Advent of “Moving Pictures”
The film industry took off at the turn of the century. Like many local theaters, the opera house had to adapt to keep up with demand. In May of 1915, the opera house put on a projector booth in the upper gallery and a screen. Opening day was May 13, 1915 (see image advertisement from the Bennington Evening Banner).

“Americans traditionally prided themselves on having the biggest and best of everything. Show business was no exception. The people who lived in small towns wanted the new and better shows just as the city dwellers did.”
—Robert C. Tull, Film Historian

Bennington Opera House
(1892–1959)
The opera house was built by Henry Putman, a wealthy businessman, realtor, and inventor, in 1892. Arguably the largest in Vermont when built, the theater was equipped with the very latest in theater technology. The opening performance was Shakespeare’s As You Like It. For the next sixty-seven years, until it burned down on February 10, 1959, the opera house hosted musicals, plays, opera, vaudeville performances, movies, and other miscellaneous performances.

Opera
The Bennington Opera House indeed had opera performances, though not as many as its name would indicate. Notable performances of famous works and singers graced its stage...

Controversial Topics
Stop This Marriage That Man Has
Not to See the Eye... 

WWI (1914–1918)
During WWI, the opera house provided entertainment for the Bennington area, and also, it served, on several occasions as a meeting hall for the community’s war efforts.

Popular Films

Mary Pickford was America’s first movie star. The opera house showed her silent film “Daisy’s Long Legs” in December of 1910.

With the possibility of moving pictures, Americans across the country could see the world from the comfort of their homes. Lyman Howe’s short films transported Vermonters to Yosemite and beyond.

The very idea of a romantic comedy had a performance in 1919 to much acclaim.

Developments in Newspaper Advertising

Indicative of the advancements in newspaper technology and the public’s ever-shortening attention span, opera house advertisements improved greatly in the first three decades.

Conclusions

The Bennington Opera House in the years from its inception to the early 1920s demonstrates Vermonters’ and, at large, Americans’, growing appetite for entertainment and the rapid change that the entertainment industry underwent at a pivotal time in the development of mass media. While often financially strapped, it hosted a range of notable financial performances, opera, vaudeville, famous personalities, and by the late-1910s increasingly showed movies. The Bennington Banner, Bennington Semi-Weekly, and Bennington Evening Banner, the local newspapers of the time, gave an invaluable glimpse into the diverse offerings of the opera house in the early 20th century, and thus, how Vermonters of the period were entertained.

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