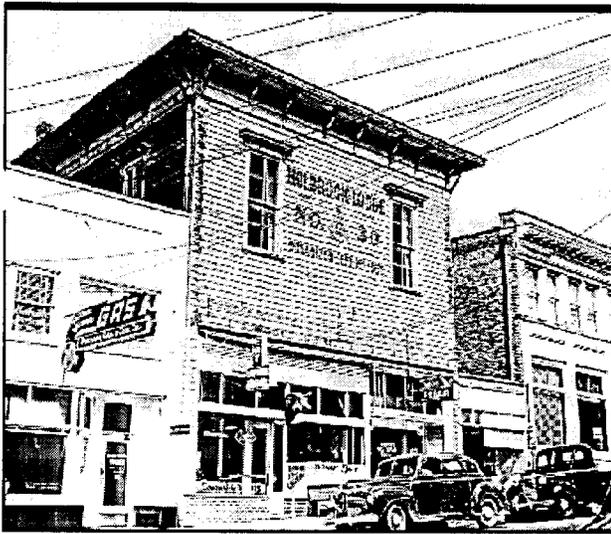


Autumn 1998

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board



Vert's Hall in the 1940s, shortly before its demolition. Its successor, Vert's Liberal Hall, was a little farther down the hill. Photo from the Eric Stewart Collection.

Vert's Hall

By Walt Wentz and Jim Casto

It is an ironic fact that the most important social center in early Forest Grove history—Vert's Hall, a public gathering place offering everything from the town's first motion pictures to lofty discourses and boxing matches—was built and named for a public benefactor who was almost completely forgotten even in the building's heyday.

No more than half a dozen references to Michael Vert exist in early newspapers and pioneer journals.

He was a tinsmith. A newspaper report of 1874 announced the completion of Mr. Vert's tinshop.

The Hillsboro newspaper reported on October 5, 1876, that "Vert, our Teutonic tinker, has gone to San Francisco for medical treatment."

The breezy tone was misplaced, as two months later the paper reported Vert's death, of "paralysis," on December 12, 1876.

And this is practically all that is recorded of Michael Vert.

He willed his property to the Liberal Association, to be applied to the erection of a "Town Hall" for all kinds of public speaking, free for all—but not for "infidels or atheists." Even liberalism had its limits, apparently.

The Masons, Holbrook Lodge #30, had been meeting for years in cramped and rickety quarters. They badly needed a lodge building, but money was tight. They entered an agreement with the trustees of the Michael Vert fund to share the cost of erecting a two-story frame building, with Vert's Hall proper on the ground floor, and the Masons' Lodge in the second story.

In 1878, the square wooden building rose at Pacific and Pine (now Main) streets, across from the southwest corner of the village green.

In the decades to come, Vert's Hall hosted a bewildering variety of political, cultural and social events.

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Forest Grove's Early Theaters

By Jim Casto

Throughout Forest Grove's history, several buildings have been used for entertainment and cultural events.

Many of the early plays and other forms of entertainment, such as poetry and dramatic readings, were conducted in Vert's Hall.

One of the earliest live dramas mentioned in early newspapers was presented June 2 and 3, 1882. It was titled "Queen Esther," and was a benefit for the Methodist-Episcopal Church. The net receipts were \$200.

Vert's Hall was also used for concerts, debates and lodge meetings, as well as political and city council meetings.

One laudatory newspaper review reported, "Vert's Hall - Tuesday evening - Swiss Bell Ringing and 'The Private Tutors,' a side-splitting burlesque, in which the characters impersonated by Ray L. Royce, were alone worth the price of admission."

Those prices could be rather steep for that era. An ad in the Forest Grove Times, January 28, 1904, announced: "One Night Only—February 1—'Happy Hooligan.' See the Funny Policeman, Glummie Gus and Silly Dude. Special Scenery, New Songs, Pretty Dances. Extraordinarily Large Cast. Reserved seats 50 cents, General Admission 35 cents, Children 25 cents."

Forest Grove got its first real theater built exclusively for movies in November 1908, when Judge Langley built an 18-by-60-foot wood building for an electric theater, located between his own office and V. H. Limber's undertaking parlor.

Mrs. Dyson won a contest by proposing the new theater's name, "Scenic." The admission was 5 and 10 cents.

The theater used a Kinetoscope projector. There was no ventilation, the projector used arc lights that smoked and sparked, and the audience sat on wooden seats.

The Scenic lasted about 3½ years in that form. In 1911 it was remodeled, given ventilation and advertised as "a place of comfort."

A competitor operated briefly in the Knights of Pythias building, just across the street from the Scenic. Another competitor, about 1910, began operating the Royal Theater.

In 1912 the Scenic moved to 2028 Pacific—currently the site of The Theater in the Grove—and reopened under the name "Star." It began as a one-story building measuring 31½ by 100 feet. It had 400 seats and a "confectionery," which today we would call the snack bar.

