



D. W. Griffith filming in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., 1919  
(Fort Lauderdale Historical Society collection)

## Fort Lauderdale's Cultural Journey

*From square dances at Stranahan's home  
to world-class arts and entertainment –  
a century of cultural development*

BY DR. CLAIRE M. CRAWFORD

Almost 100 years ago, Fort Lauderdale residents enjoyed a wide array of professionally trained musicians, actors and stimulating lecturers who traveled to the small town, which when incorporated in 1911 had fewer than 500 residents, no paved streets, electric lights or city water.

Fort Lauderdale pioneer Ivy Stranahan related that during the early years after her arrival in October 1899, villagers routinely gathered at what is now the Stranahan House for dances. Although Frank Stranahan himself never danced, entertainment was provided by an accordion player and a fiddler. At other times, early settlers gathered in homes for dances.

During the early years, the Florida East Coast Railway played a critical role in bringing nationally known troupes of performing artists and lecturers to Fort Lauderdale. The Flagler railway extended south to Fort Lauderdale in 1896, linking the tiny settlement to the outside world.

### **Early Organizations Promoted Cultural Development**

The Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club, as well as several of the early churches, played important roles in the cultural development of the town, and the Woman's Club promoted entertainment of various kinds, mounted exhibitions of paintings and formed the first circulating public library in the county, which would later become the core of the Fort Lauderdale Public Library.

In 1914, three years after its incorporation, the tiny town of Fort Lauderdale boasted three small hotels, three department stores, two banks, two book stores, two weekly newspapers, two pool halls, a Chinese laundry, a brass band, a movie house, a roller skating rink, the Woman's Club circulating library, a choral club and even a "Symphony Orchestra."

*“A special feature of the act was the use of the electric megaphone.”*

While northern operators had shown no interest in promoting a lyceum series in the South, Russell Bridges, founder of the Alkahest Agency in 1896 in Atlanta, Georgia, (America's first lecture, concert and theatrical booking management company), had “seized the opportunity” and “has used it for the intellectual, moral and spiritual uplift of the southern people,” reported the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* on November 10, 1914. The lyceum bureau, part of the Alkahest Agency, as a professional booking organization served as agent between the lecturer or reader and the contracting party. In Fort Lauderdale, the lyceum bureau served primarily as a booking agent for performers, ensembles and musical groups, while local citizens acted as managers.

On November 27, 1914, word of the upcoming traveling culture in Fort Lauderdale began to spread. With the support of the local Board of Trade, promoters announced that season tickets for a lyceum series would go on sale the following week. The season opener was to be held on

Christmas Eve at the Rex Theater. It was to feature the Cartwright Brothers Instrumental Quartette. A special feature of the act was the use of the electric megaphone.

Announcing another booking, apparently not part of the lyceum series, the December 4 edition of the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* touted the expected appearance of “The Great Chinese Magician Yee Ho Kiang.” Among Kiang's tricks were “Etheria,” which featured a person vanishing in mid-air and “the Spectacular Illusion ‘Noah's Ark’,” with live animals.

Toward the end of February 1915, organizers promoted another performance in the series, a dramatic presentation by the acclaimed monodramatist Mrs. William Calvin Chilton, who played the parts of all the characters in a single play.

Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* was performed on March 26 by the Fort Lauderdale High School students. The production included a chorus of 60 voices, the Boys' and Girls' Glee Clubs and music teacher Dorothy

Stearns. Playing to a crowded house at the Rex Theater, the production was deemed “a great success” by the local press.

Caught up in the activities of World War I, community leaders began organizing regular Community Sings in the city, beginning Friday night, July 12, 1918, with more than 100 in attendance. The impetus for the patriotic event appeared to be the War Department's Commission on Training Camp Activities, which had been established to improve morale among soldiers going overseas.

A U.S. Navy Band comprised of 22 players from the Naval Air Station at Dinner Key gave a short concert along Brickell Avenue in downtown Fort Lauderdale in the middle of November. The band members were on their way to West Palm Beach to encourage the United War Work campaign there.

On Friday, December 13, a local paper announced that the Royal Scotch Highlanders Band would arrive in town Sunday to present



Left: Brickell Ave., Fort Lauderdale, Fla., looking South ca. 1912 (Broward County Historical Commission Elmo Baker collection)  
Right: Fort Lauderdale, Fla., High School Band, 1910s (Broward County Historical Commission Edith Lewis collection)

a concert. They were expected to perform in Scottish attire wearing the Gordon plaid, accompanied by a pipe organ. The concert was to take place in front of the *Fort Lauderdale Sentinel* newspaper office.

### Cultural Events Increase As Community Grows

Early in 1919, the Woman's Club and two church groups added to the cultural life of the community. On Wednesday, February 19, 1919, the All Saint's Episcopal Church Guild was to present *Sweet Lavender*, a three-act comedy.

Brought to Fort Lauderdale by the Women's Exchange of the Methodist Episcopal Church South (now the First United Methodist Church of Fort Lauderdale), famed Danish violinist Axel Skovgaard performed before a packed audience at the school auditorium on Saturday night, March 22, 1919. His wife, Alice McClung, a famed pianist in her own right, also performed. Tickets to the event cost seventy-five cents and \$1.00 for reserved seats: open seating was fifty cents.

At the end of October 1919, one of the more interesting cultural events occurred at the Dreamland Theater,

sponsored by local chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star. Between short motion picture offerings, various members of the community provided live entertainment.

At the same time, acclaimed director D.W. Griffith was in Fort Lauderdale wrapping up the making of *Idol Dancer*. Griffith's company was the first to occupy the newly constructed Hotel Broward during filming. At the conclusion, Griffith held a gala ball at the hotel.

### Lyceum Replaced by Other Cultural Venues

By the end of the decade, the annual lyceum series no longer joined the many other cultural events the townspeople had enjoyed in the past. Still, a group of literary-minded women formed the 1919 Club; another group formed the Review Club in 1928. Fort Lauderdale continued to grow until the population reached an astounding 50,000 in 1950 despite the bust of the real estate boom of the 1920s and the Great Depression. After World War II, a new spurt in population gave birth to new community-based cultural organizations throughout Broward County, but mostly centered in Fort Lauderdale where a group

of leading citizens spearheaded the drive to raise funds to build the War Memorial Auditorium in 1949. The city-owned auditorium has played host to hundreds of cultural events, and for almost 40 years served as the only venue for symphony concerts and opera productions in Broward County.

Among the first of the new cultural institutions to evolve were the Opera Guild (1944) and the Fort Lauderdale Symphony Society (1948), followed by the Fort Lauderdale Art Center, now the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale (1958). In February 1967, the 1,200-seat Parker Playhouse, a gift to the city of Fort Lauderdale from Hungarian-born inventor Louis W. Parker, opened with performances of Neil Simon's *The Odd Couple*. ★

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Left: Broward Hotel, early 1920s (Broward County Historical Commission Ivan Austin collection)  
Right: Fort Lauderdale, Fla., The Sentinel newspaper building located on the S.E. corner of S. Andrews Ave. and S.E. 2nd St.