Life in Nevada throughout its 150-year history was colorful in many aspects, not the least of which were the ways people found to entertain themselves. Nevadans created their own cultural scene, not only for residents but also for visitors, and the diversity of amusements crossed ethnic and economic boundaries, all with a bit of a western flavor.

“When the Lights Dim: Arts and Entertainment in Nevada” is the final of three exhibits commemorating Nevada’s sesquicentennial at the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center. It showcases photographs, manuscripts, posters, sheet music and other items in Special Collections and University Archives that tell the Silver State’s entertainment story.

“We’re trying to show the range and variety of activities people enjoyed over the years,” says Donnellyn Curtis, head of Special Collections and University Archives. “Everyone had something to enjoy. There was music, dance and theater, of course, but also rodeos, cowboy poetry, Chautauqua, magicians, lectures and circuses.”
A portion of the exhibit is dedicated to a potpourri of entertainment venues and activities throughout various time periods at the University of Nevada, Reno.

“We also wanted to illustrate the diversity of cultural expression,” Curtis says. “There were Paiute dances, jubilee singers and music for all tastes, including municipal bands, dance bands, opera and the symphony. Performances were often held in high schools and theaters as well as in casinos and clubs. Reno was a popular stop for traveling performers on a circuit.”

Theater was important in Nevada mining towns, especially in Virginia City at Piper’s Opera House. Local actors as well as troupes from different cities throughout the county would put on melodramas, Shakespearean productions and plays based on Victorian literature.

“People were sometimes sitting on wooden boards in these theaters but they would be watching something sophisticated like a Shakespeare tragedy,” Curtis says.

The exhibit is located on the third floor of the Knowledge Center and will run through Oct. 31, Nevada’s official 150th birthday celebration.

TOP LEFT PAGE: Louie’s Jazz Band advertises a performance in the 1920s. Louie Rosasco, second from left, was the accordionist as well as the band leader. In one form or another, his bands played in many venues around the Reno area for decades. During the 1930s, he owned the Cocoanut Grove Dance Hall on North Virginia. LOWER LEFT PAGE: Nevada Repertory Company performing Guys and Dolls in March 1984. LOWER RIGHT: A parade honoring Charles A. Lindbergh’s visit to Reno passes the Wigwam Theater, Sept. 19, 1927. Lindbergh and Reno Mayor E.E. Roberts are in the lead car. ABOVE: Cancan dancers for Wolves Frolics, 1930s. ABOVE RIGHT: An advertisement from the Wigwam Theater Ephemera Collection, 1919-26.

Audience to participate in exciting 1860s reader’s theater melodrama

As part of the Nevada 150 celebration on campus and in conjunction with the exhibit, “When the Lights Dim: Arts and Entertainment in Nevada,” three University departments are bringing a fascinating reader’s theater melodrama to the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center in October.

East Lynne: A Story of Modern Life, abridged and adapted by David Fenimore of the Department of English, will keep people entertained with its intricate subplots, a seductive villain and a trusting, clueless heroine. Rob Gander, Department of Theatre and Dance chair, will direct the staged-reading production in which the audience is encouraged to participate by booing and hissing in appropriate places.

The play started out as an English magazine serial from 1860-1861 and was published as a novel in 1861 by Ellen “Mrs. Henry” Wood. Though dismissed as immoral, sensationalist and even repulsive by the British literary establishment, its sales were phenomenal, selling 500,000 copies, and it was almost immediately adapted for the London and New York stages.

East Lynne was performed in Virginia City in 1863, the first of many times. Other performances of various adaptations of the play have been held in Carson City, Verdi, Ely and at least 18 times from 1870-1964 in Reno. According to a quote from the Nevada State Journal on Feb. 11, 1871, after the second performance in Reno, “People do not appreciate paying a dollar for the privilege of sitting on the soft side of a rough plank in a poorly ventilated room even to witness the most interesting play put on the stage.”

The performance in 1964 by Reno Little Theater for Nevada’s centennial celebration claims to be the original version as it would have been performed 100 years earlier.

“I discovered an interesting bit of trivia about the play,” says Donnelyn Curtis, head of Special Collections and University Archives at the Knowledge Center. “Actress Dawn Wells, a Reno native who played Mary Ann on the CBS sitcom Gilligan’s Island in the 1960s, was in a performance of East Lynne as a college student at Stevens College in Missouri in 1957.”

This free event begins at 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 23 in the Wells Fargo Auditorium at the Knowledge Center.