The Washington County News Times of June 13, 1912, reported: "Two wide aisles are a pleasing feature of the arrangement. The building is equipped with two electric fans, and two ventilators in the auditorium."

"The stage of the theater is 31 feet wide, and has a depth of 20

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Forest Grove's Early Theaters (cont.)

feet. It will be equipped with handsome drop curtains and scenery.

"The management plans to put on high class plays by stock companies, these features to be part of the program about every two weeks."

The owners of the Star were Fred Watrous and Carl Hoffman. Fred Watrous was an early motion picture projectionist in Forest Grove.

The Star had some competition in November 1912, when the Grand Theater was opened by W.F. Burke in what would become the Dolly Varden Confectionery on South Main Street. It was used primarily for movies but also had "vaudeville" acts, such as comedy stunts, songs, dances, performing dogs and playlets put on by traveling stock companies.

In 1916, vaudeville came to The Star. In 1919, the Star was enlarged and remodeled, including a "PhotoPlayer" which combined a pipe organ and orchestra.

Live theater continues to this day in the old building, now called Theater in The Grove.



The Star Theater in its early days. Standing in the entry are Carl Hoffman, one of the owners, and Mr. Chapman, pianist. Neal Hoffman, Carl's son, sits on the curb. Photo from the Eric Stewart Collection.

Sources: The Eric Stewart Collection; The Hatchet; The News Times. With the assistance of Meg Havens.

Vert's Hall (cont.)

Concerts, sporting events, debates and "socials" were interspersed with plays by traveling stock companies and public demonstrations, such as a learned phrenologist who claimed the ability to determine a customer's character and innate talents by feeling the bumps on his head.

"The Cineograph, one of the later products of Edison's genius, entertained large audiences in Vert's Hall Friday and Saturday evenings. The wind up was an osculation performance which was received with unusual interest," reported the Washington County Hatchet on November 25, 1897.

In 1907—to make room for a new brick bank—the old wood building was moved down Main Street a few feet, to where the covered drive-up lanes of the US Bank are today.

The Masons had become full owners in 1906, and the building continued to be used in its new location. In 1908, Becker and Springer were showing moving pictures in Vert's Hall three times a week, under the name "The Electric Theater." A lady singer helped with illustrated songs.

Eventually, however, the trustees of the Michael Vert fund purchased a new building, which they named Vert's Liberal Hall, still farther down the block on Main. It was the central one of five connected brick and tile buildings that were built in 1912, and destroyed by fire sometime around World War II.

The original building was now showing its age. Like other wooden pioneer structures, it had deteriorated in the rainy climate and become a firetrap. Yet nobody could forget its importance to local history—even if nobody could remember Michael Vert.

The Masons completed construction of their own imposing downtown temple, and left the old Vert's Hall in 1924.

Increasingly weathered, but with the fading Masonic emblem still proudly emblazoned on its upper story, it continued to house various shops and stores until about 1948, when—without much fanfare—it was finally pulled down.

Survey of Early Additions to Forest Grove Completed

By Edwin Dey

Another milestone has been reached in the ongoing effort of the Historic Landmarks Board to identify as many historic sites within the city as possible. This milestone was the completion of an evaluation survey of building sites in three early additions to Forest Grove: Naylor's Addition, Walker's Addition and West Park Addition. They are roughly west and northwest of the present Pacific University campus.

The historic consultant hired by the City identified 185 sites, evaluating them for historic significance based upon the criteria contained in FG Zoning Ordinance, Section 9.792.

Of these 185 sites, only 18 were selected as having enough historic value to be worthy of designation as a Historic Landmark.

What comes next?

Each of the 18 fortunate owners will be notified by mail of the next regular monthly meeting of the Historic Landmarks Board on October 27, 1998. This will provide an opportunity for the owners to meet with and speak to the Board. Some owners may also be able to supply additional or corrected information that was not available to the consultant during the survey.

The Board's recommendations on sites that deserve inclusion on the Forest Grove Register of Historic Landmarks will be forwarded to the Forest Grove City Council through the Forest Grove Planning Commission.

Both the Commission and Council will hold public hearings on the Board's recommendations.

Inclusion on the register is a distinction for home owners, recognizing their building as a physical link to area history. Perhaps most important, owners of buildings on the historic register will become eligible to apply for a Historic Preservation Renovation Grant, which can help to defray the costs of exterior rehabilitation or renovation.

The Event That Never Was—1923

by Jim Casto

From the 1890s until the Great Depression, all small growing towns were filled with “boosters”—civic-minded folk enthusiastically trumpeting the virtues of their fair city.

