

# KELLER HAD RAPT AUDIENCE IN SYRACUSE

In 1920, Helen Keller, famously blind, deaf and halting in her speech, came to Syracuse. She appeared in a stage act, at Keith's vaudeville house on South Salina Street.

The show was called "Star of Happiness."

This gold nugget of Syracuse trivia was turned up by Dennis Connors, curator of history at Onondaga Historical Association. The results of Dennis' research will be on display in the lobby at Syracuse Stage, where the play, "The Miracle Worker," opens Wednesday.

The play is about Keller's struggles to break through the challenges of losing her hearing and sight as a result of a childhood illness at the age of 19 months. "Miracle Worker" features her teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy. The historical association contributed a series of historical panels to the Stage production.

Keller proved that children who are blind or deaf could be educated and become productive members of society.

Dennis found in his research that Keller sometimes used a Braille typewriter made in 1936 for the American Foundation for the Blind by L.C. Smith & Corona, a company based in Syracuse. She also used a conventional Smith typewriter, according to Dennis.

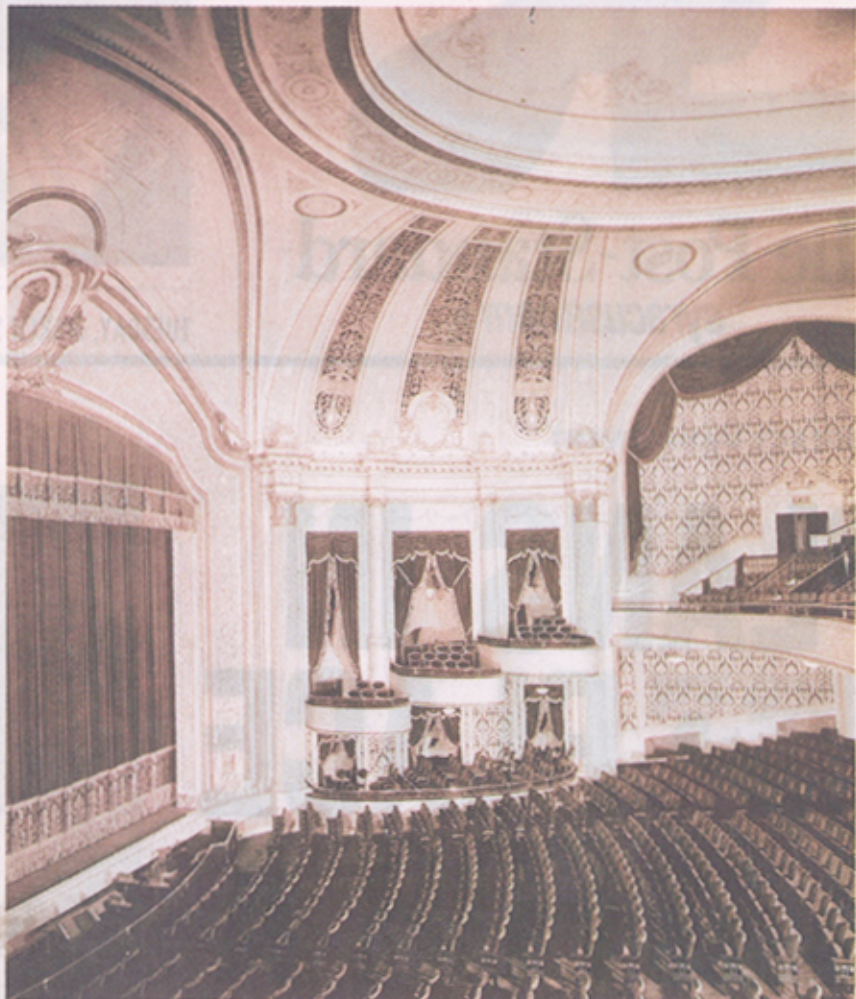
He also located a typed letter, written by Keller, to her mother, which talks about her appearance in Syracuse. She wrote that she found Keith's "smoky and dirty." Dennis guesses this may be a comment about air pollution from the city's busy railroad traffic.

The letter, dated June 29, 1920, from the Keller archives at the American Foundation for the Blind, praises Keith's as a "most beautiful theater, of which every one is justly proud. Our dressing-room was a real pleasure, with every convenience that could be desired — even a shower-bath."

She explained to her mother that "the audience there interested me, they were so silent, paying the closest attention. Indeed, some days there wasn't a clap and yet we knew they were deeply interested. After a while, they found their tongue and asked more questions than we could answer."

Apparently, Miss Keller was invited to visit Auburn prison ("Audubon" in the letter) and couldn't because of the stage show. She sent a message "to those

poor fellows and I contributed to a fund for assisting discharged prisoners . . . There were two prisoners leaving next week, and he (a contact at the prison) would think of them as 'Helen Keller's boys' and would send me news of their



Photos courtesy of Onondaga Historical Association

**THE INTERIOR** of Keith's vaudeville house on South Salina Street where Helen Keller appeared on stage in 1920 when she came to Syracuse. In a letter to her mother about her visit, she described Keith's as a "most beautiful theater, of which every one is justly proud."



**HELEN KELLER** in an undated photo.



**HELEN KELLER** sometimes used a Braille typewriter made by L.C. Smith & Corona, a company that was based in Syracuse.

translations. Among the responses: "Can you feel moonshine? 'No, but I smell it' . . . What is your definition of politics? "The art of promising one thing and doing another."

In the letter to her mother from the archives, Helen Keller summed up her impressions of the vaudeville audiences: "Although I love the people, I don't care much about the sort of audiences one gets on the vaudeville, they appear so superficial. They are peculiar in this, that you must say a good thing in your first sentence, or they won't listen, much less laugh. Still, they are shown us such friendliness, I'm grateful to them."

Helen Keller campaigned for women's rights and socialism. She died in 1968.

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