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THE CURRENT AND HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE OF SMALL COMMUNITY
ONE-SCREEN MOTION PICTURE THEATERS
SHOWN THROUGH A CASE STUDY

by

ANN GIRAND

A THESIS

Presented to the Interdisciplinary Studies Program:
Historic Preservation
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
for the degree of
Master of Science

June 1993

APPROVED: _____

Arthur W. Hawn, Chair

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An Abstract of the Thesis of
Ann Girand for the degree of Master of Science
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to be taken June 1993

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This study focuses on an intense examination of one small community one-screen theater, the 1925 McDonald Theater located in Eugene, Oregon, and selected information on motion picture theater architecture of the early twentieth century. Examples of other historic one-screen theaters have been used for purposes of comparison. The detailed study of the McDonald Theater emphasizes the existing interior architectural features, details and spaces, and the original aspects of the building. An assessment of the conditions of important interior architectural features and recommendations for specific action which will support the preservation of the McDonald Theater is made. These recommendations for the preservation of significant historic fabric and restoration of missing or altered fabric can serve as a

model for preservation of similar theaters. Ultimately it is hoped that this thesis will stimulate the revitalization of other motion picture theaters and benefit the historic preservation profession by providing specific information on small motion picture theaters.

VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Ann Girand

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon
University of North Texas
University of Florida Preservation Institute: Nantucket
University of Idaho
University of New Mexico

DEGREES AWARDED:

Master of Science, 1993, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Fine Arts, 1987, University of Idaho

AREA OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Historic Interior Finishes

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Survey of Historic Structures in Cottage Grove, Oregon, Internship, 1992
Interior Design Consultant, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1991
Commercial Interior Design, Dean/Krueger & Associates, Inc., Albuquerque,
New Mexico, 1987 - 1990

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Master Design Award from New Mexico Chapter of American Society of
Interior Designers for Commercial Design of Chinle High School, 1990

Alumni Award for Excellence, University of Idaho, 1986

Tau Sigma Delta, 1987

Completion of National Council Interior Designers Qualification examination

PUBLICATIONS:

Girand, Ann, Alexandra Buckley, and Stephanie Crandell. "Pioneer Courthouse Square Celebration. A History of the Square and Its Design." Portland, Oregon: By the authors, 1991.

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for their support and friendship and dinners.

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for his love and patience and encouragement.

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for the confidence that they gave me while growing up, and the assurance
that I could accomplish anything to which I set my mind.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Parameters on Research

The focus of this thesis is on motion picture theater architecture constructed between 1910 and 1940 in the United States. This project has emphasized the period surrounding the 1920s and 1930s, a time when movies became a popular mass entertainment in the United States. Theaters were built specifically for motion pictures; the "talkie" was introduced; and economic and social conditions played a part in motion picture attendance. A brief general survey of motion picture history between the mid-1800s and the 1940s has been included to give a basis upon which to understand the activities of the 1920s and 1930s.

This study focuses on an intense examination of one small community one-screen theater, the 1925 McDonald Theater located in Eugene, Oregon, with other examples of historic one-screen theaters used for purposes of comparison of similarities and differences. The detailed study of the McDonald Theater emphasizes the existing interior architectural features, details and spaces, and the discovery of now hidden or lost original aspects of the building. An assessment of the conditions of important interior architectural features and recommendations for specific action which will support the preservation of the McDonald Theater is made. These

recommendations for the preservation of significant historic fabric and restoration of missing or altered fabric can serve as a model for preservation of similar buildings. The recommendations have not included the actual stage area and the numerous requirements that are necessary for today's productions of ballet, musicals, and other performing arts. The overall exterior has not been addressed, except as it relates to the interior and its atmosphere. A full documentation of the structure, mechanical, structural or stage-specific lighting systems has not been completed.

This thesis does not include the legitimate theater, except where it had direct influences on motion pictures and its architecture, and it does not focus on the costs related to the operations of a theater or other financial matters. Descriptions only of a few significant motion pictures that were showing at the time which help to underscore their social importance are given.

While it has been possible to discuss only briefly the importance of the small community motion picture theaters historically, their pervasiveness, and their importance in relation to American culture, it is anticipated that what has been discussed will lead to a better understanding of the small community motion picture theater's significance, thus diminishing the threat to the continuation of these historic theaters.

Ultimately it is hoped that this thesis will stimulate the revitalization of other motion picture theaters. Pure preservation, which implies the process of keeping all features as they are, of motion picture theaters is usually not recommended because many of the theaters have been drastically altered or severely neglected. Restoration

of these theaters would probably be undesirable because of the many technical improvements that have been made since most of these theaters were constructed, and these improvements are needed to insure a successful theater for today's demanding public. Modern safety and sanitation codes must also be considered. Most successful projects have sought to

(1) meet modern standards of comfort and safety, (2) bring the house as much as possible up to modern production standards, and (3) return the decor to a particular point in time,¹

therefore "revitalization" (defined as "to give new life") and rehabilitation have been deemed the most appropriate terms to convey the ideas of returning the theater to its visual prime and render it a modern facility full of vitality.

It is anticipated that the historic preservation profession will benefit from this research since little specific information was found on small motion picture theaters in preservation literature. Recent books that have been found tend to be in tourist, picturebook format rather than detailed and scholarly. The few scholarly materials that were found, focused on the building shape, the plan, the projection rooms and the exterior. Documentation of interior details and finishes of theaters (as well as many other building types) has been scarce, although recently interiors have been receiving some long needed attention.

¹Gwen Sommers Yant, "Past, Present, and Future: The History and Revitalization of American Theatres Built Between 1865 and 1910," (Master of Arts Thesis, Cornell University, August 1982), 5.

A word must be said regarding the spelling of "theater" that has been used. There are two spellings that are commonly found, "theater" and "theatre." Conflicting information on the correct spelling has been found, with some saying the differentiation being between "legitimate" theater and motion picture theater. Since no definitive answer has been found, the spelling "theater" has been chosen for this thesis because it is the more commonly used spelling. Quotes with the "re" ending have been left in their original form for clarification and emphasis. One can view the spelling of "theatre" as an attempt to be grandiose. The ending "re" has been used over time to indicate importance. For example, "centre" has been used in connection with important places of activity rather than the source from which something originates. Perhaps the spelling "theatre" was used to denote the building's importance to the city and its early struggle to gain recognition as a viable source of entertainment. Consequently the spelling has not been changed in important instances because it is believed that the quotes which use the spelling "theatre" exhibit an aura of importance and lend a better understanding of the context of the statement.

Introduction to the McDonald Theater

The McDonald Theater, whose original name was the Lowell Theater, had its grand opening on May 7, 1925. It is located at Tenth avenue and Willamette in downtown Eugene, Oregon, with the main lobby facing onto Willamette street (see Figure 1). The promoters of the Theater Building Project included George B.



Figure 1 Map of Eugene. Source: Author.

Schaefer, Charles J. Schaefer, Frank X. Schaefer, and Albert T. Schaefer² and Aaron Harding McDonald. The Schaefer family was a prominent Eugene family who made important economic and social contributions to the city. A. H. McDonald came to Eugene from Portland in 1913.³ Upon his arrival to Eugene, he became involved with the local theater business. In 1922 he formed the Castle Theater Company which later became the Eugene Greater Theater Company.⁴ The company sold, leased and operated motion picture and other amusement shows. At one time, McDonald owned and operated the Heilig, the Castle and the Rex. In July 1924, McDonald joined with Charles J. Schaefer to form the McDonald-Schaefer Company, a real estate investment firm.⁵ The largest endeavor of the McDonald-Schaefer Company, the theater is "one of the three remaining Schaefer brothers' cornerstones, at 10th Avenue and Willamette."⁶

On April 25th, the manager Don McDonald announced that the theater would be formally opened the week of May 4th.⁷ It is reported that this came as a surprise, since it was expected to take a longer time to complete the construction on this

²"Promoters of Theater Building Project," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

³Carmi Weingrod and Judith Rees, "National Register Nomination for McDonald Theater Building," (Eugene, OR: City of Eugene HCC Department, December 1981), sec.8, p. 2.

⁴Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8, p. 2.

⁵Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8, p. 2.

⁶Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8, [1].

⁷"New Lowell Theater Will Be Open Soon," Eugene Guard, 25 April 1925), 1.

Romanesque-Byzantine style building (see Figure 2). Instead, work on the rounded arches and massive construction was speeded up to insure the completion during the announced week. This structure, described as one of the most beautiful on the west coast, was to provide Eugeneans a playhouse as well as motion picture theater, and put Eugene in a position as one of the best equipped cities in the theatrical line of any her size in the west.⁸ The announcement spurred a lot of discussion within the community. The newspaper affirmed this by saying, "It can only remain to say that it is splendid, and that its opening will be the biggest event of its kind Eugene has ever experienced."⁹ Based upon newspaper accounts, the specific grand opening of the theater was kept a secret until the last minute. A facsimile of the advertisement can be found in Figure 3. It was not until May 7th that The Guard produced a special theater section which included the announcement on Grand Opening that evening. The Eugene Guard carried the following in its paper:

Tonight
 The Grand Opening of the Lowell [McDonald] Theatre
 After almost a year of steady work the theatre now Stands Completed!
 Every citizen of Eugene has a splendid surprise in store--even the most
 euthusiastic [*sic*] and expectant Eugene booster will be
 astounded at the new theatre's massive size and artistic
 splendor.
 A Credit to any City in the World!
 The opening night will be an evening of Pleasure Supreme with a
 beautiful atmospheric prologue, special organ concert, musical
 feature and Opening Night Souvenir Program.

⁸"Mr. Gallagher, Mr. Shean Next Week; Lowell Will Open Doors," Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925, 6.

⁹"Mr. Gallagher," 6.



Figure 2 Early View of Exterior of McDonald Theater. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

Lowell [McDonald] Theatre
Only A few Days to Wait

Then the Grand opening of:

The Lowell Theatre

A great surprise Awaits Every
 Citizen of Eugene, the Artistic
 Splendor, the Stately Size, and
 the Luxurious Equipment Will
 Amaze Even the Most Enthusiastic
 And Expectant Eugene Booster

A Credit to Any City in the World!

THE OPENING NIGHT WILL BE
 AN EVENING OF PLEASURE SUPREME
 WITH SPECIAL ATMOSPHERIC PROLOGUE,
 ORGAN CONCERT, MUSICAL FEATURES
 AND SOUVENIR OPENING PROGRAMS

A Great Event in Eugene's History

With a triumph of
 Motion Picture Achievement
 As the Premier Presentation
 Gloria Swanson in "Madame Sans Gene"
 A Sensation in New York!
 A Riot in Los Angeles!
 Glorious Gloria's Most
 Gorgeous Production

The French classic, brimming with comedy, aglow with drama, and amazing in scenic
 beauty and marvelous settings.

**WATCH FOR THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE DEFINITE OPENING DATE--IT
 WON'T BE LONG!**

Figure 3 Advertisement. Source: Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925, 7.

Popular Prices

Evenings....50¢

Matinees30¢

Children 25¢ (opening night)

Doors Open at 6:30 P.M First show starts promptly at 7:00 pm. The second show will start at 9:15 and every one can feel assured that they will see a complete show even if a third show is necessary.

Regardless of the size of the crowd, or the lateness of the hour, a complete program will be presented after everyone is seated!

A thing of beauty

A joy Forever!

The Lowell will be a lasting monument to Eugene's spirit of growth and progress.

A gala event in Eugene history. May your pleasure and enjoyment be as great as ours in Presenting it.¹⁰

Perhaps Mayor E. R. Parks' greeting to the new theater reflects the enthusiasm of the rest of the community toward the theater:

The new Lowell [McDonald] theater is one of the finest in all the west, and it compares favorably with any theater in the country. Eugene should indeed be proud of such a magnificent structure. It is another step ahead in the city's history, another mark of progress.

The city has need of far-sighted men such as they who conceived and brought to completion this great project. The city has wonderful possibilities, and nothing can stop it from going ahead by leaps and bounds now.

The new theater is a perfect specimen architecturally. In it is ingrained a great noble spirit, and a vision that was able to bring together two such philosophies of life as the Romanesque, that of a sturdy serious people, and the Byzantine, that of a people who saw life in all its varied colors and tones.

The new theater is monument also to that genius of the air whom Eugene claims as a son, Lowell Smith. I am glad indeed that his name is to be perpetuated by a means which will always be before the people of this city.

¹⁰Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 8.

In welcoming the new theater to Eugene, I speak for the entire city, for I am sure that everyone is proud and happy that the new Lowell is throwing open its doors tonight."¹¹

The opening night was billed as one to be long remembered, and it turned out to be so. Some three thousand of Eugene's estimated 20,000¹² residents went to the new theater for its gala opening.

"All came expectant, eager, curious. They gazed about, heard the new organ, were charmed with the fine pictures. Then they filed out, slowly, reluctant to leave a place so beautiful....It is a structure with a spirit, and last night, as the mighty organ played softly, as the lights glowed in iridescent warmth from above, there was friendly spirit about. Many who came were friends of A. H. McDonald and to them the beauty and charm of the interior gave forth a deep feeling. These people felt the joy that was to have been that of Mr. McDonald--and the memory of this man, whose dream has become a reality for his friends in Eugene, will come back each time they enter the foyer¹³.

To start the evening's entertainment the master organist Renaldo Baggot played a specially prepared concert on the Wurlitzer organ. The music included not only the "finest classical numbers, but zippy, fast jazz, as well."¹⁴ Following the encores a comedy that Donald McDonald selected after reviewing many films, "Fares, Please" with Al St. Johns, was shown on the new Raven screen. Donald McDonald declared "It is the funniest comedy yet and I am sure it will put every one in a happy mood for

¹¹"Lowell Theater Is Greeted By Mayor," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

¹²Polk's Eugene City and Lane County Directory, 1925, Vol 10, (Portland, OR: P. L. Polk and Company, 1925), 56.

¹³"Crowds Throng to Opening of Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925, 10.

¹⁴"Gala Features on Bill for Premier to Drama Patrons. Magnificent Interior of Eugene's Finest Playhouse to be Thrown Open for First Time--Elaborate Prologues Prepared," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

the good things that are yet to come during the evening."¹⁵ Joanna James Ellis, popular soprano, then sang "Martsailles." As the last note died away an elaborate prologue welcoming the new theater's patrons began. The prologue was arranged by Kate Irwin Stange and was staged by her and 12 tiny tots all under eight years of age. Each one had a part, and each did it well.

Next came the feature presentation, which was the premier presentation of "Madam Sans Gene," a film starring Gloria Swanson in her biggest production. It was a "Pacific premier", which meant that Eugene was the first city in the Northwest. It was also the second on the west coast to have this masterpiece.¹⁶ This Famous Player-Lasky corporation movie was rich and lavish, with one of the greatest tales behind it ever told.¹⁷ It dealt with old French court days and Madame Sans Gene. "We are starting out with a master production," says Mr. McDonald,

"for we believe that our theater and the city is worthy of the very best the film world has to offer. We intend to keep on bringing in the best for the enjoyment of Lowell [McDonald] patrons is a measure of our enjoyment, too. Eugene is one of the finest cities in the country, and we hope to keep the Lowell theater worthy of the splendid city."¹⁸

"Madam Sans Gene" (Madame Devil-May Care) came to Eugene with quite a reputation. It was the first motion picture ever to play on Broadway at five dollars a seat and was hailed as Gloria Swanson's cinamasterpiece. Two weeks prior to the

¹⁵"Gala Features."

¹⁶"Gala Features."

¹⁷"Gala Features."

¹⁸"Gala Features."

opening of the McDonald, this film was premiered at the Rivoli theater in New York. The opening night was sold out, leaving hundreds of people trying to get in and trying to catch a glimpse of Gloria Swanson and her French nobleman husband, the Marquis de la Falaïse de la Coudraye. This was reported to give the police of New York quite a challenge for the evening. A week later the film was shown in Los Angeles at Grahman's Million Dollar theater and was eclipsing all former great films.¹⁹

The film was an unusually luxurious production, even for Gloria Swanson who was accustomed to acting in elaborate settings and gowns. (Miss Swanson had recently been honored for her "triumphant rise in ten years from an obscure little extra-girl to motion picture stardom, a Marquise, and a member of the famed French Academy. This latter distinction was bestowed upon her by the French Government for her remarkable impersonation of "Madame Sans Gene."²⁰) It was filmed in France, with the backgrounds including the palaces of Versailles, Fontainebleau and Compiègne, spots previously forbidden to motion picture directors; and is Forrest Halsey's adaptation of the stage play by Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau.²¹ Swanson's role was of the witty, flirtatious French laundress who washed Napoleon's shirts when he was a poverty-stricken corporal. She married one of Napoleon's sergeants and

¹⁹"Gala Features."

²⁰"Dinner Fete Given for Gloria Swanson," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

²¹"Gloria Swanson to Star at Lowell," Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925, 7.

"was swept by the French Revolution into the title of Duchess and residence in Napoleon's court, where she alternately scandalized and sent into the hilarious laughter the haughty lords and ladies, ending by saving the Empress's honor and winning for herself Napoleon's eternal gratitude."²²

During the movie, Gloria is seen sleeping in the actual golden bed of Marie Antoinette and flirting with Napoleon (Emil Drain) in the actual private chamber which the real Napoleon occupied. "The results are said to be startlingly realistic in the extreme."²³

All of these grand events for the opening were complemented by the architecture of the theater. Those who came to the opening were received by uniformed doormen and let into the theater. They greeted the "theater and its beauty with exclamations of delight" as they observed the carefully worked out Romanesque Byzantine decoration.²⁴ The crowd "fell in readily with its mood happy, yet mindful of the sturdiness of life and things stronger and larger."²⁵

To facilitate the grand opening of the theater, many fresh, fragrant flowers were provided to the theater by University Florist whose florist grounds were on a large part of the block at Patterson and East 13th streets (see Figure 4). The newspaper described, "Blooms and buds and green of every description will be used in profusion to add to the general delightful atmosphere of the theater on the opening

²²"Gloria Swanson."

²³"Gloria Swanson."

²⁴"Crowds Throng."

²⁵"Crowds Throng."

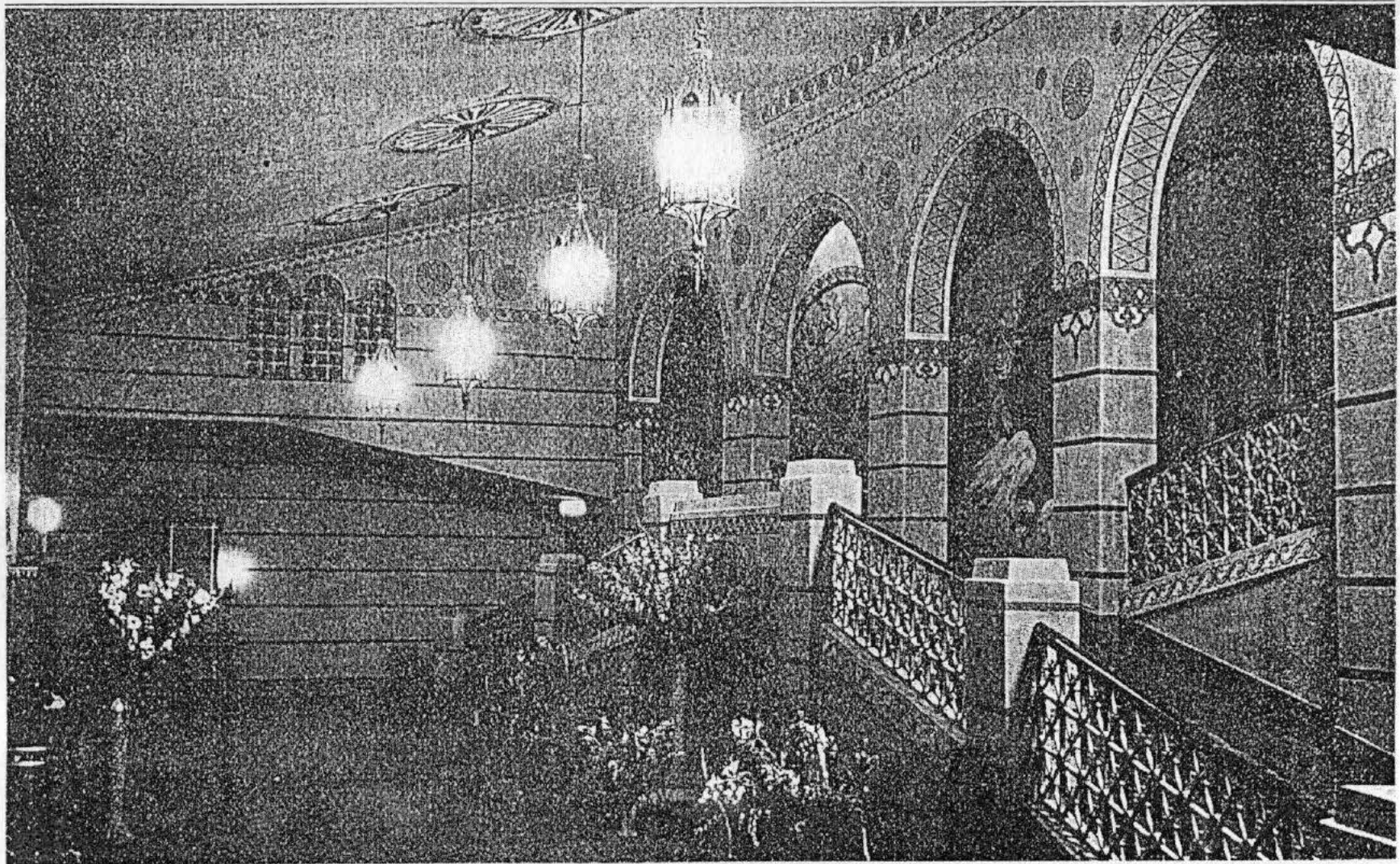


Figure 4 Foyer of McDonald Theater with Flowers. Source: Motion Picture Herald, (15 May 1926), 22.

night."²⁶ Before coming into the theater, the patrons had the opportunity to experience the building's Romanesque exterior.

[Then] into a beautifully decorated lobby they will go, to be charmed first of all by the gorgeous Byzantine colorings, blended with the sturdy Romanesque style of architecture. From here they will be ushered into the foyer, where a new and rare sight awaits their eyes. Amazement will be no uncommon feeling, for this section of the theater, with its soft colors, its beautiful wrought lights, the graceful double ramp, backed by impressionistic paintings of old Norse tales, will be a revelation to many.²⁷

Ten of the largest firms of Oregon assisted in the erection and completion of the McDonald Theater building. All were considered first-class workmen, and Mr. McDonald said that every one lived up to the letter of his contract. The firms that assisted in the project were:

Lee Thomas, architect
 Stien Brothers, Roy and Alfred Stien, general contractors
 Emil J. Koplin, foreman
 Sigwart electric company, plumbing and tinning
 J. Finne, heating
 Eugene Foundry, grilles and railings
 B. F. Shearer, Inc., decoration, drapes, seats and furnishings, Carl R. Berg in charge
 Rushlight, Hastrof and Lord, heating contractors
 Manley Cockcroft, Rudolph Wurlitzer company, organ and installation
 Jay Keller, ventilation engineer.²⁸

As noted by Mr. McDonald, the construction of the building was completed by the Stein Brothers. They started in business, pouring concrete sidewalks, seventeen

²⁶"Theater to Bloom With Flowers From University Florist," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

²⁷"Gala Features."

²⁸"Contractors on New Theater are Thanked," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 5.

years prior to completing this project. Their business had been in Eugene, with the exception of the first five years, and had grown as they made a reputation for themselves and expanded into other branches of the building trade besides paving and sidewalks. Construction on the McDonald began in September 1924, and took approximately seven months and \$135,000 to complete.²⁹ The unusual rate of speed of construction was contributed to having an average crew of 30 to 50 on the job every day.³⁰ The reinforced concrete structure is 160 by 160 feet in size, one story high and is constructed so that other stories may be added as needed.³¹ Over 22,000 yards of concrete were poured during construction.³² This construction type was noted to make the building fireproof throughout and create one of the staunchest and stoutest structures in the city. It was also said to make the theater's balcony as safe as the lower floor.³³ Some felt that the concrete construction gave the building a feeling of solidity and satisfaction. The Stein Brothers were also constructing at that time the new theater building on Alder and Eleventh Street.

Williamson and Company Plumbers were said to give the new theater the best in plumbing, sparing no expense and using every modern appliance. Hot and cold

²⁹"Stien Bros. Erect Lowell Building," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

³⁰"Stien Bros."

³¹"Stien Bros."

³²"Stien Bros."

³³"Equipment of New Theater Complete Now in Every Detail," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

water was supplied not only to the stores and other departments, but to the women's rest room and the men's smoking room in the theater. Special fixtures, which were in keeping with the rest of the house, were also said to be in the theater. A special drinking fountain ordered especially for this theater was installed, said to have been an innovation in its line, and "will prove to be useful as well as ornamental."³⁴

Even though the building was said to be fireproof, three fire openings were provided. Each were equipped with a fire valve and 50 feet of hose. "If some one's clothing should catch on fire, which is about the only kind of accident like that could happen, plenty of water is available to put them out in a jiffy," said Mr. Williamson.³⁵

The electrical equipment and installation for the theater and stores was planned and supervised by L. H. Sigwart, of the Sigwart electric company, a pioneer electrical contracting firm of Eugene. It was said that no expense was spared to make the lighting and electrical equipment the most complete of any theater in the Pacific Northwest.³⁶

Ventilation was one of the important features of theaters built at this time. The previous vaudeville houses and nickelodeons had tended to be located in confined spaces with very little air flow. This was increasingly considered to be very

³⁴"Lowell Plumbing Job is Finished as Building Opens," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

³⁵"Lowell Plumbing."

³⁶"Wiring of Lowell Done by Sigwart," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 3.

unhealthful. With the advent of introducing cooled air into buildings, theater owners saw an added way to entice patrons to come into their "cool" theater during the hot summer weather.

The McDonald Theater was no exception to this trend towards new and better ventilating systems. The newspaper of the time touted the ventilation of the theater as one of its biggest features. The system was described:

A large cold air intake from the stage wall, near the roof draws the air down through a cleaner, through immense heating coils, by a ten-foot fan. The air is then forced up and across the ceiling of the auditorium and out into the theater in four grilles in back of the balcony, four in the ceiling of the foyer, and two above the organ chambers on each side of the stage. The air goes out through a grill in the back wall of the orchestra pit through a compartment beneath the stage, and then out into the alley. It will never be possible to have a draught because the air is always forced into the auditorium and when the outside doors are opened the current of air in the building is strong enough to force its way out and not admit cold air. In the summer time an air washer is used in place of the heating coils, making the auditorium 20 degrees cooler than the outside air. The entire system is thermostatic, automatically adjusting the temperature when the house fills with people.³⁷

These "most efficient heating plants in the state," which were located in the basement, were installed by J. Finne, a heating expert.³⁸

On the front page of the paper that announced the theater's opening an article discussing the desire to rename the theater to McDonald Theater was included.

Friends of the late A. H. McDonald had petitioned his son and successor Donald

³⁷"New Lowell Theater."

³⁸"Heating Work in Lowell is Done by J. Finne," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 3.

McDonald to have the McDonald Schaefers corporation rename their theater the McDonald Theater, in memory of the man whose ideal and industry it represents. Evidently, discussion regarding the desirability of having the new theater named for the man who planned and built it began soon after his death. Among the friends who were to suggest the name change was Major Lowell Smith of the United States army aviation corps in whose honor it was originally named. He was the intrepid aviator who first circled the globe in air.³⁹ The following telegram was sent from Major Smith:

Hollywood, Cal. May 5. I sincerely believe the only proper thing to do is to name the new theater after A. H. McDonald, who so splendidly planned it. LOWELL SMITH.⁴⁰

The petition sent to Donald McDonald included the signatures of "Messrs. Schaefers, who are associated with the McDonald family in the theater and building enterprise; of Frank L. Chambers, president; W. W. Calins, vice-president and Bruce Brundage, treasurer, all representing the Eugene chamber of commerce" and of many others.⁴¹ On May 8, 1925, on the front page of the Eugene Guard, it was reported that Donald McDonald, manager of the Lowell [McDonald] and Rex Theaters, sent the following letter to the petitioners:

Your letter of May 5, in which you suggest that our new theater be named for my father, A. H. McDonald, is very gratifying to my

³⁹"Gala Features."

