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Pleasant Hill Dramatics

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had brought to the meeting. Pans of pop corn and bowls of cracked hickory nuts were consumed as the young folks talked of the time and place of holding rehearsals, and the oak chunks in the cast-iron stove had burned to glowing coals before the visitors donned overshoes, heavy coats, and mufflers to depart for home in their bobsleds.

Rehearsals were held at the homes of the players until about a week before the time set for the public performance. Then evening meetings took place at the schoolhouse, still warm from the big fire left in the stove by the teacher when she departed after school closed for the afternoon.

A few days before the date of the show the boys of the club hauled a load of planks from town for the stage, which they erected across the front end of the schoolroom. A wire stretched from one side-wall to the other held the dark cambric curtain which had been made by the girls and fastened to small rings so that the two halves could be pulled aside. The handy mechanic of the group built side panels for the stage out of pine strips and covered these with white paper on which he drew windows and baseboards with charcoal. Openings were left for entrances on both sides, the front wall of the schoolroom served as the back wall of the stage, and with this arrangement the actors had a playing space about twelve feet wide, six feet deep, and two feet above the floor.

The hall, which extended entirely across the front of the building, was transformed into dressing

rooms. There the actors concealed themselves while the patrons paid their ten cents admission and climbed over the stage to reach the double seats then in vogue in country schools. No performance could begin until the audience had assembled, for the improvised theater boasted no entrance except the one over the stage. There was always a scramble for the long recitation bench which constituted the first row of seats.

The mirror reflectors on the kerosene lamps in swinging brackets along the walls were turned so that the light was directed upon the stage. No footlights were used. Furniture, rugs, and curtains for the set were brought from home by the actors themselves.

What did it matter if occasionally someone forgot his lines in an exciting climax — the prompter was ready with the missing cue. And who cared if the villain's mustache and black beard, loosened by perspiration, threatened to drop off before the end of the act? The audience appreciated such a mishap as much or more than a flawless performance. If the pistol failed to go off the first time the trigger was pulled and the intended victim shouted, "I'm shot!" before the shot was fired, the crowd howled with delight. To the credit of the Pleasant Hill Dramatic Club be it said, however, that such miscues were the exception. The careful rehearsals of the enthusiastic young actors produced better plays than the average of amateur performances. Old-

timers still remember the four-act drama, "Better Than Gold", and the three-act comedy, "The Flower of the Family", while the participants themselves revel in the memory of the fun of rehearsals and the thrills of the final performance.

During two winters the club produced one-act sketches and longer plays. Their object was not mercenary: they engaged in the enterprise solely for their own amusement and the entertainment of the community. With the proceeds they paid for the curtain, rented the planks for the stage, had their picture taken by the town photographer, enjoyed an occasional oyster party, and divided the balance among the members.

It was not long, however, before some of the members married and moved to distant farms. Others left the homesteads to engage in business in town, or, like their parents two decades before, set out for the West. The Dramatic Club was disbanded, but the events of the winters of 1886 and 1887 at Pleasant Hill remain as cherished memories.

BRUCE E. MAHAN