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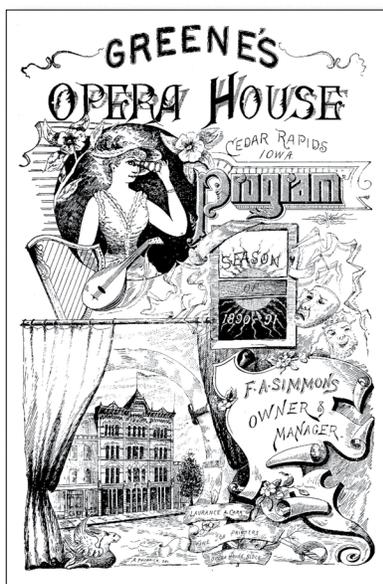
Hitting the Big Time: A Guide to Online Vaudeville Theater Resources

by Justin Baumgartner, University of Iowa

Vaudeville theater was a particularly popular form of entertainment in North America from the 1880s to the 1930s. It combined a number of elements of variety theater performance including musical performances, short plays, lectures, jugglers, dancers, and comedy routines. Vaudeville's influence on later entertainment cannot be underestimated. Many of the early film stars, such as Will Rogers and W. C. Fields, worked as vaudeville performers early in their careers. However, the popularity of vaudeville declined in the early twentieth century. It was ultimately superseded by film, which also had its early start being shown in vaudeville theaters.

Due to its enduring influence and importance, interest in scholarship on the subject of vaudeville theater has been consistent over the years, supported by the existence of various vaudeville and vaudeville-related archives in a variety of institutions. Unfortunately, while vaudeville enjoys a strong representation in institutional archives, further work is needed for it to be represented well in the digital realm. Sizable archives such as the American Vaudeville Museum Collection at the University of Arizona are not yet available online. However, over the last few years, increasing numbers of great vaudeville and vaudeville-related resources have been made available online.

It should come as no surprise that the Library of Congress's website boasts a thorough and diverse online vaudeville collection. **American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and**



Cover of the program for Bolossy Kiralfy's *Water Queen*, a grand fantastic fairy spectacle in three acts, from the Library of Congress.

Popular Entertainment, 1870–1920, at memory.loc.gov/ammem/vshhtml/vshome.html, made available through LC's **American Memory** project, contains a rich collection of primary resources including playscripts, films, sound recordings, and playbills. While the website, created in the late 1990s, does look a bit outdated by today's standards, the wealth of the materials it includes should not be overlooked. It is also a great resource on Harry Houdini, the legendary illusionist who gained much of his initial fame while touring the vaudeville circuit.

Arguably the largest vaudeville collection in the United States is located at the University of Iowa Special Collections and Archives. The **Keith-Albee Vaudeville Theatre Collection**, at digital.lib.uiowa.edu/keithalbee, includes nearly 150 ledger-sized scrapbooks of materials from a now-defunct Keith/Albee Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island, dating from the 1890s to the 1940s. The Keith-Albee vaudeville circuit, owned by Benjamin Keith and Edward Albee, promoted a "cleaned-up" version of vaudeville. Its influence was heavy and widespread. The scrapbooks in this collection primarily contain newspaper clippings and programs of the regular shows presented at the theater. Additionally, the collection contains many volumes of internal managers' reports detailing internal reviews of each act and the day-to-day financial operations of the theater. In 2014, the university received a \$300,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to stabilize and digitize these fragile materials, a project expected to be completed in 2017. These volumes and related Keith-Albee materials are being made available in the Iowa Digital Library as they are digitized (full disclosure: the author of this article is an employee on this digitization project).

A number of vaudeville-era newspapers have also been made available through institutional digital repositories. The **Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections**, at idnc.library.illinois.edu/cgi-bin/illinois?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=VVN and hosted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, contains hundreds of back issues of *Vaudeville News*, a weekly newspaper printed by Edward Albee (of Keith-Albee fame) in New York between 1920 and

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1929. The newspaper was intended for those inside the vaudeville industry, and it generally covers a wide range of information including recent vaudeville news, editorials, and advertising. The **Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections** also contains a near-complete run of the *New York Clipper*, a New York City–area entertainment newspaper published weekly from 1853 until 1924, at idnc.library.illinois.edu/cgi-bin/illinois?a=cl&cl=CL1&sp=NYC. The *New York Clipper* has the distinction of being one of the earliest American entertainment newspapers. While it covered a variety of different entertainments from music to circuses to serialized fiction to sports, vaudeville was often given ample coverage in its pages. The scans from both of these newspapers are also full-text searchable on the Illinois website.