⁴⁰"M'Donald Will be Name of Theater, Manager Decides," Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925, 1.

⁴¹"M'Donald Name."

mother and to me. We deeply appreciate the interest that you have shown in having this theater so named as, to perpetuate the memory of my father, whose ideal and work it represents. We also feel that it is very generous of Major Lowell Smith to join in your petition.

The theater will, hereafter, be known as the McDonald Theater.

Yours truly,

Donald McDonald

Eugene, Ore., May 8, 1925⁴²

As was typical for theaters built around this time, the theater was not a building unto itself. Typically the building included other types of businesses or apartments. This provided a steady and second source of income for the owners of the theater building. It was also appropriate to have businesses as most of these theaters were located in downtown business districts. The McDonald Theater building, was so located and included several other businesses within its structure. A market, opened by A. M. Tripp, which was completely equipped for the care and sale of all kinds of meats, fish, poultry, pickles, cheese, and sundry market articles was one such business.⁴³ Others included C. K. DeNeffe's clothing store, a print shop, a millinery shop, and a drug store, a music shop and a shoe store.⁴⁴

⁴²"M'Donald Name."

⁴³"New Market Opens in Lowell Building," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

⁴⁴"C.K. DeNeffe Opens Clothing Store in Lowell Building," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2; "Print Shop In New Lowell Building Now Complete," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 3; "New Millinery Shop to be Opened in Lowell Building," 3; Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8, p. 2.

CHAPTER II

GENERAL MOTION PICTURE HISTORY FROM MID-1800S TO 1940

The attempt to create motion pictures, which is a series of slightly different pictures projected on a screen in rapid enough succession that they optically appear to move, was a fascination for many over thousands of years. The effort to create a "persistence of vision" intrigued men such as mathematician Leonardo da Vinci and inventor Thomas Edison. Finally, due in part to the development of photography in the mid-1800s, motion pictures became possible.

It was for scientific reasons, rather than entertainment reasons, that the photographic process led to the development of the motion picture. Photography began to be used in scientific studies to help assist in clarifying how certain actions occurred. Through the use of timed photographs actions that occurred too fast for the human eye to see could be broken down into individual movements. One study, sponsored by Leland Stanford, was conducted by the San Francisco photographer Eadweard Muybridge in 1877.¹ Stanford hired Muybridge to help establish how horses run; the main question was whether or not horses lifted all four legs off the ground while running. The first attempts to answer this question and others were unsuccessful (see Figure 5). With refinements to the scientific applications,

¹Joseph Csida and June Bundy Csida, American Entertainment. A Unique History of Popular Show Business (NY: Watson-Guptill, 1978), 65.

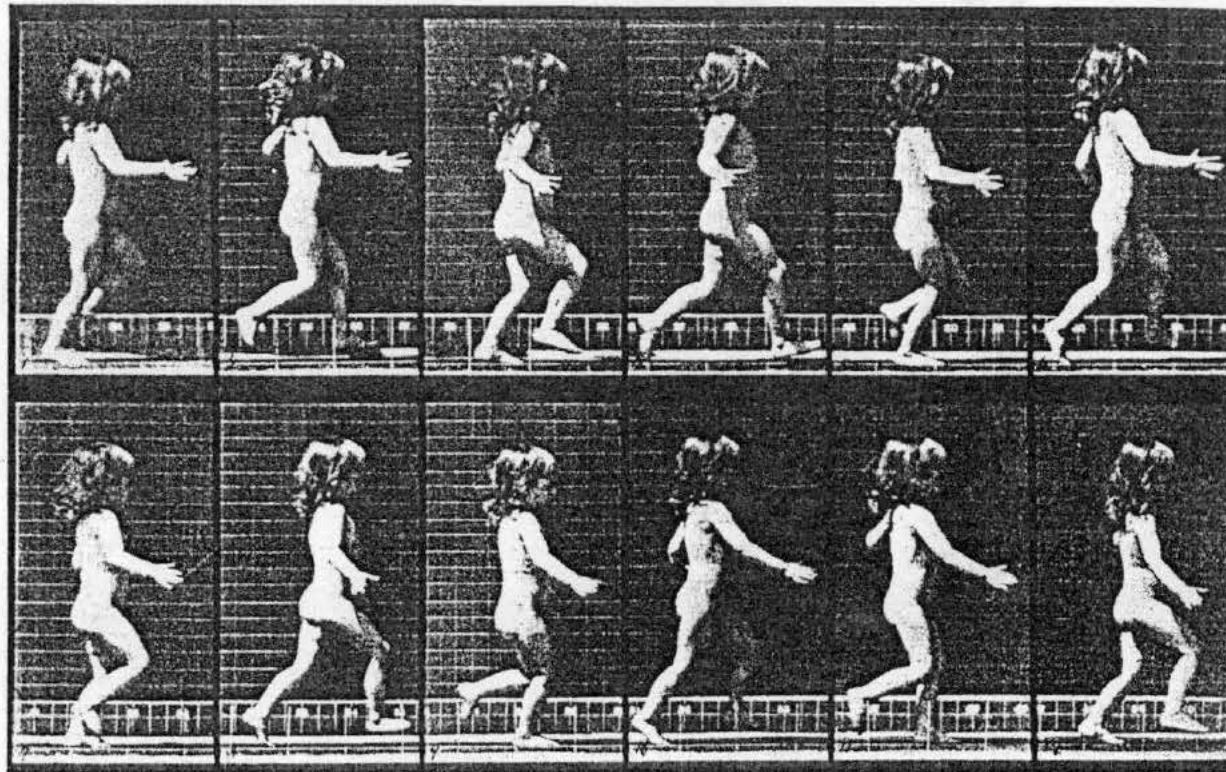


Figure 5 Series of Stills by Muybridge, the Precursor of Motion Pictures. Source: Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, The American Theatre and the Motion Picture in America, 360.

Muybridge and scientist John Isaacs were eventually able to establish that horses did lift all four legs off the ground. This was accomplished through lining up twenty-four wire-tripped cameras and became the first successful photograph of motion. Another scientific study using photographic shots in rapid succession was conducted by French scientist Etienne Jules Marey who wanted to learn about bird's flight. He perfected a camera in 1882 that could take twelve photographs at one second intervals.² By 1892 a continuous belt of celluloid film, rather than individual photographic images, was being used.

Thomas Edison made essential contributions to the motion picture industry. Soon after developing the phonograph, he began considering the possibilities of a machine that could enable one to see as well as hear. However around 1886, Edison was busy with other important problems, such as magnetic separation of ores, so he assigned the picture project to a young English assistant, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson.³ The work of Dickson was aided when Edison received strips of a manufactured thin, flexible film from George Eastman in 1889.⁴ Once images were placed on a continuous belt, the next problem to be solved was moving the film past a lens quick enough and steady enough to view the new images. Working under Edison, Dickson utilized the new film from Eastman and placed perforations at its

²Bruce N. Hayashi, "Beacon in the Night: An Examination of the Motion Picture Theatre" (Thesis, University of Washington, 1984), 6.

³Csida and Csida, 66.

⁴Csida and Csida, 66.

edge. The resulting creation was a sprocket system that moved the film smoothly past the lens of the camera. Edison's sprocket system was used in the kinetoscope, a viewing machine that showed one minute "peep show" films. The machine was activated by inserting a penny into the machine and operated by turning a crank. In 1889 the first models of the kinetoscope were completed, and Edison applied for a United States patent in 1891.⁵ His attorneys recommended that he secure foreign patents at the same time. However, Edison decided that the \$150 fee for the foreign patents would not be worth the money.⁶ As a result, the kinetoscope's popularity worldwide did not profit Edison monetarily. Edison's invention ultimately changed the theater, its buildings, and America's leisure patterns. This phenomenon began in earnest with the 1894 copyright of a motion picture, Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze.⁷

Motion pictures began being used for entertainment purposes, rather than for strictly scientific ones. This occurred with the kinetoscope peep shows which became very popular after their exhibition at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 (see Figure 6). Kinetoscope parlors became quite numerous between 1893 -

⁵Csida and Csida, 74.

⁶Csida and Csida, 67.

⁷Gwen Sommers Yant, "Past, Present, and Future: The History and Revitalization of American Theatres Built Between 1865 and 1910." (Master of Arts Thesis, Cornell University, August 1982), 13.

FROM APRIL 27, 1901 ISSUE

EDISON

1901 MODEL PROJECTING KINETOSCOPE

It is the Acme of Perfection.

Projects both Moving Pictures and Stereopticon Slides. IF ELECTRIC CURRENT IS NOT AVAILABLE we give you choice of other means of making light. Outfit is portable and light; can be shipped as personal baggage.

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We have attained the highest standard of photographic perfection in our animated picture films.

THERE'S NOTHING SLOW ABOUT US.

We have a complete staff of photographers constantly taking the latest HISTORICAL, HUMOROUS and MYSTICAL subjects.

Our Historical subjects are immense.

Our Humorous subjects provoke great laughter.

Our Mystical subjects thoroughly mystify the audiences.

Our latest films are being exhibited daily at the following New York theaters: Proctor's four houses, Tony Pastor's and Eden Musee; which is a strong recommendation as to their merit. You should follow in their footsteps. **GET IN TOUCH WITH US.**

Send in your name and ask for our Special Advance List of the latest new films. These are all winners. Write for Catalogue 103-G.

EDISON MANUFACTURING COMPANY,

Main Office and Factory:

ORANGE, - - - NEW JERSEY.

New York Salesroom, 135 Fifth Avenue. Chicago Salesroom, 144 Wabash Avenue

Figure 6

Edison Projecting Kinetoscope Advertisement. Source: Csida and Csida, American Entertainment. A Unique History of Popular Show Business, 132.

1896.⁸ One such parlor, operated by the Holland Brothers, was opened on Broadway in New York City with ten machines in 1894. A typical film was Bucking Bronco. This film, produced October 16, 1894, was 643 frames in length.⁹ Features for the peep shows were based upon Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth," and the Buffalo Bill "Wild West Show."

From the circus, Edison's company filmed The Paddle Dance by Fiji Islanders, The Dance of Rejoicing by Samoan Islanders, the Short Stick Dance by natives of India, the Hindustan Fakir, and the Cotta Dwarf. Buffalo Bill subjects included Cody himself and Annie Oakley, "the little sure shot," in an exhibition of rifle shooting at glass balls. Comedy subjects were New Bar Room, which showed a quarrel in a saloon and "a policeman taking a glass of beer on the sly;" Professor Welton's Boxing Cats; and the Glenroy Brothers, "farcical pugilists in costume."

Non-farcical boxing bouts were also peep-show favorites. In the 1894 crop were a "five round glove contest to a finish" between Hornbacker and Murphy; and Billy Edwards and the Unknown, a boxing bout in five rounds.¹⁰

Kinetoscope owners generally paid \$12.50 to \$15.00 per subject, with prize fight films selling from \$20.00 to \$25.00 per round.¹¹

In 1894 Grey and Otway Latham, brothers from Northcliff, Virginia, opened a parlor in New York with six machines. The Lathams were quite successful, but began wondering if there was a way to show the films to more people than the one-at-a-time kinetoscope machines. They came up with the idea of throwing the picture

⁸Hayashi, 7.

⁹Anthony Slide, Early American Cinema (NY: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1970), 8.

¹⁰Csida and Csida, 676.

¹¹Csida and Csida, 676.

upon a wall or screen and proposed the idea to Norman Raff who managed the Kinetoscope Company for Edison. He thought it was an excellent idea and took it to Edison. Edison rejected it, saying,

If we make this screen machine, it will spoil everything. We are making these peep show machines and selling a lot of them at a good profit. If we put out a screen machine there will be a use for maybe about ten of them in the whole United States. With that many screen machines you could show the pictures to everybody in the country - and then it would be done. Let's not kill the goose that lays the golden egg.¹²

The Lathams went ahead with their idea, even though it had been rejected by Edison. In 1895 they held a showing of the Pantoptikon, a moving picture projection machine, for the press in New York.¹³ A month later they introduced it at their store on Broadway. Thus, "the American cinema was born."¹⁴ By 1897, screen-projected movies were showing in every big city in the United States and abroad and the kinetoscope's popularity waned.¹⁵

Even though Edison misjudged the enormous popularity and potential of large screen projection, he continued to make contributions to the industry. Synchronizing Edison's newly invented phonograph with motion pictures was achieved by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson in 1888, creating the first sound film.¹⁶ Edison established

¹²Csida and Csida, 75-76.

¹³Csida and Csida, 136-137.

¹⁴Slide, 8.

¹⁵Csida and Csida, 136-137.

¹⁶Csida and Csida, 66.

the world's first movie studio, "The Black Maria," which was built in 1892 in West Orange, New Jersey, near Edison's research laboratories.¹⁷ The \$637.67 studio had a "swinging stage which rotated around a pivot post to follow the light of the sun."¹⁸ The Edison Company is also noted for releasing America's first serial, What Happened to Mary?, starring Mary Fuller in 1912.¹⁹ In discussing motion pictures in 1911, Thomas Alva Edison stated to the world's press,

When I invented the modern moving picture in the summer of 1889, I sought to do for the eye what the phonograph had done for the ear. The high character of the pictures made by my own company and the other American and foreign manufacturers under my own patents represent a development that has far exceeded my most ambitious hope.²⁰

Many successful Americans began making their fortunes with the kinetoscope. A clothing merchant, Carl Laemmle of Oshkosh, Wisconsin is a good example. As a young Swabian, he had emigrated to America with only fifty dollars in his pocket. Laemmle began as an errand boy for a druggist and worked his way up to clothing store manager. After scrimping for twenty years, enough money was saved to become independent and a move was made to Chicago to open his own store. Upon Laemmle's arrival in Chicago, he began looking for a suitable location for his new store. While looking, he came upon a crowd waiting impatiently to get into one of

¹⁷Csida and Csida, 67.

¹⁸Csida and Csida, 67.

¹⁹Slide, 157.

²⁰Slide, 8.

the new kinetoscope booths, and became fascinated with the throng of visitors that continuously came to give their ten cents for admittance. He had never seen so many customers in one place, and began counting the amount of money that was taken in by the proprietor. Laemmle counted the number of people entering the enterprise for two days; then approached the owner to find out about the installation and overhead of a kinetoscope show, the cost of the projection machine, the rent of films, and the personnel costs. With these figures, Carl Laemmle calculated that with a kinetoscope parlor he could take in the same amount of money in a month as he had been able to scrape together in all the years he had been working. The clothing business became a thing of Laemmle's past. Instead he invested his savings into a kinetoscope booth. In a few months he owned two of them, and numbers three and four were not far behind. Laemmle's early predictions were not deceiving. He made a fortune and became head of Universal Pictures Corporation and a film city, with a population of two thousand people devoted to the film industry.²¹ This fortune came to other emigrants such as glove salesman Samuel Goldfish (who later changed his name to Goldwyn) and his brother-in-law Jesse Lasky, fur dealer Adolph Zukor who became head of Famous Players Corporation and Paramount, a cloth-sponger William Fox (originally Fuchs), and the four Warners who left their soda-water stand, shoe-repair shop, and bicycle-renting businesses. The vitascope, which projected moving pictures onto a screen, was the next important invention toward today's

²¹John Anderson and Rene Fülöp-Miller, The American Theatre and The Motion Picture in America (New York: The Dial Press, 1938), 112.

motion pictures. Although credited to Thomas Edison, with his permission, the Vitascope was invented by Thomas Armat in Washington, DC.²² A deal had been made with Edison to use his name since Edison's name on something equalled box office success. The vitascope, which premiered in New York in 1894²³ and was exhibited at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1895,²⁴ is said to be the beginning of the motion picture industry.

The new motion pictures were typically shown in vaudeville houses to the middle class, the ones who could afford the admission prices. These theaters, which had more seating than nickelodeons, offered a few more comforts and a greater variety of programs. Vaudeville, like legitimate theater, was a popular form of live entertainment during this time. The entertainment was lively and consisted of

assorted songs, dances, dramatic episodes, blackouts, trained animals, acrobats, bell ringers, jugglers, magicians, ventriloquists, mindreaders, musicians, clowns: in fact any feat or phenomenon of man or beast...which can be gotten onto a stage and which is calculated to have sufficient audience appeal through uniqueness, novelty, skill, virtuosity, renown or notoriety.²⁵

Music, usually from a pit orchestra, was an integral part of the show. These shows were performed from two to five times a day and featured eight to 15 acts per

²²Csida and Csida, 76.

²³Ave Phildas, Movie Palaces (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc., 1980), 9.

²⁴Csida and Csida, 76.

²⁵Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, Theatres and Auditoriums, 2d ed. (New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1975), 2.

performance.²⁶ Since vaudeville incorporated the silent, crude motion pictures into its programs, it prospered. Legitimate theater did not and suffered greatly. By the 1890s films had become a staple of the vaudeville industry and the major vaudeville circuits scrambled to be booked in houses that could incorporate motion pictures.

One of the companies that used the vitascope to its fullest was the Vitagraph Company, founded by J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith.²⁷ Blackton, who was impressed with the vitascope, arranged to rent one of the new projecting kinetoscopes from Edison. Vitagraph became one of the first companies to regularly produce films of more than two reels in length.²⁸ When the Spanish occupation of Cuba became a serious political issue in 1898, Vitagraph produced probably the first propaganda film in the history of the cinema showing the tearing of the Spanish flag from a flagstaff, and its replacement with the Stars and Stripes.²⁹ The company was one of the most prolific of the early production companies. Vitagraph was able to survive the break-up of the Patents Company and continued to prosper as an important film producer into the Twenties.³⁰ The Vitagraph Company passed out of existence in February

²⁶Yant, 20.

²⁷Slide, 26.

²⁸Slide, 36.

²⁹Slide, 29.

³⁰Slide, 26.

1925, when Albert E. Smith sold the entire Company, including its backlog of pictures and its two studios to the Warner Brothers.³¹

In the beginning the appeal of motion pictures was the novelty of seeing people and things move on the screen. Before 1902 few films were dramatically interesting. This was because the inventors of this new technology were spending their time trying to "improve the quality of the film itself: to eliminate the eye-torturing flicker, to make the film viewable in rooms not utterly dark, and other technical problems."³² When the awe of seeing a moving picture wore off and their popularity declined, vaudeville houses declined. In fact the vaudeville houses used motion pictures as "chasers," to chase the customers away between the vaudeville shows. Creative people soon took over the limelight from the scientists and came up with new techniques for creating a film. These included shooting the story out of sequence, flashbacks, and other narrative techniques. Edwin S. Porter, who was making pictures for the Edison Film Company, was one of these creative people who used these specific modern story telling techniques in a film for the first time. In 1903 he wrote, directed, and produced The Great Train Robbery which "told a complete, exciting story, and told it in a fresh way which held the rapt attention of its audience."³³ It just also happened to be the first super successful Western. As all those aspects came together, creating better movies, vaudeville began to decline, with

³¹Slide, 46.

³²Csida and Csida, 76-77.

³³Csida and Csida, 76-77.

its death in the early 1930s. Soon its "houses were remade into temples for the new god, movies,"³⁴ and by 1938 "every sixth American visits the moving pictures daily, and that a successful picture which goes all over the world is seen by twenty million people a day."³⁵

Other things kept the motion picture industry growing as the novelty of continuous motion wore off. The industrialization of the United States was one that helped the industry grow. This was because the European immigrants that moved into urban areas and took jobs at the factories liked motion pictures. These immigrants had come to the United States to work in the factories. As they moved into urban areas, the middle classes moved out. These immigrants brought with them to America a knowledge and respect for motion pictures. To them, seeing a motion picture was an event attended by the wealthy and the elite. Their positive image of motion pictures and theater owners efforts to capitalize on the market of this large number of workers helped establish this form of entertainment in the United States as a viable one between 1890 and 1910.³⁶ The theaters for the immigrants were located their theaters in the same urban areas as the workers. The motion pictures were often shown in converted storefronts or were a secondary business within one store. For example, a dry goods store would clear out the back area, drop a few curtains, add a few planks for seats, advertise on the sidewalk with such things as "sandwich

³⁴Yant, 22.

³⁵Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 111.

³⁶Hayashi, 9.

boards," and show movies. The films that were shown were often comic in nature, consisted of two reels, and lasted 10 to 15 minutes. There was a belief that the public would not accept longer movies. As motion pictures became more popular (and thus more profitable) the motion pictures aspect of the business often eclipsed the other businesses sharing its space.

Prior to 1903, the motion picture film had to be purchased by the exhibitor. Since this was a major investment, most of the profits from showing movies were directed towards purchasing new films rather than improving buildings or seating. There was a consistent need for new films because people only wanted to see each movie once, and several films could be seen each day. Film exchanges were introduced in 1903 by Henry and Herbert Miles which alleviated some of the problems of acquisition costs.³⁷ They purchased films from various manufacturers and rented them for one quarter the purchase price. Renting movies from the exchanges freed up money for the theater owners, allowing them to put their efforts into other things, such as developing ways to draw people in to see their movies. The buildings in which movies were shown therefore began to change. Exchanges, such as the Miles Brothers Exchange, made movies more profitable and allowed proprietors to draw more people in since the feature changed frequently. Extra money and eagerness for more patrons led to buildings being specifically designed for motion picture theaters rather than the use of converted storefronts. Many small

³⁷Hayashi, 12.

family-operated movie theaters were built between 1903 and 1915 as a result of the new financial opportunities provided by motion picture operation.³⁸ The theaters were called nickelodeon theaters. The name originated from a theater that was opened June 15, 1885 in McKeesport, Pennsylvania by Harry Davis and brother-in-law John P. Harris in a remodeled store room theater. It was called "Nickelodeon" for its admission price of a nickel and the Greek word "odeon," for theater.³⁹ Many nickelodeons, most of them narrow stores with rows of chairs and a pianist to accompany screen action, opened around the country. By 1907 there were 5000 movie theaters in the United States.⁴⁰ Their patrons were mainly blue collar and illiterate.

These storefront theaters evolved into a building type of their own. Each theater owner tried calling attention to their theater by developing a distinguishing character from other buildings and theaters. The facades became eccentric and opulent in efforts to lure the passerby. They used incandescent lights liberally at a time that electricity was not yet omnipresent; using them to highlight, spell out, outline, and create decorative details. Pressed tin, stucco, plaster, burlap and pastel paints were all used to create illusions and lure in a crowd. The name of the theater was usually placed in large letters across the front of the building and the attractions

³⁸Hayashi, 13.

³⁹Charlotte Herzog, "The Nickelodeon Phase (1903 - c. 1917)," Marquee, vol 13 no 1 (1981): 5.

⁴⁰Csida and Csida, 138.

were advertised with banners stretched across the facade and with posters. The box office was centrally located within the recessed exterior vestibule with doors flanking it on both sides (see Figure 7). The floor was sloped up towards the entry doors, which created a downwards slope towards the screen which facilitated better sight lines. The interiors were still quite spartan with plywood benches, poor ventilation, and few exits. The new theaters were often located in working class neighborhoods and within a well-traveled business district. The most successful ones were located near four to five other theaters which facilitated theater hopping. Advice was given to potential theater owners not to open theaters in upper class neighborhoods or near places of worship. The motion picture industry had created their own building type, through borrowing and combining other entertainment iconography and by creating new elements.

Nickelodeons, however, began closing in 1909 due to new laws on seating, sanitation and ventilation.⁴¹ Taking their place were small film theaters, designed especially to show pictures. By 1912 these small film theaters were open in cities throughout the United States, with admission as much as 10¢ to 15¢.⁴² The advice to not locate theaters near places of worship is evidence of one of several societal objections that caused the motion picture industry to get a slow start. Motion pictures offered an alternative to the current established arenas for people to spend their indoor

⁴¹By 1917 they were gone.

⁴²Csida and Csida, 211.

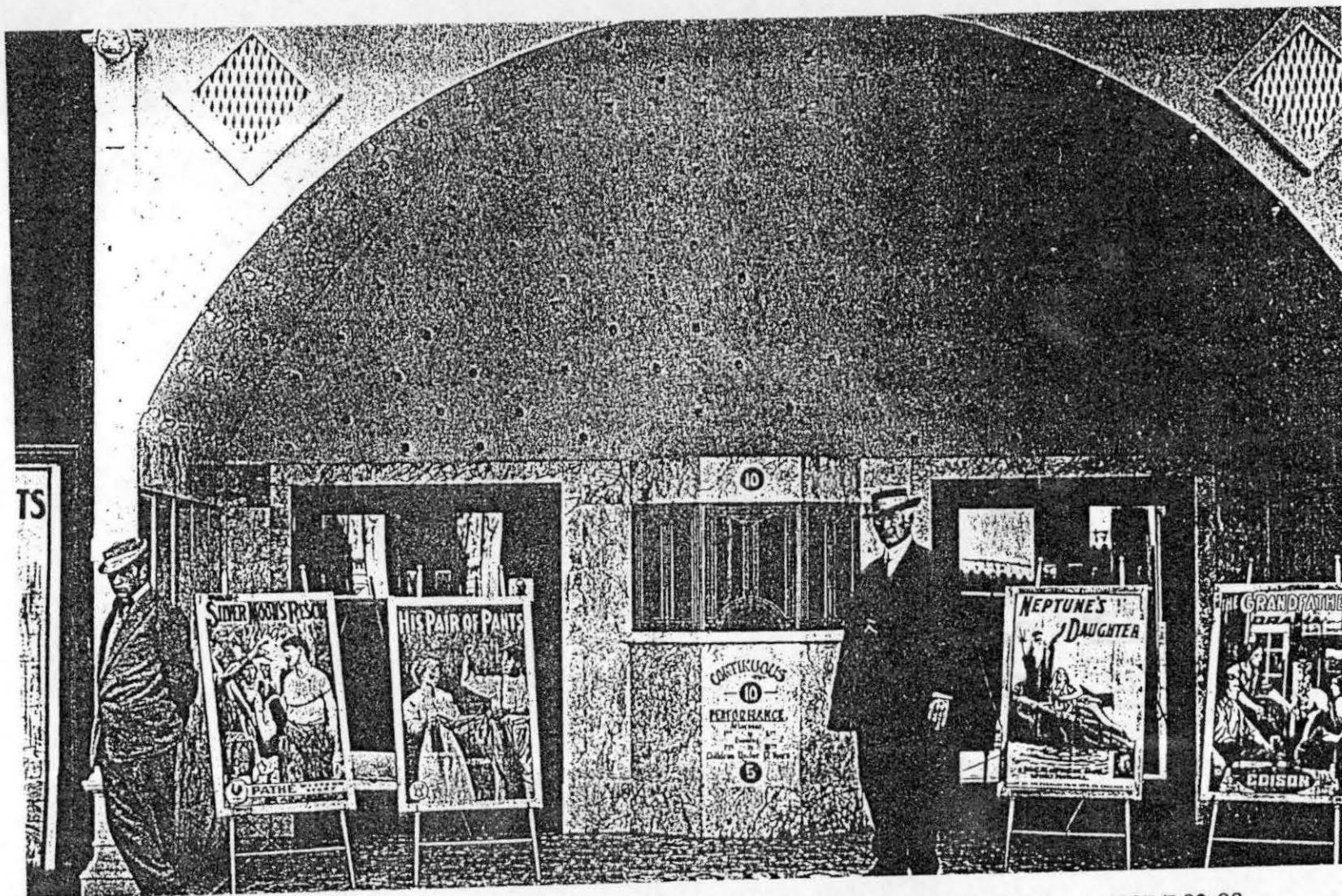


Figure 7 Savoy Theater, 825 Willamette, ca. 1912. Source: Lane County Historical Museum #22B/L82-88.

free time, such as churches and saloons. Churches complained because they began receiving less in their collection plates. Saloons disliked the motion pictures because they had to compete for customers. As a consequence, the motion picture houses began to have a reputation as a place in which immorality was occurring within the dark confines of the theaters. But the industry fought this image and perhaps because there was at the same time "an increase of leisure, with its accompanying increase of boredom, which according to Schopenhauer 'truly is a greater calamity for humankind than hunger',"⁴³ the industry grew and blossomed.

