

From footlights to foundry - Cluff Hall, Part 2

By D. ROBERT CARTER (208-489-8256) Daily Harold, Provo, Utah (Sunday, May 1, 2005)

David Cluff Jr. and three of his brothers built Cluff Hall in 1860. At that time, it was Provo's largest building. Its lower level served as a cabinet shop and as headquarters for an undertaker. Schools, dances, lectures, fairs, church meetings and other activities held in the upper-level, multipurpose room all helped civilize Provo, but perhaps the greatest improvement Cluff Hall brought to Provo's cultural life came in the field of drama.

During the winter of 1853-54, local actors and actresses performed Provo's first plays in the large, log schoolhouse located on the block north of the town square (Pioneer Park). Through the mid- and late 1850s, amateur thespians continued presenting dramas in other buildings -- the Redfield/Bullock Hotel, Bell's Folly and Union Hall -- located within a short distance of the square.

Some of the players showed a respectable amount of talent. One of them, William Wallace Cluff, may have been too convincing. He played the LDS missionary in "The Mormon Converts," a play presented in the Redfield Hotel. He was so persuasive that church leaders called him on a mission to Hawaii in 1857.

When the Cluff brothers completed their building in the fall of 1860, Provo gained a much bigger and better venue for presenting dramas. A group of interested people soon grasped the opportunity. They met at the hall on April 27, 1861, drew up bylaws and a constitution and organized the Amateur Dramatic Company.

The group selected William E. Miller as its president. Several Cluff brothers became officers: David Jr., secretary; Harvey H., treasurer; and Benjamin, stage manager. N.T. Moore acted as assistant stage manager, H.E. Hudson, critic and teacher; Peter M. Wentz, prompter and William Riley, doorkeeper.

Other members who joined the club included Moses, Joseph and Mrs. Sarah Ann Fleming Cluff, Edward M. Peck, Martin Mills, Mrs. Holden, Mrs. Electa Bullock and Miss Frances Worsley, who soon became Mrs. Samuel Cluff.

According to the company's bylaws, the members owned the scenery. Every male, except the president, was required to buy a \$10 share in the company, and that money bought the scenery. Each female member who took a prominent role in a play received one share free of charge.

Luckily, the dramatic company needed scenery just as U.S. troops prepared to leave Camp Floyd and return to the East. Scenery from the post theater at the camp sold at bargain barrel prices. The company paid \$275 for what its members considered to be a fairly complete inventory.

The Amateur Dramatic Co. produced two successful plays in Cluff Hall that season: "Still Waters Run Deep," in which Sarah Ann Fleming Cluff played Mrs. Mildmay, and "Lend Me Five Shillings," a farce. The company staged these plays during the winter of 1861-62 when inclement weather slowed the pace of life in Provo.

The Deseret News reported the dramatic company closed their season on April 25, 1862, "after giving to the public a series of brilliant entertainment. ... The hall was densely crowded."

More than just plays

In May 1862, Cluff Hall hosted a dramatic extravaganza of another variety. Charles W. Wandell's school in the Seminary Building on 500 West 100 North closed on May 2. The next day his students and young scholars from other Provo schools celebrated May Day in the hall. Wandell's young students took the stage, sang and gave a dozen recitations.

Provo City Council minutes show that in December 1864, Warren N. Dusenberry secured a license from the city to hold a theater and other exhibitions in Cluff Hall. The license cost \$5 and covered a period of three months. Dusenberry made "necessary arrangements with the City Police to preserve order during the time of exhibition." The license stipulated "that no transient person or persons have the privilege of using [sic] Said Hall without first obtaining a permit from the mayor." The mayor apparently acted as quality control inspector.

In December 1865, David Cluff Jr. secured a three-month license to hold dances, theaters and exhibitions in Cluff Hall. The cost of the license escalated to \$10.

