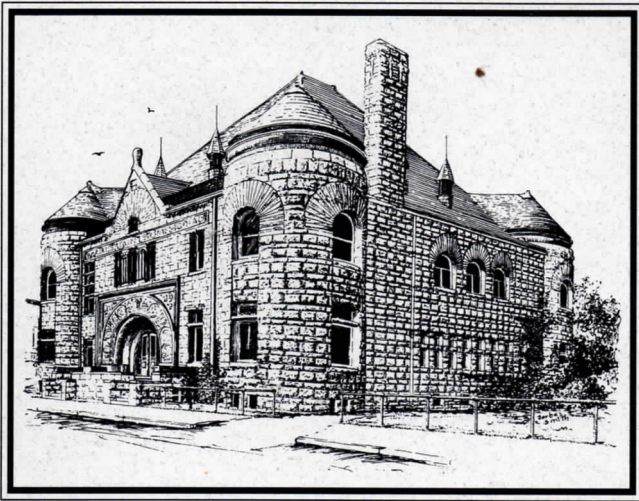


# The Mabel Tainter Memorial

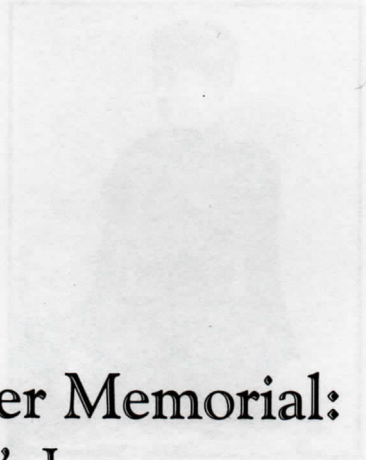
Menomonie, Wisconsin



A Lumberman's Legacy

## Introduction

In creating the Mabel Tainter Memorial Building it was our aim to accomplish something that would be of permanent value and utility to the Citizens of Menomonie, to contribute something toward the intellectual, social and moral advancement and well being of the community now and



# The Mabel Tainter Memorial: A Lumberman's Legacy

The Mabel Tainter Memorial was constructed in 1889 by Andrew and Bertha Tainter. It was built as a tribute to their daughter who died suddenly at the age of 19. Their grief motivated the loss of Mabel and built a structure that would be of lasting value to the community of Menomonie, Wisconsin. When deciding what would be the most appropriate memorial, the Tainters were prompted by their Unitarian ministers. Reverend Henry Levy Mason, to build a library/alterman. This building would then also function as the Menomonie Unitarian Society's home.

Construction began in April, 1889 and was completed in June of the following year. The Mabel Tainter Memorial was a gift of love to both daughter and community. As a result of Andrew and Bertha Tainter's bequest to the community, the Mabel Tainter Library, Library and Educational Society was incorporated, and a non-profit board was established to govern the activities of the Memorial.

The following is the story of the Mabel Tainter Memorial Building, a Menomonie

Compiled and written by Adam Rockwell

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# Introduction

“In erecting the Mabel Tainter Memorial Building it was our aim to accomplish something that would be of permanent value and utility to the Citizens of Menomonie, to contribute something toward the intellectual, social and moral advancement and well being of the community now, and in years to come.”

—Andrew & Bertha Tainter



Mabel Tainter

The Mabel Tainter Memorial was constructed in 1889 by Andrew and Bertha Tainter. It was built as a tribute to their daughter who died suddenly at the age of 19. They greatly mourned the loss of Mabel and built a structure that would be of lasting value to the community of Menomonie, Wisconsin. When deciding what would be the most appropriate memorial, the Tainters were prompted by their Unitarian minister, Reverend Henry Doty Maxson, to build a library/auditorium. This building could then also function as the Menomonie Unitarian Society's home.

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The following is the story of the Mabel Tainter Memorial Building, a structure that has stood as the cultural center of Menomonie since 1890.

## Tainter Family History

Andrew Tainter was born in 1823 in Syracuse, New York. He was the firstborn of fourteen children. At the age of nine he moved with his family to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where his father was doing government contract work at Fort Crawford.