One cannot review the motion picture industry without looking at the Motion Picture Patents Company. This company was created from the intense competition that developed between Edison's motion picture operations and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, which had been formed in 1896 by Edison's previous assistant William Kennedy Laurie Dickson.⁴⁴ On December 18, 1908, the Motion Picture Patent Company was formed by Edison, Biograph, George Kleine, Essanay, Selig, Vitagraph, Lubin, Pathé Frères, Melies, Kalem⁴⁵ and French Gaumont⁴⁶ to pool their patents. It was a powerful group of pioneer producers and distributors, who agreed to hand over to the Patents Company all their patent claims and agreed to pay Edison a royalty fee for the right to produce and distribute films in

⁴³Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 110.

⁴⁴Csida and Csida, 76.

⁴⁵Csida and Csida, 210.

⁴⁶Slide, 81.

the United States. By becoming a part of the Company, the individual companies were admitting that Edison was the inventor of the motion picture, and they agreed that only films that had met Edison's approval could be produced. With this agreement, most of the motion picture industry was encompassed within the Patent Company's grasp.

The next year the Company further extended their hold on the industry when they established General Film, which was responsible for the distribution of the Company's films to licensed theater exhibitors only. Non-licensed exhibitors were refused films. "Thus, the Motion Picture Patents Company had to all intents and purposes monopolized the American film industry. No film could be legally produced, distributed or exhibited by any person or company not a member of the Patents Company group."⁴⁷

The Motion Picture Patents Company also began purchasing exchanges (i.e. small film distribution centers) and theaters. By October 1910, of 9,400 theaters in the United States, 5,281 were under their control.⁴⁸ A few people were willing to fight this mighty company led by J. J. Kennedy (the then head of the Kennedy family). One successful hold out was William Fox. He had begun with one small nickelodeon business and had grown by 1910 to owning a large group of theaters in

⁴⁷Slide, 81.

⁴⁸Slide, 84.

New York.⁴⁹ His company was called the Greater New York Film Rental Company.

Carl Laemmle also rejected the control of the Motion Picture Patents Company and rejected their idea that it was best to keep actors and actresses unknown, nameless. The movie producers preferred that there be no stars paid star wages. Instead, they wanted to continue paying actors proportionately low wages for one-reel films. The public, however, selected their own favorites, even without the advantage of movie credits that told the names of the actors. Without the actors real names, the movie-goers supplied them with appellations of their own. For example, the unbilled star in Biograph movies was Florence Lawrence. She was dubbed by the crowds "the Biograph girl." Laemmle organized the concept of a "star billing system," where the actors were named on the screen, hoping that an actor's reputation would pull in an audience. Star billing was a success and a major turning point in the production aspect of movie theaters.

Over the years many of the early companies within the Motion Picture Patents Company declined and disappeared. Many of them did not have the vision to realize that the cinema could grow and become an entity unto itself. For example, they were incapable of seeing that the public would accept, and really wanted, films that were longer than one or two reels. Their argument was that movie goers only had an attention span of approximately ten minutes.

⁴⁹Slide, 84.

Adolph Zukor is credited with bringing forward the proposal of lengthening films to longer than the standard two reels and with suggesting modifying the content of the movie. Zukor's idea was to film well-known plays with well-known actors in a serious manner. The result was movies that were longer, offered more variety, and exposed the middle and lower classes to plays that previously had been limited to the upper class. D.W. Griffith's 1913 movie Birth of Nation was the dramatic demonstration of these changes. This long feature ended whatever question remained about the viability and profitability of multiple reel feature length motion pictures. Film production was suspended in Europe when World War I began. As a consequence, the United States had the opportunity to become the dominant country in the world film market. By 1915, Hollywood had become the capitol of American movie production because film producers were enticed from the eastern part of the United States by the climate, good light and more lenient tax and labor laws.

As mentioned previously, many people in America associated motion pictures with immorality and the a lower class. This was especially true with the nickelodeons which were associated with the illiterate, blue collar immigrants. In order to gain the middle class' acceptance, movies began to be exhibited in more respectable quarters and associated with stage productions in concurrence with Zukor's idea. Theater owners felt that a structure that gave a sense of permanence and monumentality would lend a legitimacy to their places of business. Theater-goers were lured in with grandeur and elegance, often imitating Versailles or the Paris Opera House. These theaters seated as many as 5000 people. The first of these palatial movie theaters was

the New York City Regents Theatre (1913) designed by Thomas Lamb.⁵⁰ Another influential palace was the Strand Theatre (1914) on Broadway, operated by Samuel L. "Roxy" Rothepfel.⁵¹ The Strand Theater, with its elegant decor, "opened with a thirty-piece orchestra (to provide background music for the movies) and only a twenty-five cent admission charge."⁵² These theaters were such a hit that similar houses were opened around the country. Most of these large theaters, called picture palaces, were constructed in existing entertainment districts of major cities of 100,000 or more.⁵³

The typical picture palace sought to create a total environment for the moviegoer which was based on entertainment. This was especially appealing for people who wanted to escape their mundane lives. The event (the entertainment) and the environment (the theater) met this desire. The event began with an opening overture which often was a variation on the feature's music, a live stage show, a short comedy film, and a newsreel film. Only after this prelude did the feature film begin, accompanied by the theater organ. The theaters were a success due to their decorative interiors, large audiences, and first run movies.

⁵⁰Hayashi, 27.

⁵¹Csida and Csida, 213.

⁵²Csida and Csida, 213.

⁵³Douglas Gomery, "The Picture Palace: Economic Sense of Hollywood Nonsense?" Quarterly Review of Film Studies, vol 3 no 1 (Winter 1978): 24.

Picture palaces can be divided into two categories. The first category includes the glorified versions of the opera house, which often borrowed from historical styles of architecture and were labor intensive to construct. The second category is "atmospheric" theaters, which made their grand entry in 1922 with the opening of Houston's Majestic Theatre. This theater was designed by John Eberson, an architect who did many atmospheric and Art Deco theaters. The atmospheric theaters were a little less expensive and labor intensive. In the atmospheric theaters, environmental images on plain wall surfaces were used, including starry skies and outdoor landscapes. Decorative images were often influenced by events such as the 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb. The Egyptian motif and other thematic motifs such as Aztec, Moorish, Islamic were often used. Since these picture palaces were centered in major urban centers, the outlying areas still needed to be served.

Theater owners felt

obliged to win the American countryside as a market, the countless little towns of the Middle West whose Babbitts formerly felt only an unattainable desire for entertainment. The farmers and cowboys of the little prairie settlements were there also to be converted into moviegoers, as well as the inhabitants of the big cities who by and large had not yet become accustomed to reading books and engaging in other mental activity, and who consequently needed an accessible pastime.⁵⁴

⁵⁴Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 116.

By the end of the 1930s, there were nearly seven small theaters for every one picture palace.⁵⁵ This proliferation of theaters was encouraged by the great and consistent success of the new multiple-reel features.

The design of theaters was not respected by the architectural profession. This may have allowed renegade architects that designed theaters to be more free with their experimentation with design solutions. They often explored ideas presented at shows and expositions. One such exhibition that received a lot of attention was the 1925 Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris, which restricted the exhibited objects to those that were not imitations or reproductions of ancient styles. New styles emerged from this show, e.g. Moderne and Art Deco. Art Deco, also known as "Cinema Style" and "Hollywood Style" in theater design, was the more influential style for theaters and was predominately used in the smaller suburban theaters that gradually replaced, in number, the picture palaces.

New materials were being used in the theaters as well as new uses for old materials. These included terra cotta, glass block, aluminum, plastic laminate (commonly known as Formica), decorative tiles, chrome, and neon. Lights of all types were a key image to the theaters as they transformed the area into one of pulsating excitement when the sun went down. The automobile and the position of its occupants became another design consideration for theaters. People had to be attracted not only as they walked down the sidewalks but as they whizzed by in the

⁵⁵Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces Renaissance and Reuse (NY: Educational Facilities Laboratories Division, 1982), 11.

car. One solution was to place theater names at an angle to the street rather than against the building as had been the tradition since the nickelodeons and other pre-car advertising. Another was tall vertical signs which served as landmarks, especially in the vast open spaces of towns of the West.

In 1924, movie makers were invited to see a talking film which had been developed with a synchronized sound-on-disk system.⁵⁶ Their response was not at all enthusiastic. Sound was again introduced in 1926 as a last resort effort to save Warner Brother Studios from bankruptcy. They introduced the Vitaphone, which was the beginning of sound as a integral part of the motion picture. It made a substantial difference in the industry and Warner Brothers. Rene Fülöp-Miller wrote in 1938 about sound:

[the] naturalness in film photography has been reinforced by the addition of the sound apparatus, so that now people on the screen talk and make noises exactly as in real life. The water fowl now splashes not only optically, but acoustically as well; the stairs creak; and the gate of the castle falls in with a loud crash.⁵⁷

During the first several years of the Depression, movies which were a relatively inexpensive type of entertainment, prospered due to the introduction of the "talkies." The public quickly and positively responded to these talking movies, especially after The Jazz Singer (1927) was released. Attendance almost doubled from 60,000,000 paid admissions in 1927 to 110,000,000 at the end of 1929.⁵⁸ Only 500 United

⁵⁶Csida and Csida, 222.

⁵⁷Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 175.

⁵⁸Csida and Csida, 228.

States theaters had sound in 1928. Theaters rushed to install sound systems and by the beginning of 1929, 1300 theaters of the 20,500 in the country had installed sound.⁵⁹ By the end of the year, 9000 houses were wired, and before the end of 1930, 83% of all the houses in the nation showed talking pictures.⁶⁰

The great demand for sound soon reduced the installation prices that were originally between \$16,000 and \$25,000.⁶¹ By 1929, the price had dropped considerably. For example, one advertisement indicated that a RCA Photophone sound-on-film system could be installed in smaller theaters for \$2,995.⁶² Even though this invention spelled the demise for many of the picture palaces because of the sheer cost of conversion, it is credited for being responsible for carrying the motion picture industry through the Depression. Another development which enhanced the film's illusion was color and its development was fast on the heels of sound. Herbert Kalmus had begun to experiment with processes he called Technicolor around 1918.⁶³ By 1935, the Technicolor system was to the point that it delivered a highly acceptable full color print.⁶⁴ However, the impact of color movies did not match that of the initial overwhelming impact of the conversion of

⁵⁹Csida and Csida, 228.

⁶⁰Csida and Csida, 228.

⁶¹Csida and Csida, 228.

⁶²Csida and Csida, 228.

⁶³Csida and Csida, 215.

⁶⁴Csida and Csida, 229.

talkies. Neither did the three-dimensional films which Rene Fülöp-Miller said, "should complete the moving picture's ability to present completely deceptive replicas of nature."⁶⁵ With these advancements, movies became America's favorite entertainment.

Later theater architecture was also influenced by changing demographics, the automobile, and the economy. Urban shopping strips with theaters were a consequence of the automobile. Another automobile related phenomenon was the drive-in theater, which popped up near population centers on surrounding inexpensive land. The first drive-in to open was in Camden, New Jersey in 1933. Theater owners also followed the migration of people out of the cities and into the suburbs. Theaters were no longer focused in downtown areas or in the working class districts.

The economy played a part in the closing of many theaters during the Depression, and later during prosperity and World War II. Between the 1930s and 1940s those attending movies shifted to the middle and upper class, as lower income Americans could no longer afford to attend regularly. The motion picture industry's best year ever was 1946. This climax forecast a decline for the next thirty years, due in part to the development of television. Previous movie patrons stayed home instead of going to the movie causing many theaters to close during this time. In the novel,

⁶⁵Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 175.

The Last Picture Show when the lone theater in a small Texas town closed, the owner explained,

We just can't make it, Sonny...There wasn't fifteen people here tonight, and a good picture like this, Jerry Lewis. It's kid baseball in the summer and school in the winter. Television all the time. Nobody wants to come to show no more.⁶⁶

The book, ironically, was made into a film for the theaters in the 1970s. One author in Architectural Record stated that the

race with television will eventually settle down to a matter of real entertainment values...of intensity of illusion created...Its [motion picture] task is to remain ahead, to heighten dramatic quality, to lure the television owner out of his home for better entertainment value.⁶⁷

One notable attempt to heighten dramatic quality and fulfill Rene Fülöp-Miller's prediction was the introduction of three-dimensional motion pictures and the Cinerama (1952) which created a three-dimensional effect by surrounding the audience. The Cinerama has been most successful in amusement parks. Another, the Omnimax-type theaters, has been prosperous with movies such as To Fly and the Eruption of Mount St. Helens. As owners tried to encourage audiences to attend their theaters, new movie types and theaters were developed. The 1960s saw the development of X-rated theaters, shopping center theaters, and multi-plex theaters. In the 1990s, the motion picture theater competition worldwide has moved away from theater to video rentals and big screen televisions.

⁶⁶Larry McMurtry, The Last Picture Show (England: Penguin Books, 1966), 203.

⁶⁷"A New Architecture for the Movie Theatre," Architectural Record, vol 104 no 5 (November 1948): 122.

The motion picture industry and its buildings have gone through many transformations since it began in the later part of the nineteenth century. The technology of motion pictures progressed rapidly as did the entrepreneurial ideas which allowed the owners to spend money on the buildings. The architecture of theaters has always been a product of its time, especially in relation to technology and the public's attitudes. This can be seen in the designs of theaters built between 1910 and World War II when the designers were given more freedom by their clients. The theater owners demanded bold designs to attract movie patrons to their theaters. Many theater architects took full advantage of the requests, and perhaps went even further than they would have ordinarily because they were regarded as outcasts in the architectural profession. They had little to lose if their building designs were already looked upon with disregard.

Social Aspects of the Motion Pictures

To continue drawing people to the movies and making more money, the industry studied the minds of the masses. Rene Fülöp-Miller in The American Theatre and The Motion Picture in America tells his perspective on the issue:

It is true that the motion picture has developed not through the poetic urge of artists for creation, but from the calculations of shopkeepers, with the result that the film from its earliest beginnings until the present time has been mainly inspired by the desire for profits. The demand has determined the character, themes and styles of its products; without undue artistic considerations the movie producers have dared to throw themselves completely on the instincts of the public.

Only an entertainment form whose creators are concerned with winning the approval of a public of millions, with no regard for traditional aesthetic prejudices, may give us valuable material for the knowledge of what the masses wish, fear, hope, and what constitutes the reality of their inner life.⁶⁸

James Card, curator of the George Eastman House, agreed when he said: "For unlike the arts of individual expression, the aim of the film has been to reflect in pictures, the universal longings of the multitude."⁶⁹ The result was that the dealers "arrived at an insight into the public demand for entertainment that surpassed anything commercial psychology in that field had achieved up to the time."⁷⁰

Audiences all over the world were studied since the films' distribution were not limited to the United States. Therefore the subject matter of the film had to give "careful attention to all social, sexual and race prejudices, to prevent violating any convention which would arouse the antagonism of the public."⁷¹ Not even the tiniest detail could be included in a film which might run counter to a social taboo. The producers also realized that success would come to those films which realized the wishes and fantasies of the spectator. The movie would allow freedom from the "eternal necessity for watchful care that real life occasions, freed from the strenuous

⁶⁸Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 188.

⁶⁹George C. Pratt, Spellbound in Darkness (Rochester: University School of Liberal and Applied Studies, 1966); quoted in Slide, 8.

⁷⁰Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 117.

⁷¹Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 135.

effort of attentiveness, of the obligation to think."⁷² The producers wanted to know what were the "wishes, feelings, temperaments and philosophies of life of all mankind?"⁷³ In addition, it was necessary to satisfy spiritual needs and offer each patron something that could be taken away from the film.

One place that the industry looked for information was advertising. Here they found what people longed for: magnificent houses, sleek automobiles, beautiful people, good fitting clothes, and "happy, contented, smiling husband, wife and children."⁷⁴ Thus the films offered pictures of wealth and ease and luxury. No social barriers were in the way to accomplishing these goals in the movies. Geography was not a barrier either. Those who felt bored or stuck in their place could escape to the beauties of strange parts of the earth. The dark side of people was also included in the films.

If, in real life, education, law and threats of punishment have shoved the bolt against the activity of these instincts, the film spectator's sense of fulfillment is all the deeper when he sees fun poked at the guardians of the law, the heroine of the underworld idolized, and, as occasion offers, is permitted to live the crimes of criminals. Thus, the motion picture satisfies even the most secrete appetites, with no fear of consequences.⁷⁵

Mark Sennett's *Keystone Cops* is an example of meeting this impulse. No matter what type of fantasy one had, the film makers attempted to fulfill it. Technology

⁷²Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 150.

⁷³Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 118.

⁷⁴Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 133.

⁷⁵Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 143-144.

allowed audiences to receive the films that they desired; mechanics allowed the barriers of everyday life to melt away.

With a few production tricks and mechanical artistic conceptions, it is possible for this new medium to break down the casual thought obstacle, to conjure up the past, to slip omnipresently from one spot to another, to make the whole multitude of human dream-pictures appear in play-form combinations before the eyes.⁷⁶

Audiences approved of these attempts as is exhibited by the continued growth in the number attending the movies.

Subject matter was not the only thing that was scrutinized. The first film actors studied the masses to determine reactions. They attempted to acquire "the sure instinct as to what the crowd must be offered in order to hold it and to evoke its tears of sorrow or laughter."⁷⁷ One particularly successful actor was Charlie Chaplin. He explained the ideas that led him to develop his distinct character.

A tramp in a fine hotel--that is a universally effective situation. Almost everyone has seen himself in the role of a poor lonely creature in the midst of a day throng, with no point of contact and yet forced somehow to identify himself with the atmosphere about him. So I buried myself in the tiny nuances of such a figure; I practiced pulling down my shabby cuffs, getting the correct angle of the hat, all the gestures which could give the characterization a broader significance.⁷⁸

The motion picture, which can be considered a marvelous index to the primary functions of the human, met the needs and desires of the audiences.

⁷⁶Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 142.

⁷⁷Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 118.

⁷⁸Anderson and Fülöp-Miller, 127.

Even with all these other influences on the motion picture industry, another played an important part. This was the buildings in which the films were shown. In the beginning there were parlors, then the back rooms of businesses. Later came buildings specifically for movies. In each case the owners of these buildings strived to please the audiences, with the main goal of keeping them coming back to their theaters.

A theater is more than a building, a stage, or an auditorium.

It is a place in which to experience a heightened sense of life. Two factors interact to establish this vivid sensation -- the place and the performance. The drama is not an illusion of real life. It is more moving than life. The drama may be gayer than real life, more exalted than real life or fuller than real life, but it dare not remain a merely factual presentation, lest it perish...As with all human endeavor, the drama and the theater have been given various expressions by different people in varying places and in succeeding ages.⁷⁹

This dual interaction of place and performance was exhibited through the films that have been discussed and the things that were provided with the building. This included not only the building but also the services that went with it to heighten the grandeur and fantasy. Theaters employed ushers and usherettes to facilitate the ease of moving through the theater. At times they performed in military-like uniforms, at others they dressed in accordance to the film that was showing (see Figure 8). At all times they exhibited exemplary manners. "Ushers were taught speech and deportment, theater-management skills, and even military maneuvers. At the Roxy Theater in New York they reported for work in battalions and were trained by a retired marine

⁷⁹Joseph Urban, *Theatres* (NY: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1929), [1].



Figure 8 Usherettes dressed for Charlie Chaplin Movie. Source: Lane County Historical Museum, Kennell-Ellis Collection #23P1/L78-582/34A.

colonel."⁸⁰ Seat annunciators, a standard feature of Paramount theaters, were also used during this time of owners attempting to provide a sense of luxury. These were used to keep track of seating availability.

Ushers stationed at the head of each aisle dialed the number of available seats in their sections on a dial inset in the wall. The numbers dialed were transmitted via telephone lines to the ornate seat annunciators in the foyers, and lighted corresponding numbers behind the vertical glass panels. The usher stationed in the center of each foyer--who was called a 'splitter'--could then greet entering customers with news of exactly where they might find seats. "There are three seats on Aisle Five, to your left, Madam." 'Sir' and 'Madam' were requisite forms of address in the halcyon days of ushers.⁸¹

Theater architecture was another avenue that was used to provide a fantasy experience. Trying to influence the actions and thoughts of people through architecture was not a new idea. With theaters, the influence was rendered through such attributes as opulence in the picture palaces, painted starry skies in the atmospheric theaters, and murals and lighting in the McDonald theater. During the difficult consequences of war and depression, the desire of people to escape from the hard times and mundane daily existence was particularly significant for theaters.

Today, these theaters offer many of the same qualities. However they "also generally possess an ambiance held by few, if any, modern houses."⁸² This is in

⁸⁰Susannah Harris Stone, The Oakland Paramount, (Berkeley, CA: Lancaster-Miller Publishers, 1981), n.p.

⁸¹Stone, n.p.

⁸²Yant, 348.

stark contrast to the ubiquitous mall cinema, which "has as much charm as a hospital corridor," ⁸³

The richness of ornament characteristic of period theatres evokes a sense of festivity and grandeur that adds not only to the audience's pleasure (as anyone having enjoyed a performance in such a house will readily attest), but to the players enjoyment as well.⁸⁴

One performer stated it very well, "A fine old theater is inhabited by a certain magic you just can't build into a new facility."⁸⁵

⁸³Donald C. King, "From Museum to Multi-Cinema: An Outline History of Theatres in Boston," Marquee vol 6 no 3: 21.

⁸⁴Yant, 348.

⁸⁵Educational Facilities Laboratories, The Arts in Found Places (NY: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1976), 51.

CHAPTER III

MCDONALD THEATER ARCHITECTURE

Setting

The McDonald Theater building is located at 1004-1014 Willamette, Eugene, Oregon.¹ The building is located at the southwest corner of the intersection of East 10th Avenue and Willamette Street within the downtown area (see Figure 9). One block to the north is the intersection of Broadway (9th) and Willamette which is considered by many to be the epicenter of the downtown business district. The theater building's location indicates the special importance of the building and the institution in the life of this town. When the theater opened on May 7, 1925, the McDonald joined several other theaters in Eugene's downtown, including the Rex which showed motion pictures and the Heilig which showed motion pictures and live plays. All of these theaters were located on Willamette, within four blocks of each other (see Figure 9, Figure 10).² Locating several theaters within a concentrated downtown area was a common practice during this time as is evidenced here in Eugene, and other locations such as Tacoma, Washington and Portland, Oregon.

¹The theater's address is 1010 Willamette.

²Their addresses were 977 Willamette and 676 Willamette, respectively. The 1921 Polk's Eugene City and Lane County Directory indicates that there was a Castle Theatre at 817 Willamette, but it was not included in the 1925 directory.



Figure 9 Plan of Eugene Downtown with Theaters Located in Their Respective Blocks. Source: Author.



Figure 10 Willamette Street Looking North from Seventh with McDonald, Rex, and Heilig Theater Signs, ca. 1948. Source: Lane County Historical Museum #23P/L78-569T.

Eugene's first public hall was opened in 1869, west of Willamette on 8th Avenue.³ In 1882 the building was fitted as a theater and named Lane's Opera House.⁴ In 1884 Rhinehart's Opera House was erected at Broadway and Oak, becoming Eugene's second theater.⁵ The Heilig (1903), Eugene's third theater, was originally known as Eugene Theatre.⁶ It was built as an "opera house" by the Eugene Theater Company and leased to Portland theater manager, Calvin Heilig.⁷ These theaters were called opera houses even though they were not the classical large opera houses. The "adoption of the grandiose name 'Opera House' for provincial 'theatres' was, in fact, a classic example of the booster's art."⁸ As Glabb and Brown observed in their book A History of Urban America, "In the completion of the urban network, the quality of urban entrepreneurship often dictated whether the enterprise of city-building succeeded or failed."⁹ Every advantage counted for growing cities and the possession of an "opera house," however meager, proved to be one competitive

³Daniel Wyant, "Shows Lived Early Eugene. Need for Place for Performances Felt Early in Eugene's History," Register-Guard Centennial Edition, 15 February 1959, sec I, p. 5.

⁴Wyant.

⁵Wyant.

⁶The Heilig was remodeled in 1926 for motion pictures.

⁷Wyant.

⁸Gwen Sommers Yant, "Past, Present & Future: The History and Revitalization of American Theatres Built Between 1865 and 1919," (Master of Arts Thesis, Cornell University, 1982), 32.

⁹Charles N. Glabb and A. Theodore Brown, A History of Urban America (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1976), 116.

edge. Its value as a symbol of a town's refinement and culture was universally understood by "boosters", as was such a town's subsequently enhanced appeal.¹⁰

The Eugene community wanted to promote the town and did so through exhibiting its pride and a sense of identity. This was demonstrated in a newspaper advertisement greeting the new McDonald Theater.

...[we] wish to convey in a few words that a hearty welcome is extended to the new Lowell [McDonald] Theatre.

Eugene is justly proud of this well appointed theatre which compares most favorable with those in cities much larger in size than Eugene.

A few words of commendation is justly due the management of the Lowell Theatre for its realization. It denotes progressiveness, enthusiasm, the time of improvement--more in tune with progress, for which this hustling city has a widespread record in its favor.

In the joy of seeing things well done, in the possession of all that commerce calls best, you will...find all these ideals in the Lowell Theatre management fulfilled.¹¹

Eugene also had an advantage of being able to draw notable entertainment because it was a convenient one night stop for road companies traveling between Portland and San Francisco.

Eugene had theaters for many years prior to the opening of the McDonald. A random selection of City Directories provides a sense of the theater activity for the city. The 1907 Directory indicates that the Bijou Theatre and the Eugene Theatre were the active theaters. Both of these theaters had a Willamette address, 489 and 490 Willamette. The 1921 directory listed three theaters, the Castle (817 Willamette),

¹⁰Yant, 32.

¹¹"Hail to the New Lowell Theatre," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

Eugene and Rex Theatres. As can be seen through this brief sampling, Willamette street was the center of the theater activity for many years. In fact the Heilig, Rex and McDonald theaters all remained in operation through the early 1970s.

During the early years, theaters were generally built within the town's commercial area. As current wisdom holds, there are three important things to consider when buying real estate: location, location, and location. This was true even in the early part of the twentieth century. Edward Renton's book, The Vaudeville Theatre: Building, Operation, and Management notes,

The better the location, the more business is to be expected. The busier the street corner, the more bus and streetcar lines, the more centrally located [the theatre] the better. ¹²

Since these theaters were located in a business district, owners often took advantage of the situation and included other facilities within the same building as the theater. These facilities often included: a hotel, upper level apartments, office and/or commercial space. The incorporation of these other rental spaces insured a steady and additional income for the building's investors. The McDonald Theatre was no exception. Several commercial spaces were provided within the building. The 1925 Eugene Sanborn map indicates seven different spaces for the McDonald building (see Figure 11). Announcements and advertisements from the Eugene Guard, the evening newspaper, give an indication of the businesses which were in these spaces when the theater opened. They included Mr. A. M. Tripp's market, C. K. DeNeffe's clothing

¹²Edward Renton, The Vaudeville Theatre: Building, Operation, and Management (NY: Gotham Press, Inc., 1918), 11.

store, a print shop, a millinery shop, and a drug store. These commercial spaces are still being used today for such things as a bus station, a record store, a clothing shop, and a bookstore.

