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Montana State University opera returns from Montana tour

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"It's a hell of a long way around Montana when you're packing a tuba!"

That was the opinion of at least one of 85 tired trouper who rolled back to Missoula recently after one of the most unusual treks in the history of Montana State University music. They had taken a grand opera, complete with costumes, props, full orchestra and lights, on a 1500 mile tour of the state during spring vacation. They had played to upwards of 15,000 people—a fair sized percentage of the state's population—and they started something that will be repeated again in coming years.

Puccini's "The Girl of the Golden West" was the opera, and the University undertook the production as a salute to the state's territorial centennial which is being celebrated this year.

Wherever it played, and there were seven towns enroute, the opera was rated as a smash. Some of the places had never seen an opera before in all their history, including Miles City, Plentywood and Poplar. The same is probably true for Anaconda, although old residents have a vague feeling that some kind of opera played there during the smelter town's palmier days.

It is a reasonable guess that not more than 10 universities could have mounted a production of this scope without the aid of outside professional help. As it was, the school relied entirely on its own resources. Dr. Charles Bolen, Dean of the School of Fine Arts, was producer; general director was Dr. Firman H. Brown, Jr., chairman of the Drama Department; musical director was Professor John Lester who directs the opera workshop at the University; Professor Eugene Andrie conducted the opera orchestra; and Professor Richard James was technical (more)
"The Girl of the Golden West"

director. For the rest, singers, dancers, stage hands, electricians and musicians were all University students.

Not content with doing the Puccini opera, the company broke up into sub-groups to present various kinds of entertainment for high school audiences enroute. The units participating in this side-bar activity included the Jubileers, choral group, the University orchestra, and a set of three combined groups from the Masquers drama unit and the Opera Workshop. There were 31 such performances scheduled enroute, although a couple of them had to be cancelled because the company ran into an old fashioned Montana blizzard.

Customarily, the technical group was maintained as a separate unit, hedge-hopping from one opera stand to the next with 7,000 pounds of equipment for the stages. One item in the kit, a specially purchased fog machine, was too enthusiastically worked at Miles City and gave the audience momentary qualms about a fire back stage. When the curtains were finally opened, the fog rolled forth to engulf the orchestra and about a third of the main floor. But aside from this incident and one mechanical breakdown with the scenery truck, the trip went off in bravura style. While most of the larger towns of the state were in the list, the names of some of the stops sound like the clink of horseshoes on an old Montana trail--Chinook, Plentywood, Poplar, Medicine Lake, White Sulphur Springs, Three Forks and Boulder.

Something like an official stamp of approval (or an official signature) was put on the whole operation when the troupe got into Helena. Governor Tim Babcock, enthusiastic about the production, came back stage and autographed enough programs for all hands. The Governor told the producer that the University ought to do something like that opera again.

The University is.