Andrew first came to Northern Wisconsin in 1845. He knew of the virtually "limitless" amounts of

untapped natural resources available in the region, and wished to make his mark on the land. In 1847, he began his own logging camp on Poskin Lake,

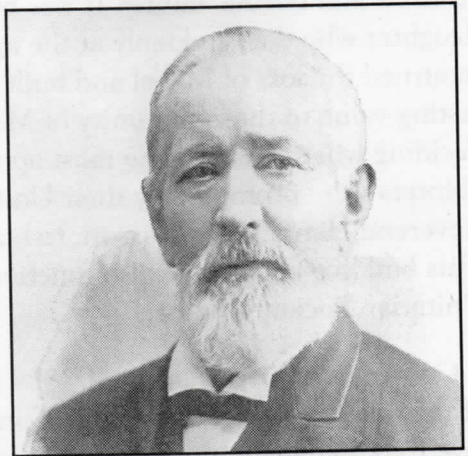
located near present-day Barron. With the amount of pine trees available, Tainter soon had a considerable logging operation. His camp provided logs to a lumber company located in Menomonie, Wisconsin, owned by John Holly Knapp and William Wilson. The logs were transported there by way of the Red Cedar River.

By 1850 Andrew was brought into a partnership with Knapp and Wilson.

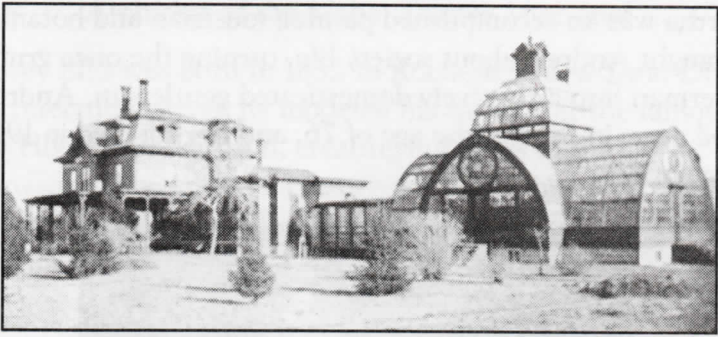
This lumber company eventually became the famous Knapp, Stout & Co. By the 1880s, due to an ever increasing appetite for lumber in the U.S., it became the largest white pine lumber company in the world. Andrew Tainter's fortune was made through his early partnership with Knapp and Wilson.



Young Andrew Tainter



Andrew Tainter



Andrew and Bertha Tainter's mansion with attached greenhouse

The same year Andrew became a partner with Wilson and Knapp, he married Mary Poskin Goose. Mary was a member of the Ojibwa tribe from the Poskin region. Their union produced five children—Julia, Charlotte, William, Thomas and Eliza. Charlotte, Thomas and Eliza were the only children who lived into adulthood.

Andrew and Mary's marriage of eight years could not have been easy. As the general boss for all logging operations, Andrew was often away, leaving Mary alone with the children for days at a time. Feeling out of place in a predominately white society, Mary decided to leave Andrew in 1858 to return to the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation, where she passed away in 1868. In order that the children could be educated, Andrew kept custody of the children and hired Bertha Lucas Lesure as their governess.

Bertha Lesure was a widow and the mother of two sons. In 1856 she moved to Menomonie to teach. After three years of working as governess to the Tainter children, Bertha and Andrew married in 1861 and began a family of their own. They had five children together—Louis Smith, Ruth, Mabel, Irene and Fanny. Louis and Fanny were the only children from this union who lived into adulthood.



Bertha Tainter

Bertha was an accomplished painter, musician and botanist. She taught Andrew about society life, turning the once gruff lumberman into a relatively domesticated gentleman. Andrew passed away in 1899 at the age of 76, and Bertha died in 1916 at the age of 88.



