



“Opera Houses of Kansas” By Audrey Urban

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October 6, 1886. John & Sadie Stevens do not have to secure transportation to tonight’s event, as their home—a suite in the Windsor Hotel connects by door to their velvet draped private opera box. Mr. Stevens is dressed in a tailored suit, while his wife is dressed in a long-trained crimson velvet evening gown. Upon entrance, they’re seated in box seats covered in a red & gold tapestry. Three additional private boxes also seat patrons. The curtain masking the stage is made of a deep red velvet, as are the 370 floor seats. Formal benches round out the 120 gallery seats of the house. All are dazzled by the gas-lit chandelier hanging high above the audience. Enchanting, frescoed murals and sculptures adorn the walls. As the house lights lower, the audience quiets, leaving only the hiss of the gas footlights onstage. For the next few hours, the audience is entranced by Gilbert & Sullivan’s comic opera, *The Mikado*, only one year out from its London debut. [\(insert first 15 secs of song\)](#) One might think this a history hailing from the cosmopolitan east coast, but this was the Stevens Opera House, located in Garden City, Kansas, population 6,000. A successful businessman, John Stevens built his opera house not expecting financial gain, but to reflect the culture, society, and sophistication that Garden City offered new settlers.

Like hundreds of towns in Kansas, Garden City was a stop off the Sante Fe Trail railroad system. And like Garden City, countless Kansas towns had erected their own opera houses. The railroad system offered a conveyer belt of culture from the east. Troupes could travel with their full production designs—costumes, sets, even entire orchestras, in some cases.

During its heyday, The Stevens Opera House would become a destination for such stage luminaries as opera star Emma Abbott, Broadway star Effie Ellsler, and Minnie Maddern Fiske, one of the first important American actors of realism. Shakespeare, opera, musicals, and modern stage plays—all were billed in Garden City.

Like most of the Kansas opera houses, the rising popularity and ease of film began to see a conversion of stage to screen around WW I. Stevens Opera House faced fierce competition as a movie theater and never found success. The building had many incarnations until it was finally razed in 1953. John & Sadie Stevens’ home—the Windsor Hotel—still stands to this day and was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

Go ahead—pick a Kansas town off the Sante Fe railroad and you’ll likely find the story of an opera house—some are just ghosts of memory captured in historical societies’ archives, some have been converted, and some are standing with their secrets sealed behind locked doors. But their imprint on the history of Kansas is impossible to erase.

This transcript of “Opera Houses of Kansas” is part of the Humanities Kansas Humanities Hotline, a series of bite-sized micropresentations about Kansas stories – both serious and light-hearted – that are researched and presented by experts across the state. Humanities Hotline topics change monthly. For more information about Humanities Kansas and the Humanities Hotline, visit humanitieskansas.org or call 1-888-416-2018.