

Palace Theatre marks 75th anniversary in Lake Placid

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, June 18, 2001

LAKE PLACID — The main venue for film exhibition at this weekend's Lake Placid Film Forum is the Palace Theater on Main Street, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year.

The Adirondack Theater Corporation, a locally owned and managed concern, erected the Palace Theater in 1926. As the building neared completion, the corporation also took out a long-term lease on the only other movie house in Lake Placid, the 15-year-old Happy Hour Theater.

The Happy Hour had been built in 1911 by its owner-operators, referred to in the Lake Placid News of the day only as "Messrs. Walton & Adams."

"During the intervening period (since the Happy Hour's construction), extensive alterations have been made in the property," the 1926 News said, "which have materially increased the seating capacity of the auditorium."

ATC took possession of the Happy Hour on May 16, 1926, less than two weeks before the doors were opened to the Palace.

It's not certain when the Happy Hour closed, but current Palace owner Reg Clark recalls that it was not long after the new theatre's opening.

The final touch to the new Palace cinema was the installation of "a first-class, strictly orchestral concert organ," said the LPN. "The organ differs from the so-called pipe organs and church organs in that it is strictly orchestral in practically all its qualities.

"There are two departments or organs, one on each side of the stage. It requires many miles of wire for the electrical works, and a 15 h.p. motor to operate it."

The organ was played to accompany the silent films being shown when the Palace was built.

The Palace opens

Today, the Palace Theater remains the same in many details as the grand, 925-seat movie palace that opened on May 29, 1926, "before an audience that filled every seat of the big auditorium and overflowed into such standing space as was available," according to the News.

"The buzz of conversation ceased as the special orchestra struck up an overture. The audience seemed to realize that here was something more than a mere theater opening. In truth it was a dream made real," the News reported.

When Chamber of Commerce President W.R. Wikoff addressed the audience — gathered from as far afield as Plattsburgh, Keene and Au Sable Forks — he spoke of the Palace as an emblem of Lake Placid's shining future.

"He (Wikoff) dwelt on the fact," the LPN said in its decidedly biased report of the opening, "that the Palace was a monument to the optimists of the village, the men who said, 'It could be done.' He also pointed out that Lake Placid is going ahead in no uncertain way, as proved by the new theater."

Sources differ on who designed the Palace Theater. The June 4, 1926, Lake Placid

News gives the credit to John N. Linn, of Brooklyn. A later historical assessment, however, lists architect Louis Wetmore, of Glens Falls, as the designer.

Both sources agree that the building was constructed by George Bola, a Lake Placid contractor.

The Palace that today's movie-goers experience exhibits many of the distinctive architectural features of the original 1926 building, including:

- the Neo-Classical “cast stone” detailing on the Palace's Main Street facade, with its central Palladian window, lotus-capital pilasters and pediment;
- the orchestra pit in the main, downstairs movie hall, complete with the Robert Morton 1926 pipe organ, built in Van Nuys, Calif., and bought for \$25,000 — or, in the inflated currency of 2001, about a quarter of a million dollars;
- late Art Nouveau stenciled walls; and
- original cast plaster chandeliers and wall sconces.

The theater's painted ceiling panels originally depicted angels, suspended in the heavens above and watching over the movie patrons below. The angels were covered over in the 1930s with a composition material designed to improve the auditorium's acoustics after the introduction of “talkies.”

“Talkies” — motion pictures synchronized with a soundtrack — were first brought to the Palace in 1929.

“Lake Placid as a village would probably not have talking pictures for some time to come, due to the heavy initial expense of installation,” observed the April 5, 1929, edition of the Lake Placid News, “but (Placid's) position as a resort town, and the wish of the local owners and manager to keep up with the parade, bring (the talkies) to Lake Placid ... a year or two ahead of what would be the case if the summer-visitor angle did not enter into the calculations.”

Clark restores the Palace

Reg Clark inherited a Lake Placid funeral parlor, and running it constitutes his “day job.” But at night, the man who worked in the Palace as a lad runs his very own movie house.

In 1960, the year Clark bought the Palace, 12 cinema screens were operating in the area. By 1983, all but the Palace and Saranac Lake's Berkeley Theater, also run by Clark, had closed. (The Berkeley closed last year.)

For more than 20 years, the Palace continued to rotate several movies a week across its single screen, just as it had since its 1926 opening.

Then, in 1983, following the advent of the first multiplex theaters in the larger cities, Clark closed off the balcony to make way for a second screen. A “grand re-opening” was held on June 10, 1983, to mark the occasion, with Kate Smith singing “God Bless America.”

Two years later Clark cut that upstairs room in half, making for three screens in all.

Today there are 298 seats downstairs at the Palace, and 136 more in each of the two upstairs viewing rooms, for a total seating capacity of 570.

Though the viewing space was broken up to accommodate the greater variety demanded by modern audiences, Clark hired Eileen Black, of Saranac Lake, to restore the Art Nouveau wall paintings in the two upper halls and duplicate the style of their trim on

the wall dividing the rooms.

“Dividing the theater improved its economic viability without significantly impairing its integrity, as the main auditorium remains intact,” wrote Troy architect Janet Null in a 1990 evaluation of the Palace for the Lake Placid-North Elba Historic Commission.

“Apart from the changes above and minor alterations on the facade, the theater retains its original form and fabric,” said Null.

She characterized the Palace as “eclectic rather than innovative in design, but nevertheless harmonious. It is a very prominent part of Main Street, and well-appreciated in the community.”

Null’s study of the theater was conducted as part of an effort by Clark and Lake Placid Building Inspector James Morganson to secure money from the N.Y. Office of Historic Preservation to renovate the building’s crumbling Main Street facade.

The money did not come soon enough for some, however, as a report from the Village Board’s July 1991 meeting indicates. A resident came to that meeting to complain that pieces of crumbling brick had fallen onto the sidewalk in front of the theater, inches from his parked car.

Protective nets had to be thrown up over the sidewalk before the facade was finally stabilized.

The return of the pipe organ

The building was not all that Reg Clark restored at the Palace Theater.

In 1998 Clark commissioned the rebuilding of the original Robert Morton organ, which is one of only two such organs still in operation in the theaters in which they were originally installed.

Not only had the Morton organ suffered the normal indignities associated with age and disuse, but the wires connecting its central console to the two pipe units on either side of the stage had been accidentally cut in the process of modernizing the downstairs viewing hall in the mid-1980s.

Melvin Robinson, who rebuilt the Palace organ, said that theater organs had been designed in the silent-film era to give a “big sound” to a one-musician instrument.

“What’s especially unique about the Palace’s organ,” he told the News, “is that it comes with all the ‘toys’ — the tam-tams, drums, whistles and other percussion instruments.” Those rare percussive add-ons accompanied the organ as it played the soundtrack to the Twenties’ silent film classics.

The Morton organ had its revival debut in October 1998 for the Lake Placid Institute’s Silent Film Festival, and it’s gotten a workout for that festival every year since.

In addition, the organ was played last year during the inaugural Lake Placid Film Forum as accompaniment for a silent film.

At this year’s Forum the organ will again be played by Jeff Barker, who assisted Robinson in restoring the Palace instrument three years ago, for a showing of Buster Keaton’s “The Cameraman” (1928, 90 minutes) this Sunday, June 10, at 4 p.m.

Thanks to Mary MacKenzie, North Elba and Lake Placid’s official historian, for use of her archival files on the Palace Theatre.