Some of the richest vaudeville collections currently available online are through image collections devoted to early theater. The **J. Willis Sayre Collection**, located in the digital collections at the University of Washington and available at content.lib.washington.edu/sayreweb/, offers over 24,000 photographs of a variety of national theater performers who had toured through the Seattle area between 1900 and 1955. While the collection covers theater in general, the vaudeville image content is rich and varied. Many publicity stills of the performers as well as performance shots are contained in this collection. The collection, hosted through CONTENTdm, offers users easy options to browse by various subsets including vaudeville. The University of Washington offers a number of other similar collections on its digital website.

Both the **Prior and Norris Troupe Photographs**, content.lib.washington.edu/norrisweb/index.html, and **19th Century Actors and Theater Photographs** collections, content.lib.washington.edu/19thcenturyactorsweb/index.html, offer hundreds more photographs of vaudeville performers. Like the **Sayre Collection**, a majority of these photographs are studio portraits, although these collections do contain some performance photographs as well. One additional similar collection is the **Variety, Vaudeville and Burlesque Image Collection** accessible through the New York Public Libraries Digital Collections at digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/variety-vaudeville-burlesque.

For more high-quality primary visual resources in vaudeville, a number of university libraries' digital collections have made useful online exhibits from selections of materials from larger entertainment collections. The **Bonnie**

and Semoura Clark Black Vaudeville Collection at Yale is one of these worthy digital resources and is available at beinecke.library.yale.edu/collections/highlights/ruckus-american-entertainments-turn-twentieth-century-and-bonnie-and-semoura. High-resolution images of performers from the era, including minstrels and dancers, are primarily featured in this collection. While the collection currently available online is quite small, the quality and vividness of these resources more than make up for it. The University of Georgia Libraries has a similar online exhibit entitled **America Had Talent**, a compilation of striking images of various vaudeville performers from their collections to be found at www.libs.uga.edu/hargrett/pexhibit/vaudeville/talent.html.

Looking beyond images of performers and their performances, the Chicago Public Library makes available an impressive number of historic vaudeville programs from Chicago-area theaters in its **Chicago Theater Collection** at digital.chipublib.org/cdm/search/searchterm/Vaudeville--Illinois--Chicago/mode/exact/page/1. These programs offer the researcher a unique glimpse into the era and context of vaudeville theater, as well as a wealth of further information on vaudeville performers and performances.

While a majority of the vaudeville resources currently available online are in the print and photography mediums, LOC's digital collection isn't the only place to find more multimedia on vaudeville, especially in the medium of sound. The University of California, Santa Barbara's **Wax Cylinder Recording Project**, at cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/, has digitized and made available thousands of the earliest sound recordings, dating from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. These mp3 recordings are available to stream or download. Over 300 of these recordings are performed by artists specifically identified as vaudeville performers and can be located by selecting the *vaudeville* option under *browse collection*. Most of these vaudeville recordings consist of comedy routines and sketches, likely similar to what a vaudeville theatergoer would have seen onstage.

Although North America is the region most associated with vaudeville, it was hardly the only area of the world where vaudeville enjoyed popularity. In particular, Australia has a rich vaudeville tradition and has been making some of its vaudeville-related materials and research available. Some of these materials are made available through the University of Queensland's AustLit digital repository

in its **Australian Popular Theatre** subset, at www.austlit.edu.au. A number of quality primary and secondary vaudeville resources are available through this repository. However, a subscription is required to access these materials. Additionally, one of the researchers in this area has created his own publicly accessible website on Australian vaudeville for research purposes, the **Australian Variety Theatre Archive**, at www.ozvta.com. While this site has been made using the WordPress platform and may not have quite the searching and database-capabilities of the usual institutional digital repository, it offers a great wealth of material on Australian vaudeville. Information and biographies on key performers and people behind the scenes, as well as heavily researched articles and essays on the subject from a variety of angles, feature prominently on this website.

The politically incorrect nature of some of the materials contained in these resources should be noted. Images that are offensive today, such as artists in blackface, figured prominently in the vaudeville era. However, vaudeville is a crucial part of the American entertainment industry's history. These materials help contextualize its evolution to the modern day.

These resources are the most prominent and accessible of what is currently available for research in vaudeville. As institutions become more involved in the digital humanities, a wonderful boon for researchers in vaudeville and early American entertainment will result.



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