Currently the theater building is located within the downtown business district (although many would question whether it is an alive district) and is the only historic theater left in the downtown area or in the city. As much of the historic downtown was destroyed by urban renewal, it can be supposed that the other theaters on Willamette met their demise because of this trend.¹³ Perhaps the McDonald was saved from this fate of destruction or extensive alteration because it was owned by the original promoters, the Schaefers family until 1977.

The fact that the theater is still located in the downtown area can be looked upon as an asset. This is especially true when one reviews the success of programs such as the Main Street Program where downtown areas complete revitalizations of their core business district. In many instances theaters have been recognized and utilized as an important tool in the economic and physical rehabilitation of these areas. They bring life and dollars back into depressed, blighted, and often abandoned areas. Some cities, where there is activity during the day, benefit from business being brought back to downtown in the evening also. This encouragement of evening visitors to the area can be accomplished through promotions such as "cultural passports," where an agreement between businesses gives discounts at certain times to

¹³The Heilig was closed and destroyed in the early 1970s. The Rex was still open in 1981, although it had been remodeled beyond recognition.

patrons. For example the York Theatre in Elmhurst, Illinois, is next to a small restaurant. On a certain night of each week, the movie will be free for those who have eaten dinner that evening at the restaurant. Activities such as this promote the downtown area and encourage people to frequent the other businesses. Several people agree with this philosophy:

The prominent locations and imposing appearance of many period theatres have made them valuable spearheads and anchor buildings in the physical rehabilitation of targeted areas. By upgrading an area's appearance and attracting consumers, these theatres benefit not only businesses in the immediate vicinity, but attendant area establishments such as hotels and restaurants.¹⁴

These revitalized theaters help to "create a climate in which the decision to locate or remain in a city or region is viewed not as a risk, but as an investment."¹⁵ New businesses are established, generating new jobs and additional tax revenue, while the quality of life and surroundings is improved and new residents are attracted.¹⁶ These events can eventually lead to the rejuvenation of an entire area.

Style

Theater architecture for many years followed the prevalent stylistic trends. Many followed the elements of Roman and Greek classicism, while others abandoned

¹⁴Yant, 360.

¹⁵David Cwi, "The Economic Importance of Cultural Facilities," (Brochure) Available from the Cultural Policy Institute, Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁶Yant, 360.

these for the "Romantic styles -- neo-Gothic, Egyptian and Tuscan."¹⁷ Gwen Yant's study determined that two styles between 1868 and 1910 were particularly pervasive among theaters, the Romanesque popularized by H. H. Richardson and the "American Renaissance" introduced by Beaux-Arts trained architects.¹⁸ Sometimes a combination of the two styles was also used. "In addition, late western theaters began to be built in a variety of native American revivals. San Francisco's Alcazar Theatre, for example, was of Mission Revival design."¹⁹ But the experimentation that occurred with facade design did not develop an easily recognizable "theatre style," that distinguished theaters from other commercial buildings. This was because owners still wanted to maximize the number of patrons and income rather than to spend money on art and other conveniences. This began to change as more money was available to owners, when they began to feel confident that theaters were going to continue to be a profitable venture, and when they had to look for new ways to draw people into their theaters.

The designs for theaters became quite embellished as this new avenue to increase profits was pursued. The epitome of this trend can be seen in the lavish, very large movie palaces that were created by architects such as Rapp and Rapp and John Eberson. The small theaters were not immune to this trend and also received

¹⁷John Cornwall Edwards, "A History of Nineteenth Century Theatre Architecture in the United States" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1963), 63.

¹⁸Yant, 74.

¹⁹Yant, 76.

extra attention to their architecture. During the 1920s these small theaters often were lavishly ornamented "thematic" theaters, used by operators "to attract audiences through novel decor and luxurious appointments."²⁰

The McDonald Theatre benefitted from this attention to architectural styles and decoration. One newspaper declared the building "to be one of the city's finest buildings in appearance and in construction."²¹ The building has been described in many different ways: Romanesque, Mediterranean, Byzantine, Oriental and Nordic.²² A blend of these flavors is perhaps the best description of the McDonald. The eclecticism here and in many other theaters was common. The Romanesque style, with its massive proportions and arches, was defined in 1926 as a theater staple and is evident in the McDonald.²³ A contemporary news article agreed with the Romanesque classification of the McDonald by using words such as solidity, massive construction, staunch and stout when describing the new building. The building's exterior was finished with stucco, making it "not only a durable, but a beautiful finish."²⁴ It originally had a false shed tile roof which served as a decorative parapet. A pedestal with an urn on each of the three corner piers that extended above

²⁰Elisabeth Walton Potter, Lucy Pope Wheeler, and Denys Peter Myers. "Oriental Theater, Portland, Oregon, Historic American Building Survey" excerpts printed in Marquee, IL: Theatre Historical Society, vol 19 no 1 (First Quarter, 1987): 7.

²¹"Stien Bros. Erect Lowell Building," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

²²The descriptions were made in various articles of the Eugene Guard.

²³"--and Now It's Oriental," Exhibitors Herald, (May 15, 1926): 23.

²⁴"--and Now It's Oriental."

the roof line was another original feature. The pedestals do not remain, but they could easily be returned. This can be facilitated by the existence of copies of the original measured drawings of the corner piers and urns which are available at the Lane County Historical Museum Library. Other original features, which are still existing, were described in the McDonald Theatre Building's National Register Nomination Form:

In line with the architrave, the corner pier panels are capped with terra cotta trim surmounted by a circular, convex surface of blue terra cotta in a frame of cream terra cotta. This motif, employed at both ends of the front facade and around the corner on 10th Avenue, remains intact. The terra cotta cornice and upper portion of the frieze are embellished in a classical decor. The frieze contains a row each of dentils and egg and dart pattern. The cornice is mounted with a row of projecting, open-mouthed lion heads. These details, crucial to the strong horizontal nature of the facade and its understated classical elegance, are intact.²⁵

The front of the building was of terra cotta, granite and Belgian Blue marble trim. Over the main entrance to the theater and above the marquee was a large arch with a keystone. Pilasters framed the entrance to the theater, which along with the arch, emphasized the entrance to the theater.

Materials alone cannot create a successful theater. A spirit must be there also, an aim, behind which must be a philosophy of life and a supreme ambition to give expression to the highest ideals.

The spirit is felt immediately as one enters the new Lowell [McDonald] theater. Here the ambition was to present a theater that

²⁵Carmi Weingrod and Judith Rees, "McDonald Theater Building National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form," (City of Eugene, HCC Department, Eugene, OR, 1981), sec. 7, p. 1.

would be ideal in every way, to present first of all an atmosphere that would put a person in the most receptive mood for genuine enjoyment.

To achieve this aim two styles of architecture were carefully blended. To the solidness of the Romanesque was added the lighter, freer Byzantine, with its remarkable ability to convey impression with color, rather than bold or carved relief. So the Roman arch is lightened and made [alive] by the Byzantine color mood, and the whole is so carefully met that the feeling is one of harmony and satisfaction. The stolid philosophy of the Roman, that life is a serious business, something to be safeguarded at every turn, is relieved by the Byzantine outlook of carefree joy and splendor.²⁶

The man responsible for the exterior architecture of this spirited theater was Lee Arden Thomas, an architect from Portland, Oregon.

Some say that between 1868 and 1910 theaters in America were built by stage carpenters.²⁷ Gwen Yant refutes this with her study of theaters. She found that many early theaters, both urban and rural, were designed by architects. As the number of theater commissions increased, architects began to advertise their services for this building type along with other buildings. One prolific Pacific Northwest architect was E. W. Houghton. "Of the 339 buildings designed by him between 1889 and 1909, 20 were theaters, located in such cities as Seattle, Butte, Spokane, Bellingham, Aberdeen, and Helena."²⁸ As theaters grew in demand, so did the number of theaters that were required. Soon architects began specializing in the

²⁶"Spirit Guided by High Ideals Felt in Lowell Theater, " Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

²⁷John A. Fox, "American Dramatic Theatres--I," The American Architect and Building News, vol 6 no 186: 20.

²⁸Official Guide to the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, (Seattle, Washington: Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, 1909), 63; as found in Yant, 105-106.

design of theaters. This is supported by Clarence Blackall in a 1908 article, "[T]here are several architects [today] who do hardly anything but theatres."²⁹ Some of these architects went on to national fame for their theater designs during the 1920s and 1930s. Two giants were John Eberson (1910 Walnut Street Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky) and Chicago's C. W. and George Rapp (1910 Orpheum Theatre in Dubuque, Iowa).³⁰ Rapp and Rapp also completed Oregon's largest theater in Portland, the Publix Theatre, later known as the Paramount.³¹

Illusion

The architecture of movie palaces was a reflection of the technological developments of the cinema and the desire for escapist entertainment. The architectural experience was meant to be a part of the theatrical entertainment, growing from the stage to the screen and reflecting the imaginative qualities of both live and filmed production. The illusionary world of film also helped achieve the escape from daily life. The first technological developments that led toward film was taking a real object and placing a semblance of it on a piece of paper through the photograph. With continued development, motion pictures were created. In the motion picture events that looked realistic as possible were placed on the screen. No

²⁹Clarence H. Blackall, "The American Theatre--XI," The Brickbuilder, vol 17 no 10: 233.

³⁰Yant, 106.

³¹Elisabeth Walton, "Historic American Buildings Survey, The Oriental Theatre," Salem, OR: State Parks (January 1970), 1.

longer was the real thing needed for each audience, the actors could perform just once and be projected millions of times all over the world onto a flat screen. At first the plots for these films were rather unimaginative, but as the art of film-making progressed they became quite elaborate and even futuristic. Through film, people experimented with creating an illusion of three-dimensional events on a two-dimensional screen. They tried many ways to enhance this illusion in film, first by adding sound, then color, and then 3-D. Theater architecture followed similar steps towards the three-dimensional illusion. First theater architecture was just a plain back room. Later it grew into its own building type. As film continued to progress, theater architecture began to become more exotic. Just as films were attempting to place three-dimensional objects on a flat screen, theaters such as the McDonald attempted to do the same, only onto a wall rather than a screen. Some theaters created the illusion through painted starry ceilings. In the McDonald the exotic illusion was created through the use of numerous stencils, creative types of lighting, and murals.

Lee Thomas

Lee Thomas was an architect who included theaters within his repertoire. He also designed homes, commercial buildings, the \$200,000 Grand Central Public Market,³² and even the acclaimed Union Memorial Building on the campus of

³²Walton, 8.

Oregon State University in Corvallis. This 20th Century Classical building at Oregon State University was completed in 1928.³³

Lee Arden Thomas was born in Plattsmouth, Nebraska in 1886.³⁴ He received in 1907 a Bachelor of Science degree from Oregon State College and in 1910 a Bachelor of Architecture from Cornell.³⁵ He also attended a special architectural course at Columbia University. Thomas began practicing architecture in Seattle with Somerville and Putnam.³⁶ Later, when he moved to Portland, he was associated with A.E. Doyle and subsequently spent three years with the Portland School District architectural staff. He started his own private practice in 1913.³⁷ "When the Oregon Architects Registration Law was enacted in 1919, Lee Thomas had the distinction of being named by Governor Ben W. Olcott to the original State Board of Architect Examiners."³⁸ In 1924 he and Albert Mercier joined, creating the firm of Thomas and Mercier. Mercier, the junior member in the partnership, had spent several years of his youth in Spokane, Washington with his parents. His early architectural years were spent in Portland with Whitehouse & Price, and George K.

³³Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8 and sec. 8, p. 1.

³⁴Toni McSwain and Nancy W. Price, "Great American Movie Theaters: Egyptian Theatre," National Trust for Historic Preservation Form, (August, 1986), 1. Available from The Theatre Historical Society.

³⁵Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3.

³⁶Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3.

³⁷Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3.

³⁸Walton, 8.

Keith.³⁹ After serving in World War I, working in Wenatchee, Washington and the National Builders Bureau Mercier returned to Portland in 1923.⁴⁰

Thomas and Mercier's firm was recognized not only for the previously mentioned buildings but also for their design for a number of theaters in the popular exotic style. Their Portland theaters included: the Bagdad theater (1926) which cost \$135,000 and was called a "fine example of the Italian Renaissance" style; and the Oriental theater.⁴¹ The firm of Thomas and Mercier was chosen to design the Oriental because of their long association with Portland's East side (where the theater was located) and their prior experience in theater design (see Figure 12). This theater was "the most elaborate of their eclectic designs"⁴² and cost between \$300,000 and \$500,000.⁴³ Built in conjunction with the Weatherly building, the Oriental Theater was located between Morrison and Belmont streets at 828 SE Grand Avenue. It was considered to be the second largest movie theater in Oregon. Its grand opening was December 31, 1927⁴⁴ and its final destruction came in February, 1970.⁴⁵ The

³⁹Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3.

⁴⁰Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 4.

⁴¹Costs came from Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3; dates came from Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8 and sec. 8, p. 1.

⁴²Walton, 7-8.

⁴³Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3.

⁴⁴Walton, 7.

⁴⁵Walton, 1.

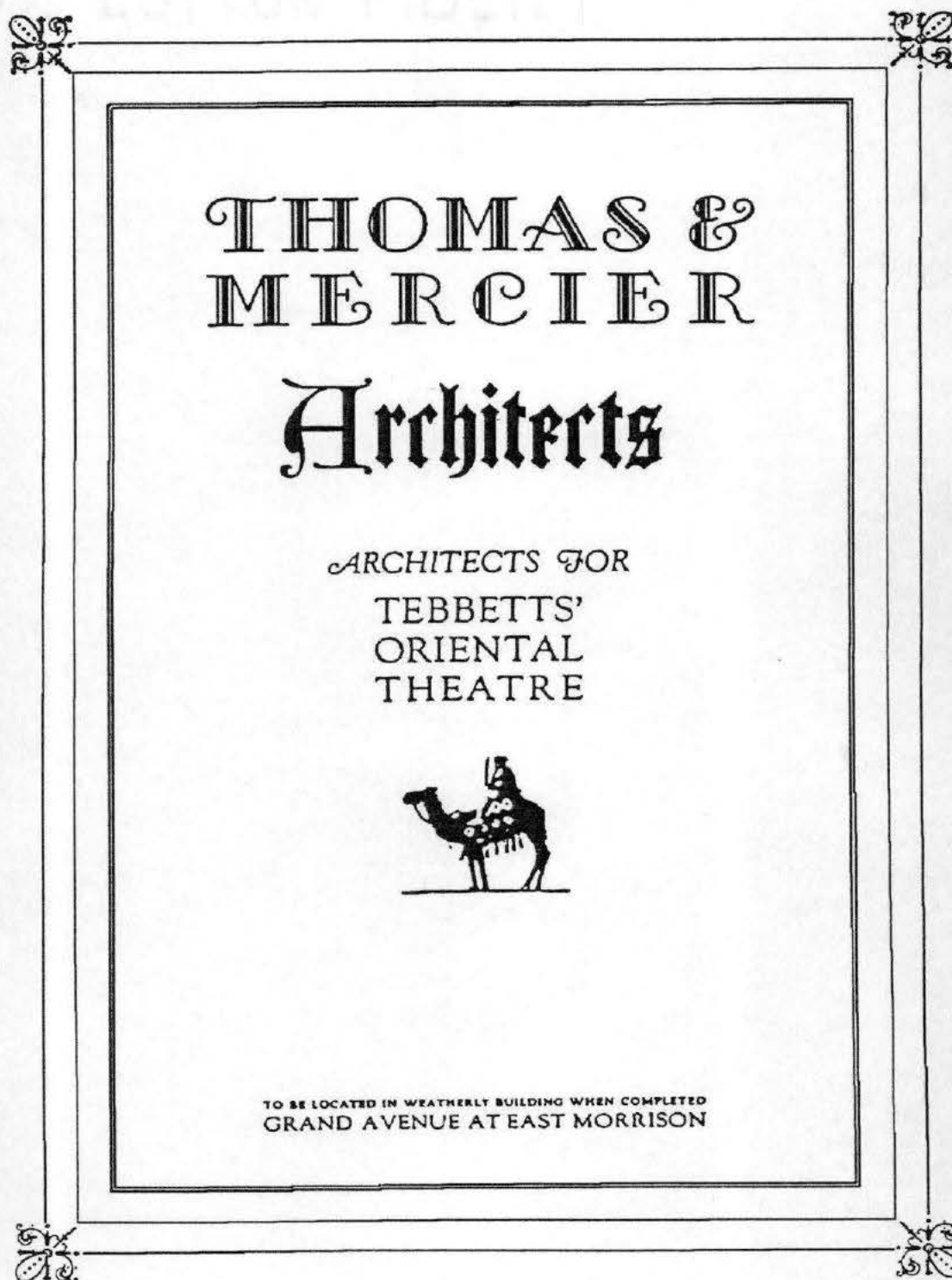


Figure 12 Page From Opening Souvenir Brochure of Oriental Theater. Source: Marquee, (vol 19 no 1), 17.

Oriental was a notable example of the thematic decor which was derived from exotic cultures and was popular at the time. As the name indicates, the theater was done in the ornamental Oriental style "which was not intended to recreate any historic structure, but rather to create the feeling of an exotic culture through the use of recognizably authentic design vocabulary."⁴⁶ This theater is notable for many other reasons. Its plasterwork was executed by the internationally known Portland sculptor Adrien Boisin; it featured the only orchestra pit in Portland that was on an elevator; and the theater's sign and marquee made a remarkably early and extensive use of neon lighting. According to a Souvenir Commemorating the Gala Opening, the sign was the "largest NEON theatre sign in the US."⁴⁷ This may not have been true, but "certainly, it was a remarkably early example of so extensive a use of neon lighting."⁴⁸ Other theaters in the state that Thomas and Mercier completed were the Salem Capitol (1926) for \$40,000 and the Coos Bay Egyptian Theatre (1925) for \$60,000.⁴⁹ The Egyptian Theatre in Coos Bay, Oregon, originally was an auto garage and service station. It was remodeled in 1925 by Lee Thomas into a theater.⁵⁰ The interior and exterior remain virtually intact today and the auditorium

⁴⁶Walton, 15.

⁴⁷Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 7.

⁴⁸Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 7.

⁴⁹Potter, Wheeler, and Myers, 3; Walton, 7-8; dates came from Weingrod and Rees, sec. 8 and sec. 8, p. 1.

⁵⁰The Egyptian is located in the retail district of Coos Bay at 229 S. Broadway.

still has its Wurlitzer organ. The decoration "is a paeon to the romantic nations of ancient Egypt which swept this country in the wake of the [1922] discovery and excavation of the tomb of Tutankhamen."⁵¹

⁵¹McSwain and Price, 1.

CHAPTER IV

MCDONALD THEATER INTERIOR SPACES

Entrance

Description

The experience of the McDonald Theater begins upon arrival to the building. One is greeted with a marquee and signs indicating the name of the theater and the attraction. These have long been an important part of theater architecture. Letting everyone know the name of the attraction goes back to the days of back room films when sandwich boards were often placed on the sidewalk for advertisement (see Figure 13). As theaters came into their own, the signage became more elaborate. Hundreds of lights were used to draw attention to the theater. This was particularly effective at night and in wide open expanses where the tall signs could be seen at great distance. During the day, those passing by could be drawn to the theater with display boards advertising the latest and coming attractions. With the addition of automobiles to everyday life, theaters also accommodated the new perspective, the view from the road. The solution often was to place signs perpendicular to the street in very large letters. This would allow the passengers of cars speeding by to be told what was at the theater.



Figure 13 Orpheum Theater, Chehalis, Washington, ca. 1911. Source: Lane County Historical Museum #E3N/L82-92.

The McDonald is not an exception to this evolution of advertisements. This can be seen in Figure 2, Figure 14, Figure 15 and Figure 16 which span many years. "The original marquee was of burnished copper and glass. Above the marquee, a large electric sign spelling "McDonald" in the shape of a sky rocket shot upward from the roof.¹ The rocket shot up from the back of the tile roof and rose to a height of 22'.² From there it burst into stars that fell on both sides of the letters that spelled the theater's name. Above the marquee at the mezzanine level was a great archway. Beneath the marquee on each side of the box office, facing inward, were built-in display frames.³ The marquee was replaced in 1938 with one that was two-sided, lighted and "that expanded upward to read 'McDonald,' thus covering the arched opening. Additional display frames of travertine marble closely matching the terra cotta in color were built on each side of the entrance."⁴ In 1971 the marquee was again replaced with a streamlined, nondescript sign. This sign was blown off in the December 1987 wind storm. Henry Kunowski, the preservation specialist in the city of Eugene's planning department, joked that this removal of the marquee was an act of God, and the artist played upon the wind loss in the rendering for the replacement with the reader board advertising "Gone With the Wind" (see Figure 17). When the

¹Carmi Weingrod and Judith Rees, "National Register Nomination for McDonald Theater Building," (Eugene, OR: City of Eugene, HCC Department, December 1981), sec. 7, p. 1.

²"New Lowell Theater Will Be Open Soon," Eugene Guard, 25 April 1925, 1.

³Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 1.

⁴Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 1.



Figure 14 View of Exterior of McDonald Theater. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

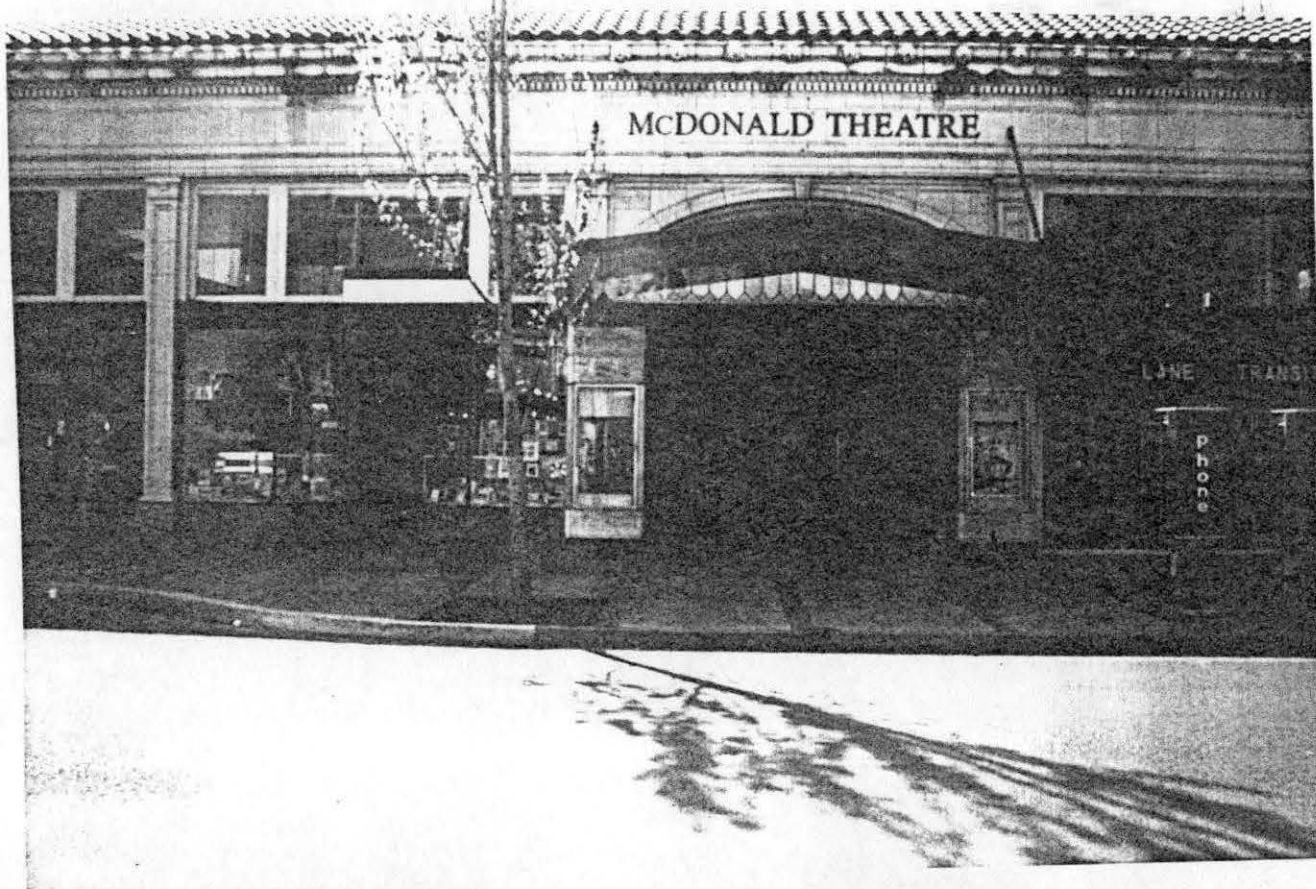


Figure 15 Exterior View of McDonald Theater. Source: Author.



Figure 16 McDonald Theater on 13 November 1928. Source: Lane County Historical Museum, Kennell-Ellis Collection #23P1/L78-582/33.

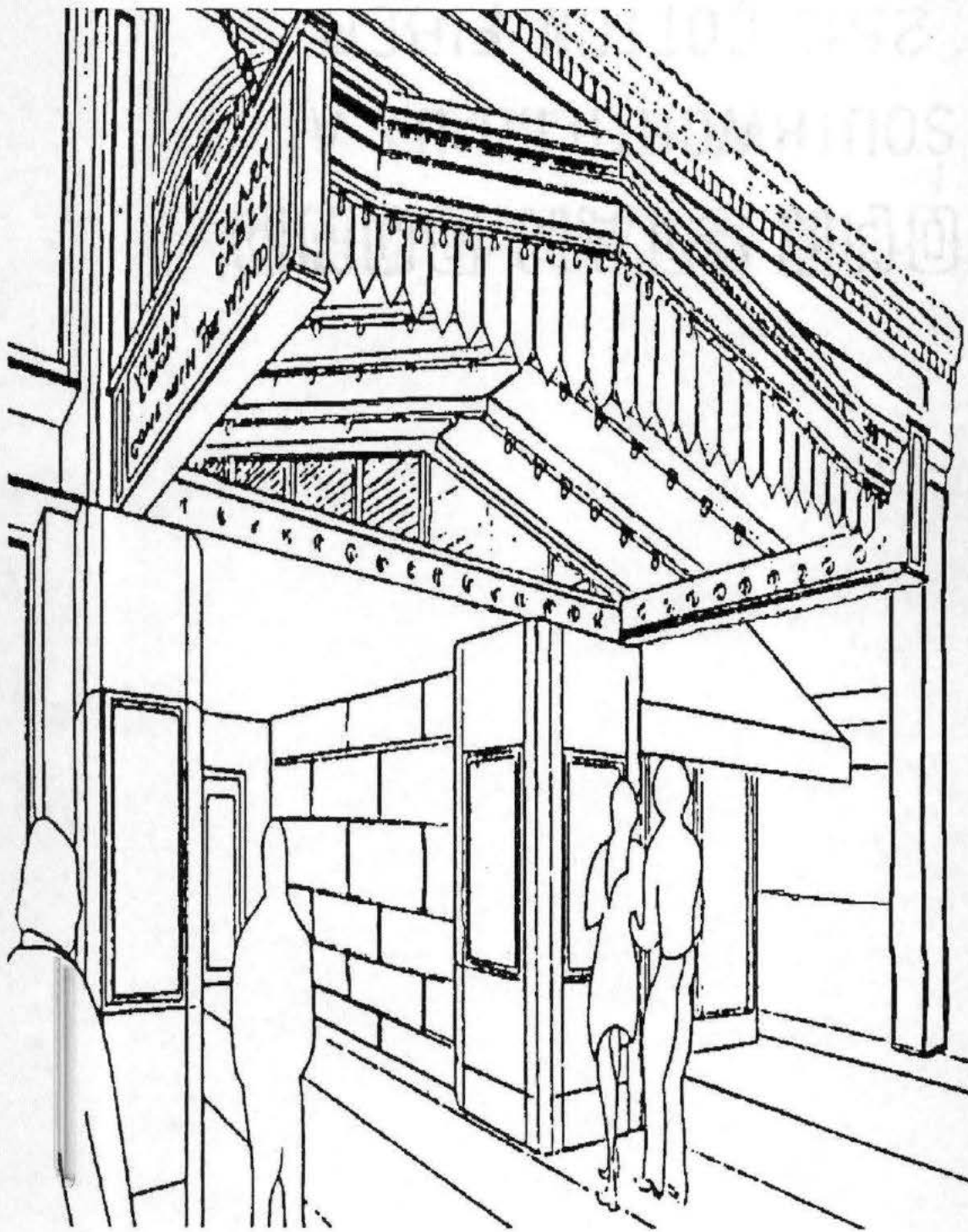


Figure 17 Artist's Rendering of New McDonald Theater Marquee. Source: Register Guard (23 February 1989), 4B.

marquee came off, the arched window was rediscovered and reglazed to match the original. The replacement marquee was designed to emulate the original 1925 marquee (see Figure 16). The sign included copper that developed a patina over time, miniature incandescent light bulbs around the perimeter and reader boards to advertise the featured films. The original marquee only provided two feet of overhead protection of the patrons. The new one was extended five feet to provide seven feet of protection over the sidewalk.⁵

Below the marquee, in line with the sidewalk, a ticket booth was often located to facilitate purchase of tickets. The McDonald's booth was centered directly in the outer lobby and bordered the sidewalk. A newspaper article bragged about the ticket booth:

A feature of the lobby of the new Lowell [McDonald] theater is the large quarters for the girl who presides at the ticket window. She is not shut in behind bars, not cramped in any way. The windows are full length on three sides.