When workmen completed Lewis Hall in 1866, Provo gained another theater. The two-story, adobe building stood on the northeast corner of the intersection at 300 W. Center St. The second story of the building housed a theater called Timpanogos Hall. This playhouse contained facilities superior to those of Cluff Hall.

Until Brigham Young Academy moved into the Lewis Building in 1876, most of Provo's dramas took place in Timpanogos Hall, and Cluff Hall waned in popularity. The Amateur Dramatic Co. had ceased to exist by the 1870s.

Rejuvenation of the hall

However, Cluff Hall became Provo's theater of choice once more in the late 1870s -- by default. Because Brigham Young Academy held classes and activities in Timpanogos Hall, fewer plays could be scheduled there when school was in session.

Workmen repaired Cluff Hall and altered it early in 1879 to make it better suited for theatrical purposes. That same year, two new dramatic companies organized in Provo. Members of Provo's LDS Fourth Ward formed the Provo Amateur Dramatic Union. People who lived in the other areas of Provo formed the Home Dramatic Co.

Both companies performed in Cluff Hall, and rivalry between the two groups grew intense. "Ten Nights In a Bar Room," became the Amateur Dramatic Union's biggest success. The Home Dramatic Company performed two popular plays that year: "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and "The Lancashire Lass."

John C. Graham, a popular actor from Salt Lake City, moved to Provo and began performing in the mid-1870s. In January 1880, he leased Cluff Hall for a limited amount of time, and the rival companies presented dramas there. Graham also brought acting companies down from Salt Lake City to perform in the hall.

A Salt Lake Herald correspondent who reported on some of the plays presented by the Salt Lake City companies apparently felt Cluff Hall could have used a more complete repair job in 1879. He wrote that the uncomfortable seats, rickety staircase and unclean surroundings generally were "not elements

calculated to attract the better class of amusement goers." The paper unabashedly suggested the construction of a new theater in Provo, but the right time had not come just yet.

In October 1880, Graham used his influence to merge Provo's two rival acting companies into the Home Dramatic Co. The Salt Lake Herald predicted the combined company would likely attract larger crowds in 1881 than Cluff Hall could accommodate.

The owners of Cluff Hall took the hint and installed new seats for the upcoming season. Under the management of W.C.A. Smoot, the Home Dramatic Co. opened with "The Orphan of Geneva," and the new seats seemingly helped with crowd control. The Herald wrote, "The new and comfortable seats were duly appreciated by the audience, as evidenced by the good order maintained, without the aid of policemen." This leads one to suspect that the previous season had, indeed, been an exciting one.

Even with the improved seating, the hall was overcrowded when the Home Dramatic Co. staged "Waiting for the Verdict" in October 1881. The Herald responded with this backhanded compliment: "Those who were fortunate enough to get seats, or standing room where they could witness the performance, say the parts were well rendered."

According to Provo City Council Minutes, in December 1881 a Mr. Jones complained about the safety conditions in the overcrowded theater, especially when the audience entered and exited. For a fee of \$1, City Inspector J.J. Fuller examined the building in January 1882 and caused improvements to be made in its entrance and exit.

A tragedy averted

Although no major tragedies occurred in the overcrowded building, there was one brush with disaster. In May 1883, about 300 Salt Lakers traveled to Provo on an excursion. Many of them attended a concert staged in Cluff Hall.

As Thomas C. Hall sang a solo at the front of the hall, a kerosene lamp sitting on a stand toppled over and caused a small fire on the floor next to a 5-gallon can of kerosene. A quick thinking man rapidly removed the container. Other keen-minded concert goers beat the small blaze into submission with the only firefighting equipment on hand -- carpets and other woolen fabrics.

Hall's cool response to this heated situation also helped avert disaster. He calmly finished his song as though nothing were wrong. The crowd, following his example, remained calm and did not rush for the exit. If they had bolted for the door, there would likely have been injuries, and possibly even fatalities.

