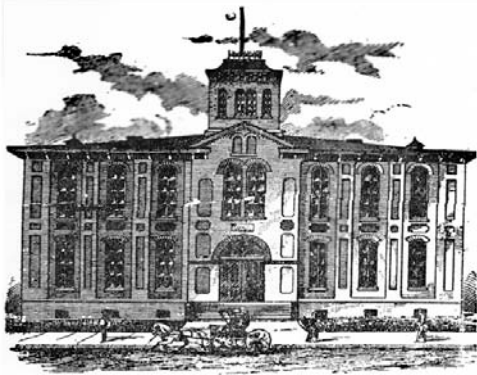


# Auditorium Memories

By William Nold McElrath, Murray High School Class of 1949

For more than 130 years there has been an auditorium on the corner of Eighth and Main Streets in Murray. Now it's the auditorium of Murray Middle School. But there were other auditoriums before that -- and memories of those auditoriums too.

The first assembly room on that site was built in 1871 for the old Murray Male and Female Institute. It stretched the full width of the building on the second floor, with a large high platform at one end. This "chapel" as it was called, was also used as a study hall, so it was flitted with 125 desks. Two large potbellied stoves provided heat.



The first official function in the new auditorium was the opening of the Institute in 1872. Members of the school's board of trustees sat on the raised platform. One of the four teachers was 21-year-old Fannie Nold, daughter of the first principal of the Institute, Henry Nold II. Among the trustees "Miss Fannie" saw a man who looked old enough to be her father; he seemed carelessly dressed, his boots had not been blacked, and he had a sour, unhappy expression on his face. *There's a man I'm not going to like*, the young teacher said to herself.

How wrong she was! After that 41-year-old widower had wooed and won the youthful schoolmarm, she found out why he had looked so shabby sitting on the platform that first day. He had been sick all the night before, and only by sheer willpower had he forced himself to attend the ceremony at all.

John C. McElrath and Fannie Nold McElrath later became the parents of six children, ten youngest of who was my father. As Daddy remarked many years later in his book *Dr. McElrath's Murray*, "It seems there have always been school plays." Of course many such plays were presented during the late 1800s on the raised platform in that large upstairs auditorium at Eighth and Main. "Chapel" was also held there each Friday, always being opened with singing, Bible reading, and prayer. Then the young ladies would read essays and the young gentlemen would deliver speeches.

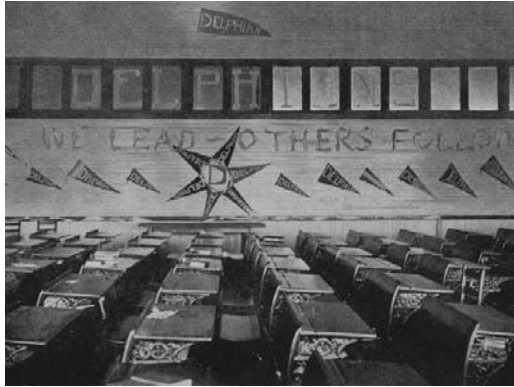
Enrollment at the Institute grew faster than had been planned for. By 1890 there were already 200 pupils; by 1900 there were 500. To help make room for so many, the upstairs assembly room had to be renovated. The large platform was taken out, more desks were added, facing toward one of the long sides of the room. There was still a small rostrum where the principal sat at his desk, within easy reach of the bell rope. Chalkboards were mounted on three walls; a piano and a bookcase stood against the fourth wall.

Did this mean that there was no longer an auditorium at Eighth and Main? Don't you believe it? When time came for a school production, teachers and pupils would work together to build a temporary stage that blocked the double doors at one end of the wide hall downstairs. Rows of chairs all the way down the hall provided seating, with the lower stairs on either side serving as balconies. As a small boy, Daddy was probably perching on the steps when (as he later remarked) he "all but exploded with laughter" at a comic performance.



The old Institute building burned to the ground in the fall of 1904. The new brick building that replaced it was larger, sturdy, and functional, although some folks said it wasn't nearly as attractive in appearance as the old. It did have a furnace in the basement, though, rather than stoves in every room.

And somewhere or other, the new building must have had an auditorium. We know there was again a large study hall on the second floor; was this also used for the assembly room, as in the old Institute building?



On a certain day along about 1913 or '14, things must have been unusually dull during study hall, for a boy offered to jump out the window for a quarter. A collection netted only fifteen cents, but he decided to go ahead and jump anyway. He suffered no serious injury, but folks do say he walked around for several days with tissue paper stuffed inside his show soles.

Kerby Jennings, local historian, tells about another lively time in 1915 (*The Story of Calloway County, 1822-1976*, pp. 201-202) when "a steam radiator valve in the second grade blew off, shrouding the room in a cloud of steam. Although no one was physically hurt, it can never be forgotten by one of the writers of this book, who jumped out of the window of the sixth grade to land on the neck of Julie Karr, a fellow student. The sixth grade completely evacuated in less than five seconds ... The convenient escape route was by way of first floor windows, even a few from the high second story."