This is the latest type of equipment for this department of theaters, and it makes for greater efficiency. With plenty of room, the ticket seller can work faster, and patrons can be better accommodated, it is stated.⁶

The booth was dismantled in 1971, and replaced by a counter inside the doors. The 1981 National Register Nomination form indicated that the etched glass of the original booth was in the theater basement. Unfortunately this could not be located at the

⁵Ann Portal, "Downtown Theater to Get New Marquee," The [Eugene] Register-Guard, 23 February 1989, 4(B).

⁶"Ticket Booth Ample In Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard 7 May 1925, 2.

present time. The plan and placement of the ticket booth can still be seen and the raised tile floor of the entry area is still intact (see Figure 18).

Since the booth is located beneath the marquee, it is often covered in darkness in photographs. A few close-up photos show the ticket window, but the structure was often covered with decorations advertising the current film (see Figure 19). Figure 16 gives the best indication of the ticket booth's original form. The National Register Nomination Form stated that although the entrance ceiling has been lowered with a layer of prefabricated ceiling squares, the original ceiling remains intact above.⁷ The doors entering into the building have also been mostly hidden by darkness in photographs, and are no longer in place (see Figure 20). A door that might have been an original entrance door was located in the stage area. "Cocoa mats will be at the entrance to the inner lobby. Arched columns, a heavily carpeted floor, and four large framed paintings in antique Florentine frames on the walls will be outstanding."⁸ The frames are still evident, but without the paintings. One frame has an historic exterior photograph with a short description of the theater. Most of the others remain empty.

⁷Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 1.

⁸"Lowell Open Soon."

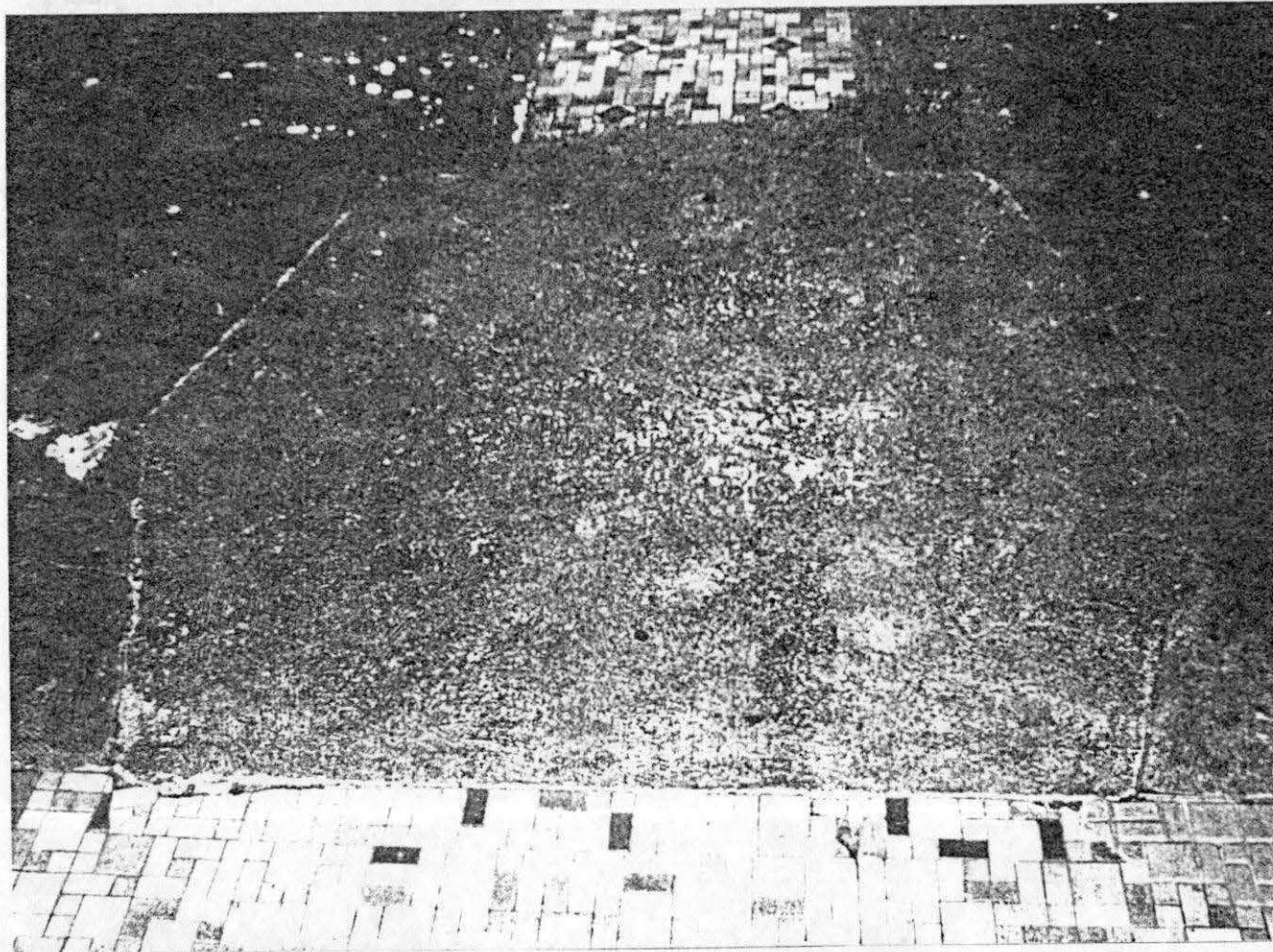


Figure 18 Outline of Original Ticket Booth. Source: Author.

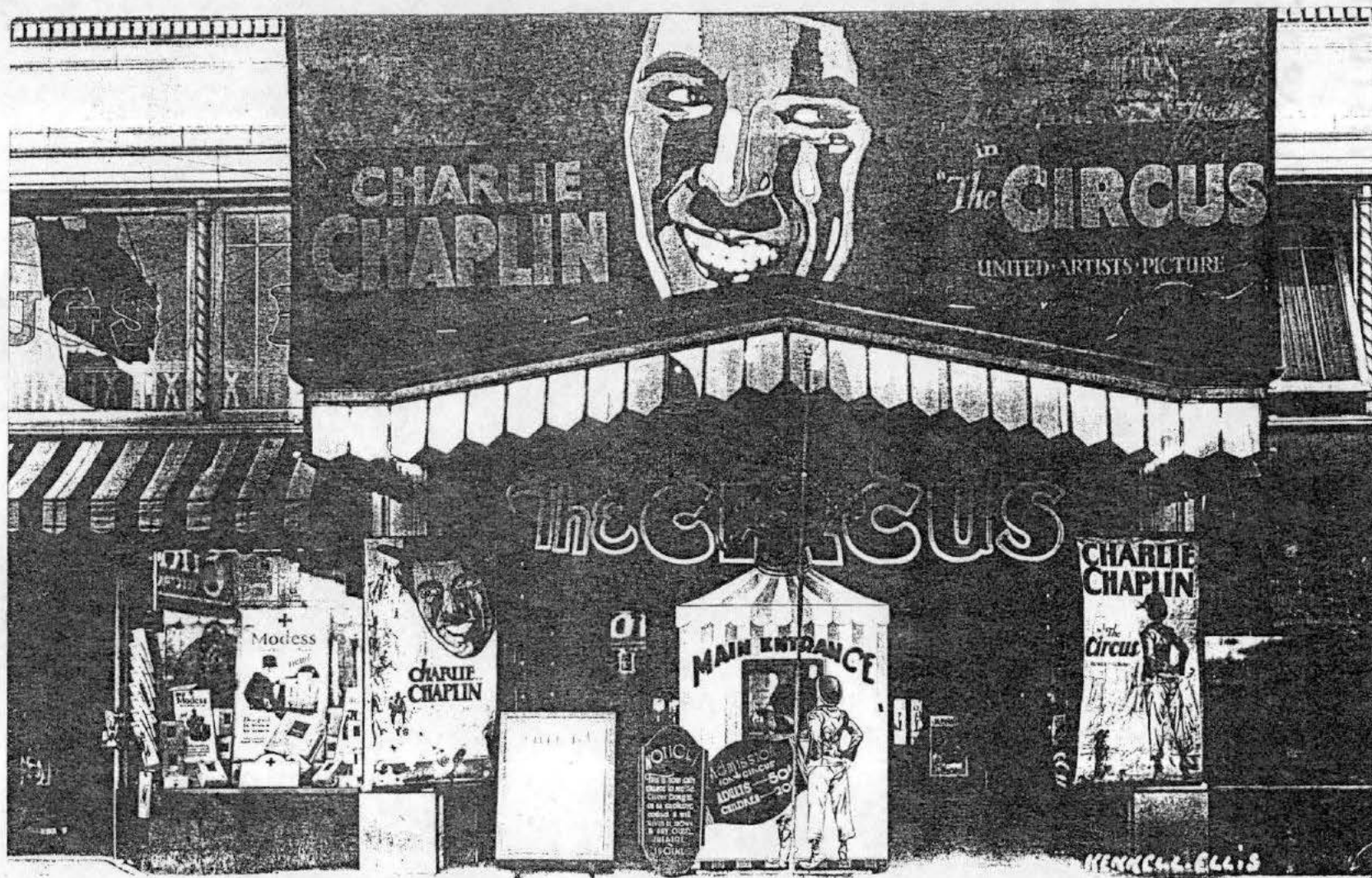


Figure 19 Exterior of McDonald Decorated for Charlie Chaplin Movie. Source: Lane County Historical Museum, Kennell-Ellis Collection #23P1/L78-582/35.

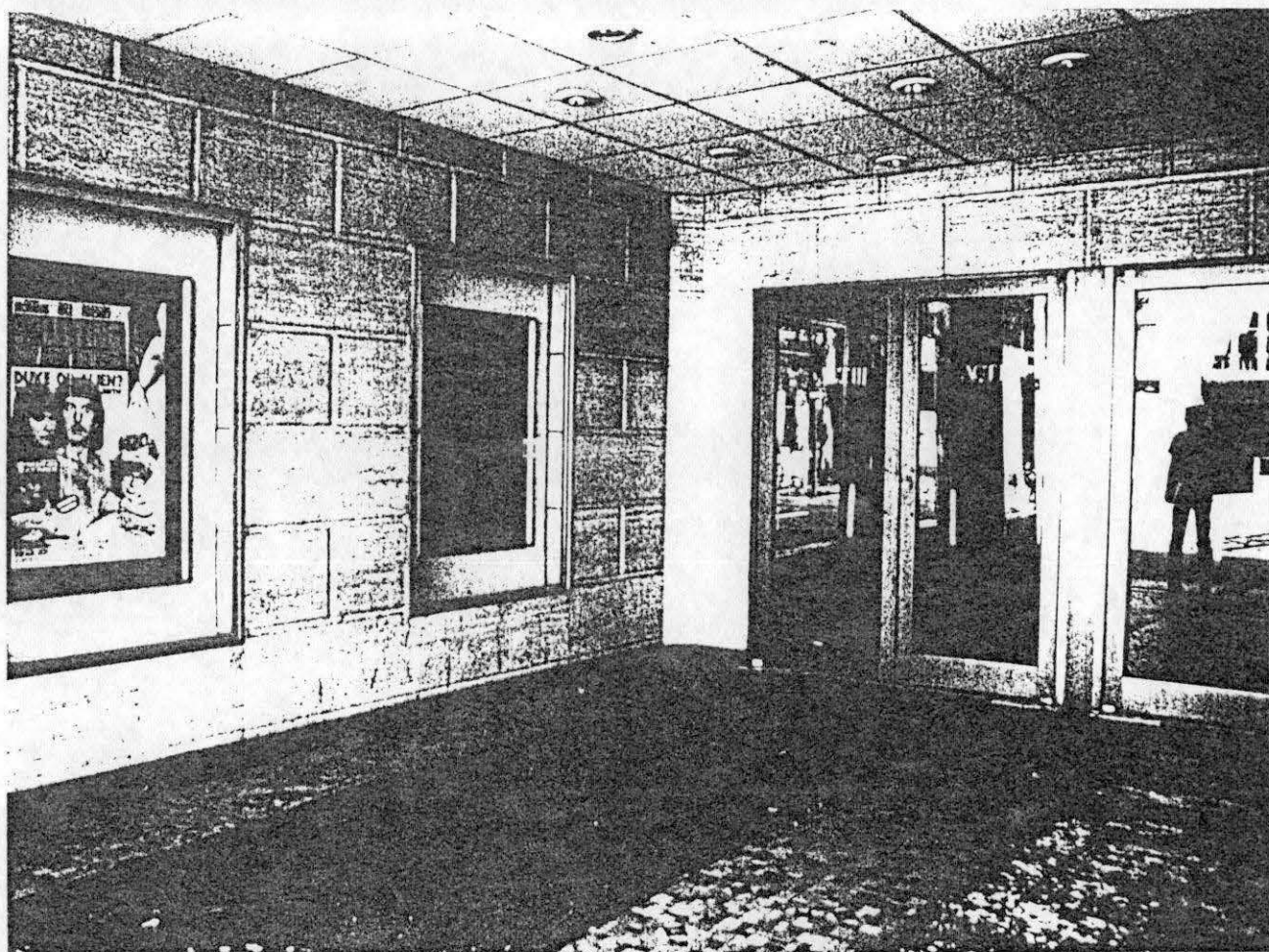


Figure 20 Entrance of McDonald Theater. Source: Author.

Recommendations

Currently the lobby is simply a space between the doors and the foyer where you happen to purchase a ticket. The space exhibits a hall-like dark atmosphere. There are a few framed areas that are not being utilized to their fullest. A chair or bench is interspersed along the wall. The ceiling is coved. Little physical description and no photographs of this space has rendered detailed description of the area. This space can be used for new functions that are needed for today's theaters. This recommendation is based upon the theory that, since it did not warrant a full description in the extensive newspaper articles, it played only a minor part in creating the atmosphere of the theater. With this in mind, the architectural space of the lobby is recommended to contain the new required items. Ideally the ticket booth should be returned to the center of the entrance edging the sidewalk. The design could be done by one who has studied the early photographs of the theater and has been able to assimilate the style and character of the building. With this in mind, and with clues taken from the parts of the booth that are visible in the photographs, a design that is sympathetic to the original could be created. If returning the ticket booth to the outside is impossible, it is recommended that a new ticket counter be constructed inside the doors, and again with an eye towards the original architecture. This could be accomplished with a design that incorporates the decorative elements of the rest of the theater with the technological requirements of ticket sales. The ticket booth

should become a part of the architecture rather than looking like it was a second thought and not one that was very carefully considered.

The concession stand should be moved to the entry hallway. With all the activity that a concession stand creates, the once hall-like space could become quite lively. This would be a benefit in several ways. First it would create a much more welcoming feeling to those first entering the door. Second, the activity would catch the attention of other people passing by the theater and perhaps draw them into the theater. The current location of the stand does not keep people near the door and does not attract attention. Attending movies has long been a social event and those passing by may desire to become part of this activity or at least to investigate what has drawn so many people together. The increased activity would also enliven this currently dark, uninviting space that serves only as a way to get from one place to another. Another advantage of moving the concession stand from its current location in the foyer, is discussed later.

It is recommended that the walls and ceiling of the entrance be repainted, maintaining the character that has been established by the foyer and auditorium and based upon a paint analysis. The frames on the walls once again should encompass paintings and the floor coverings returned as described in the newspaper article. The cocoa mats at the entrance will function as doormats, attracting dirt and protecting the carpet from heavy soiling. The hanging light fixtures in the entrance should be similar to those in the foyer, perhaps in a smaller scale.

Foyer and Ramps

Description

[Upon] entering the lobby, the massiveness of the Roman arches is relieved by gay colored lunettes on each side, in which the rich coloring of the ancient Oriental world are allowed full display. The soffits are in warm tones, in harmony with the substantial pilasters.

The lobby opens into the foyer, here the first vivid impression is one of bewitching bewilderment. The ___ first tries to take in every charming detail at once, then as one point ___ another looms into clear view. [With] each is seen a new note that adds to the whole until it seems a perfect symphony of color and architectural beauty [see Figure 28].⁹

The foyer which was heavily carpeted:

"is a thing of real architectural beauty. Specially designed iron chairs, console table, and tapestry and mirror on the end wall, add to the charm. A fountain, with the drinking fount cleverly concealed, will have a part. Four heavy chandeliers hang from grilled rosettes in the ceiling. The torches are of wrought iron."¹⁰

Two arched draped entrances into the auditorium are on each side of the projection booth. These and two other arches on each end of the foyer, were decorated with silk velvet drapes. The carpets were all designed and executed under the direction of B. F. Shearer Company especially for this theater. Their "soft [t]ints harmonize so well that one is only conscious of the softness under foot and the pleasing effect."¹¹ The walls were painted with decorations. "All relief work has been carefully,

⁹"Spirit Guided by High Ideals Felt in Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

¹⁰"Lowell Open Soon."

¹¹"Spirit Guided."

purposefully omitted, to carry out the general scheme. The success of the impression thus created is at once apparent."¹²

B. F. Shearer, Inc.

B. F. Shearer Company was a Seattle based "Theater Equipment Specialists" firm composed of decorators, designers and technical men.¹³ Such firms were not unusual, as the interior of the Brown-Grand Opera House (1907) in Concordia, Kansas was done by the Kansas City firm of Emery, Bird, and Thayer, and the Bell Decorating Company of Seattle, Washington did many important theatres in the Pacific Northwest in the early 20th century.¹⁴ B. F. Shearer was responsible for the painting and decorating, draperies, carpet, lighting, projection room equipment, stage equipment, opera chairs and all the furniture for the McDonald Theater.¹⁵ The company is noted for doing many theaters in the northwest. They did all of the interior furnishing and decorating for the Craterian Theater (1924) in Medford, Oregon. Upon its completion, the newspaper noted that the firm had "handled the furnishings of more than one hundred theatres in the northwest during the past two

¹²"Spirit Guided."

¹³B. F. Shearer, Inc., Theatre Equipment Specialists advertised two offices, in Seattle and Portland.

¹⁴Gwen Sommers Yant, "Past, Present, and Future: The History and Revitalization of American Theatres Built Between 1865 and 1910," (Cornell University Master of Arts Thesis: August 1982), 90.

¹⁵[Advertisement], Eugene Guard, (7 May 1925), 7.

years."¹⁶ When the McDonald opened, the firm had "decorated 34 theaters on the Pacific coast during the past five years."¹⁷ The firm is also known to have completed the Lake Theatre in Oswego, Oregon which was described in the August 24, 1940 Motion Picture Herald. With all of this experience, the firm was said to have systematized the work so that "the ordinary theater can be decorated in a third of the time formerly needed."¹⁸ This was possible because, at the time of the opening of the McDonald, the firm had kept the same personnel for the past four years, and every man on the force was an expert and an artist in his line.¹⁹ For the McDonald Theater, every detail was attended to by the B. F. Shearer firm. Carl R. Berg, "who is a true artist with a wide philosophical background,"²⁰ was in charge of the work at the McDonald.²¹

¹⁶"Craterian Theatre Furnishings of Highest Grade," The Medford Sun, 19 October 1924, 3.

¹⁷"B.F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task For New Theater," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

¹⁸"B.F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task."

¹⁹"B.F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task."

²⁰"B.F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task."

²¹The surname Berg has been found in relation to several other theaters. Berg and Weisenborn (from Seattle) executed the work for the Craterian Theater which was handled by B. F. Shearer. Ben Berg was the painting contractor for the interior decoration of the Oriental Theater designed by Lee Thomas. It has not been determined how all or if the references to Berg are related.

Double Ramps

The foyer was dominated by a double ramp gracefully inclining to the restrooms and eventually the balcony (see Figure 21). Double ramps were also found in two other theaters, the Hollywood Theater (1926) in Portland, Oregon, and Lee Thomas' Bagdad Theater (1927) in Portland (see Figure 22).²² The railings for the ramps are executed in wrought iron grills. The railings for the ramp's lower section were secured with large solid looking piers that had small bands of color painted around them at wide intervals. The lowest had one band about one-third of the way down from the top. As the piers lengthened with the height of the ramp, the number of evenly spaced bands increased to two and then four. Between the piers are "exquisitely wrought grills....Here true artistry is at once apparent in the design, which is made to harmonize with the rest of the building."²³ From the photographs, the grilles appear to have had a mottled finish and have a wooden cap. In line with the piers and following the ramp are five arches which divide the two inclines. The center arch provides the opening to the second section. Between the other arches are the same grills which create the railing. The columns upon which the arches rest were banded similarly to the piers. Around the arch openings were intricate stencils.

²²David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters (Washington, D. C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 230.

²³"Eugene Foundry is Maker of Delicate Iron Grille Work," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 7.

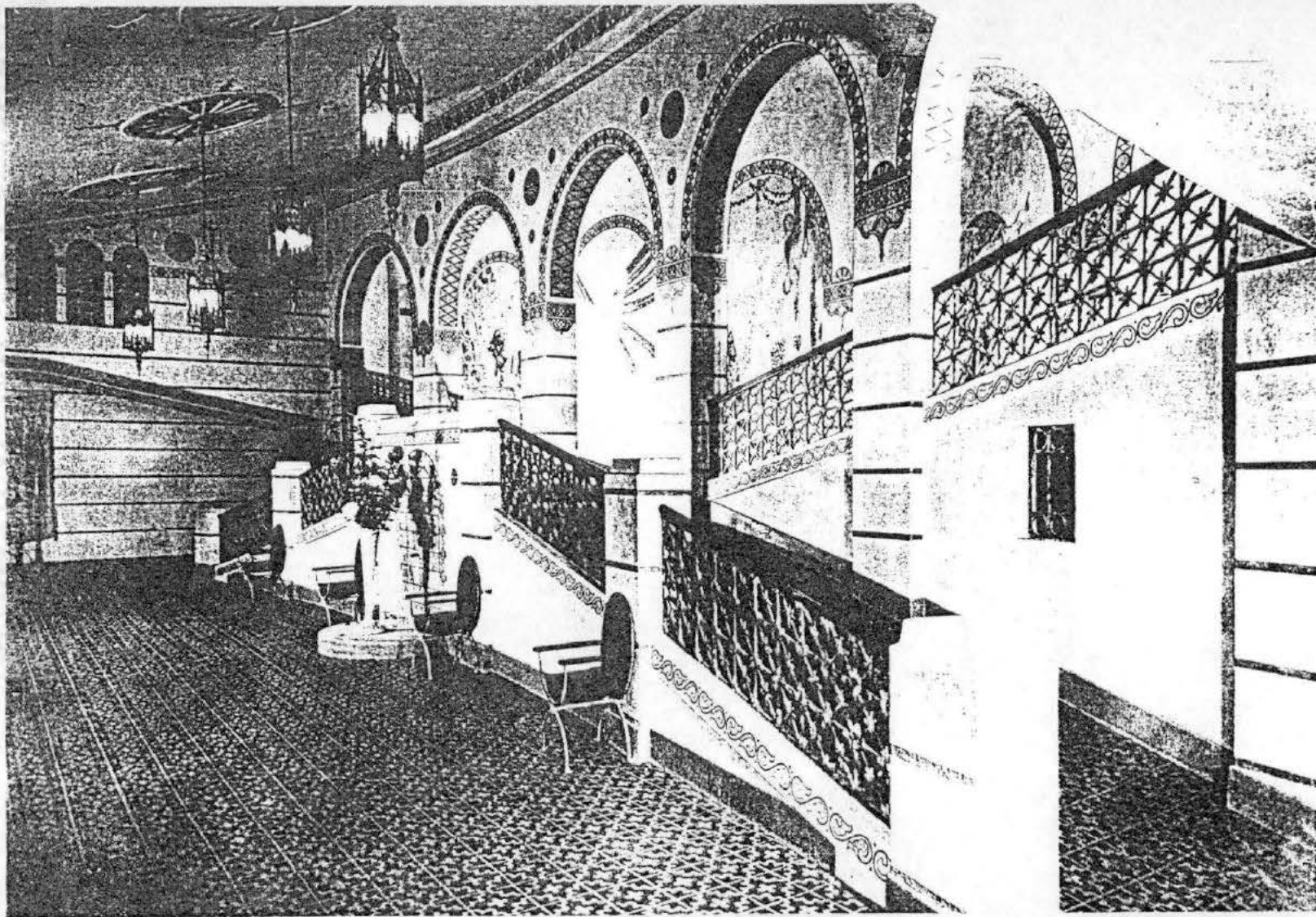


Figure 21 Early View of Foyer and Double Ramps. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

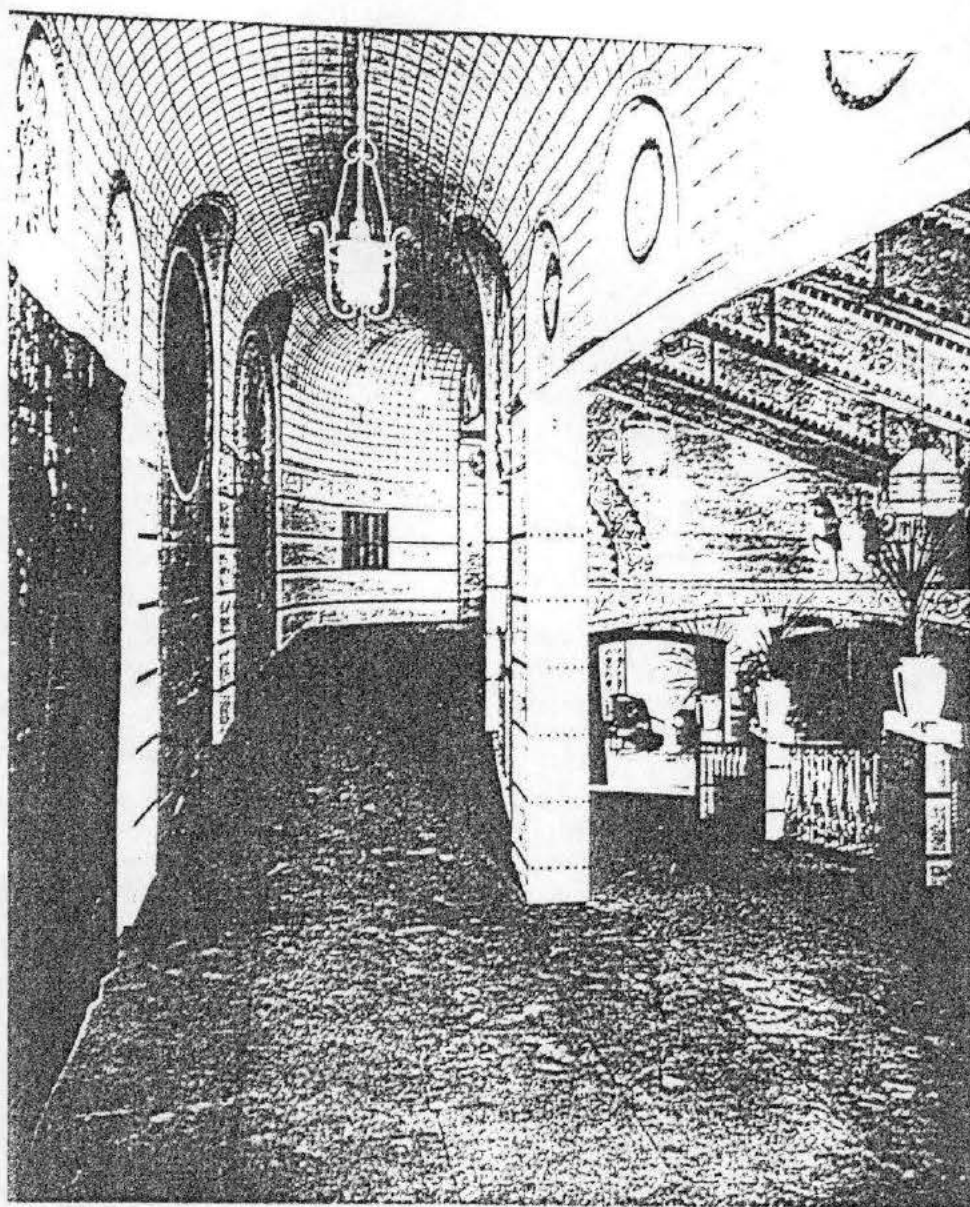


Figure 22 Badgad Theater by Lee Thomas. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

This decoration began at the railing's highest point, where it ended at the wall. From this point up and around the arch was the framing decoration. Decoration was also painted immediately below the railings on the flat wall surface.