The Provo Theater Co. organized in 1883 with H.H. Cluff as its president. As its main objective, the company undertook the task of providing Provo with a new theater. Company officers selected a site for the Provo Opera House on the east side of 100 West between Center Street and 100 North, and construction on the building began.

When the structure was completed in 1885, it comfortably seated an audience of 800. The Home Dramatic Co. presented "The Streets of New York" on opening night.

The completion of the Provo Opera House sealed Cluff Hall's fate as a theater. The Provo Minstrels from the city's LDS Second Ward staged one of the last performances there in January 1885. Young

men with blackened faces told jokes, staged comic dance routines and sang ludicrous songs. The highbrow event ended with a farce titled "Inquisitive Darkies."

The same week, Reuben Kirkham exhibited his Book of Mormon Panorama in Cluff Hall.

During its 25-year career as a theater, scores of Provo residents gained acting experience in Cluff Hall, and thousands of people benefited from entertainments staged there.

Foundation of the foundry

Although the hall was no longer used as a theater, its owners found another function for the building in December 1884. Thomas Holdaway had established a successful foundry centered around the old carding mill once run by Shadrack Holdaway. The Vulcan Foundry & Machine Shop stood near 500 W. Center St. on the block north of Pioneer Park.

Cluff, Booth & Company, owned by Harvey H. Cluff and John E. Booth, promoted the establishment of a larger foundry at Cluff Hall. They lured Leo Whitehead away from the Vulcan Foundry and made him superintendent of Provo Foundry & Machine Company, which they incorporated for 50 years in December 1884 with Cluff as president. A.O. Smoot, George M. Brown, Samuel Liddiard, Hyrum Cluff, William Hathenbruck, and Joseph B. Keeler invested in the company. It had a capital stock of \$30,000.

Workmen equipped Cluff Hall for the manufacture of iron castings and hollow iron work to be made from iron manufactured in Utah Valley. The new company also made brass castings and manufactured and repaired machinery. Provo Foundry & Machine Co. ordered machinery from the east and hoped to open in January, soon after their order arrived.

Laborers went to work constructing a 60-by-40-foot molding room to the rear of Cluff Hall. They also built additional engine rooms and shops. Machinists equipped the foundry with planers, turning lathes, power drills and furnaces.

By early February 1885, the foundry was finished except for the installation of some machinery that had not yet arrived. The Salt Lake Herald reported the buildings contained "every convenience necessary for the work done in a first-class foundry."

Fortunately, the foundry functioned without the tardy machinery, and its first casting in mid-February succeeded.

Some of Provo Foundry's early work still exists, and although they may not realize it, hundreds of people view it every week. Teams and wagons from the foundry visited Provo's LDS wards during the winter of 1885-86. They collected scrap iron and took it back to Cluff Hall. From this iron, the foundry cast the pillars that currently support the gallery in the Provo Tabernacle.

Rising reputation

Like most church jobs, the pay for the columns came mostly in the form of blessings. The foundry received the contributions donated for the purpose of securing the pillars, but according to the Salt Lake Daily Herald, the work was done "partially for the reputation to be gained by it."

In 1888, the foundry installed what may have been the most heavy-duty power punch in Utah Territory. It perforated three-eighths-inch iron plate with ease. The pressmen used the power punch to fabricate decorative iron fence and make holes in boiler iron.

Under the leadership of Cluff and Booth, the foundry did not bring in enough profit to justify keeping it open, so in 1888, superintendent John Devey shut it down.

The foundry did not stay closed for long. Only months later during the spring of 1889, Thomas Pierpont, who had been in the foundry business in Salt Lake City since the 1870s, leased Cluff Hall and reopened Provo Foundry & Machine. That year the business turned out the largest boiler made in the territory up to that time. The business also made an iron balcony and railing for the Smoot Building, a three-story structure constructed by Reed Smoot. It once stood on part of the property occupied by the current Wells Fargo Building on University Avenue.

Large boilers became the foundry's principal product. In 1890, the business constructed four large boilers for the Bullion Beck Mining Co. in Eureka. Pierpont's workmen also manufactured a large steam engine.

