

— HISTORY —

Just who was Burton Leavitt and his act?

This coming autumn the Windham Theatre Guild will officially open the Burton Leavitt Theatre in the old Fleet Bank Building on Main Street. Discounting movie theaters, this will be Willimantic's first purpose-built theatre for the performing arts since the Loomer Opera House was built in 1880.

This fine edifice, which stood on the corner of Main and North streets, was demolished in 1940, and since then local and traveling dramatic groups have performed in private residences, local clubs and school auditoriums.

But who was Burton Leavitt for whom Willimantic's newest theatre was named?

The Leavitts were an ancient Yorkshire, England, family and became some of the first settlers of New Hampshire. Burton Emerson Leavitt (1871-1912) was born at Orleans, Vt., the son of Nason Wesley Leavitt (1832-1919), a highly talented musician and one of America's earliest vaudevillians. He was born in Craftsbury, Vt., and met

Scotland's Sarah Jane Martin while touring with his group, the Green Mountain Serenaders.

The couple were married in Windham in 1868, and had homes in Vermont and Pinch Street, Scotland from where Leavitt toured with the Serenaders. He added bell ringers to his ensemble, and the talented Scotland violinist, Herbert L. Hatch. The new group was known as Leavitt's Swiss Bell Ringers, and traveling by railroad and bandwagon, the vaudeville troupe entertained audiences across New England and the South.

In 1875, Nason Leavitt founded the Enterprise Publishing Co. and produced a weekly advertising sheet from offices in the old Franklin Hall building on Willimantic's Main Street. Shortly afterwards Franklin Hall was



Tom
Beardsley

destroyed by fire. When it was rebuilt in brick, Leavitt launched a new daily newspaper. Known as the Willimantic Enterprise, it challenged the dominance of the long-established Willimantic Journal. The new newspaper was highly successful, thanks to Leavitt's informal approach to reporting. He moved away from the stuffy formalism so often found in local newspapers at the time.

The readers enjoyed his original touches, such as entitling items of local news as "Scotland Squibs" and "Mansfield Mites."

Desiring to concentrate on music and entertaining, Nason Leavitt sold the Willimantic Enterprise to Fayette Safford in 1879. Shortly afterwards, John A. McDonald arrived from Danielson and bought a share in the newspaper, and changed its name to the Willimantic *Chronicle*. Leavitt then focussed upon writing music and teaching singing. His son, Burton E. Leavitt, inherited these musical talents and in 1889 the family sent him to Yale to study music.

While at Yale, Leavitt wrote and produced a comic opera: the acclaimed "Frogs of Windham." It was successfully staged by him

and members of his class, and then performed across the state with great success. Shortly after Burton graduated from Yale, the Leavitts relocated to Putnam, where father and son taught music and compiled songs and operettas.

They included "The Charter Oak," a satire of colonial Connecticut politics, Bell Rock, which cannot be traced, "The Idyll of the Mill," concerns a Putnam miller, "Ponce de Leon" is based upon the search for the mythical fountain of youth. The Leavitts also collaborated on a popular labor protest song, "The Factory to the Potter's Field," an indictment of child labor in Connecticut's cotton mills.

Burton Leavitt was a devout socialist, and gained the Connecticut Socialist Party's nomination to Congress in 1906, and its nominations to the state legislature in 1908 and 1910. He returned once to the town he was raised, and celebrated Scotland's 50th anniversary celebration on July 4, 1907.

The Leavitts final operetta, "Tea Tephi," concerned the legend regarding the discovery of Noah's Ark in Ireland. Unfortunately, Burton Leavitt never saw it performed. He died of sarcoma can-

cer, age 41, just two days after the printer delivered the final score.

In 1983, a newly formed community theatre group reprised Leavitt's most widely known operetta, the Frogs of Windham to celebrate Willimantic's 150th anniversary. So Burton Leavitt became indirectly responsible for giving birth to the region's most accomplished group of amateur dramatic performers.

The Windham Theatre Guild performed "Frogs of Windham" once more in 1992 to celebrate Windham's 300th anniversary. Willimantic's Burton Leavitt Theatre will therefore honor a highly talented, but mostly forgotten individual and family.



Burton Leavitt, circa 1900.

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