Murals of Norse Tales

Upon reaching the center arch and turning towards the next incline, one was greeted by the rear wall that had a series of picturesque illustrations from ancient Norse tales painted within five arched indentations in the wall.²⁴ The arches were outlined with the same stencil patterns as the intermediary arches.

Mr. A. H. McDonald had selected each of the scenes which graced the walls of the ramp. Mr. B. F. Shearer told about completing this task with Mr. McDonald: "How we marveled over the imaginations of those old Norsemen, and how pleased we were to think that their forms were to live again in such pleasant surroundings."²⁵ The murals were executed by Carl F. Berg based upon illustrations of Kay Rasmus Nielsen.²⁶ The first painting to burst into view is a scene from Prince Lindworm. The mural was "a queer painting wherein a serpent with a man's head is being married to a beautiful damsel."²⁷ The first mural on the right is taken from "The

²⁴The murals for the Ziegfeld Theater (1926) in New York City, were also inspired by old tales.

²⁵"B.F. Shearer Ends Decorating Task."

²⁶"Charming Tales of Old Norse Days Depicted in Scenes on Lowell Wall," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 1.

²⁷"Spirit Guided."

Lad in the Bear Skin," the second is "The King of Arabia's Daughter."²⁸ On the left, the first is "North Wind Goes Over the Sea," a striking impression of speed, and strength; and the second is "Lad in Battle" (see Figure 23).²⁹ Carl Berg declared:

"it is queer that the atmosphere of the old Norse period should fit in so well with the southern Byzantine and Roman style, but that is exactly what happens when the two are brought in to contact.....Although this art originated in the far North, the style is as Oriental as Byzantine, which originated in the Far East."³⁰

The long, graceful lines of the murals were blended together to form the impression of sinewy strength and "caught the fanciful spirit of these people and the color tones, blending from golden to light blue, give an interplay that is not only pleasing to the eye, but provocative to the imagination."³¹

Kay Nielsen was born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1886 to the Director of the Royal Danish Theatre.³² He studied art in Paris and remained, working in England between 1911 and 1916.³³ He then returned to Denmark and designed sets and

²⁸"Charming Tales of Old Norse Days."

²⁹The order of the murals is given in "Charming Tales of Old Norse Days," 1. The description of the mural is given in "Spirit Guided," 1.

³⁰"Charming Tales of Old Norse Days."

³¹"Charming Tales of Old Norse Days."

³²Brigid Peppin, Dictionary of British Book Illustrators: The Twentieth Century, (London: Cameron Books, Ltd.), 1983.

³³Simon Houfe, Dictionary of British Illustrators, 1800-1914. (England: Baron Publishing, 1978), 401.



Figure 23 Kay Nielsen's "Lad in Battle," 1914. Source: Feaver, William. When We Were Young. Two Centuries of Children's Book Illustration, 56.

costumes for the Royal Danish Theatre between 1918 and 1922.³⁴ Nielsen then emigrated to America in 1926 and moved to Hollywood in 1939, where he worked on Walt Disney's Fantasia.³⁵ Kay Nielsen's work was influenced by Aubrey Beardsley and by Oriental art (especially the great Chinese colorists) and Middle Eastern art, yet he assimilated all of these influences into a style all his own.³⁶

He uses stippling effects and elaborate rococo motifs which are reminiscent of Beardsley, but also the swirling lines of Vernon Hill and the more sculptural lines of incipient art deco.³⁷

He died in 1957 in California.

It is appropriate that Nielsen's illustrations were chosen for the McDonald Theater. The murals were based upon tales, images of things that did not really happen, as motion pictures are images played upon a screen. Louise Gordon-Stables describes the illusion created by Nielsen's illustrations:

He knows how to represent them [creatures of fantasy and myth] in a convincing fashion, yet with a charm and glorious exoticism that does not belong to this world. His colors are the hues of such enchanted jewels as might have hung in Aladdin's case, his blues glow like sapphires, his greens are the greens of jade.³⁸

³⁴Simon Houfe, 401.

³⁵Brigid Peppin, 215.

³⁶Brigid Peppin, 216.

³⁷Simon Houfe, 401.

³⁸Louise Gordon-Stables, "London Letter," Art News, vol 29 no 12 (20 December 1930), 17.

Selecting Kay Nielsen, rather than other illustrators, for this theater is also fitting because of Nielsen's background in theater. This was gained from his father and mother (a famous actress) who were in the theater business, and his participation in designs for motion pictures.

Current Status of Foyer

The foyer currently has very few of its original features intact (see Figure 24). The painted decorations have all been painted over, the draperies have been replaced by doors and the original furniture is gone, as are the original light fixtures. Remaining are the rosettes that once held the lighting fixtures and the ramps. The foyer has lost its original charm and effect. This is due mainly to two reasons. First is that the walls have been painted into a monochromatic effect, leaving very little visual excitement that can be gained from the remaining decorative features. The other reason is that the once open foyer is now filled with the counter and equipment of the refreshment stand. This causes the once dramatic and commanding ramps to become hidden and make less of a statement architecturally (see Figure 21 and Figure 25).

Recommendations

Recommendations for improvement of this area are several. It is recommended that the concession stand be moved towards the front door, along the lobby wall. Moving the stand would open the foyer up for the mingling of people

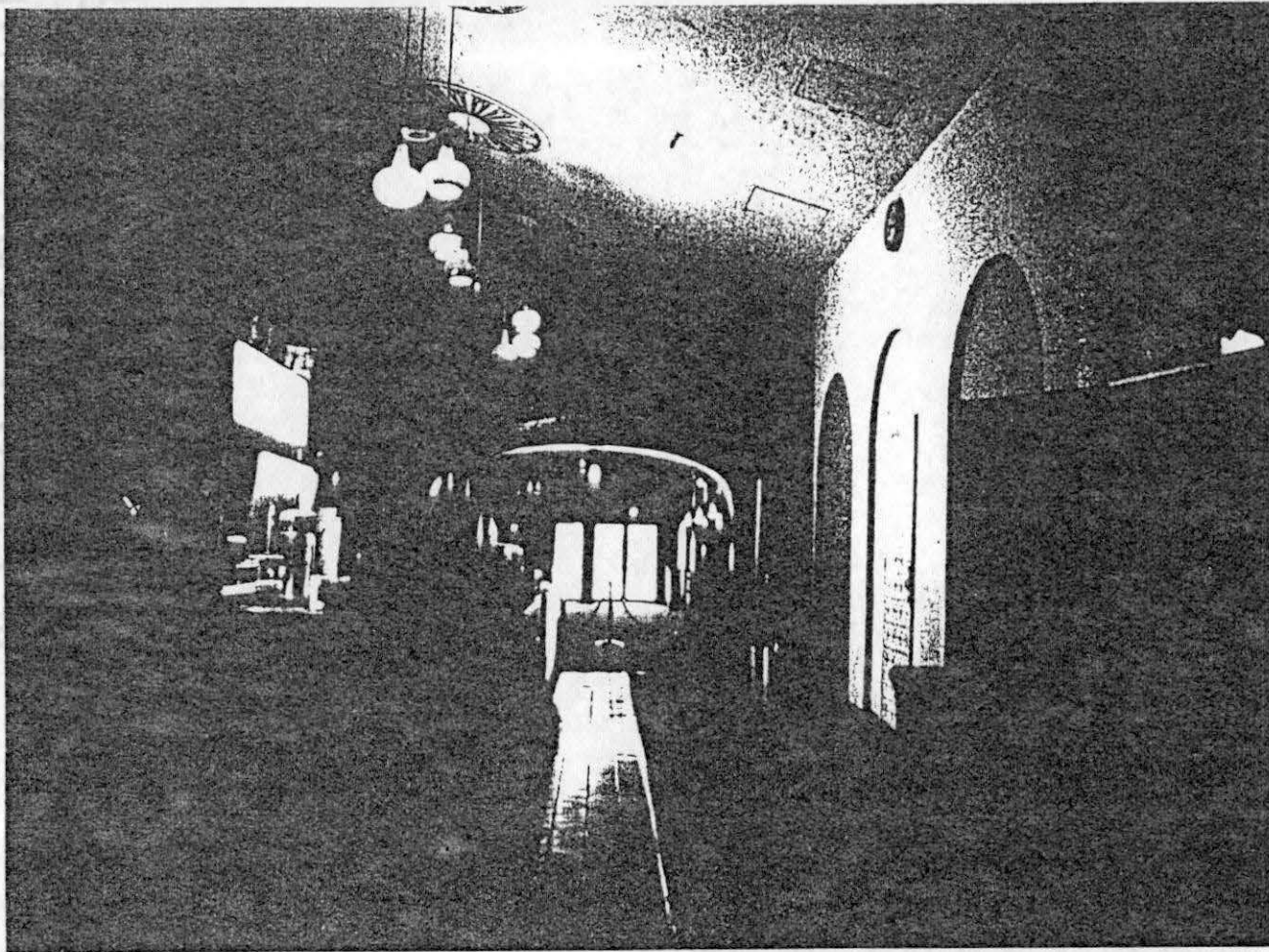


Figure 24 View of Foyer Looking Towards Entrance. Source: Author.

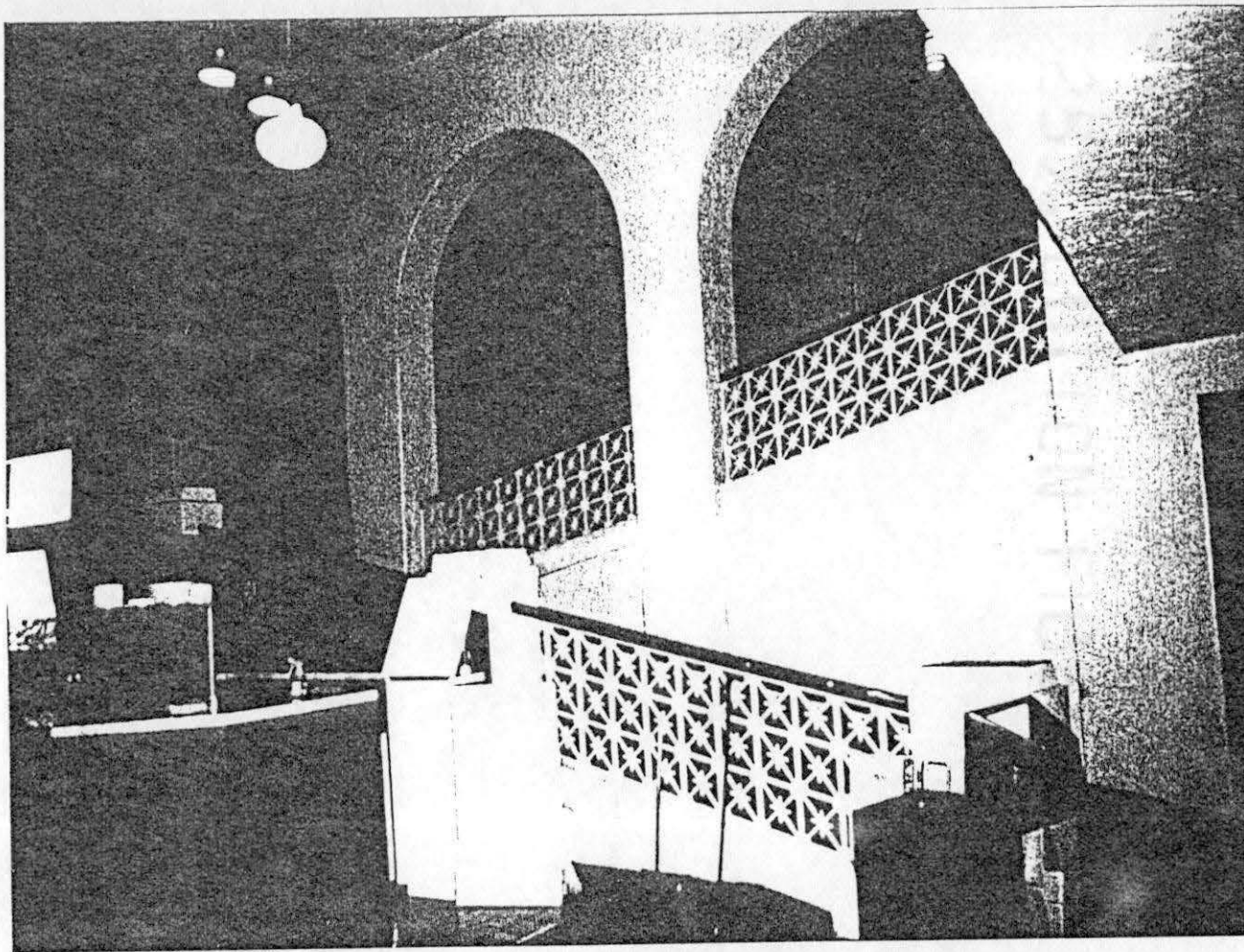


Figure 25 View of Double Ramps in Foyer. Source: Author.

within its full space, rather than crowding them between the foyer wall and the concession stand. The current location of the stand essentially renders useless the far west section of the foyer. The other effect that moving the concession stand would have is that the ramps that were designed to make a visual impact would again be allowed to do so.

The walls of the foyer should be repainted, replicating the designs that are evident in historic photographs (see Figure 24). Most of this work was probably stenciled and new stencils could easily be made for the restoration of the paint finishes. Since many major architectural elements are the same as when the theater was opened, the existing measurements of such things as the archways could be used with the historic photographs to determine the actual sizes of each decorative pattern.

The rosettes in the ceiling which follows the slant of the balcony are still evident today and hold hanging light fixtures as they originally did (see Figure 26). The original fixtures were wrought and lit with exposed light bulbs pointing up (see Figure 27 and Figure 28). The National Register Nomination Form indicated that an original fixture was still extant in the stage area, but it has not been located during this study. The existing photographs give a fairly clear indication of the design of the original fixtures. It is recommended that these fixtures be reproduced by a local firm which can fabricate wrought iron. Until the time that it is possible to recreate the fixtures, commercially produced fixtures which exhibit the general characteristics of the original may be used to replace the current colored plastic fixtures. This small change will begin to return the original Byzantine/Romanesque feeling of the

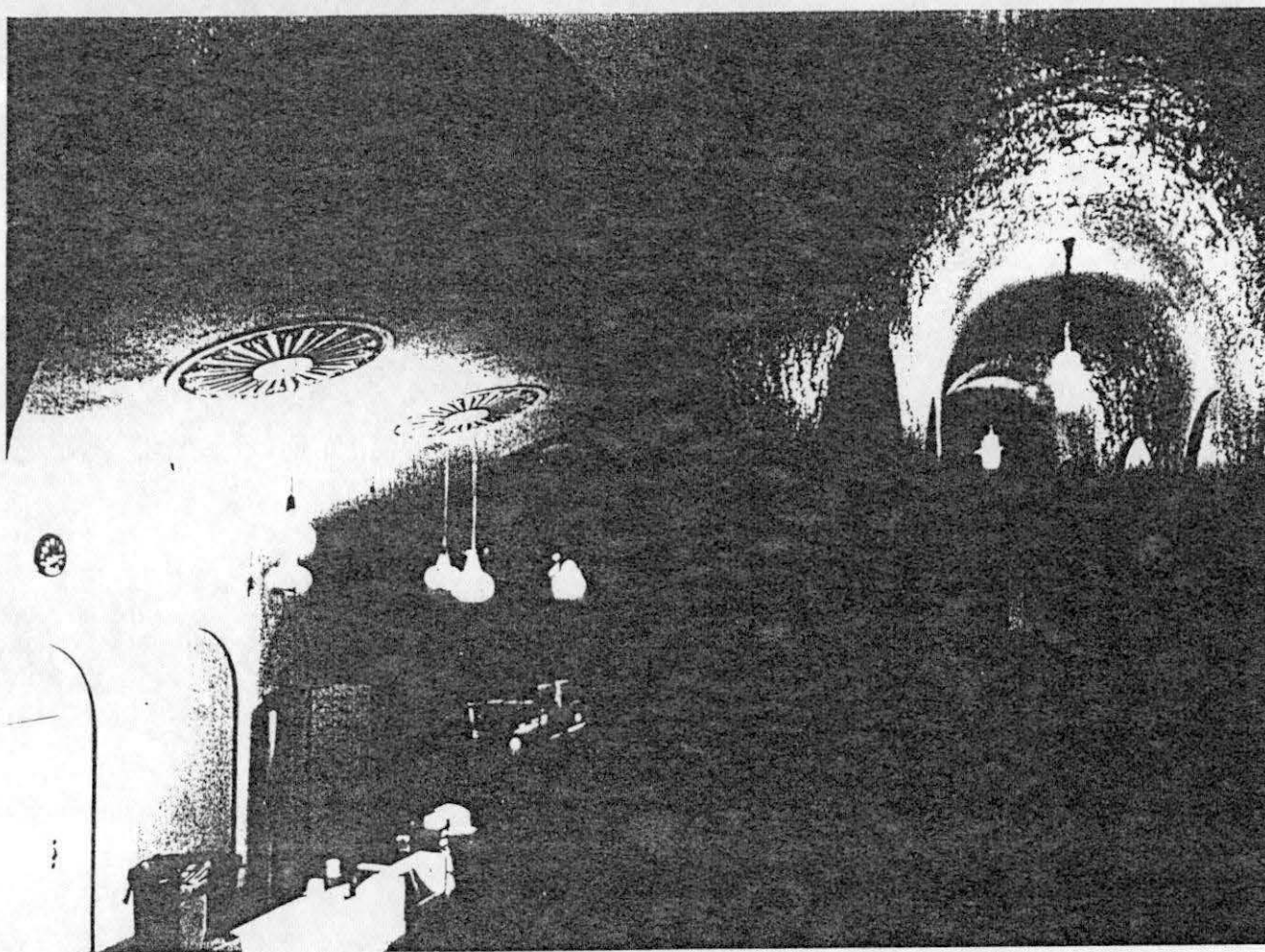


Figure 26 View of Foyer Looking Down From Ramp. Source: Author.

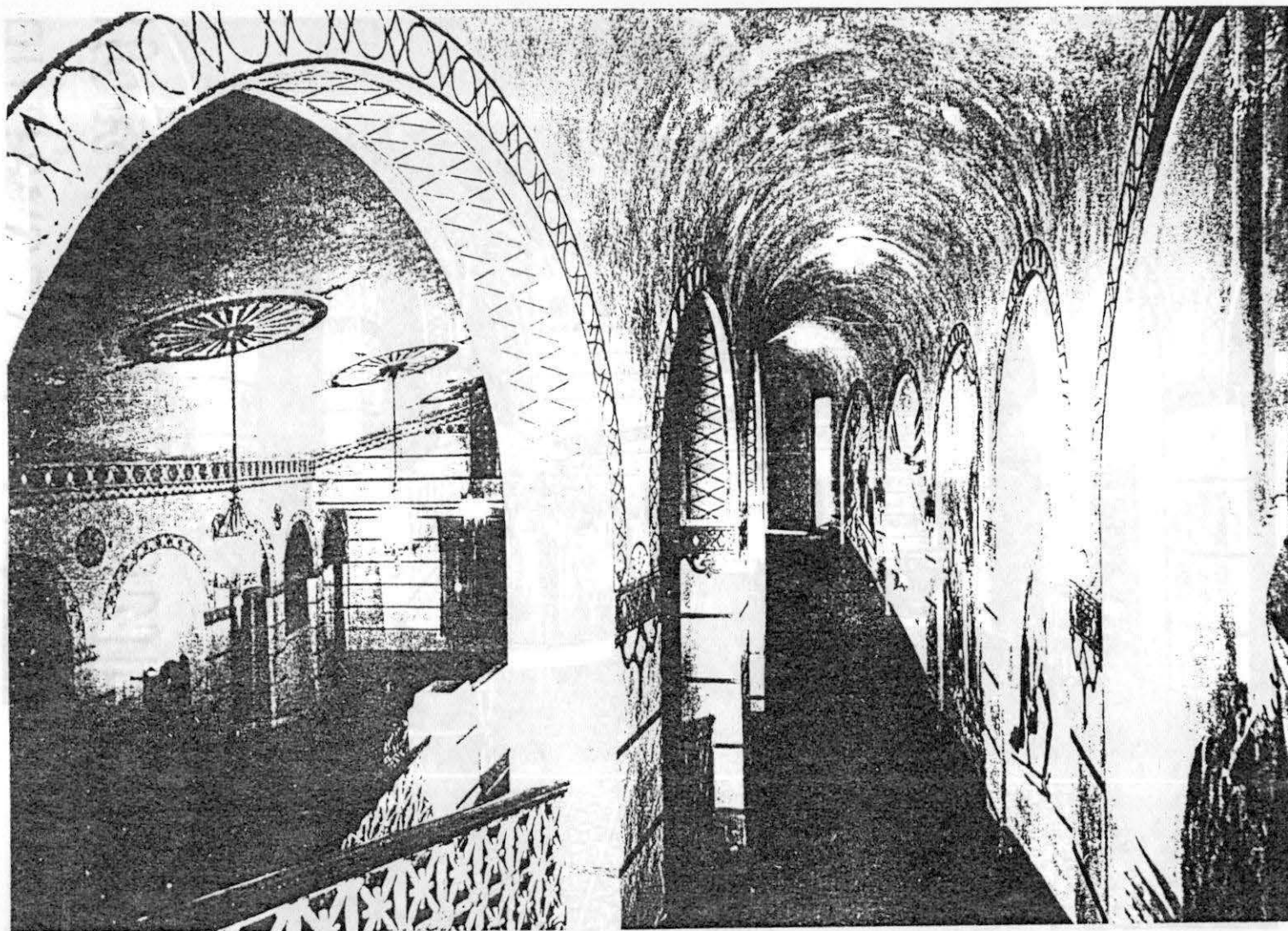


Figure 27 Early View of Foyer Looking Down From Ramp. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

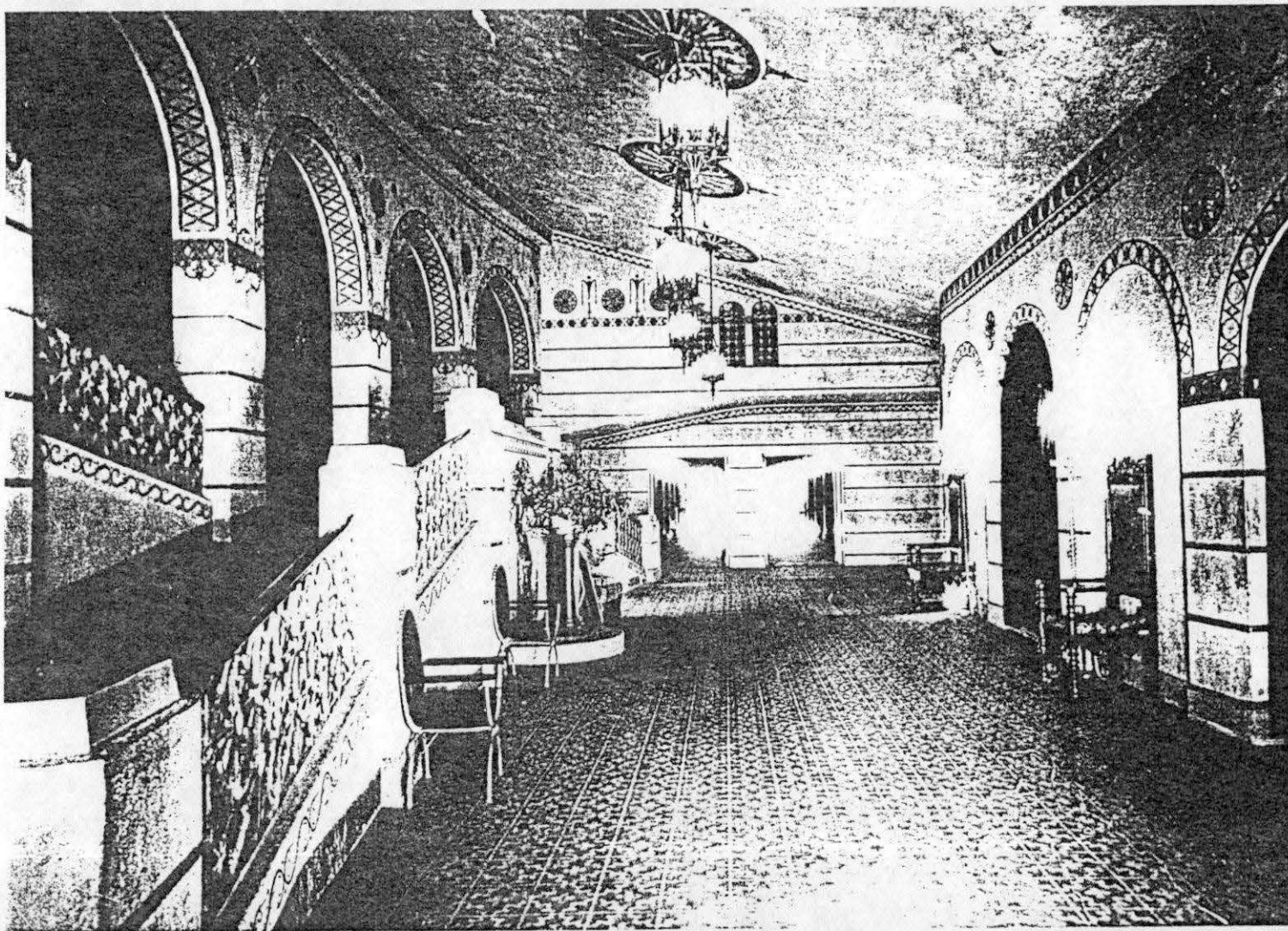


Figure 28 Early View of Foyer Looking Towards Entrance. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

architecture. Paint analysis, once conducted on the rosettes, would indicate the colors that this decorative work should be repainted. Furniture similar in character and based upon photographs should be returned to the foyer (see Figure 28 and Figure 21). This would not only be in keeping with the original, but also provide a place for people to rest or wait for their companions.

