

HISTORY FROM OHA

J.R. Clancy:

Let the show go on

■ BY KAREN Y. COONEY

If you have ever attended a Broadway production, you can be guaranteed that some of the stage hardware was manufactured by J.R. Clancy, Inc. Recently, J.R. Clancy observed its 125th anniversary and is one of several local companies that have served this area for well over a century.

John Richard Clancy was born in 1859, the son of an Irish immigrant. Early in high school, Clancy was stricken by a serious illness that lasted several years and required him to drop out of school. Once recovered, he gave up on his education to pursue his thespian interests. In 1882, at the age of 23, he became the assistant treasurer for the Grand Opera House in Syracuse.

A popular melodrama during this time, "Romany Rye," was scheduled to be shown at the theater. This gypsy drama was considered to be the "heaviest" drama of the day in that it severely taxed the mechanical abilities of the host theater. Clancy's boss wanted to cancel the production, but J. R. volunteered to build scenery that would be more manageable.

At the time, canvas scenery was con-

structed on heavy frames that moved on the floor via rollers or were set at right angles and fastened down with metal braces, thus limiting the amount of scenery that could be used for theater productions. Clancy made rough drawings of a more efficient pulley system which was attached to scenes painted on lightweight linen fabric that could be pulled up above the stage when not in use. Since suitable hardware was not available, he special ordered the hardware from a local machine shop and then successfully installed it at the Grand Opera House.

Clancy opened his first factory at 72 N. Salina St. in Syracuse after spending six years standardizing his designs. His career designing, constructing, and installing hardware for stage productions had officially begun. Initially, he had to sell other items to supplement his



Sewing scenic sandbags
— a photo from 1956.

livelihood such as burglar-proof window sash locks, billiard chalk holders, and pure oxygen for medicinal purposes.

However, when the company was inundated with orders for theater riggings, he limited his stock to stage hardware, and in 1886 he produced his first catalog. To help better promote his products, the catalog included ads from well-known scenic artists from across the country that had used his hardware.

With an eye on safety and attention to detail, the company flourished. After a very serious fire in a Chicago theater in 1903 that resulted in the deaths of more than 600 people, Clancy designed a fire-curtain mechanism, parts of which are still utilized today, to prevent a similar event from recurring. He

went on to design specialized theater lighting and develop more elaborate control systems for the mechanical aspects of theater. The company continues that tradition today.

Outside the company, Clancy was active in several charitable local organizations such as the Red Cross, St. Joseph's Hospital, the establishment of the CNYSPCA, and the Chamber of Commerce. He also served as a U.S. Congressman from 1913 - 1915. J. R. Clancy ran his company until his unexpected death at age 73.

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