Andrew and Bertha Tainter at home in their mansion

## Conception of the Memorial

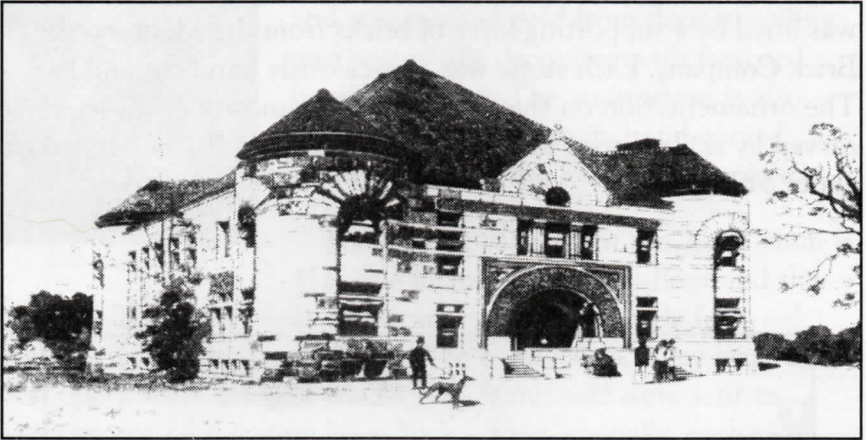
Through the prompting of Reverend Henry Doty Maxson, Andrew and Bertha Tainter decided they would build the Mabel Tainter Memorial. The Memorial would house a well-equipped library and auditorium. The auditorium would have two purposes: an opera house and the permanent home to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie. Also included in the plans for the building was a Young Men's Unitarian Society room, a billiards room, a meeting and dining room, a pastor's study and other office space. In order for all of the building plans to be incorporated, Andrew contracted a well known architectural firm in Minneapolis—the L.S. Buffington firm. Architect Harvey Ellis was commissioned by Buffington to design the Mabel Tainter Memorial.



Rev. Henry Doty Maxson

## Architect of the Mabel Tainter Memorial

Harvey Ellis was born in 1852 in Rochester, New York. During his architectural career, he modeled his work after the famous Henry Hobson Richardson, creating buildings in the Romanesque Revival style. However, his style involved a slight departure from the strict Romanesque with the addition of his own elements of fantasy.



Harvey Ellis' rendering of the Mabel Tainter Memorial

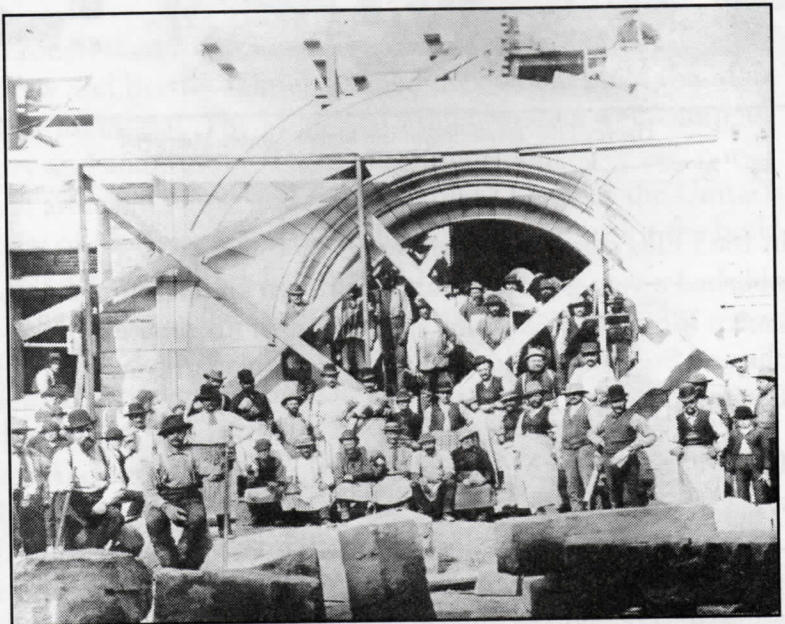
In 1885 Ellis came to the Midwest. By this time he had established a very good reputation through architectural circles. Between 1888 and 1893, Ellis spent most of his time in Minneapolis and St. Louis, designing many fine structures in both cities in his unique style.

The Mabel Tainter Memorial is considered to be one of the best preserved examples of Ellis' work. A large number of his structures have been torn down in the name of progress. Ellis died in relative obscurity in 1904, but his legacy lives on in his few remaining buildings and the influence he had on later architects.

