

MOBERLY'S FOURTH STREET THEATRE

The following article appeared in the Oct. 14, 1998 issue, page 5, of the Moberly Monitor-Index and Evening Democrat. The Fourth Street Theatre in Moberly has been a landmark in the city for nearly a century and the information is worth sharing on this page. With the permission of Mr. Bob Cunningham, Publisher of the [Moberly Monitor-Index and Evening Democrat](#), it is transcribed here in its entirety. Thank you, Mr. Cunningham. Thanks also to the members of the Randolph County Historical Society mentioned in the article.

Historical society wants theater as national historical site



Note:

Photo found: 1 April 2023, Date of photo unknown

Moberly's Fourth Street Theatre, donated late last year by B&B Movie Company, a chain based in Salisbury, to the Randolph County Historical Society, is among the oldest, if not the oldest, movie theater still standing. The Society is currently working to have the theater recognized as a national historical site, and preparing to obtain grants to restore the theater to its original glory for public use. The theater opened in 1914, before a major motion picture had been released from a place called Hollywood.

Using the original plans, drafted by Ludwig Abt in 1911, members of the Society have been removing modern additions to discover the treasures long hidden behind painted plywood walls. Recently, long-time Society member Karl Rice tore off a wall by hand to find one of the original mahogany entry doors to the theater. The original ticket booth has been found, as well as the segregated entrance for African-Americans. The Abt papers were donated to the Society by J. Kay Cleavinger, Abt's partner for approximately 20 years.

Another member of the society, Ron Brockman, husband of Society president Carla Brockman, wishing to top Rice's discovery, found the original black marble slabs of the ticket booth. The ticket booth, with two windows, front and rear, one for whites, the other for blacks, was removed years ago and replaced with a concession stand.

Though long-range plans for future use of the theater have not been developed, it is expected that the theater will be restored to its 1914 condition including some of the 1924 additions with some modification for modern conveniences such as accessible toilets.

For an 84-year old structure, the Fourth Street Theatre is in remarkably good condition. Though remodeled at least three times, the first time extensively in 1924 by Carl Boller, the theater is close to what it was in 1914. The stage, orchestra pit, projection booth and dressing rooms remain exactly as designed by Abt. Changes over the years include addition of two public toilets, a cry room, a manager's office adjacent to the projection room, a second set of stairs, the replacement of the original ticket booth with a concession stand, and the "colored entrance".

Society Proceeding Step by Step

Carla Brockman says all this will take time. "For now, our main concern is routine maintenance," she says. Recently the Society had the roof repaired and the marquees removed. Maddox advertising of Moberly volunteered to remove the aging marquees, a recent one and another, older, beneath it. "This is a major effort for the Society. We shall proceed step by step to ensure the integrity of the building and its future use as a possible cultural center for Moberly," she says. Those interested in helping are encouraged to contact her any evening at (660) 263-3306.

"Our next major effort is removing the modern screen and sound system," she says.

According to Brockman, the first step is to nominate the theater for the state and national Registers of Historic Places. "This will make us eligible for grants and other funding. We estimate it will take \$200,000 to \$250,000 to restore the Fourth Street to its original glory," she says. "We have a small committee working on this" Joe Barnes, Cecy Rice and Becky Snider, a doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri-Columbia."

Theater Designed in 1911

Much of the primary research is the responsibility of Barnes. "We knew that we had a historic building," says Brockman, "but Joe is uncovering more and more fascinating facts every week." The theater was designed by Ludwig Abt, the famous German architect who settled in Moberly in 1910, assisted by one his former partners in Kansas City, Robert Sanneman. John P. Beuth owned the property at 110 North Fourth at that time. Two local theater owners, Everett E. Tritch and Fred A. Selby, formed a partnership to manage the planned theater. In the spring of 1913, Beuth sold the land and the theater, then under construction, to O'Keefe Bros Grocery Co., Inc.

Barnes research shows that the theater opened on Monday, Feb. 9, 1914, as a small-time vaudeville house. Small-time vaudeville, found outside of the major cities of the period, had a feature movie followed by a visiting vaudeville act. Big-time vaudeville, found in urban areas, consisted of several acts but no movie.

Barnes says, "The Fourth Street Theatre was designed for a capacity of 1,000 but on opening nights, even though the heating was yet to be installed, an estimated 2,000 packed in to see the movie *An Hour Before Dawn* followed by *Three Elliotts*, a visiting musical act. *An Hour Before Dawn* is a Famous Players film. Based on a Broadway play, the master print of this movie, produced by Adolph Zukor, was later lost in a studio fire. We know it was a war-time melodrama - a really trite but popular plot. Taking place in England, a husband discovers his wife is a German spy. Though a pacifist, the hero patriotically kills his wife and then enlists. Quite a tale! Obviously a different time."

