting if they really knew what “more” was exactly. But the Opera House itself received rave reviews, about its decoration, its scenic views of the stage and much trumpeting about its existence. Pipestone had a fine opera house they could be proud of and all were ready for the larger caliber shows to come to town.

⁴⁷ Grand Opening, *Pipestone County Star* (*Pipestone, Minnesota*) newspaper, 10 March 1899, p.2 c.1 p.2