

W. L. Nicholas – Theater Man

W. L. Nicholas may be remembered for the Nicholas Theater, presently the Fairmont Opera House; however, it appears that he was much more than just a “theater man.”

Willie Lincoln Nicholas was born in Bridgewater, Somersetshire, England, in 1874. Nicholas' father named him for the young son of Abraham Lincoln, whom he deeply admired, who died while Lincoln was in office. According to the August 8, 1947 edition of the *Sentinel*, he was admirably known as “Linc” to his many friends and acquaintances. His early schooling was in England. In 1889 his father, a cabinet maker, again brought his family to America settling near Emmetsburg, Iowa. While in Emmetsburg, Nicholas attended school, took a position with the American Investment Company of Emmetsburg where he worked until 1895 when he moved to Fairmont.

When he moved to Fairmont, he worked for the Martin County National Bank. In 1897, he was appointed as a Court Reporter for the Seventeenth Judicial District. He continued in this position until 1922 when he resigned devote his attention full time to the moving picture business which he and William Hay had developed for the city of Fairmont. He had an interest in the moving picture business, and in 1912 he leased the Fairmont Opera House, which he later owned. He and members of his family developed the Fairmont Theater Company which operated both the Nicholas and the Strand Theaters.

Being a civic minded individual and greatly interested in Fairmont's parks, he served as Chairman of the Park Board for several years. He was also elected Alderman, and then Mayor of Fairmont in 1935. While serving as Mayor, the city's parks remained his special interest. During his tenure as mayor, Mrs. Nicholas presented a substantial amount of land to Lincoln Park as well as funds for building a shelter house.

Nicholas also had an interest in politics. He served was chairman of the Martin County Republican Central Committee from 1933-1945. He was also past Commander of The Knights of Pythias and was a charter member of Kiwanis. In addition, he was a member of a number of fraternal and civic organizations locally, statewide, and nationally.

The August 8, 1947, edition of the *Sentinel* stated in a council tribute to Nicholas upon his death that “No man who has held office in the City of Fairmont contributed more generously of his time and effort toward the betterment of the City than did the deceased during his tenure of office. He was also generous in his contributions to the churches and other civic organization.”

Arthur Nelson had written an obituary for Mr. Nicholas two years prior to Nicholas' death with the instructions to “hold for use when the need arises – which may be any day now.” Interestingly, Nelson predeceased Nicholas by four months. In Nelson's obituary, it was stated that the Fairmont theaters will operate on a regular schedule with Mr. Nicholas' wish to follow the tradition of “The Show Must Go On.”

Nicholas took great pride as being “Dad” to the many young men who worked for him in the theater business over the years. He always spoke highly of them and referred to them as “my boys.”

W. L. Nicholas passed away in 1947 at the age of 73. He was survived by his wife, Caroline, their son, Charles Lincoln Nicholas, E. H. Nicholas of Jackson, and a sister in California. His first wife died in 1914.

In researching information about W. L. Nicholas, it is interesting to note that one newspaper article stated that “Fairmont never had a better, more useful citizen.” There is no question that Mr. Nicholas’ contributions were many and meaningful. However, in viewing the past and those that shaped our city and county, it is even more interesting to note the many individuals that have contributed so very significantly to our community and county and that they were ever so publicly recognized for their accomplishments and contributions. In contrast, it often seems in today’s world, instead of emphasizing the positive attributes of individuals, those are frequently overlooked in favor of finding fault. Were all of those individuals in the past that built our cities and county faultless? I hardly think so. Could it be that in the past more attention was given to the positive contributions people made rather than emphasizing their shortcomings?

For more information about the past and history of Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.