

Nineteenth Century Albury Theatres

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In the mid-nineteenth century, concerts and plays were presented in large rooms in or adjacent to local hotels. Then some hotels built their own theatres.

The Exchange Theatre opened in 1858 and could hold an audience of 300. The theatre was attached to the Exchange Hotel on the south-east corner of Smollett and Townsend streets. It became a popular venue for the next twenty years.

In January 1879, a fire destroyed the theatre. The *Albury Banner* praised "the pluck" displayed by fire fighters, but went on to report "the cellar was rushed by a crowd, who had done nothing to stay the progress of flames, and liquor stolen wholesale ... 60 bottles of case whisky of the most expensive brand were taken away bodily, while champagne, wine, brandy, &c, were removed in an equally wholesale manner."

In August 1859, the Albury Amateur Dramatic Club formed. Next month they staged 'The Country Lovers' and 'The Egyptian Mummy,' raising £70 to aid hospital funds. In December of the same year, to raise money in aid of the building fund for a Mechanics Theatre, they staged 'Two Heads are Better Than One,' and 'Irish Tiger' at the 'Theatre Royal' which was attached to the Imperial Hotel in Townsend street.

Involved in the formation of the Dramatic Club and stage manager for their productions was Dr Joseph Knight Barnett. He arrived in Albury and established a surgery at his Kiewa street residence in October 1858.

The Mechanics Institute in Dean street opened with a ball on May 25, 1863. Major extensions to the hall took place in 1884 and added to in 1893. Various known as the Civic or Plaza Theatre, with seating for 800, it became the venue for drama, musicals, concerts, recitals and cinema. It was demolished in 1966, making way for QEII Square.



THEATRE ROYAL
New Year's Eve.
Benefit in Aid of the Building Fund of the
ALBURY
MECHANICS' INSTITUTE.
THE ALBURY AMATEUR DRAMATIC CLUB beg leave to announce that they will give a
GRAND HOLIDAY ENTERTAINMENT
ON
SATURDAY EVENING DEC. 31st,
To commence with the mirth-inspiring Farce (which was received with such rapturous applause on its first representation), entitled,
TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE.
(Characters by the Amateurs.)
To be followed by a
MUSICAL MELANGE.
Comprising both Vocal and Instrumental Novelties.
BALLAD Savourneen Deelish.
INSTRUMENTAL TRIO.....The Wreath.
BALLAD.
COMIC (Ethiopian Solo) Song and Dance
DESCRIPTIVE SCENA.....The Maniac
SOLO Piano Melodia (operatic)
The whole to conclude with the amusing Comedietta of the
IRISH TIGER.
(Characters by the amateurs.)
For this evening cards of admission will be 4s. to all parts of the house.
FRONT SEATS RESERVED FOR LADIES.

An advert in the *Border Post* of December 28, 1859.

Arguably the biggest event in the theatre's history was a 1908 concert featuring Nellie Melba. Visitors flocked from miles around to hear her "fresh from worldwide triumphs such as never had been won by a woman in musical history." Hundreds unable to gain admission, jammed the nearby Mechanics Lane – Melba instructed the doors be thrown open to "let them all hear."



The Mechanics Institute, circa 1885.

Note the theatre behind, the poster advertising the 'Jubilee Singers,' the lady with two children, one behind the gas street light, the second sitting at left.

The Temperance Hall was built on the north-west corner of Kiewa and Stanley Streets in 1885. It was re-named the Federal Theatre in 1890 and became a popular venue, staging events from productions by the Albury Operatic Society to boxing bouts. The theatre was demolished in 1966.