## The Memorial's Construction

The Mabel Tainter Memorial's construction began in April 1889. Hundreds of craftsmen and laborers worked on the completion of the building. Many of the workers were local, but a number of the stone masons came directly from Scotland.

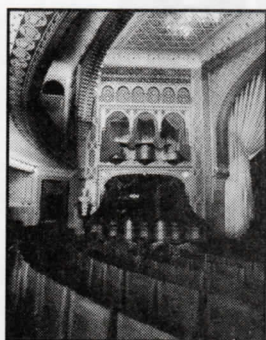
The exterior of the building was constructed of Dunnville sandstone, quarried about ten miles south of Menomonie. These stones were brought up the Red Cedar River on barges to Downsville, five miles south of Menomonie. From Downsville they were brought to Menomonie by rail. The exterior sandstone was lined by a supporting layer of bricks from the Menomonie Brick Company. Each stone was meticulously hand cut and laid. The ornamentation on the exterior of the sandstone was hand carved by skilled stone masons. Construction of the building cost about \$105,000.



Mabel Tainter Memorial during construction in 1889

# The Memorial Interior

The interior of the Mabel Tainter Memorial can best be described as lavish. The grand entrance, staircase and Reading Room are adorned in Italian marble, Philippine mahogany, oak and polished brass. Every item throughout the building was the best available in 1889.



The auditorium

## The Auditorium

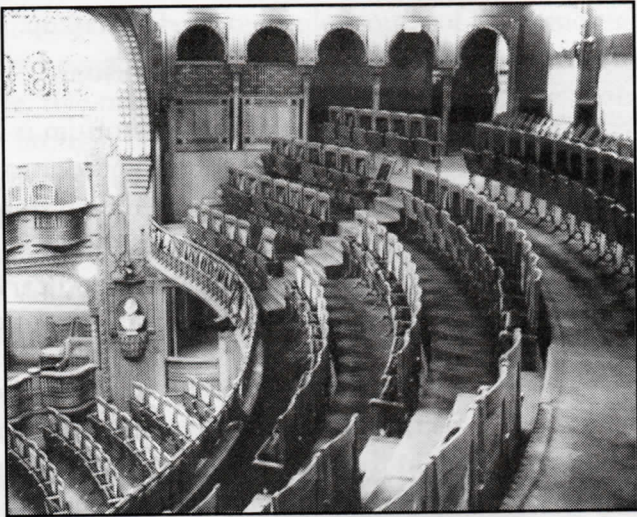
The design of the auditorium is Moorish, and was painted gold from floor to ceiling and beautifully decorated with frescoed hand stenciling. The auditorium is also decorated with delicately hand-carved white pine from the Knapp, Stout & Co.

The seating capacity of the auditorium is 313; this includes the main floor and the balcony. The opera seats in the auditorium are made from oak and the seat cushions are covered in gold velvet. They were the best opera seats made in the United States and were sent to Menomonie by rail from New York state. Originally, each seat had a hymnal rack on the back and a hat holder on the bottom. Both have since been removed because of the lack of use and the need for more leg room for patrons.



The auditorium-viewed from stage

The intimate size of the theater allows a great view of the stage from every seat in the house. The exception to this is the four boxes on either side of the auditorium, which were angled outward towards the audience. This exclusive box seating had a poor view of the stage, but the people seated in them were highly visible to everyone in the theater.



The auditorium

### The Sitting Rooms

In the southwest corner of the auditorium is the Blue Room, also known as the parlor. Before a concert, the men would escort the women to the main entrance of the building and then bring their carriages to the stable at the rear. The women could then socialize while waiting for the start of the performance. The Terra Cotta Room, or men's gathering room, is located on the opposite side of the theater. It could be entered from the stable area behind the building.

