

BACK IN TIME

Merchant's dream goes bust

By DICK SHEARER

Success stories abound of early Lansdale citizens who came to town with little more than an idea and the will to make it work. But not every idea was a good one and not every dreamer found lightning in a bottle.

One such person was Gilbert L. Thompson who came to town in the early 1890s and opened a hardware store at Main and Green Streets. By all reports, Thompson was a very successful businessman as long as he stuck to selling hammers and saws.

Just a few years earlier the Music Hall theater opened on Broad Street, marking the start of Lansdale's cultural revolution. The local community band very quickly gained a regional reputation for excellence, so much so that it often brought in well-known guest conductors.

Among them was Julius B. Alder, who like many out-of-town musicians roomed at the Hotel Norwood during his stay here in 1895. To fill his spare time Alder composed the score for an opera which he called "Liberty Bell". He hoped to assemble a cast and take the show on the road, but he lacked the money to do so.

Enter Gilbert Thompson. We don't know for certain what attracted Thompson to Alder's fledgling opera plan but we can assume that Alder somehow was aware that Thompson had recently inherited \$30,000. Word spreads in a small town?

Once Thompson was on board, other prominent citizens with spare capital to invest jumped in. Among them were Washington Geller, E.K. Bean and Robert Lownes, proprietor of the Norwood. We don't know how much money they amassed - \$40,000 was one guess - but it was enough cash to

construct scenery and hire a troupe of 75 performers and stagehands.

In retrospect, "Liberty Bell" may have been a not-so-clever scheme from the start. It just so happens that the 1895 Cotton Exposition - the South's version of a World's Fair - would be hosting the real Liberty Bell as part of the festivities and an opera of the same name had the potential to be a smash hit.

Alder and his gang quickly booked a five-week engagement in Atlanta and waited for the crowds to roll in. Well, they didn't - which may have been a blessing because theatre critics roasted the show from beginning to end. It fared so poorly that it closed after two weeks, wiping out most of the local investment money.

But Thompson was determined to give it another try. He returned to Lansdale and managed to talk Jacob Geller, owner of the Grand Emporium, into providing more capital in an attempt to rescue the show.

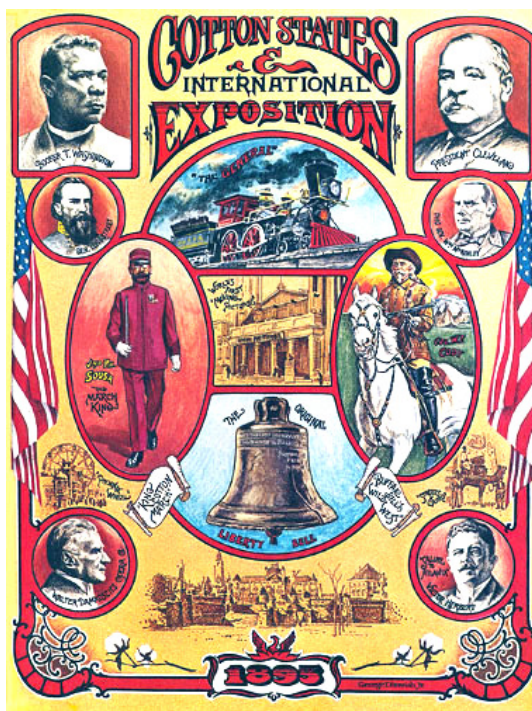
The troupe then headed north to Washington where the reception was lukewarm at best. Next it was on to Philadelphia. Certainly the home folks would turn out in droves to show their support.

In show business, timing is everything and as luck would have it Alder's unfortunate troupe arrived in Philly just in time for a citywide transit strike. According to the *Reporter*, the city was a mess because theatergoers and everyone else had to fend for themselves once they came into town by train. Wagons and buggies of every shape and size turned the streets into chaos, so people just stayed home.

Chalk up another financial disaster for "Liberty Bell".

By now this escapade was turning into a tragedy or a sick comedy depending on your viewpoint. Believe it

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THE OPERA 'LIBERTY BELL' was supposed to benefit from an opening during Atlanta's Cotton Exposition of 1895.

Opera a costly flop for local citizens

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or not after all of this there was one more stop – Boston – where matters went from bad to worse.

Alder saw the writing on the wall and suddenly jumped ship, leaving word that he was going to marry the company's prima donna and relocate to the West Coast where he supposedly had rich relatives. Oh, and he also was alleged to have absconded with money Thompson had given him to pay the troupe's salaries.

That left the Liberty Bell Operatic Co.'s manager Frank Perley stuck in Boston with no money to pay room and board for the troupe let alone their salaries. The show lasted a mere four nights but that was plenty of time for Boston reviewers to have their say.

According to the *New York Dramatic Mirror* of June 13, 1896, the paper's correspondent in Boston reported:

"When the opera opened here it received the worst kind of a roasting. The critics who had written comic operas and those who had not proceeded to demolish the work and there was little hope of bolstering the scheme into a success.

"The company opened on Tuesday night to a \$300 house, by all odds the best one of the week, and although the company received 50 percent of the receipts, it wound up owing money to the theater. The performers had their trunks seized as payment for their rooms and all of "Liberty Bell's" property at the theater was attached by the sheriff as payment

for the theater's stage crew."

In the end, Perley – who was not to blame for any of this mess – reached in his own pocket to transport the troupe members back to New York City where most lived.

"Liberty Bell" likely taught its Lansdale investors an important lesson: Don't put your money in something you know nothing about.

No one took a bigger financial bath than Gilbert Thompson, the merchant who at one point commissioned architect Milton Bean to draw up plans for an 800-seat opera house on the site of today's Wells Fargo Bank parking lot.

More than the money, this misadventure cost him friends and self-esteem in Lansdale. He left town shortly thereafter. The only



GILBERT THOMPSON'S home at Green and Vine Streets, now an apartment house, is one of the few reminders of his years in Lansdale.

reminder of Thompson is his home at Vine and Green Streets, now an apartment house owned by LHS Board Member Richard Stricker.

If there is a silver lining, we can report that Gilbert Thompson went back to selling hardware. He ran a very successful business in Perkaskie that flourished prior to his death in 1934.

Material for this story was gathered from archival issues of the North Penn Reporter, the Ambler Gazette and the New York Dramatic Mirror. We also thank member Leopoldo Montoya for his research assistance.