Commencement week in May of 1916 was typical of activities held in that third auditorium at Eighth and Main. Graduating seniors heard a special sermon on Tuesday and held their Class Day program on Wednesday. The senior play, with every member of that class of 17 in the cast, was presented on Thursday night. Then graduation exercises followed on Friday. For the first time that year Murray High School graduates imitated college students in wearing "the dignified caps and gowns, with all first class high schools are doing" (so one of the "sweet girl graduates" primly remarked; she was Gladys Thomas, later to become my mother).



The third auditorium at Eighth and Main perished in flames, just as the first two had. The time was Christmas Eve of 1919; rumor has it that several young men were shooting craps as they nestled near that warm furnace in the school basement, when one of them carelessly dropped a lighted match.



When a new school building arose at Eighth and Main, it included a first-floor auditorium large enough for 650 people; present-day fire codes and more comfortable seats have probably reduced the capacity somewhat. The building housing this fourth auditorium now forms the eastern end of Murray Middle School. The western end was added in 1930, and until carpeting was laid you could easily tell where the two wings joined, for one had wooden floors and the other had floors of masonry.

The new auditorium was built just in time for a very special use. By the fall of 1923 no buildings were as yet ready on the raw new campus of Murray State, so this institution of higher learning also

got its start at Eighth and Main. No doubt during those first few months the new auditorium echoed with the sound of many university-level activities.

Even though the auditorium now stood on the first floor, some of us seem to remember it in second-story perspective. Seating followed rigid protocol. Seventh graders sat in front on the left facing the stage, eighth graders sat behind them, and ninth graders in the back on the left. When you were promised the next year a shift came, as sophomores sat in back on the right, juniors in front of them, and seniors took the coveted seats of honor on the right-hand side in the front. When "chapel programs" (as we called them) were deemed good for younger pupils as well, fifth and sixth graders were crammed into the hot, dark balcony.

Through the decades this auditorium saw many high school productions. It was long a tradition for both the senior class and the junior class to present an annual play. For a time there was also a one-act play competition involving sophomores and freshmen as well. There were band concerts, choral programs, talent shows, pep rallies before football games, and (of course) speakers -- many of them boring. One who didn't bore us was Miss Alice Waters, a plump little local lady who introduced us to the land and people of China, based on her many years there as a missionary. (After the auditorium had become a part of Murray Middle School, I had the privilege of going back there and



introducing its students to the land and people of Indonesia.)



Miss Lillian Watters kept a piano in one of the backstage rooms; many were the pupils who took lessons there. Once a year she would line up her protégés to present a recital in the auditorium. Charlotte Whitnell, teacher of "expression" (as we called it in those days) also staged student recitals consisting of monologues and recitations, many of them comic. Through the years young tap dancers such as Carolyn Carter (Reagan) and Lochie Faye Hart (Landolt) showed off their skills.

Not all of the programs in the auditorium featured local talent. Once a group of hoop dances from the Hopi tribe of Native Americans presented a cultural show. Once a grey-haired African-

American ventriloquist brought a dummy out of a suitcase and made it seem to come to life. Even the relative darkness in that dusty old balcony became a plus when a portable screen was set up and films were shown there.

The auditorium at Eighth and Main was used not only for school functions. Sometimes in the evenings there would be a magician, sometimes a minstrel show. During World War II people gathered there to sign up for ration books and to learn more about growing Victory Gardens. The whole community came together there for Christmas music, with real candles set in the big auditorium windows; as a third grader I recited by heard Luke 2:1-20 for a Christmas program in December of 1939. (One elderly hard-of-hearing lady reported, "I could catch every word he said!")



Fire seems to have been a major hazard on the corner of Eighth and Main: in February of 1943 the stage area of the auditorium was reduced to smoldering ruins. Smoke and

water also caused lesser damage throughout the building. But even though construction materials were in short supply during wartime, the auditorium was soon back in business again, better than ever.

When is an auditorium not an auditorium? The answer is when it becomes a holding area during bad weather for students who have finished eating lunch and don't want to go outdoors while waiting for their afternoon classes or when it becomes a box office. (Special removable platforms in a side aisle made it possible for Miss Ruth Lassiter and her assistants to stand at the right height so they could reach through the opened windows to take in cash and give out tickets for home football games.)



Of course the major use of the auditorium continued to be for live stage productions. Remember that twelve grades, not just three, used the same building in those days; besides high school plays there were also many primary and middle school functions. As a seventh grader I staved off an attack of mumps long ought ot sing a supporting role in *Tom Sawyer*, an operetta presented in December of 1943. Younger children sang in musical version of *Pinocchio* and *Rip Van Winkle*. For several years high school students imitated Murray State's annual campus Lights by producing their own musical variety show, *Showboat*.

The last time I stood before a group in the auditorium on Eighth and Main, it was in June of 1999 during the fiftieth reunion of my high school class. Our classmate Pat Elkins (since deceased) had been kind enough to give us all a tour of the vastly renovated building. When a retold a few of the school stories you've just been reading, friends said I ought to write them down, and so I have.