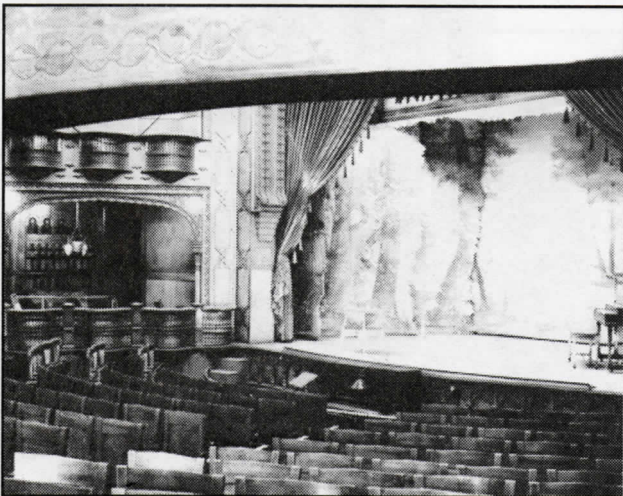
## The Steere and Turner Organ

Located on the ground floor in the left box of the auditorium is the Steere and Turner tracker pipe organ. It was built to specification for the Memorial in Springfield, Massachusetts and cost \$4100. The organ is encased in polished mahogany and has 1597 pipes which extend into the third level of the building. Originally, the organ's bellows were driven by a waterworks and crankshaft located on the building's lower level. During the early 1900s an electric generator replaced the old system. The organ is still played today.

## The Stage

The stage is known as a hemp house. This refers to the scenery, curtains and backdrops, all being controlled through ropes, pulleys and pins. The stage is shallow by theatrical standards, but extends up three floors to encompass the grid area.

On the stage there are three trap doors which are manually operated by a weight/counterweight system, allowing actors to appear or disappear during a performance. Backstage there are four dressing rooms and a restroom. Below stage there is a makeup area and a large dressing room to accommodate the cast members.



The Mabel Tainter Memorial stage

One of the most unique features of the stage is the beautiful hand-operated butterfly curtain. It is opened by turning a drum on the second level. This is the only working hand-operated butterfly curtain left in existence in the United States.

In 1890, the theater purchased fifteen backdrops from the Peter Clausen Studio in Minneapolis for the sum of \$1750.00. The building still has seven of those original backdrops and they are used on a regular basis.

### The Library

Originally the most prominent feature of the building was the elegantly decorated Reading Room and Library. The Library contained many pieces of fine literature and a large selection of periodicals, as well as a beautifully crafted circular mahogany reading table. In 1890 over three thousand volumes of books



Mabel Tainter Memorial Reading Room and Library

were purchased for the Library by the Tainters. This number grew as steadily as the city's population. The Library was opened to the public in January, 1891, after the librarian was trained in library methods in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The Reading Room opened directly into the library Stacks Room through a fireproof safe door. The Stacks Room consisted of a number of high shelving units with a ladder that ran through the room on a specially designed track.

By 1915, the library's collection was so large that the stacks area could no longer hold it. The Memorial turned the Billiards Room in the basement into book storage. In 1974, the Children's Library was established in the basement of the Memorial. Then, in 1986, the Library moved to its new and larger facility.

While no longer a lending library, the Memorial still retains the essence of the library's past, housing a large number of books from the original collection. The books are displayed in the Stacks Room.

## The Memorial's Struggle

Traveling theater had reached its height in the United States by the time the Mabel Tainter Memorial opened its doors in 1890.

Hundreds of professional traveling theater companies were making their way across the country, many making an appearance on the Memorial stage. Even though there were two other opera houses in Menomonie, performers



The Memorial Orchestra



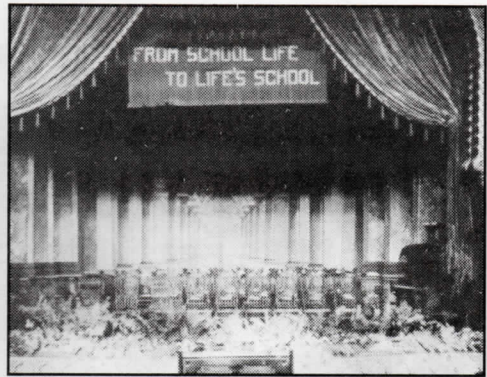
The LaGrande Sisters: A Vaudeville variety act that performed on the Memorial stage

preferred the Memorial with its intimacy and superior acoustics.

