

## PARK RIVER LYRIC THEATER

“I set about finding how many theaters there were in small towns in North Dakota--many more than anyone would think. They struck me as museums in a sense, the kind of place that held the memories of the community in a way not even the “official” museums have been able to do.”

“The Memory Palaces of the Dakotas,” by Mr. Tim Kennedy

It was a beautiful spring evening, May 12, 2002, and after many years of being closed, Park River’s Lyric Theater was opened. A young business group, all students at Park River High School, planned to show one movie to the public before beginning their ambitious business venture of reviving and restoring the Lyric. Others involved were Superintendent, Harold Knoll; City manager, Tom Larson; Rebecca Chyle; Matt and Susan Degner, and others who were interested. A nautical theme was used for the showing of “Titanic,” as the first movie. The movie was well attended by a very appreciative audience. Mr. Tim Kennedy, a professor at the North Dakota State University was in attendance; he is doing a study of old theaters. Park River’s Lyric Theater has a rich history, and everyone who has contributed information to this article had fond memories to add.

On March 26, 1915, Will McEachern and Fred Walstrom purchased 416 Briggs Ave, the lot on which the theater was built. The theater opened July 8, 1915, and according to the town historical record, “The pictures were as close to perfect as possible.” Pictures were silent, with a pianist providing music. Some of the accompanists were: Lila McLaughlin, Snow (Magoon) Leek, Disa Spornitz and Marie Simmer (who also sold tickets). Other background or “sound-effect” music was played in the back of the theater by vita phones. Florenz (Teeny) Ferguson Swanke added that one benefit of the “silent” movies was that you had to become a good reader because the dialogue was written beside the picture. The seats were wooden, and there was a stage in front of the screen which was used for plays and other entertainment. One of these groups was a drama school from Winnipeg, The Winnipeg Kiddies.

Jack Erovick and Mr. Kopang were projectionists. The movie usually needed more than one reel, requiring the projectionist to stop the film, turn on the lights, and change reels. Those selling tickets included: Irene Knutson Peterson and Helen Conner. “Teeny” reminded me that her father, John Ferguson, was the Park River City electrician, and because he did electrical repairs for the Lyric, his family received free passes to the theater.

1928-1929: The beginning of talking pictures. A movie was ordinarily played for two nights with two showings each night: 7:30 and 9:30. The theater featured “serials” during the three midweek nights. A part of the movie would be played each night, continuing into the next weeks until completed, often taking several weeks. This sounds like the beginning of our soap operas. Betty Boop comedies, and mysteries such as “The Thin

Man,” starring Myrna Loy, were popular.

In the late 1930's, a movie was usually played for two nights: Sunday/Monday, Wednesday/Thursday, and Friday/Saturday. Tuesday featured a “take-a-chance” movie. The Friday/Saturday feature was usually a western—referred to as a cowboy movie, and often starred Hopalong Cassidy or Gene Autry.

November 1931: Will McEachern purchased Fred Walstrom's share of the theater, and when Mr. McEachern died, his wife, Laura (Gowan) McEachern became the sole owner.

1936: The Lyric was air-conditioned, and the theater was updated to the art deco decor which was popular at that time.

During the 1940's & 1950's, the following people were among those who helped with the management of the Lyric: Clarence Everson; Don Dobmeier; and Gerald and Josephine Pohanka.

Dorothy and Lorraine Bena were two of those who were hired to usher patrons to their seats, using small flash lights. Children, attending a movie alone, were often ushered to the front rows, as the back rows usually were preferred by adults. It was customary to reserve a seat for those who attended regularly.

There were no treats sold in, or brought to, the theater as that would have been considered “messy,” and if you had a candy bar, etc, you kept it in your pocket until the lights went out, leaving no papers as evidence of your wrongdoing. In later years, popcorn was sold and today, there is an assortment of candy and popcorn available.

Sept 1948: Ida Neste and Jack Erovick leased the theater from Laura McEachern.

Sept 1953: J.J. Arnold leased the theater from Laura McEachern.

June 1, 1956: Donald Lindgren took management of the theater from J.J. Arnold.

May 5, 1957: J.J. Arnold repurchased the theater

June 30, 1967: Marvin Agotness took management of the theater from J.J. Arnold

Much of the above information is taken from the Walsh County Historical Books, and includes our memories and those of friends, including the following: Florenz (Teeny) Ferguson Swanke, Lorna (Harris) Marifjeren, Adelle (Harris) Williams, Maud (Hanson) McPherson.

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The following comments, sent to me in 2002 by Mary (Kenny) Marifjeren in answer to my request for information about the Lyric, are included, much as she wrote them. They are first-hand information about the early years of the Lyric, and “shed light” on some of the “business practices” of early theaters. Mary will celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2006.

“My association with Will McEachern began while I was a student at PRHS. I graduated (with Maud Hanson-McPherson) in 1925 and was employed as a part-time telephone operator. In January 1926, I entered nurses training in Fargo, ND. I contracted T.B. there (from a patient) and spent the next few years at San Haven T.B. Sanitarium. While there, the McEacherns visited me often. Mr. Mac assured me then that I could have work with him when I was well. That came about in 1932. While then working as an operator in the telephone company, Mr. Mac’s eyesight began to fail, and I did a lot of reading for him, such as (scripts of forthcoming movies, etc. for the Lyric) Very soon, I was put on that payroll. The contracts for movies were with representatives of Metro, Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros, and others from Minneapolis. He had me “sit in” on discussions while contracts for forthcoming movies were negotiated. I learned that a good contract was one with a high elimination clause. He was very good at bargaining. The “Take a Chance” were started to use the movies that couldn’t be eliminated. These contracts were signed before the movies were made. I married Elmer Stokke in 1941. After Mr. Mac Died, I continued to work for Mrs Mac until 1942. We moved to Fargo in 1942, and Elmer died later in 1942. I moved to California in 1950, and am still here. I know very little of the history of the Lyric before working there. Many of the names mentioned in your letter are familiar. I remember Jack Erovick well. He was lineman for the Telephone Company as well as projectionist at the Lyric, all while I was there. I believe that Ida Neste worked for Laura when I left there. Beulah McLaughlin (a neighbor of ours in PR) also played piano in Lyric at one time. When the McEacherns were away, I sold tickets, ushered, counted the receipts, banked deposits or whatever was needed. Most of the time, I worked with Mr. Mac in office and sold tickets.

I sincerely hope Park River High School youth accomplish their venture very successfully and love doing it. It’s a fascinating business. (Mary finished her letter with personal greetings to me, as well as Mina Marifjeren and Maud McPherson.)  
Material from 2002. Compiled by Yvonne (Chapman) Walstad, 2006