(Famous Players later merged with the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Co. to become Paramount, the first major studio in the small California Methodist community of Hollywood. Paramount is the only studio remaining in Hollywood.)

Open Night - 1914

"Imagine opening night," says Barnes. "The public entered under a rectangular copper porte cochere into an open area, now glassed in. Brass rails guided the patrons to a black marble ticket window, and then through glass doors framed with solid mahogany. We believe the original stained glass panes over the doors remain as they match in the Abt house on Holman. The theater was decorated in shades of green and old ivory."

Barnes places the Moberly theater into context. "In 1889, W.K.L. Dickson, working at Thomas Edison's laboratory in New Jersey, invented the Kinescope - the peep show. In 1894, C. Francis Jenkins projected the first movie in his home in Richmond, Indiana. The feature movie in the U.S. did not come until the Edison studio released Edwin S. Porter's The Great Train Robbery in 1903. Originally movies were shown in tents, traveling box cars, and converted stores. The first Nickelodean, a remodeled store, opened in 1905 in McKeesport, PA, leading to a Nickelodean craze which lasted about five years.

"The point is that movies were not shown in movie houses," he says. "These did not yet exist. But during this period the concept of small-time vaudeville evolved. Moberly had a few opera houses, vaudeville houses and Nickelodeans, but the Fourth Street is Moberly's first movie theater built for that specific purpose, not a building remodeled for showing movies. So far, my limited research shows that the Best, a St. Louis theater, was built as a movie theater in 1910, but it is long gone. The famous Strand in New York, often cited as the first large movie theater, did not open until April 1914, two months after our Fourth Street."

Barnes continues, "Perhaps a better context is to understand that the first major film produced in Hollywood, Oscar Apfel and Cecil B. DeMille's The Squaw Man, was not released until February 15, 1914, six days after the opening of our theater" The Fourth Street Theatre is one of the oldest movie theaters in existence anywhere in the world! "Further research is necessary but we may have the oldest still around." says Barnes.

As Rice, Barnes and Snider complete the nomination form for the National Register, an article on the theater is being drafted for publication in about 2000 in the Missouri Historic Review. Snider is writing her dissertation on the theater. Barnes is working on a booklet on the complete history of the theater. His research so far has concentrated on its construction and later remodelings. Ralph Gerhard, Marie O'Keefe, J. Kay Cleavinger, Don Robb and others have so far contributed information to this effort.

"However," says Barnes, "though we have uncovered much, much remains to be uncovered." Anyone with any stories or information on the Fourth Street Theatre is encouraged to contact Barnes at his office (660) 263-6048, preferably in the evening. "I need information on Theodore Davis, Beuth, Abt, Selby, Tritch, the O'Keefes or anyone associated with the theater," he says. "I also need stories, memories and the like."

Several have asked about the segregated entrance to the theater. Barnes says this was not in the original Abt plans. "Actually, it was built in 1924," he says. "The O'Keefes, and Tritch and Selby had a parting of the ways, and Theodore Davis became manager. There was some redecorating in early 1923, but in 1924 Carl Boller, the famous theater architect who also designed the Missouri in Columbia (MO) and the Landers in Springfield (MO), augmented the original structure - extending the balcony, adding a cry room, and six loges. He also added "A special gallery, with separate box office and entrance for African-Americans. Before then, our black community was not allowed to attend the theater. So if you need a date, April 25, 1924 - that's when the 'colored entrance' opened."

Future Plan

Many have asked about tours of the theater. Brockman says public access is not feasible at this time. "Much of what they would like to see, the stage area and dressing rooms, are poorly lit. Some of the Door (?) is rotten. Liability prevents us from opening the theater now, but we may make arrangements for small groups," she says. "Once we start major work, access will be more limited. For now, just look in the glass doors and drop by the Historical Center to see the Abt plans and photographs we have taken."

What are the future plans for the Fourth Street Theatre beyond mere restoration? Brockman emphasizes that the Society does not plan to go into the entertainment business. "We have excellent groups - such as the Community Theater and the Art Council - which are already doing this. Our goal is only to protect and restore the building and make it available to these and other groups."

A group will be formed to suggest ideas to the Society. Suggestions so far include an annual silent-movie festival, opening the theater for visiting and local productions, and providing a facility in a historic setting for community groups and their programs.

Moberly is best known as a railroad town and the home of (General of the Army) Omar N. Bradley. But it could easily become a mecca for fans of the classic silent cinema.

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