By the 1910s, professional theater was challenged by a number of other forms of entertainment. Vaudeville variety and comedy acts had gained tremendous popularity. The advent of cinema also negatively influenced the popularity of live theater. On January 15, 1910, the

first movie house opened its doors in downtown Menomonie. This movie house offered lower ticket prices than the Memorial's, leading to a quick decline in sales. By 1913, there were four movie houses in Menomonie. These movie house screens offered big name actors, something with which the Memorial could not compete. The movie houses also consistently underpriced the Mabel Tainter Memorial's shows.

The Depression of the 1930s brought an end to professional theater at the Mabel Tainter Memorial. During this time, only a few professional companies performed at the Memorial. By the time World War II began, the Memorial was no longer able to support any professional productions. Between 1939 and 1957 the stage was devoid of professional activity and was only used for community functions. It was not until the restoration began that the theater again became frequently used.



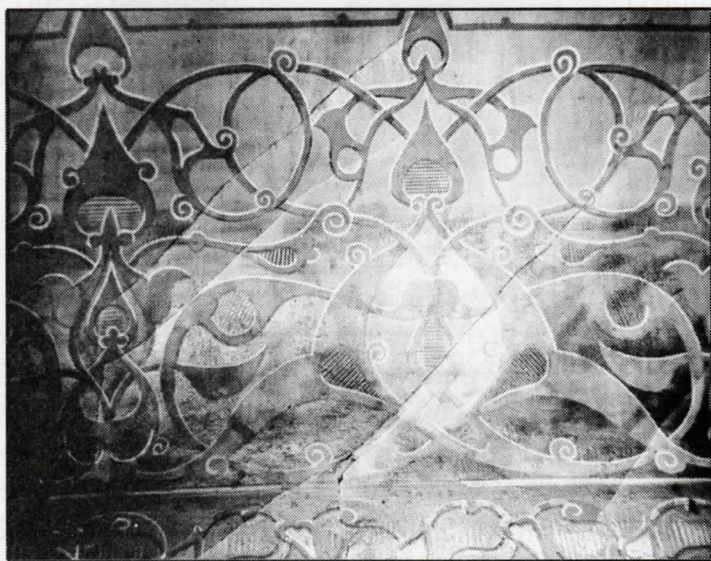
The Mabel Tainter Memorial stage during a graduation ceremony

While the stage stood empty, the building remained in use. The library continued to function, and City Hall was located in second floor offices. The lower level of the building housed the Chamber of Commerce offices as well as a teen recreation center with a fully operating soda fountain. The Memorial struggled to find its identity.

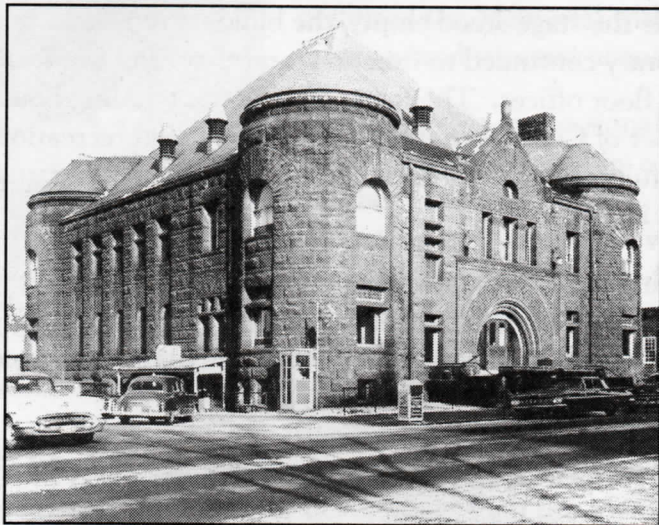
During the 1950s, talk began of removing the theater from the building and adding more city office space. Representatives of the Woman's Club and many other community groups formed the "Save the Memorial" campaign.

## Memorial Restoration & Revival

From 1939-1959 the theater had not been adequately maintained. Coal soot and water had damaged the delicate stencil work on the walls and ceilings, as well as the fabric of the seats. The great butterfly curtain had also grayed from the soot.