The heavy carpet that was custom designed should be returned to the entire space. This is particularly important in the foyer because of the space's prominence and importance. The existing carpet does not have the same color qualities, scale or pattern as the original. The original as seen in Figure 21 had more contrasts between colors, was a geometrical pattern and maintained the exotic nature of the buildings style.

Restroom

Description

After passing the elegantly done murals, one reaches the landing at the end of this section of the ramp. On the east is the women's rest room and on the west is the men's smoking lounge, as it was called when the theater opened. At the entrance to each area there are lighted, etched glass signs that indicate the room's use. These wall fixtures appear to be original, although no documentation has been found to support this. Each of the rooms had custom designed furniture and was quite

luxurious. The two spaces are currently intact spatially but none of the furniture or finishes are existing. In fact, the women's lounge area is completely empty.

Recommendations

It is recommended that furnishings be provided to again recall the lounge atmosphere, rather than reinforcing the already barren theater atmosphere. The carpeting from the foyer, which continues up the ramp, should continue into the lounge areas of the restrooms. The toilet areas should remain with their hard surfaces, with repairs being made as needed. The walls and ceilings finishes should maintain the theater's character and provide the luxurious atmosphere that they originally had.

Balcony

Description

Going towards the south, and up another ramp that continues the vaulted ceiling from the previous ramp area, one is "rewarded with a splendid view of the entire theater in all its royal setting."³⁹ The balcony reportedly sat as many people as the lower floor and afforded the same perfect vision as below. The seats were heavily upholstered, the ventilating was as effective as elsewhere in the theater, and the aisles were heavily carpeted and lit with aisle lights. Providing balconies in

³⁹"Crowds Throng to Opening of Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925, 10.

theaters was a common practice. They "not only provided theatre patrons a clear view from every seat but theatre owners more saleable seats."⁴⁰ Theater balconies elicit many reactions from people as they were used for many special purposes. In areas where segregation was practiced, the balcony was often the place that blacks were allowed to sit. Other theaters had a "smoking room" in the balcony. Others might have a "crying room" where mothers could take their children when they were being too noisy. This afforded the opportunity to still watch the show and not disturb all the other patrons. Some theaters, such as the Craterian Theatre in Medford, Oregon, had both a smoking and a crying room. Later balconies became the place to gain a little privacy with one's movie date. Today many balconies are closed to the public. Some are closed for reasons of concern over the structural stability of the balcony and others because of cost concerns. The theaters that do have open balconies, such as the Lobo Theater in Albuquerque, New Mexico, are often filled with patrons, especially since balconies often have the best seats in regards to view and sound. The balcony is closed to the public at the McDonald Theater because of the cost involved in cleaning the upper level.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the balcony be reopened. This would allow many movie patrons, especially those who have never had the opportunity to see a motion

⁴⁰Yant, 13.

picture from the balcony, to experience the full effect of the theater and the movie from a different perspective than before. The walls, ceilings, carpeting, fixtures, and seating for the balcony should be consistent with the auditorium.

Projection Booth

Description

The large projection booth, which was the largest in Oregon, was the most advanced available when the McDonald Theatre opened. Because of the numerous theater fires that had been started in other projection rooms, this one was metal enclosed. These fires often started because the film was highly flammable. This projection room was said to be "absolutely fireproof" and was constructed of reinforced concrete, with selfclosing doors and windows, and steel shutters that snapped closed if the room became overheated.⁴¹ It was a projectionist's paradise in every way.⁴² It had two of the latest moving picture machines,

so constructed as to cut the actual work to a minimum, yet give unexcelled, steady projection service....These are so placed that not a motion is lost, and there is no chance of a delay in a picture.

On one side is a brand new double dissolving stereoptican machine for the showing of slides, and on the other side is a high power array of spot lights. All are but a step or two apart, and are placed with a view to high efficiency.

⁴¹"Lowell Open Soon."

⁴²"Lowell Open Soon."

Overhead, within reach of the operator at all times, are light controls, which regulate all the house lights. Three primary colors are on the switch, so that the operator can create any atmosphere he desires. Any color combination is possible with this arrangement....Every little device, to shorten labor and to make for more efficiency is found in the room.⁴³

Frank Gibbs, veteran projectionist, was the one in charge of the projection room when the theater opened.

Projection booths were not included as part of the standard requirements of theaters until after 1908. In a 1908 article Mr. Blackall states that most theaters were equipped with connections for moving picture machines.⁴⁴ Booths for the machines did not come until later and when they did many existing theaters rushed to have them installed. This rush was felt in vaudeville houses in order to remake them "into temples for the new god, movies."⁴⁵

Recommendations

Specific recommendations for the projection room are beyond the scope of the project because of the numerous technological requirements. However, a few general recommendations can be made. The booth originally was set up to accommodate slides and special lighting affects. The theater could investigate reinstating the

⁴³"Lowell Has Ample Projection Room," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

⁴⁴Clarence H. Blackall, "The American Theatre--VIII," The Brickbuilder, vol 17 no 7: 136; as quoted in Yant, 88.

⁴⁵Yant, 22.

practice of holding performances along with motion pictures. This facility could fill needs that are not currently met by the Hult Center facility. Before spending lots of time and money, a thorough investigation of current needs of the performing arts must be completed and the theater's capability to meet these needs accessed. Opening the theater would provide another way to draw people into the theater, be beneficial for the owners, and offer a service to the citizens of Eugene.

Auditorium Description

The auditorium of the McDonald Theater originally sat 1400 people on the main floor and balcony.⁴⁶ Everyone was able to settle into Haywood-Wakefield chairs "with a soft, springy seat, upholstered with genuine Spanish grain leather," and have a full view of the stage "without a lot of cramming or leaning."⁴⁷ On each of the side walls were two large arches reaching up to the coved ceiling (see Figure 29). These arches were delineated from the rest of the wall surface with a small projection and shallow relief (see Figure 30). The arches each had painted decorations in the upper portions; there were two decorative borders, a sunburst pattern in the top, three rosettes, and two double arches. In line with the top of the column capitals a wide frieze encircled the room with a four line "brightly painted band in Oriental

⁴⁶"Equipment of New Theater Complete Now in Every Detail," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 2.

⁴⁷"Equipment of New Theater," 2.

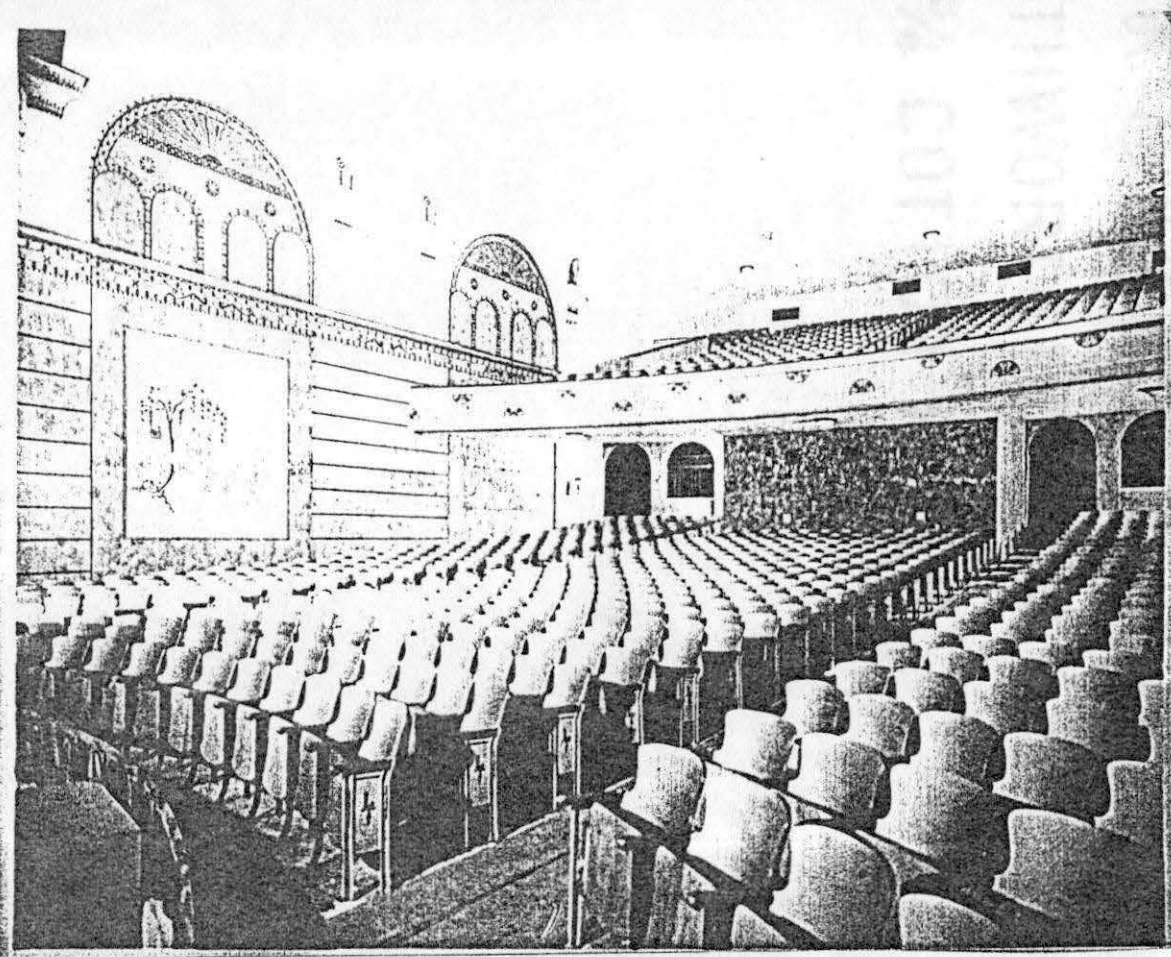


Figure 29 Interior View of Auditorium Looking Towards Balcony, ca. 1931. Source: Lane County Historical Museum, Photo Art Laboratories #23P1/L72-293R.

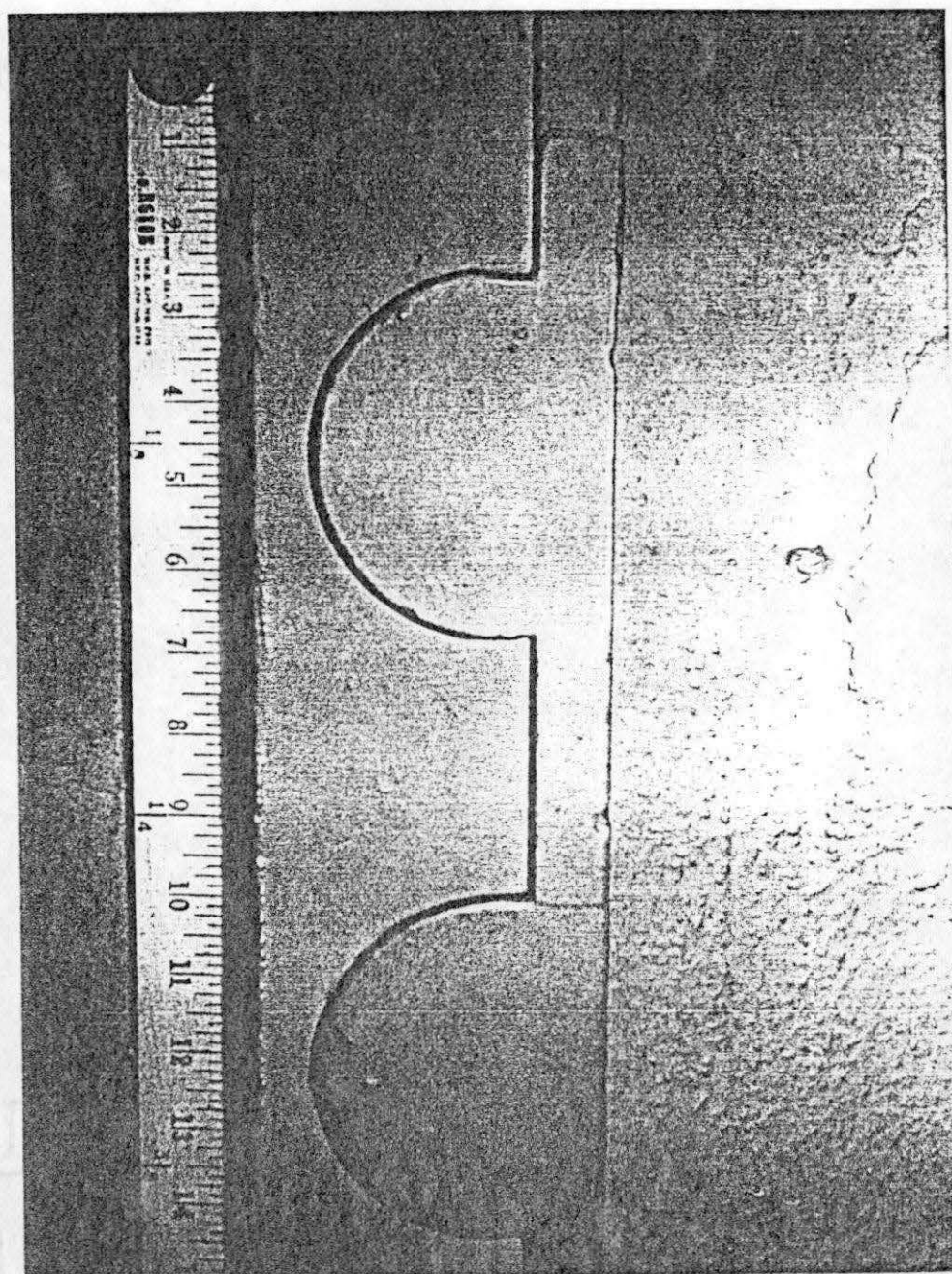


Figure 30 Detail of Auditorium Arch Surround. Source: Author.

motif."⁴⁸ This molding divided the upper and lower portions of the large arches. In the lower portion of the front side arches were "two great 12 by 20 feet futuristic paintings."⁴⁹ It appears the rear arches contained smaller paintings, as they were intersected by the balcony. The main wall surface was painted "in blends of grey, canestone [sic] and ivory,"⁵⁰ and lined horizontally to resemble stone. Perhaps the canestone mentioned in the newspaper was referring to caenstone, a "stone quarried in France and used extensively in the Middle Ages. To paint an interior surface to resemble stone was not unusual at this time. In fact, the lounge at the U[niversity of] O[regon] Gerlinger Hall originally contained painted walls imitating caenstone."⁵¹ The cove ceiling "was indeed a masterpiece of interior work. It is designed primarily to give the impression of a sky overhead."⁵² The enclosed front railing of the balcony was decorated with half circles with the flat half touching the top then the bottom of the railing, alternating all the way across.

Between the two side wall arches, and between the decorative front arches and the front side arches were two niches with "baskets" projecting from the wall (see Figure 31 and Figure 29). The niches each had a flower painted into the back. The baskets which appear to be stucco finished, also had a decorative pattern along the top

⁴⁸Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 3.

⁴⁹"Lowell Open Soon."

⁵⁰"Lowell Open Soon."

⁵¹Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 3.

⁵²"Spirit Guided."

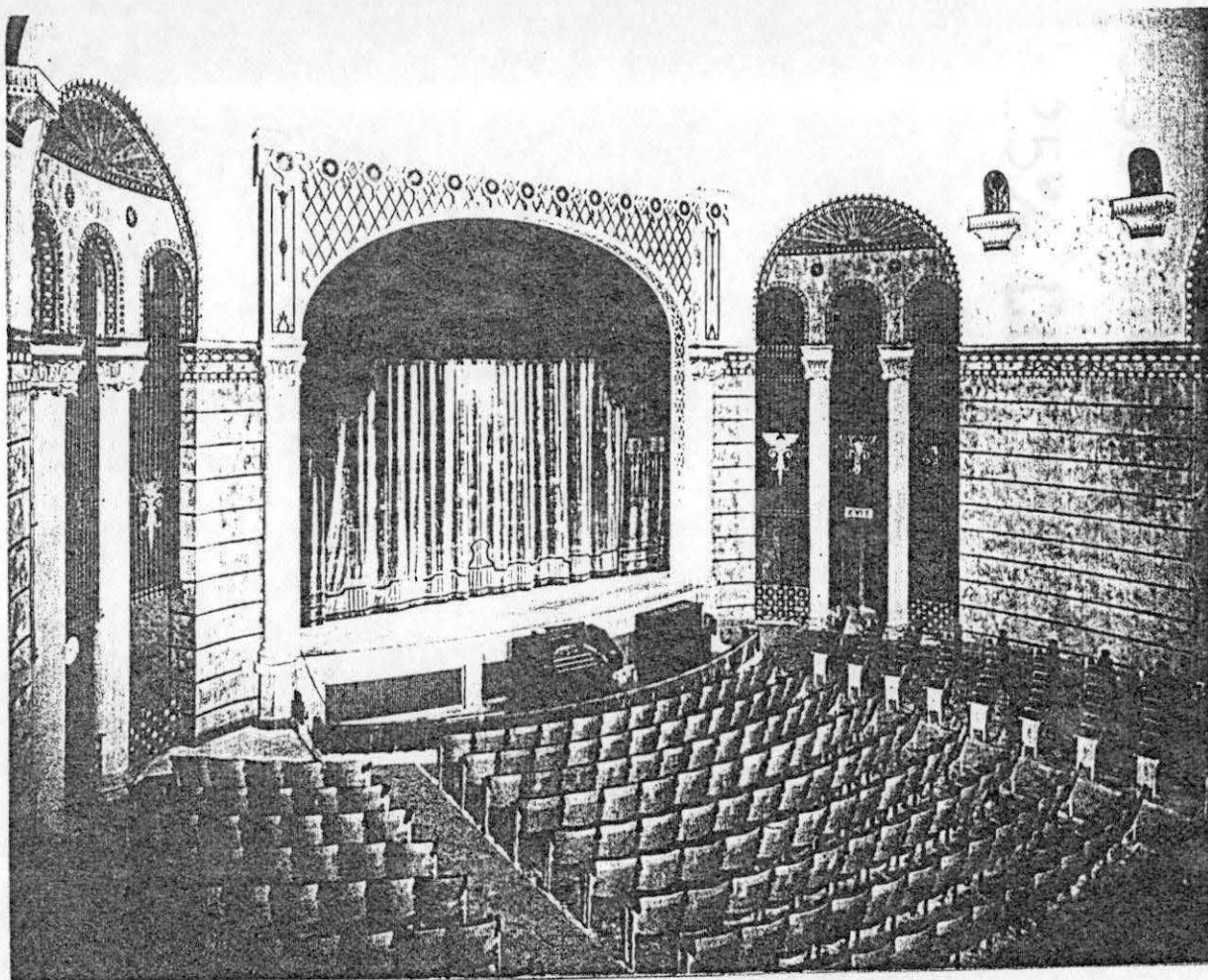


Figure 31 Interior View of Auditorium Looking Towards Stage, ca. 1931. Source: Lane County Historical Museum, Photo Art Laboratories #23P1/L72-289N.

and bottom. A single niche and basket similar to the others was placed between the back arch and the rear wall. These five wall baskets on each wall provided the main auditorium lighting. Each basket "has an alcove backing, with three colors and white lights in each basket. Each color may be used alone, or in combination with others, so that a widely varied lighting effect may be obtained."⁵³ The use of the three colored lights is

based on the neo-impressionism, as carried out by Turner and Cezanne in their time. The two artists, in creating colors, mixed the pigments on their palettes as for example, yellow and blue are mixed to make green. The newer school, to produce this impression, first put on a series of yellow, then added blue in the portions not covered. Then at a [right] distance the green effect was given, but in a new scintillating way.⁵⁴

The lights are "so cleverly arranged that it is almost impossible to detect the exact spot from whence emanates the soft radiance that spreads and shifts about the beautiful interior."⁵⁵ Both the auditorium and stage lights were able to be controlled from the lamp booth and the stage, and each circuit was on separate dimmers. The footlights and hanging spot border lights were the newest type available and created the most novel lighting effects.⁵⁶

The auditorium itself lives or disappears through lights. Like the theatres of the Greeks, where plays began in the starlight before dawn and continued into the blaze of noonday, this auditorium can

⁵³"Lowell Open Soon."

⁵⁴"Spirit Guided."

⁵⁵"Ample Projection Room."

⁵⁶"Lowell Open Soon."

enfold the beginnings of a drama in obscurity, and gradually disclose it to the audience....Perhaps the lighting and the music of some new opera can be interwoven, heightening the effect of one by the other in a manner as grand as the dawn accompaniment of a Greek play. The decoration of this room is plastic, dependent entirely upon light to reveal it. At the time of performance it is unlighted, vanished. At the intermission it can again become apparent to divert the unoccupied gaze. Changing lights can give it movement, and colored light, mood. It can even be brought into the production and made to contribute the whole auditorium to the effect.⁵⁷

Stage Description

When the theater opened, the front of the auditorium was a pleasant sight. It offered decorative finishes, artistic grille work, and a stage (see Figure 31). The proscenium arch was flanked by two columns with decorative capitals that were at the same height as the frieze, approximately 21 feet from the floor near the stage arches. Around the arch and above it, creating a rectangular shape, was a diamond shaped pattern. It appears that hanging in front of the diamond pattern were medallion type ornaments that were alternating circles and diamonds. Inside the arch's depth was another stenciled pattern that began at the stage floor and went all the way around to the other side's floor (see Figure 32). It is still intact, although hidden by the motion picture screen. The stage opening was draped with heavy, burnt orange silk plush velvet "especially dyed for all color effects."⁵⁸ Across the lower edge of the drape

⁵⁷Joseph Urban, *Theatres*, (NY: Theatre Arts, Inc., 1929), n.p.

⁵⁸"Equipment of New Theater," 2.

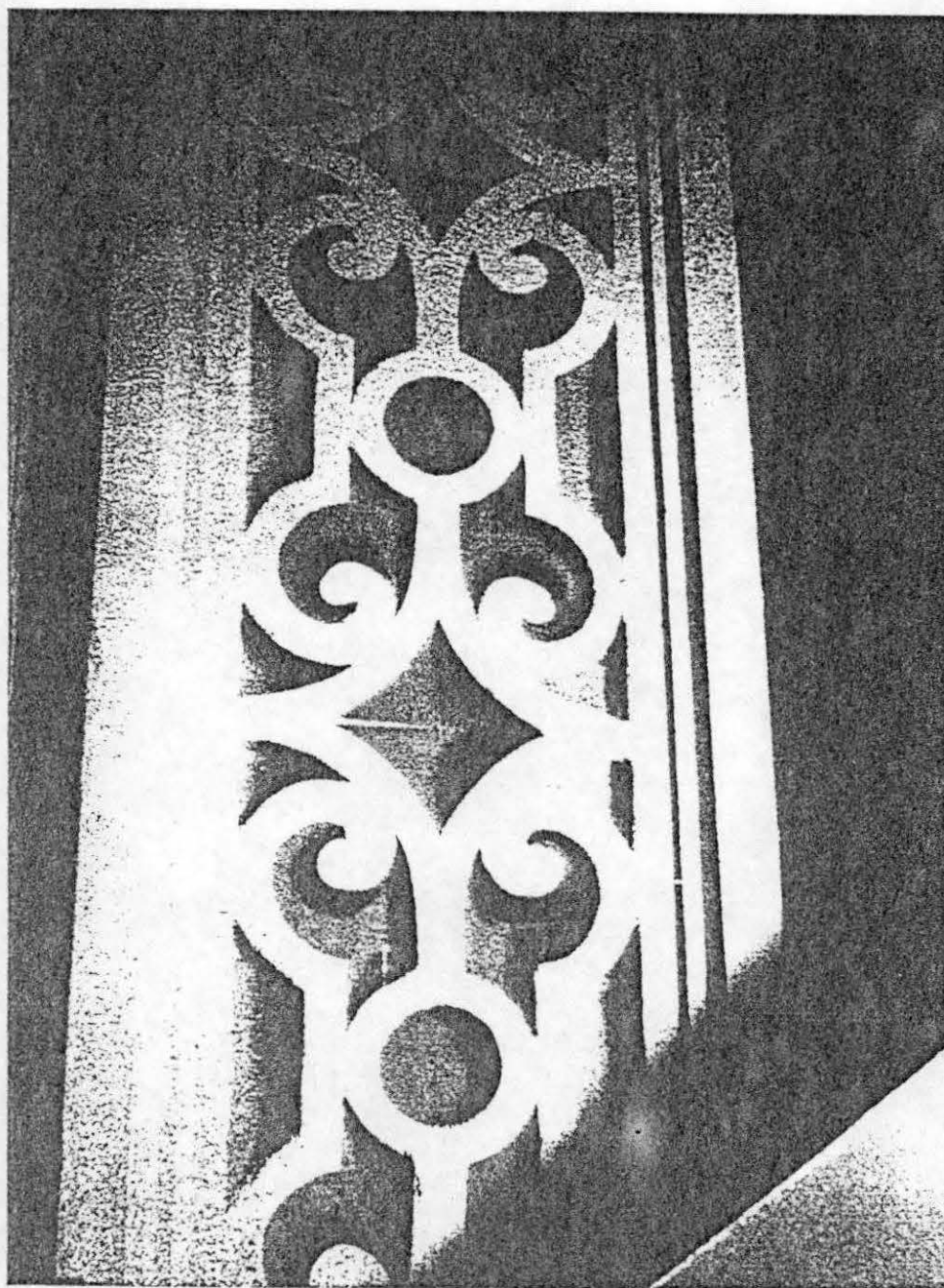


Figure 32 Stenciling of Proscenium Arch. Source: Author.

was a horizontal band pattern whose center rose to a higher point to emphasize the mid-point of the stage (see Figure 31). The draw curtain was blue-grey with a metallic backing. All the curtains were operated by motors controlled from the stage and the projecting room.

The stage was constructed to accommodate road shows, vaudeville and any other musical organizations and was "one of the finest equipped on the Coast."⁵⁹ The screen was the very latest type of screen, a Raven, which "reproduces pictures perfectly."⁶⁰ The stage, with its 42-line motor-operated pulley system for raising and lowering the curtains, and the central switchboard for controlling the lights are all existing.⁶¹ The original curtains are gone, as is the organ which was donated to Willamette University.⁶²

In front of the stage was an orchestra pit, now filled with sand and covered over, with a Wurlitzer Organ that was specially designed for the theater. It was nearly twice as large as the Wurlitzer in the Rex Theater. The console was placed in a pit that was capable of accommodating a large orchestra. It had three manuals and could play the music a "75-piece orchestra could not reproduce."⁶³ The instruments contained in the great organ included:

⁵⁹"Equipment of New Theater."

⁶⁰"Equipment of New Theater."

⁶¹Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 2.

⁶²Weingrod and Rees, sec. 7, p. 2.

⁶³"New Wurlitzer Proved to Be an Innovation Here," Eugene Guard, 2 May 1925, 7.

Three violins of different tonal qualities, cello and bass viol of the string family, two flutes, piccolo and tibia of the woodwinds, tuba profunda, ophicleide, harmonic tuba, krumett, oboe and vox humana of the reed instruments, diaphone, bourdon, diapason, clarion and trumpet. The traps and effects include: Marimbaphone, orchestral bells, mandolin, cathedral chimes, sleight bells, snare drum, base drum, kettle drum, crash cymbal, Chinese gong, tom tom, Chinese wood block, tamborine, castanet, triangle, fire gong, auto horn, door bell, surf effect, bird whistles, steamboat and train whistle, train effect, storm effect, horse hoof effect, and numerous combinations obtaining everything from a baby cry to an airplane bombardment.⁶⁴

The organ chambers were located on either side of the stage. The music, which emanated through decorative arches faced with grilles, was noted for its great sounds.

