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Out of the Attic

Women performing at The Lyceum

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Photo, The Tyrolean Minstrels – including three of the four who performed at The Lyceum. Stillenacht.com.

In 1839, The Lyceum Company, which promoted education in Alexandria, partnered with the library to build what became known as Lyceum Hall. Now Alexandria's History Museum, for its first two decades The Lyceum was the intellectual and cultural center of Alexandria.

The Lyceum Company hosted lectures and debates but they also rented the hall for musical performances, additional lectures, meetings, scientific displays and fundraisers. It was a place where men and women from the community gathered, and while most of the speakers and performers were men, there were some notable women who graced the stage of Lyceum Hall as well.

On Feb. 20 and 21, 1840, the Tyrolean Minstrels, aka The Rainer Family, sang a variety of traditional Austrian songs at Lyceum Hall. They were founding member Ludwig Rainer, his cousin Helen Rainer, Margarethe Sprenger and Simon Halaus (all billed in the *Alexandria Gazette* with the last name "Rainer"). They wore traditional Austrian clothing. They sang "a variety of Solos, Duets, Ranz-de-Vaches, and Melodies of the Alps, in their native costume." They likely yodeled.

Two months earlier, at Christmas, the Rainers performed "Stille Nacht" ("Silent Night") for the first documented time in the United States. They sang it in New York at Trinity Church in front of the Alexander Hamilton monument and it may have been on the program when they sang at Lyceum Hall as well. The Rainer family became a sensation and American singers began to mimic their close four-part harmony. That the Rainers published their songs only helped spread the influence. The Hutchinson Family became the most popular of the American family groups to follow the lead of the Tyrolean Minstrels.

And while the Hutchinson family did not perform at Lyceum Hall, (much to the chagrin of one writer to the *Alexandria Gazette* who complained about too many minstrel acts being booked), another family group, The Orphean Family Singers, did appear in March and June 1845. From the *Alexandria Gazette*, "The Orphean Family, from the banks of the Kennebec, consisting of two brothers, and two sisters, respectfully announce to the Ladies and Gentlemen of Alexandria, that they will give a GRAND CONCERT of Vocal Music ... when they will introduce all of their most popular Quartettes, Trios, Duets, &c." They are listed as Harriett, Adele, Charles and Jacob on published sheet music.

The 1840s were also a time when the display of "human curiosities" was a popular entertainment. A few of the people who appeared at P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York also appeared at Lyceum Hall. Miss S.G. Shore, "the Albino Lady," performed on May 29 and 30, 1840. She appeared with James O'Clancey, "The Irish Giant" and was assisted by Mr. Tank, a German musician, who





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accompanied her. Shore sang a variety of popular songs, including “Carrier Dove” and “O Give Me Back My Arab Steed.” The ad in the Gazette notes, “In the course of the evening, any Lady or Gentleman, wishing to examine the hair of the Albino, can have the privilege; as we exhibit Natural Living curiosities, we are willing any person or persons should satisfy themselves that there is no deception practiced.”

Another notable performer at Lyceum Hall was Madame Delores De Goni, giving a “grand Vocal and Instrumental Concert” on May 21, 1842. Madam De Goni, accompanied by George Knoop on cello and Professor Daunas on piano forte, was a celebrated Spanish guitar player. According to the Martin Guitar Company, she was “probably the finest professional guitar soloist of her time.” The Civil War brought an end to performances at The Lyceum, but women were very much a part of those who performed and those who attended in the first two decades.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.