

Virginia's Socialist Opera House History

By Jim Roe

When reporting on the near completion of the Opera at 307 1st Street North, a writer for the socialist newspaper *Tyomies* told his readers that "our new hall ... is the epitome of the struggle up to this time of the Virginia working class." To some within the socialist fold, the building did indeed become an object and accomplishment. When describing the Socialist Opera as the "epitome" of the class struggle, the writer from *Ty6mies* pointed not only to the functional greatness of the new hall but also to its importance as a motivational symbol of their cause.

The Opera opened on April 5, 1913, to an audience of 800. The celebration lasted two days and included a performance of *Clavigo*, the soap opera like story of a woman jilted by a Spanish courtier, written by the German dramatist, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Old timers recall the famous names who appeared there, the productions in which live horses were used on the stage, the countless plays produced by local actors and the stormy political meetings held during one of its most controversial eras." Virginia's Socialist Opera House was one of many halls built in communities across the nation where concentrations of Finnish immigrants had settled. Most of the halls served a dual purpose, encapsulated in the unusual pairing of the words "socialist" and "opera" carved over the Virginia hall's entrance. Used for dances, gymnastic performances, and stage plays, they also provided meeting places for like-minded Finns, many of them laborers who embraced socialist ideals. The Socialist Workers' Organization of Virginia built the Virginia hall. Its mission statement outlined its goals: With the help of plays "it was possible to draw audiences unaware of the [socialist] movement to hear agitators' speeches, poems, songs and such material with which it was possible to elevate their knowledge.

The most significant moment in the building's long history came in 1916, during a miners' strike that rocked the Iron Range. The Socialist Opera became the headquarters for the local strike committee and for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a national organization that had come to town to direct the strike effort. Fiery, emotionally charged speeches and rallies were staged at the Opera House, with IWW leaders' speeches translated into the workers' many languages. The strike was considered lost by many, and mining companies throughout the Iron Range blacklisted Finnish workers. But the IWW held out at the Opera House and supported a loggers' strike later that year. For many, the building came to symbolize workers' struggles for equality, and for the rest of its tenure as a public building it remained in the hands of workers' organizations, from cooperatives to, eventually, unions.

HEADQUARTERS OF STRIKERS DESERTED

Finnish Socialist Hall Has Tomblike Appearance; Agitators Awaited

Virginia Daily Enterprise—Friday, July 14, 1916

Five weeks ago the Finnish socialist hall on First street north was a pest house of treason and anarchy. Loud-mouthed agitators raved and roared. They told miners that they should strike, and they were believed. This was at the opening of the strike.

Today the hall presents a different appearance. It is dark. The I.W.W. signs have disappeared. Few people are to be seen about the structure and one would doubt that the building at one time crowded with hundreds of miners.

Wednesday night, a few Finnish residents were seated on the steps of the hall. They smoked and their thoughts were apparently of things other than the strike. No I.W. W. cards were seen among them. The appearance of the socialist hall about describes the present strength of the comparatively few remaining strikers. Many miners have returned to work at range mining properties, while others have accepted employment with streetcar companies and other concerns. Last evening the socialist hall was again deserted. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the I.W.W. leader, did not appear.

Virginia Daily Enterprise—Friday, July 14, 1916

WHAT THEY SAY OF THEMSELVES

Duluth News-Tribune—Wednesday, July 5, 1916

Sympathy with the I.W.W. is wasted. At best it is purely sentimental where found outside ranks of the organization, and inside the membership, it must be based on ignorance or cupidity. This does not ignore the fact that among the I.W.W. leaders and propagandists are many Socialists who are as sincere as their emotional nature permits.

There are among these, men of much ability, of native force, of intellectual power as speakers and writers. But it must not be forgotten that they work with the most ignorant and the most easily swayed of the population. Moreover their subjects are from those sections of Europe whose people are most easily swayed and whose history has been that of conflict and turmoil.

Recently we were handed two I.W.W. pamphlets with an invitation to read them and get a position of information. We found them very interesting and entirely confirming our unyielding opposition to this organization. It does not belong in the United States. It should not be permitted to exist here. These pamphlets are official, they have the sanction of the supreme authority; one, indeed, is its constitution and bylaws. In the other, explaining the purposes, all we have said of the I.W.W. is more than confirmed. It is wholly un-American and as hostile to our government as to capital.

“We realize,” one says, “that as workers we have no country. The flags and symbols that once meant great things to us, have been seized by our employers. Today they mean naught to us, but oppression and tyranny.”

Yet these same men who declare they have “no country, and no flag, are constantly demanding their “constitutional rights.” As constantly they appeal to the protection of the laws of this country which it is their purpose to seize, without regard to its laws.

They say: “We are going to do away with capitalism by taking possession of the land and machinery of production. We don’t intend to buy them either.” But they appeal to the constitution which guarantees the rights of property and to the courts organized to enforce them.

When, too, did these men discover that the flag, which “once meant great things to us, is now seized by our employers?” They are so fresh from the old world that most of them have not yet learned this country’s language and still fewer have any knowledge of our institutions. With rare exceptions, they were born in other lands.

They all came here voluntarily, but not as they now declare to make it their country or to acknowledge its flag, to recognize its laws and to observe its constitution.

We have read and it is plain from the reading that no member of the I.W.W. should be submitted to become a citizen of the United States and that every citizen who affiliates with it should automatically, by that act, lose all his rights of citizenship. They have no country; then they should be in fact men without a country so far as the United States is concerned.

We want no adopted sons of that sort, and membership in the I.W.W. should be sufficient cause for deportation. It is absurd to shut out physical disease while admitting mental disease; to shut the door on poverty and illiteracy, while opening it to men who confess their objective is the overthrow of the government; to prepare against enemies who come in battleships, yet admit its vicious foes who come in immigrant ships.

Duluth News-Tribune—Wednesday, July 5, 1916