

SEE A SHOW! LET'S GO TO THE THEATER!

WHEN? Late 1800s to early 1900s

WHERE? Wilkes-Barre,

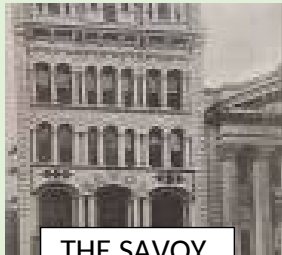


EVENT
entertainment

VOCABULARY
vaudeville

Many people love to see live singers, dancers, jugglers and other entertainers. Wilkes-Barre had no shortage of places to go to do just that. We know that Chubby Checker, Neil Diamond, Barry Manilow, Grateful Dead, Jethro Tull, KISS, and others came in the 1960s and 1970s, and Elton John in more recent years but did anyone famous ever come here back in the day? And where did they play? This article will highlight several of the spaces and the personalities who graced the stage.

One of the larger venues was the Music Hall. Located on the corner of Market Street and River Street on the site of the now demolished Hotel Sterling, it was designed by Isaac Perry and cost \$65,000 to erect. The hall could seat 1400 people. It opened with the Germania Orchestra of Philadelphia and hosted *Il Trovatore* which, according to Butkiewicz, was the first grand opera produced in Wilkes-Barre (72). Nationally known popular entertainers like Marie Dressler and Edwin Booth (brother of John Wilkes Booth) played here. Mark Twain, who loved to stay at the nearby Wyoming Valley Hotel on South River Street, also did shows here. After the opening of the Grand Opera House on South Franklin Street in 1892, the attendance dropped significantly, and it closed and was torn down



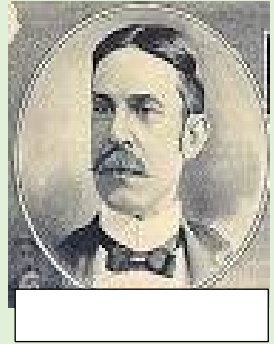
THE SAVOY

The Grand Opera House had well-known acts cross its stage, too. Legend Ethyl Barrymore came, and John Phillips Sousa played there with his band in 1915. His most famous march, "The Stars and Stripes", became our national march in 1987. The Opera House was joined by the Savoy, the Capitol, the Comerford, Poli's (where the venerable comedian Bob Hope starred), and smaller venues through the 1920s and 1930s (Butkiewicz 70). Present-day F.M.Kirby Center which is now housed in the former Comerford Theater on Wilkes-Barre's Public Square, noted in their opening program that "audiences in Northeastern Pennsylvania were notoriously tough. Among performers the saying was that if they could succeed here, they could play anywhere" (Butkiewicz 71).

Poli's was owned by S.Z. Poli who had a chain of theaters in New England. The Wilkes-Barre location built in 1908 had marbled walls in the lobby, and could seat 2400 (Mooney). With three shows a day, people flocked to see entertainers like Roy Rogers, W.C. Fields, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Abbott and Costello, Amos and Andy, the Dorsey Brothers big band, and Thurston the magician (Butkiewicz 73).

When moving pictures arrived, Lyman Howe of Wilkes-Barre proved to be a popular draw with his moving picture machine called an Animotoscope. It was innovative at the time and

while the pictures flashed on the screen music was played from a vinyl recording machine. His High-Class Moving Picture Show featured clips from Africa and Europe as well as local flavor. At a time when people had never seen pictures move, the result was stunning for the audience. After movies became more sophisticated and venues built to show them were constructed, Wilkes-Barre boasted some of the finest in the Savoy, the Capitol, and the Comerford. Every small town like Kingston, Forty Fort, Pittston, and Wyoming had its own movie house though they tended to show movies that had already been played in the larger venues.



ONLINE RESOURCES

[Lyman Howe and Moving Pictures](#)
[City's Old Theater Houses by Mooney](#)

PRINT RESOURCES

Butkiewicz, Joe. *A Proud Legacy*. Times Leader: Wilkes-Barre, Pa. 1991.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Research Lyman Howe and present your findings about his inventions and shows.
2. Research what happened to the buildings that once housed the theaters.