Damaged stencil work in the Memorial auditorium



The Mabel Tainter Memorial in the 1950s

In 1957, Larry Richardson asked the Memorial Board for permission to inspect the organ. He examined it carefully and determined that it could be restored. Richardson began work on the organ and made the instrument partially playable. During the 75th anniversary celebration at the Memorial in 1965, Norman Walter (the great-grandson of Andrew Tainter) decided that he would fund the restoration of the organ, which was completed professionally a few years later.

During this period, many groups became interested in the Memorial building. One of these groups was the Menomonie Woman's Club. Another was the newly formed Menomonie Theater Guild. Both organizations were instrumental in the restoration of the theater. Through their grass roots efforts, they began to solicit support that was essential to the future of the Mabel Tainter Memorial building. Thanks to their campaign, the Mabel Tainter Preservation Association was formed. This association became responsible for the fundraising and administration of the restoration. By 1961 a new stage curtain was purchased by

the Menomonie Theater Guild, and preservation work was well underway. During the 1960s, the De Nardo Studios from Minneapolis performed the interior work of restoring the Memorial building to its original beauty.

By the early 1980s, Menomonie had grown to a population of over 12,000, not including several thousand university students. The Memorial's library facility was no longer able to meet the demands of the community. A referendum was brought before the voters of the city to build a new library. Heated debate began about a new location for the library and the impact the move would have on the Memorial. Many members of the community feared that if the library was removed from the Memorial, the building would be abandoned. Their fears have not been realized.

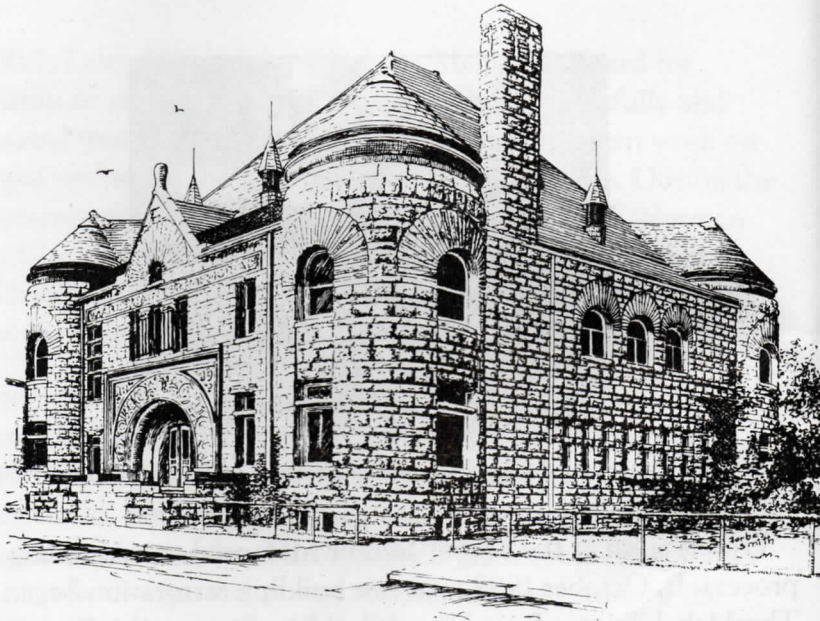


Audience viewing the first Menomonie Theater Guild performance in 1959

Preservation at the Mabel Tainter Memorial is an ongoing process. In October 1998, exterior building restoration began. The Mabel Tainter Board hired Building Restoration Corporation from St. Paul, Minnesota to restore the exterior masonry and sandstone. Donations for Memorial restoration are always welcome and appreciated. Through constant vigilance, the Mabel Tainter Memorial will continue to preserve the lumberman's legacy.

# Conclusion

The Mabel Tainter Memorial stands as a link to the past. One can attend a performance in the beautiful theater, read a newspaper in the opulent Reading Room, browse through the Victorian Gift Shop, or view art by local and regional artists in the Gallery. A visit to the Mabel Tainter Memorial leaves an indelible impression on the visitor. The original intent of the Memorial remains—a building dedicated to the community.



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Any profit from the sale of this book goes to the restoration and maintenance of the:

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