

Offbeat Oregon History: Mayor Baker's theatre in Portland

By Finn JD John
For The Sentinel

Most modern Oregonians interested in Portland history don't quite know what to make of George L. Baker.

Baker served longer in the

office of Mayor of Portland than anyone ever has, before or since. He was hugely popular among most Portlanders for most of that time, becoming known for a kind of adorably bluff teddy-bear boisterousness.

But he also resorted to fascist

tactics in opposing labor unions and other "subversives"; he was famously friendly with the Ku Klux Klan; and during Prohibition, his police department ran an outright protection racket among illegal speakeasies and kept City Hall generously furnished with seized liquor.

Baker got his start as a Vaudeville showman, and by the time he was getting into politics he was running Portland's premier stock theater company. But hardly anyone today understands how important that was. And the fact is, one can't understand Mayor George Baker without knowing what his theater meant to the Portland of the 1910s.

Stock theatre is something most Americans today know little about. It still exists; but it's a faded and impoverished ghost of what it was at the turn of the 20th century. Usually it's seen in the form of local repertory theatres like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. It's something of a niche art form, patronized by a small but enthusiastic cohort that tends to pride itself (not without reason) on its cultural refinement.

But in 1901, when George hung out the shingle over his very own stock-theatre playhouse, that wasn't the case at all. Stock theatre was a mass-media enterprise, and it was huge — possibly one of the five or ten most important industries in the city. But it was an industry with a bit of a lingering reputation problem, dating from

the years just after the Civil War.

Vaudeville has always had a bit of a disreputable edge, and never more so than in the 1870s in the American West. Companies toured around the country like circuses or carnivals. The shows they performed were often poorly written and ribald, the theatres they played in sometimes doubled as bordellos. The players were widely considered fast and disreputable, and although they usually weren't, it only took a few examples to reinforce those stereotypes.

But local resident players, back in the early days, were worse. Vaudevilleans usually weren't prostitutes and card-game swindlers. In the frontier town of Portland just after the Civil War, local players usually were. Venues like the Oro Fino — owned and operated by Portland's first chief of police, James Lappeus — actually had little rooms upstairs for "private theatrical performances," and trained mountebanks staffing the gambling tables downstairs to fleece the suckers and tenderfoots and keep the regulars winning just enough to keep them coming back. Particularly in saloon settings like the Oro Fino, the women sometimes would vamp audience members between sets, cajoling them into buying them drinks which they would dump discreetly into spittoons.

As the town got bigger and more respectable, though, so did the theaters. And by the time George Baker was entering the field, there were basically two kinds: Vaudeville houses, offering cheap shows by the traveling troupes; and big upmarket mainstream houses, less cheap but by no means expensive,

which hired their own professional staff or "stock" of players.

In this era, live theater was the preeminent storytelling medium. When the movies came to prominence after the First World War, it was live theater that they essentially replaced. Live theater supplied the stories and narratives that Portlanders used to define themselves and their world, and it was the most accessible source of the East Coast culture that middle-class Portlanders felt the lack of rather keenly in their rough-hewn frontier city.

By the turn of the century, the Baker Stock Theatre was the center of Portland's mainstream social life. Baker positioned it as a great unifying force: it was not too high-brow for the average longshoreman to appreciate, but not too frivolous for an erudite lawyer to enjoy.

It was strictly G-rated: Mindful of the sketchy reputation of his industry, Baker took pains to make his theaters as clean and wholesome as possible, and his players — who were part of the community, of course — shared that vision. Entire families made it part of their weekly routine, and on Wednesday matinees, babies and children under 5 were allowed.

Baker's players, especially the leading ladies and men, quickly became celebrities.

"We belonged to them," said Miss Fay Bainter, the company's leading lady for a time around the turn of the century. "We were a part of their lives. Our position was enviable. Why, I never had to use a street-car or taxi. Someone would al-

ways stop and take you where you wanted to go."

For those few years, Baker's theater was the cultural epicenter of Portland. It brought the upper and lower classes together, gave young people a place to meet and get to know one another, and performed a community-building function of which Baker was obviously very proud.

"Don't you remember the way it was?" former leading man Howard Russel asked an Oregonian reporter in 1909. "Why, if the right people did not occupy the seats we were accustomed to seeing them in, we would ask (from on stage), 'Where is so-and-so tonight? I don't see them in their regular seats!' It was like a family party."

It's this picture of Portland — an overgrown small town, rough-hewn but with high cultural aspirations, a town in which workers and business executives moved in the same circles and knew one another's families and laughed at the same jokes and enjoyed the same diversions — that has to be kept in mind when considering the things Baker became most notorious for after he was elected mayor of Portland in 1917. Because within just a few years of his election, that "belle epoque" Portland was lost and gone.

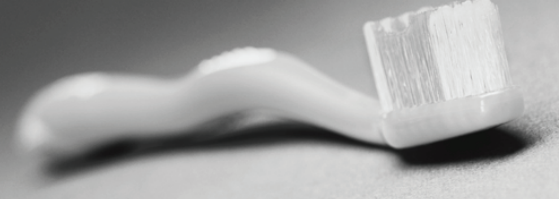
George knew, and had presided over, the golden past that the cultural reactionaries yearned for as the "Red Scare" dawned in 1919. He looked at union representatives fighting to get their members treated fairly, and saw out-of-town troublemakers trying to turn brother against brother for their own personal gain; so he hired a secret crew of thugs to fight them. He saw ethnic minorities and newly emancipated women influencing and changing the culture he'd helped create in ways he didn't like, so he threw his support behind the "100 percent Americanism" of the Ku Klux Klan. This is, of course, no excuse for his quasi-fascist behavior throughout the 1920s; but it's important to know in evaluating this fascinating and controversial ex-mayor.

By the end of his time in office, in 1933, Baker was basically a spent force. Perhaps that's because his theater company, which he hadn't really been able to run personally while serving as mayor, went out of business in 1922. The golden age of stock theater was over; its primary functions had been taken over by the new Hollywood feature-length movies. By then there was a whole generation of Portlanders who had never been to Baker's theater, never met him working the crowd on opening night, and knew him only as a back-slapping character about whom rumors of disreputability occasionally swirled, presiding over one of the more corrupt City Halls on the West Coast.

In 1932, 47 percent of the electorate voted to recall him from office. Baker took the hint and announced he wouldn't run for re-election. He died in 1941.

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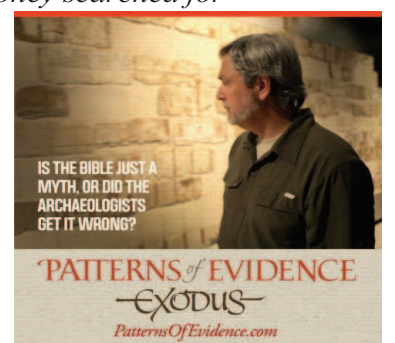
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