Provo's Daily Enquirer reported the foundry had so much work "that, although they have large and commodious workshops, they cannot find room therein; they have therefore been under the necessity of turning the whole of their yards into one immense workshop."

Its work still seen today

In August 1891, Provo Foundry and Machine cast another set of columns that are still used today. The 23-foot-tall, 1,500 lb. columns can be seen in the ballroom on the third floor of Academy Square. The foundry also cast some iron lintels for the building. The structure eventually contained 10,000 pounds of iron cast in Provo.

In 1891, Provo Foundry & Machine also cast six round and two square columns for the Young Men's Co-op in Spanish Fork.

Two years later, the nationwide panic of 1893 forced the foundry to close once more, but in June 1895, Thomas F. Pierpont and Harry Heaton leased Cluff Hall and reopened the business. Provo's Evening Dispatch called Pierpont "a bright young man, thoroughly honorable and a competent mechanic." The newspaper wrote that Heaton came "to Provo highly recommended."

The versatile firm made harvesting machinery, mining cars, iron and brass castings, models of inventions, surgical instruments, and boilers for heating plants. They also repaired bicycles and did plumbing.

Late in 1898, Pierpont & Heaton leased the larger Sun Foundry at 500 West Center. They purchased the equipment in Cluff Hall and moved it to the new location. By February 1899, they were ready for business.

The partners bought the Sun Foundry property from the Amos Holdaway estate in 1901. The men put up a new building on the site in 1902. The partnership dissolved in March 1904, and Pierpont became the sole owner of the foundry, which continued to expand.

When Provo Foundry moved out of Cluff Hall, the building's die was cast; the owners could find no other use for the aging structure. After serving Provo for 40 years as a ballroom, school, theater,

foundry and for multiple other uses, workmen razed the empty building in June 1901. George Smoot and others later built houses on the site where pioneer Provo's largest building had once stood.

William W. Cluff

William Wallace Cluff was a gifted actor. In the drama "The Mormon Converts," he played the part of a missionary so well that LDS Church leaders called him on a mission to Hawaii in 1857, not long after the play closed. -- LDS Church Archives

Harvey H. Cluff

Harvey H. Cluff served as president of the Provo Theater Company, an organization that helped build the Provo Opera House. Cluff and his business partner, John E. Booth, also promoted the establishment of the Provo Foundry & Machine Co. in Cluff Hall. -- LDS Church Archives

Cluff Hall Sketch

This 1897 sketch shows Provo Foundry and Machine Co. which was established in Cluff Hall by Harvey H. Cluff and John E. Booth during the winter of 1884-85. This rendering of the hall portrays the building as being a little larger than it really was. The owners attached the frame building to the rear of the hall and made other changes. Thomas Pierpont took over the foundry in 1889. The Provo Foundry moved to 500 West and Center Street during 1888-89, and workmen razed Cluff Hall in 1901. -- Utah County: A Graphic Account of its Foundings

Sanborn Map

This Sanborn fire insurance map shows the location and size of Provo Foundry & Machine Co. in 1890. The street running horizontally is 200 North; the one running vertically is 200 East. The original Cluff Hall faced 200 North. All of the other buildings were added after the structure became a foundry. -- Harold B. Lee Library

Foundry Ad

This 1886 advertisement in the Provo newspaper announced that Cluff and Booth's Provo Foundry and Machine Co. was the largest foundry in Utah Territory south of Salt Lake City. Cluff Hall housed the business from the winter of 1884-85 until the winter of 1898-99. -- Provo Daily Times

Cluff Family Reunion

The descendants of David Cluff Sr. and Betsy Cluff will be holding a family reunion June 17-18, 2005, in Springville, Utah, at the Arts Park, 620 S. 1350 East. They will enjoy food, games, entertainment, movies and a tour of Cluff family sites in Provo. Beverly Cluff, 489-8866