Manley Cockcroft, special representative of the mammoth new Wurlitzer organ, spoke about the theater and the organ:

Beautiful! Amazing! I think it is the most artistic and acoustically perfect auditorium I have ever been in. True, the organ is one of the finest large Wurlitzers installed on the coast, but without the sound quality of the theater the best organ in the world would be wasted.⁶⁵

The arches which contained the organ chambers were an integral part of the decorative features of the theater (see Figure 33). On each side of the stage were two plaster columns with painted capitals. The upper portion of the arch was painted similarly to the other large arches in the auditorium. Within the arches were three tall grills of wrought iron, highlighted in gold, with Oriental motifs (see Figure 34).

Wrought iron work rivaling in design that of the period when the craft was brought to a real art, graces the Lowell [McDonald] theater interior. The work was all done by the Eugene Foundry, and

⁶⁴"New Wurlitzer."

⁶⁵"New Wurlitzer."

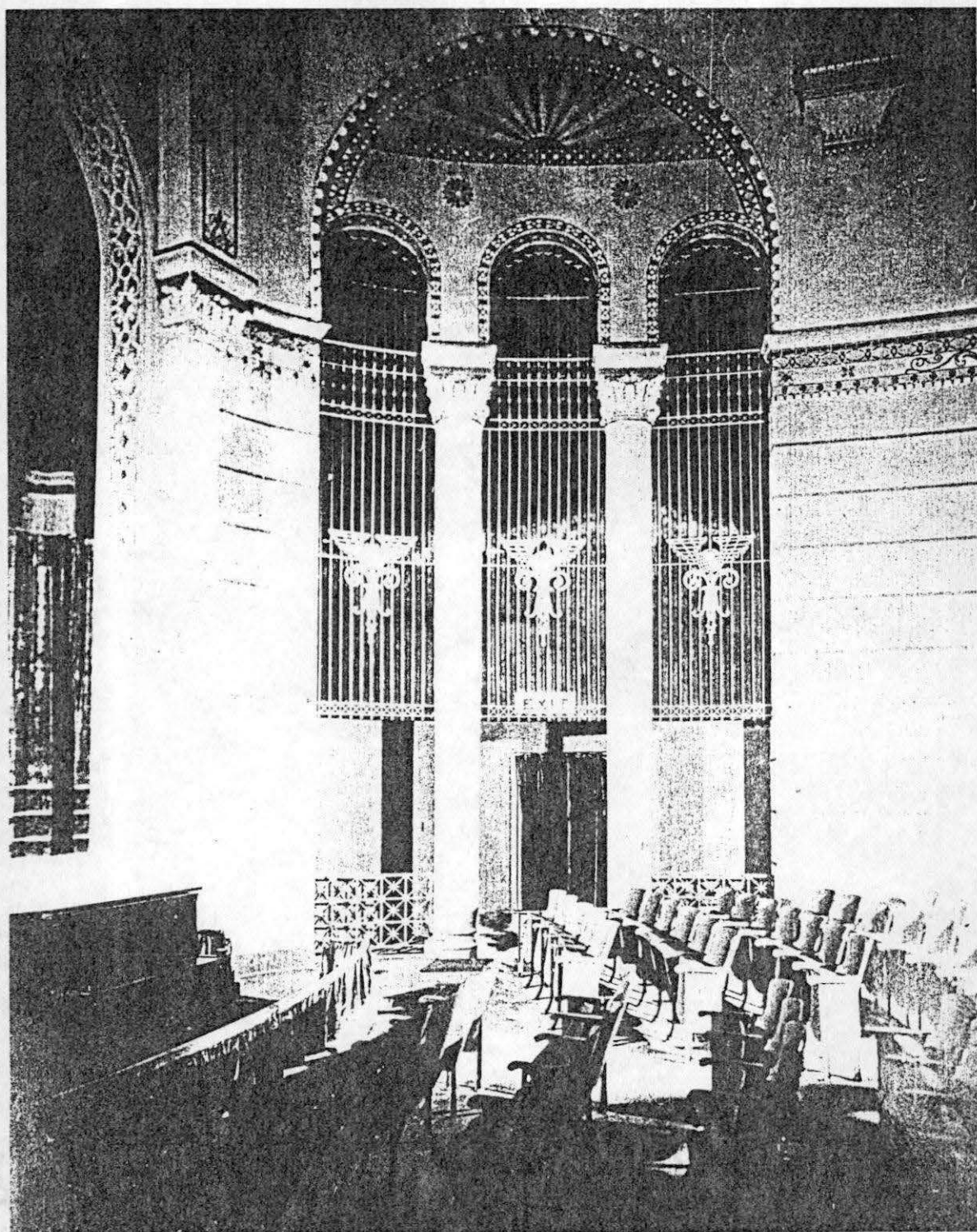


Figure 33 Early View of Auditorium Arches with Grillework. Source: Theatre Historical Society.

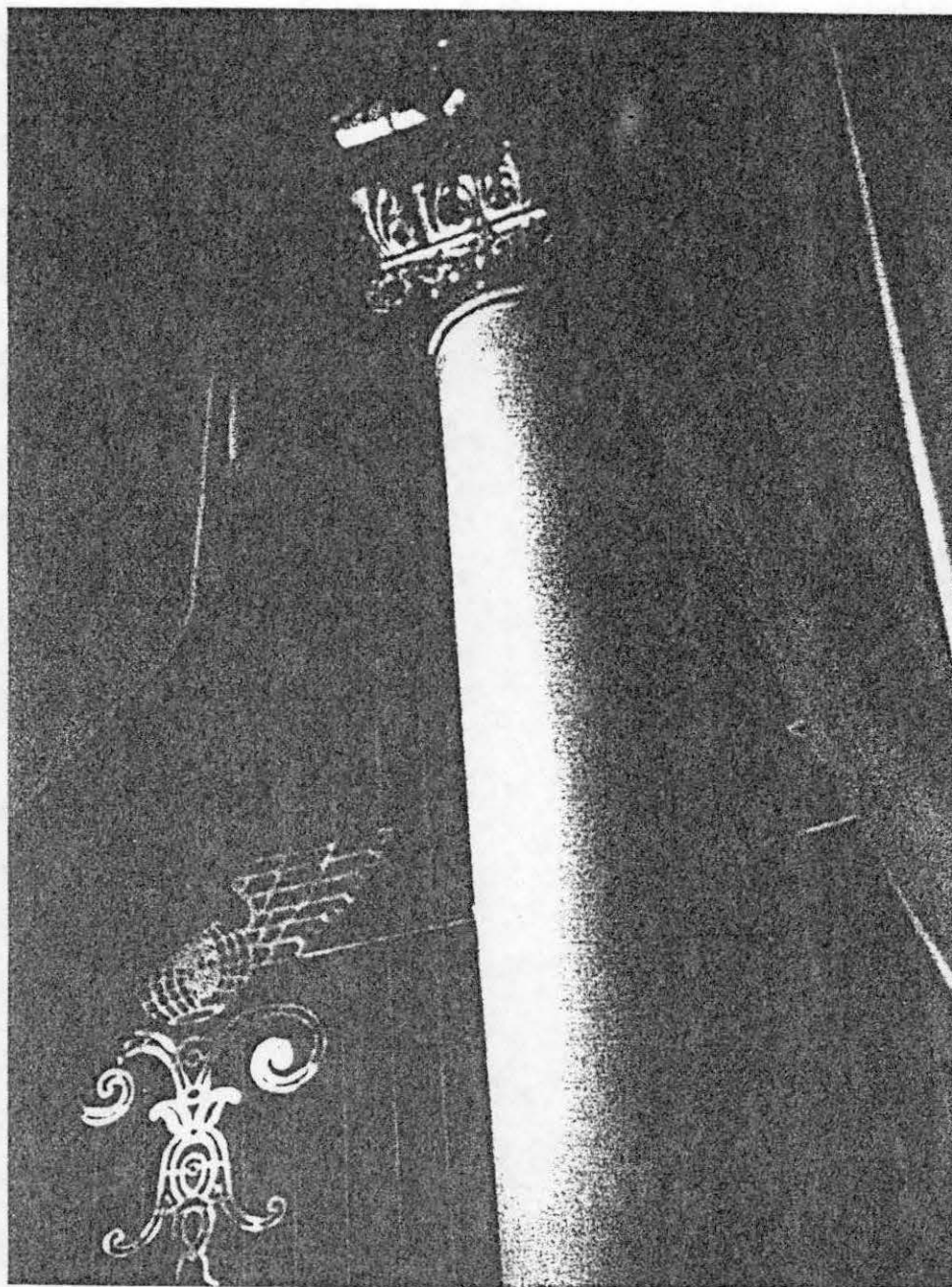


Figure 34 Column Capital and Decorative Grillework in Auditorium.
Source: Author.

every bit of it was done here in Eugene....

One of the finest pieces of iron work in the state is the grille work over the organ sound chambers, declare architects who have inspected it. The bars are placed with mathematic precision, each in close harmony with the next, and the [w]hole so carefully designed that the casual spectator is struck at once with its beauty.

Both the contractors and decorators are loud in their praise for this touch of old-world artistry. "It completes the building, giving it just the tone desired," declares R. W. Stien of Stien brothers, contractors, and the B. F. Shearer company, decorators, also expressed this thought.⁶⁶

A garden was to be installed beneath each organ chamber behind the wrought iron grill which was similar in pattern to the grilles in the foyer (see Figure 35). Colored lights were to be used in the garden for full effect.

The lighting in the McDonald theater was able to facilitate the needs of both the road show and motion pictures. About ten miles of wire of various sizes were used in the building and were installed over several months by skilled electricians.⁶⁷ The ability to use lighting to create mood and facilitate the show was a relatively new aspect to theaters that came about with the advent of electric lights. During ancient times, theaters were outside in the open air and mainly used the sunlight. Much later gas lighting was used with "one grand central ceiling light, or group of lights, in the dome, and smaller ones to show the local gold and color on balconies, with supplementary brackets on walls and under galleries."⁶⁸ The stage was usually

⁶⁶"Eugene Foundry is Maker of Delicate Iron Grille Work," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 7.

⁶⁷"Wiring of Lowell Done by Sigwart," Eugene Guard, 7 May 1925, 3.

⁶⁸John A. Fox, "The American Dramatic Theatre--V," The American Architect and Building News, vol 6 no 190: 59.

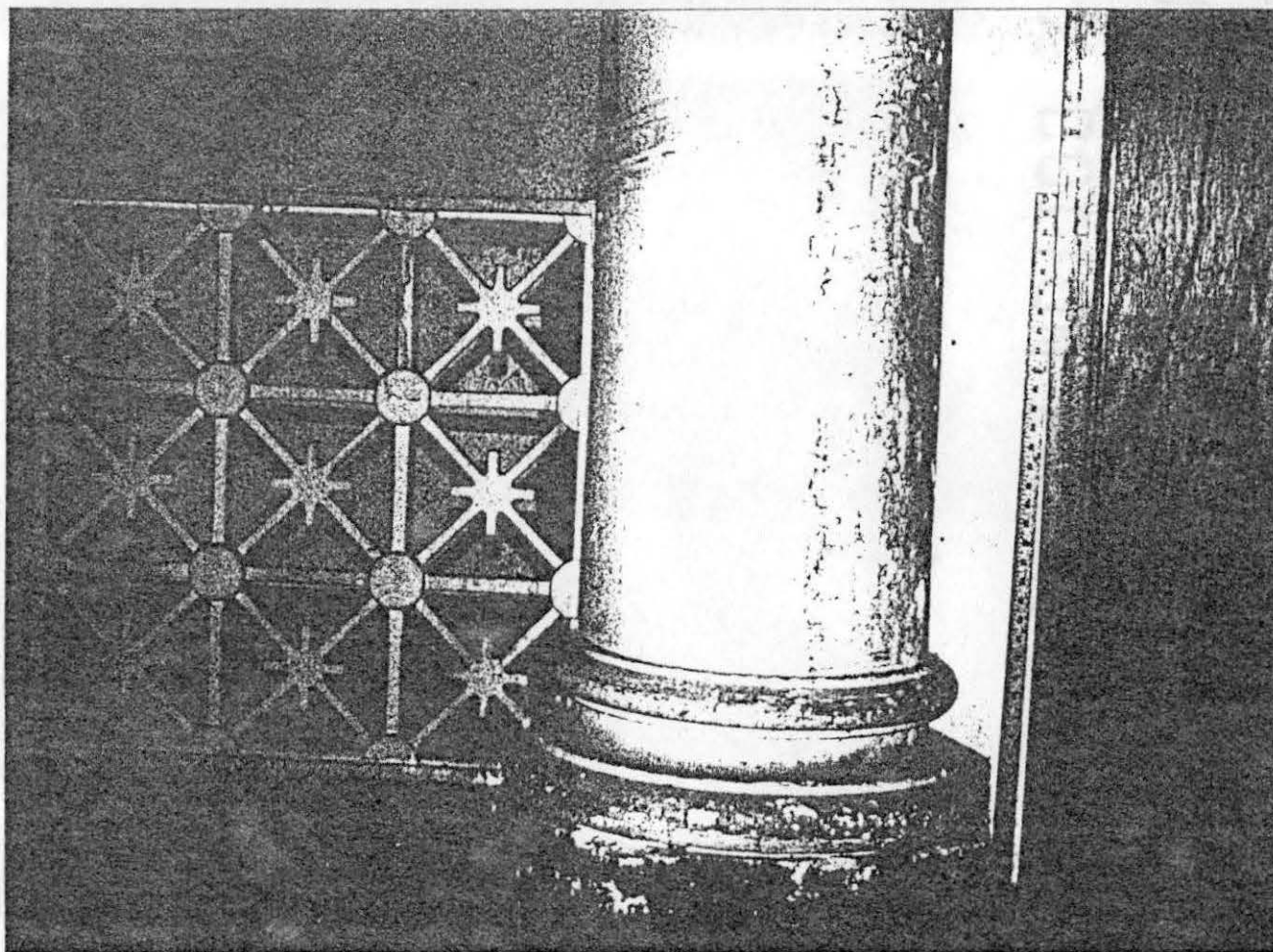


Figure 35 Column Base in Auditorium. Source: Author.

"illuminated with footlights, aided by the auditorium lights which remained on continually."⁶⁹ This type of lighting was popular up to about 1890. The introduction of electric lights, with their ability to provide greater brightness and be controlled more easily, allowed many changes to occur in stage and auditorium lighting. The McDonald with its advanced electrical lighting system allowed an operator great freedom with the lighting affects that could be achieved.

Auditorium and Stage Recommendations

This flexibility with lighting has been partially lost with the removal of the five baskets in each wall. The niches in the walls have been filled in, but their ghosts can still be seen in the walls. It is recommended that these be returned to their original form and the baskets be replaced with lights that are similar to the original. This would help create the atmosphere that was a part of the original decor. It would also eliminate the need for the use of the strong, blinding lights that are currently mounted at the center of the balcony railing.

The walls currently are draped from the frieze molding down to the floor. Removal of the curtains to expose the wall surface is recommended. Perhaps their removal will expose the original surface of the wall. If it has been painted and plastered as is indicated in the National Register Nomination for the McDonald, then a surface similar to the original should be returned to the walls as well as the

⁶⁹Fox, 59.

decorative frieze patterns. The arches and all their patterns should be returned.

Figure 29 shows one of the landscape murals that was part of the large arches. These murals, which help carry out the freedom of the Byzantine style, should be repainted with murals that are in a style similar to the painting found in the photograph. The proscenium arch and all its detail should be once again exposed. As mentioned previously, the detail within the arch is still in tact (see Figure 32). It is not known how much more of the decorative work that originally surrounded the arch is still existing. However there is potential that a lot of it is still existing, as a very little bit of decoration can be seen sticking up above the current screen (see Figure 36). Further exploration of this area should be conducted. Exposure and protection of all remaining features should immediately ensue.

Photographs which exhibit the original wall finishes indicate that the carpet in the auditorium was not patterned as in the foyer. Since the photographs are not dated, it is hard to determine if the carpet is the original. A carpet with a solid appearance should be installed in the auditorium between the aisles. It should match the carpet in the foyer and be able to withstand the abuses that will be inflicted upon it with feet and refreshments.

Realizing that seating needs and clearance requirements have changed, returning the original seating to the McDonald may not be possible. However, seats with similar shape and ends should be considered for this theater. There are several companies which specialize in the restoration and reproduction of theater seating. One that was found to be mentioned often was Country Seating from Belding,

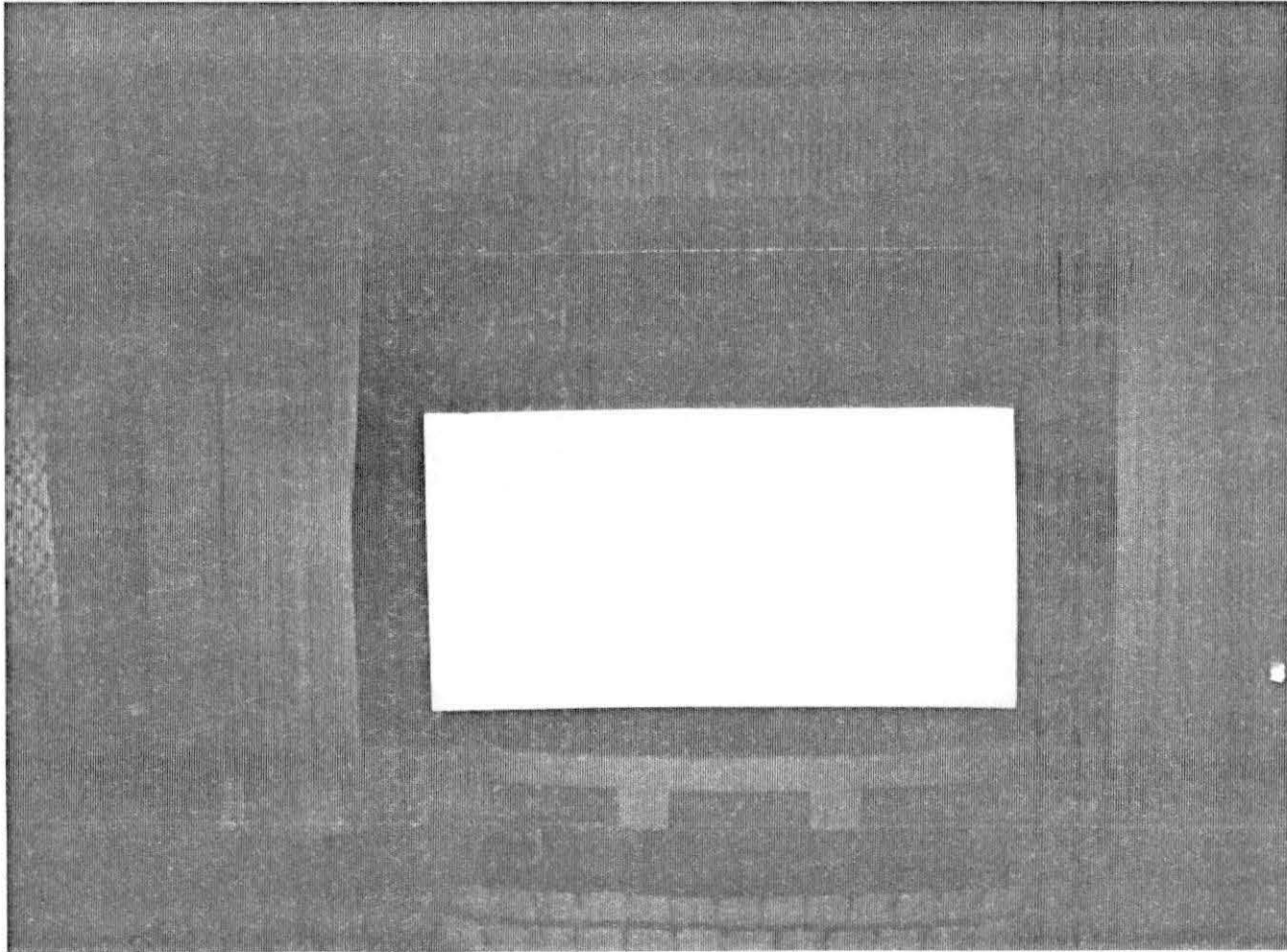


Figure 36 View of Auditorium Looking Towards the Screen. Source: Author.

Michigan. Two manufacturers of seating during the 1920s were found to be used quite often: American Seating and Haywood-Wakefield.⁷⁰ The seats in the McDonald, the Oriental, and Craterian theaters were Haywood-Wakefield chairs. American Seating company is still in business today and sells auditorium seating. It has not been determined if they are able to reproduce their old patterns. Since many companies often produce similar products, review of catalogs from various seating manufacturers may produce a clear photo of the original seat ends that were installed in the McDonald. Photographs that have been located have provided an indication of the pattern of the seat ends, but detailed knowledge of the original seat ends was not located (see Figure 29). These catalogs may be available from the manufacturer or organizations such as the Theatre Historical Society's archive."⁷¹ Contact with seat restoration firms may also provide information on historic seat ends.

The arches with the grilles are fortunately still intact. Currently the arches and columns are covered with draperies (see Figure 34). It is recommended that these draperies be taken down, allowing the beauty of the iron work to shine through. The columns are still intact as are the grilles at the bottom of the arches. The capitals of the columns are still painted with bright colors.

Repainting the capitals and arch patterns should be done in conjunction with the other arches within the room. A paint analysis should be completed on the capital

⁷⁰Also spelled Heywood-Wakefield in other references.

⁷¹A copy of an old American Seating catalog is available at the Theatre Historical Society.

columns and the front arch surroundings. An analysis of this particular area is recommended because it looks to be the least disturbed area of the theater. With the knowledge gained from the paint analysis, a color scheme for the entire theater could be developed. Further color analysis could be completed in other areas, but would be more difficult since most areas have been re-plastered since the theater's opening.

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CHAPTER V

RECOMMENDATION PRIORITIES AND CONCLUSION

After investigating, researching and examining photographs of the McDonald Theater, several recommendations can be made for the rehabilitation of the theater. Specific recommendations have already been made for each area of the theater. Taken all together, the recommendations may be a little overwhelming. A few suggestions will be made that place priorities on the recommendations. Ideas for implementing these recommendations will also be offered. These priorities have been made with the presumption that funds will be limited, but with the belief that implementation of long range goals will be profitable over time. If finances are plentiful, firms that specialize in restoration can be hired to do a thorough rehabilitation. However, realizing that few owners have the resources to complete such a venture all at once, other recommendations have been made. No matter what avenue is taken for rehabilitation, professionals should be consulted throughout to insure that changes are made appropriately and those features that still exist are not damaged.

It is believed that time is of the essence with the McDonald Theater for two reasons. One is the previous record of Eugene's lack of support for the downtown area, and resulting destruction of the majority of its historic buildings. Second is the desire of Lane Transit District to place their new main transit facility on the theater

block. It is still unclear if the McDonald Theater building is threatened, however being prepared will insure a better resistance to any move to demolish or destroy this theater and building. The order of recommendations have been made in light of small amounts of money being available and the need to make the public aware of the qualities of the theater. The priorities are listed in order:

1. Remove draperies over organ grilles and columns
2. Display photographs of the original interior
3. Move concession stand to the lobby
4. Create a new ticket counter or booth
5. Repaint patterns in upper portion of the auditorium arches
6. Repaint patterns in foyer
7. Repaint murals at ramp
8. Replace light fixtures in foyer
9. Complete acoustic analysis and implementation of report
10. Remove wall curtains in auditorium
11. Repaint stone affect on walls in auditorium
12. Repaint murals in auditorium
13. Replace light "baskets"

By removing the draperies over the organ grilles first, a stunning feature of the theater will be quickly revealed. The prominence of these arches will immediately be noticed by those attending the theater and be an inexpensive way to begin exposure of

the architectural features of the theater. Based on what can be seen under the curtains, the area is in fair condition and would require little immediate attention.

The effect of the removal of the curtains can be heightened with the display of early photographs of the theater and its interior, which can be found at the Lane County Historical Museum Library and the Theatre Historical Society. The photographs should be located prominently where the theater patrons can view the display before and after the feature. The location recommended is where the concession stand is currently located. Until this ideal location is realized, the lobby is suggested. With the new location of the concession stand, the foyer will be open for interaction of people, will allow the essence of the space to shine through and will provide more life to the lobby area. By reconstructing a new ticket booth at the sidewalk edge, the lobby area will begin to look as a space that was designed as a whole rather than a disjunct collection of ideas and additions. The visibility of the ticket area and the new concession stand will create a draw to the theater.

Repainting of decorative patterns is the next priority. The upper portions of the arches in the auditorium can be repainted without the removal of the curtains on the lower portion of the walls. Returning these patterns will increase the visual stimulation of the auditorium and the enjoyment of the patrons. Repainting in the foyer and ramp area will also make a leap forward in returning the original character of the theater. Since the University of Oregon has an extensive Architecture and Allied Arts college that includes fine arts, interior design and historic preservation, a collaboration between the University and the theater could be established. The paint

finishes such as stencil work and the faux stone walls could be repainted in cooperation with a historic interior finishes course. The murals could be completed by some fine arts/painting students. Paint analysis could be coordinated with a historic preservation course. A specific course just for the theater rehabilitation could also be developed as was developed between the City of Eugene and the University of Oregon for the McNail-Riley House. If coordination with the University for specific courses was not able to be done, then the owners could hire students from these various programs to complete these tasks. This might even be done partially through exchange for passes to the movies, helping to limit the overall cost. It is vital to remember, though, that all activities need to be overseen by a preservation professional.

As the painted decorations are reconstructed and the theater gradually is returned to its original grandeur, it will expose the community to a resource for restoration that is available to the city. This should encourage people to support the theater either through increased attendance or donations for its continued rehabilitation. In either event, the next recommendation will require a large sum of money to accomplish, a complete analysis on the acoustics of the theater auditorium. This analysis should take into consideration the effects that the removal of the curtains will have on the sound qualities. This recommendation is made because returning the theater to its original atmosphere must include the removal of the draperies on the walls, and because several people have stated that the poor sound quality distracts

them from the movies. When acoustic improvements are made to the auditorium then the remaining painted finishes can follow to embellish the large arches.

After these first recommendations have been completed, the theater will be well on its way to being the original work of art that created an illusion while providing a pleasing functional space which meets today's motion picture requirements. As money becomes available it should be spent on refining the space. Refinements should include such things as returning the light baskets to the auditorium walls, replacing the carpet when it is worn with a carpet similar in pattern and color to the original, and replacing inappropriate furniture with furniture similar to the original. This furniture would include the auditorium seat ends, the foyer furniture, and the furniture in the restrooms. When all is completed the best pictures can be shown at the theater, as it was when it was opened, and the following statement which was made in regards to the popular new film "Madam Sans Genre" will again be true: "The picture is worthy of the new theater, and the new theater is worthy of the picture, a matchless combination."¹

The McDonald and other small community motion picture theaters can be a benefit to the community and the downtown area in which they are located, especially after revitalization of the theater. The revitalization can be accomplished after an understanding of the theater's place in history and a knowledge of the theater's original features is gained. This thesis has provided a general history of the motion

¹"Crowds Throng To Opening of Lowell Theater," Eugene Guard, 8 May 1925, 1.

picture industry and its architecture to facilitate the history gathering process. The history specific to the McDonald Theater can provide a guide for other theaters when they are discovering their own historical background. While the recommendations that have been given for the McDonald Theater are specific to this theater, other owners can customize the recommendations for their individual theaters. This can be done by using the same concepts and ideas that are behind the particular recommendations and then determine specifics based upon the individual theater. This will work because of the evidence that many theaters were built with the same concept, yet with individual results. With the ideas presented, other small community motion picture theater owners will have a base to work with and begin the revitalization of the theaters. These efforts may well lead to community revitalization, preservation of the arts, preservation of an important historic building of the community and the continued economic fitness of the theater.

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