

'I think they just make fun of us because it's so hard to spell the name'

Schenectady takes jokes in good humor

By John Strachan
Associated Press

SCHENECTADY, N.Y. — It's been more than half a century since comedian George Burns played Proctor's Theatre here as a young vaudevillian. Burns is still around. So is Proctor's Theatre. And so are the jokes about Schenectady.

Schenectadians are used to the jokes. They have a well-developed sense of self-deprecation from more than 300 years of living in a city that has written itself a place in history, and then listed it under a name no one can spell and few can pronounce.

In one of his half-dozen books on Schenectady, local historian Larry Hart claims at least 78 different spellings for the city's name dating to 1661, when Arent Van Curler, a Dutch fur trader, brought a group of families to settle a wilderness outpost along the Mohawk River.

The derivation of the word "Schenectady" is as difficult to pin down as the spelling. Choose between the Dutch phrase "Schoonachtendeel," meaning a beautiful and valuable piece of land, and the Indian "Schaghnectatie," referring to the land beyond the pine plains. There are countless variations.

Some comedians insist that the name is an Indian phrase meaning "end of the trail." Mayor Frank Duci disagrees.

"I think they just make fun of us because it's so hard to spell the name," said Duci, who treats Schenectady jokes like ethnic jokes — he tolerates them but doesn't tell them.

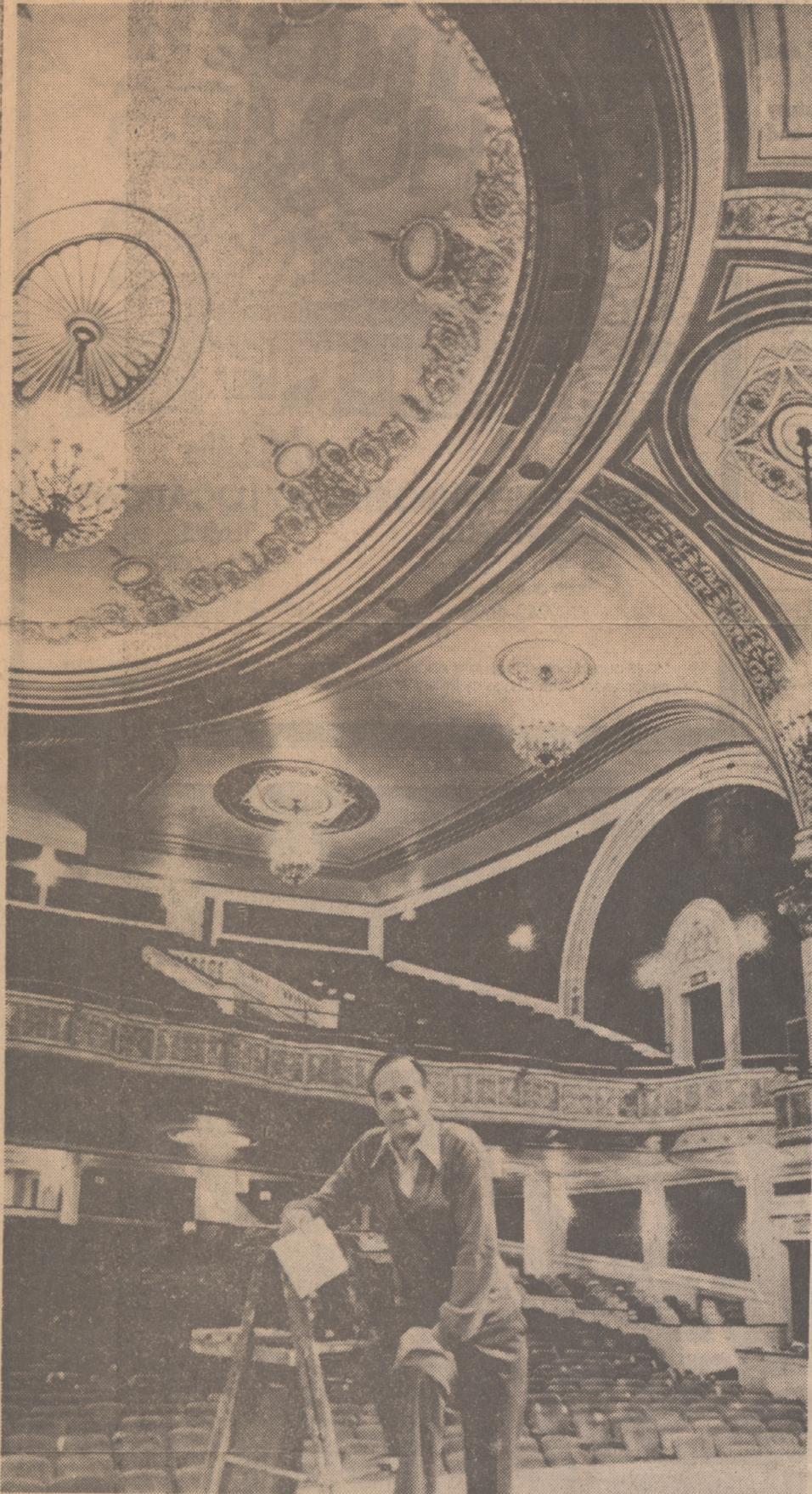
In 1977, Duci chided President Carter in a letter for Carter's joking reference to Schenectady as the city that was burned in the film *Gone With the Wind*, which had just been shown on television.

Carter's effort to have a laugh on Northerners — and put Schenectady rather than Atlanta in flames — is understandable. He was stationed here as a young naval officer in the 1950s, learning nuclear engineering. He once told a reporter that he'd never seen so much snow in his life.

For the record, Schenectady hasn't been burned to the ground since 1690, when a raiding party of French soldiers and Indians made their way down from Canada to avenge a British foray on Montreal. They were bound for Albany, but the weather was so bitterly cold that they stopped at Schenectady and burned it instead.

Several U.S. presidents other than Carter have known Schenectady. George Washington slept here; Chester Arthur was raised and educated here; Ronald Reagan legitimized his nickname "Dutch" here when he was made a

— Schenectady, SL8



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Local historian Larry Hart inside Schenectady's Proctor's Theatre.