Forest Grove was no different. Our weekly newspaper, the Washington County News-Times, carried a permanent boast on its front page, above the paper’s nameplate: “Pacific University, An Accredited High School, The Best Soil in Oregon, Prettiest Scenery Extant, Purest Water on Earth, Municipal Power Plant, The Choicest Fruit Lands Anywhere, A Mild Climate and Fine Paved Streets.”

The April 16, 1923 edition noted another cause for civic pride: President Warren G. Harding, who was soon to make a trip to the Pacific Coast, was to be invited by the Commercial Club to visit Forest Grove to lay the cornerstone of the new boy’s dormitory to be constructed at Pacific University that summer. It was confidently anticipated the president could arrange his itinerary to make the visit.

The university was still aglow over a gift of \$100,000 from Mrs. Robert L. McCormick of Tacoma, Washington. Fifty thousand dollars was to be used to establish a chair of American history and patriotism, and the remainder was to be used for the erection and furnishing of the new boy’s dormitory, to be known as McCormick Hall.

On April 28, the U.S. Senator from Oregon, Mr. Charles L. McNary, sent a telegram to the Commercial Club saying he had presented their invitation to Mr. Harding, and that the president was delighted with the invitation. The president also stated his itinerary had not been definitely fixed, but he would keep their cordial invitation in mind when reaching a decision as to points he could visit while in the West.

The paper’s June 28 edition carried the news President Harding was expected to arrive in Portland at 9 a.m. on July 4, and remain until late in the evening. He was to give a general address at Multnomah Field at about 2 o’clock in the

afternoon, and then appear at various functions during the day before continuing his Pacific tour.

There was no mention of a visit to Forest Grove, nor was one forthcoming.

The August 9 edition carried black headlines: President Harding had died suddenly in San Francisco on Thursday, August 2. His ambitious journey across the Western states and then on to Alaska—together with strenuous days full of speechmaking and receptions—had been too much for him.

The Leaders of the Band

By Kim Montoya

The roots of music in Forest Grove may very well have started with Tualatin Academy, Tabitha Brown and the orphaned children she raised there. Sharing her lovely voice with them might have affected them, and the role music played in their lives to come.

Music was the entertainment of the early days, although some among the pious pioneers regarded the violin as an instrument of the devil. S.T. Walker records two boys bringing their mandolin to the First Congressional Church to help lead in worship songs—a violin would never have been accepted.

With no radio, television or even theater, the early pioneers’ own voices and their musical instruments—if they could afford them—were all that was available for social entertainment.

Professor Merrill of Amity organized a singing class in Forest Grove that met on Monday and Thursday mornings, starting at 6 a.m. and lasting to 8 a.m. What a start for a busy workday—to get together with your neighbors and fellow businessmen and raise your voices in song.

Well before the turn of the century, as Forest Grove grew and roads and transportation were improved, bands were organized. Music stores were established to provide sheet music, instruments and instruction manuals. Larger Instruments were sold by the Horn of Portland. Every town of any size or pretention had its own band.

By 1894, Forest Grove had a 14-piece brass band, directed by Professor John Wall, which presented open-air concerts. By the summer of 1895, the new Forest Grove Band Orchestra was so well liked that people came from other towns and counties to hear it. Around 600 attended an outside concert in July. In August, concert attendance rose to 800—but August concerts included ice cream socials.

In 1901, Forest Grove’s Ladies Band played at the Washington County Street Fair in Hillsboro. The crowd loved the ladies for their “modest demeanor, attractive uniforms and excellent playing.”

By 1905, the bands of Forest Grove were so popular a fundraiser was organized to build a bandstand—at a cost of \$90—in the village green, where the pioneer Congregational Church had stood before burning in 1901.

The Band Boys gave a concert by street car in 1906, playing from the town to the depot at Carnation and back, their music wafted by the summer breeze so that a good share of the town got the benefit of it. I wonder if these musicians suspected they were helping to lay the foundation for Forest Grove’s music in the years to come.

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The activity that is the subject of this publication has been financed in part with federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, as provided through the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office. However, the contents and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior, nor does the mention of any trade names or commercial products constitute endorsement or recommendation by the U.S. Department of the Interior.



Baseball was Serious Business

Baseball, the great American pastime, was little known before the Civil War. Veterans of the conflict, who were introduced to the game in the Union army, spread its pleasures nationwide in the decades that followed. Every town — including Forest Grove—had one or several teams, some of them sponsored by mills, breweries or other large businesses.

The old photo above depicts seven Forest Grove players from around the turn of the century ... and, in the striped sleeves, one player from Cornelius. History fails to record the date, the names or why the mixed team.

Photo from the Eric Stewart Collection

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Preserving Forest Grove is a quarterly newsletter published by the Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board to help fulfill its duty of public education regarding the preservation of cultural resources. If you would like to be on the mailing list, please call James Reitz at 359-3233.

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