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Fiske Opera House

You will recall that at our last meeting, I discussed the Barton opera House, Fresno's first real first class theatre, which opened on September 29, 1890. Prior to this theatre's opening, there were two other theatres in town, neither of which had a real theatrical rigging system, the type used for "flying in" backdrops. The first of these was **The Riggs Theatre**, which was actually an armory building owned by Charles Riggs. By January of 1890. The Riggs Theatre was bankrupt, and it would soon be transformed into a skating rink, and a few months later into a livery stable (which says a lot about its suitability as a theatre). The other theatre in Fresno was the **Fresno Opera House**, some called it the **Fiske Opera House**, owned by J D Fiske. Previously, it had been known as the **Grady Opera House**. Let's take a good look at The Fisk Opera House and its owner, JD Fiske.

The Fiske Opera House was not much of a theatre. It had no rigging system, as I mentioned before, so scenic devices were limited. JD Fiske himself was an interesting fellow of somewhat questionable ethics. He had a history of fraudulent real estate dealings in the east, and those didn't stop when he came to Fresno. Previously, he had two marriages, numerous lawsuits, he was disbarred as a lawyer in Massachusetts, and was involved in several fraudulent schemes. There was even a question about the actual legal name of his wife. She used the name Amanda Jean Graves, but told others that her name was Minnie J. Newman.

Fiske's legal problems didn't stop when he got to Fresno, and in fact, he was quickly involved in legal skirmishes with several people, including his own business

partners and acquaintances. He also was rapidly recognized as a brawler, and was part of several fist fights, including at least one with the editor of the Fresno Expositor.

One of Fiske's business dealings included the purchase of the Grady Opera House (renaming it the Fiske Opera House) and Fiske didn't seem to care about its condition or upkeep. You will recall the fire marshall's report of June 23, 1889. Fire Marshall Major Cummings reported, "I made a cursory examination and got out as fast as I could. The whole building is liable to fall in at any moment. The building has no foundations, the walls are cracked and crumbling beyond repair, and the gallery is sagging and barely strong enough to support its own weight." He forbade firefighters from even entering the building in the event of a fire.

City Trustees inspected the building in June 1889, calling it the "tottering ruin known as the Fiske Opera House." A committee of local builders and carpenters soon visited the facility and were appalled at its condition. Repairs were ordered, and by September of 1889 all was repaired and fit for the presence of an audience.

Fiske himself was in a condition similar to his theatre, he circulated through theatres from Texas to California, signing up theatre companies to perform at various theatres. Travelling by train, these theatre companies would play at every little water tank town they found themselves in, while the train's locomotives would be serviced and refilled with water and fuel. Fiske would claim a percentage of the house's revenue at each theatre in each town for each performance. He also charged the theatre companies for booking them into these tiny little minute hamlets. Eventually, these theatre companies would find themselves in Fresno, while travelling on the Southern Pacific Railroad, since at the time, it was the only railroad to serve San Francisco.

This is where Fiske really shined. Once the theatre company arrived in Fresno, ready to perform, Fiske would confiscate their baggage and properties, and hold them until he was paid the amount he said they owed him for these "bookings." Fiske employed the local constable to seize the goods of companies performing in his theatre, or in other theatres, especially the Barton Opera House. He would go so far as to attached the box office revenues of these other theatres, until he was paid. He claimed that 50 or 60 theatres throughout the west belonged to his "circuit," so eventually, no theatre company would dare deal with him, or come to Fresno. All of this was happening in late 1889 and early 1890, just as Robert Barton was nearing completion of his Opera House. Fiske's plan seemed to be to set Fresno up as a place that no theatre company would play, thereby ruining Barton.

Noted actor of the time, Fredericke Warde, was set upon by Fiske all the way in Tulare, where a Fresno constable went to secure \$125 supposedly owed to Fiske by Warde. Warde paid the money, but subsequently brought suit against Fiske for \$10,000 in April of 1890, saying he had never entered into any kind of contract with Fiske. This was the same thing that every other theatre company owner said when shaken down by Fiske. The Southern Pacific, feeling that they were being used for ill will, hired attorney SJ Hinds to prevent further attachments by Fiske. This ended the attachments scheme, and Fiske would now need to move on to different pursuits.

By May 1890, Fiske realized that the Fiske Theatre would not be any kind of competition to the Barton, and Fiske sought to unload his theatre. He transformed it into a garden restaurant with much greenery, private dining rooms, a huge water fountain, and fans which circulated the cool air from around the fountain.

But Fiske wasn't done yet. In July 1890, Fiske filed for divorce from his wife, accusing her of cruelty and adultery. The offending male adulterers were listed as George W Stone, Nathan Raphael, and Robert Barton! Fiske filed suit against Barton for \$150,000, for the seduction of his wife.

Barton was livid, claimed innocence, and explained it all as "a huge piece of devilment concocted... to extort money out of me." Barton claimed that Fiske had offered a man \$100 a month to join a scheme that would make both of them money. The scheme "would make it hot for me." Barton had actually met Mrs. Fiske on a train to San Francisco, and she was accompanied by her children and maid. He helped her find a hotel, the landlady of which was a friend of the Barton family. Meanwhile, Mrs. Barton was steadfast in her belief of her husband's innocence as well as that of Mrs. Fiske. The truth however, never came to light, because the trial never took place.

Living in Fresno at the time was an eccentric inventor named Joseph L Stillman. He had invented a device for the coupling of train cars, but never found a buyer, which was the way of most of his inventions. However, Fiske, hearing of the invention, was ready to cash in on Stillman's device and tried to work a deal with him. They met on a train in January of 1890. While in San Francisco, Stillman stumbled in on Fiske in "compromising position" with a lady not his wife. Fiske instantly tried to arrange a "tryst" between Stillman and Fiske's French maid, so that Stillman would have to stay silent about his discovery Fiske and this other woman. Stillman refused the offer, and claimed that Fiske's plan was to tell a wild tale about Stillman and the maid once he returned to Fresno.

Once back in Fresno, Stillman, who was not the most rational person in the world, became agitated and increasingly irrational. Fiske was trying to ruin him, his reputation, and embarrass Stillman's wife. He claimed that he

was going to bring a suit against Fiske for \$150,000, and on at least two occasions, challenged Fiske to a fight in the street.

On July 26, 1890, at approximately 8:20 pm Fiske emerged from the Fiske Building at Mariposa and J streets (Fulton Street) after a lengthy meeting with his now estranged wife. Across the street was a figure, partially hidden in the shadows of the evening. The figure approached Fiske, and struck him in the face. It was Stillman! The two men fought in the street, Fiske using his cane to beat Stillman, and appearing to be besting his opponent. But Stillman drew a gun, and Fiske turned and ran. Stillman fired once, then ran after Fiske and fire two more times. On the third shot, Fiske fell to the street. All three shots had hit Fiske, but the third one killed him.

This ended the court trial with Barton, the divorce case, the suit from Stillman, and any other plots and plans that JD Fiske still had up his sleeve.

FYI - The Fiske Building was completed in 1890, and was at the time, the tallest building in Fresno. Attorney S N Griffith bought it after Fiske's death. In 1914 it was demolished to make way for a new building, the Griffith-McKensie Building, Otherwise known as the Helm Building, it was also the tallest building in town for a short time.