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# OLD BERRIEN

Newsletter of the  
Berrien Historical  
Foundation

Volume 4 Number 1

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## THE OPERA HOUSE & MAJESTIC THEATER



*The marquee shown above in this 1954 photo, is the most familiar image that Berrien County movie-goers remember of the Majestic Theater. It was the 1936 remodeled building of the old Nashville Opera House, a three storied structure built in 1912.*

*Source: Information from the Nashville Herald and Berrien Press article extractions by Skeeter Parker*

The arrangement was not satisfactory to one of the parties, evidenced by the resignation of Mr. McLeod who accepted a position at Ft. Walton, Florida. He was replaced by Frank Lineberger, who had previously managed the theater for 16 years. It also appears that he was managing the Midway Drive-in Theater on the Adel Highway.

Sometime between September, 1956, and February 1959, Tommy Brantley managed the theaters, then was replaced by Billie Register. Mr. Register went about sprucing up the refreshment counter at the Majestic, and also making improvements at the Midway.

The next manager of the Majestic Theater was Mrs. Howard Mainor, whose husband had operated it for many years. She cleaned up the theater, repairing seats, and repainting the interior. Though movies were still an attraction, the advent of television was keeping families home, and making the Majestic less profitable.

Sometime in the early 1960s, Mrs. Feldon Lee took over management, followed by Evelyn Mathis and Jack Kent in 1964, however with larger theaters opening in nearby towns, the Majestic's life had nearly run out.

The theater finally closed its doors for good, sitting in disrepair and dilapidation for several years. In 1978, H.D. Hand and Sam Akins purchased the building from Byron Adams and C.P. Cohen of Jacksonville, with some consideration of restoration. However in November, 1989, the Old Opera House, the Deal Theater, and the Majestic Theater, all-in-one, fell to the demolition crew of Paul Newbern. And today, all that remains of that grand edifice are a few theater seats, a candy machine, and a huge void on the south side of Courthouse Square.



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his Sunday showings, telling his customers, "If you want to see a good show on Sunday, just go to any of the towns within a radius of twenty-five miles and maybe you will see lots of your friends there."

The hearing on the injunction was held before Judge W.R. Smith at the courthouse in January, 1947. The hearing was well attended by both sides, however Mr. McLeod must have prevailed as evidenced by the poster above.

Another noteworthy event in the history of the Majestic, was the addition of air conditioning in September, 1949. The theater also did another remodeling in 1954, under new manager, R.N. Thomas, adding

*The December, 1949 Majestic Theater calendar shown above, hung on the wall in the home of Mrs. Mattie Jean Griffin, as a reminder of upcoming film features. Notice that the films only showed one or two days, occasionally as a double feature.*

a giant wide-screen for the new "Cinemascope" productions. In addition, modern restrooms were added down front under the screen, and exits out into the alley behind the theater were also added.

Promotional events brought movie goers to the Majestic—events like Rock-and-Roll competitions and personal appearances by Hopalong Cassidy and Frog Millhouse, and Tex Ritter.

In December, 1955, Mr. Thomas was replaced, once again by Eddie McLeod.

battered popcorn. For this is where the old Majestic Theater once stood—a gathering place for an afternoon or evening's entertainment to the citizens of Nashville and Berrien County, for more than six decades.

Though the neon marquee is the most memorable image that brings back those nostalgic thoughts of the grand edifice, its original facade appeared much different when the building was first erected in 1912, as the New Opera House.

The first Opera House in Nashville was built on the north side of the Square in 1908, but was an unprofitable venture, and was remodeled to become the Marion Hotel.

The new three-story brick building on the south side of the square began construction in January, 1912, along with its neighboring Berrien County Bank Building, under the supervision of Rilt Turner Construction. The bottom floor was occupied by the Nashville Herald Newspaper, while the top two floors housed the theater.

The theater operated under the management of M. S. Griffin, and the movies were all silent films, with piano or organ accompaniment, and occasional fiddle, banjo, and orchestra support. The building was not heated or cooled initially, and made the audience quite uncomfortable during weather extremes. However by 1914, a heater was added, though seating placement was crucial for a comfortable viewing.

The program consisted of 35 minutes of stage vaudeville, and then followed



by four reels of film. Admission was 15 cents for children, 25 cents for adults. The novelty of a movie theater was quite intriguing to the Nashville community when it first opened in 1913.

However, by June of the same year, patronage was slipping, and merchants were giving away free tickets. The Saturday afternoon “farmers matinee” drew the best crowds.

But the patronage continued to dwindle, and the theater closed down in May, 1914.

In July that same year the theater opened under a new name, Sweat’s Opera House, managed by A.J. Connell. It seemed to do fairly well for about three years, showing silent film adaptations of American stage plays, and a few live minstrel shows. But once again, the theater closed down in March, 1917.

It did reopen six months later, featuring a new projector that eliminated the

delay of reel changes. In 1919 the theater management was turned over to Gladys and Kate Sweat, in hopes that they could keep the theater open.

Ownership of the theater changed hands in 1920 when Messrs Hurst and Arnett of Macon took over the operation. It may have been about this time that the name of the theater was changed to the DEAL. This name of the theater lasted until sometime after 1927.

In January, 1929, the theater opened under a new owner, E.F. Falte, who had been operating the Dreamland Theater in Ocilla. The Nashville theater took on its most familiar name, THE MAJESTIC, and offered quartet selections from Messrs Baker, Griffin, Tucker, and Crumm. Misses Arlo and Aline Futch gave a small skit, with a song and dance assisted by Wilson Giddens. The local orchestra also performed, and

*Home of the Nashville Opera House, the three story structure above center, was built in 1912, in conjunction with the Berrien County Bank, to the right. It housed the Nashville Herald offices on the ground floor, and the Opera House on the top two floors. The bank is the present-day remodeled Dogwood Pharmacy, and the market and feed store to the left is now hidden by the false front of the old Peebles Store.*

Mrs. Falte played violin and piano selections to enhance the silent movie.

However, the Faltes did not stay long in Nashville, turning operation of the theater over to Wilson Giddens in March of that same year. This change was for the better, as Mr. Giddens purchased a “sound device” (phonograph) that gave music and sound to synchronize with the movie, though the movie itself was still silent.

But by June, Mr. Giddens was gone

and James Echols took over the management. In July, he added a balcony to the theater, seating about 50, so that the black population could view the movies for the first time.

Echols partnered up with O.E. Futch and in February, 1930, the managers brought in two Paramount films, operated by a factory representative, exposing the Berrien community to their first truly “talking pictures.”

The trial showing must have been only a mild success, as it was not until November before the Majestic Theater finally installed the DeForest Phonofilm sound system. Even then it was stated that, “It has become necessary that talking pictures be begun in Nashville as . . . the leading picture corporations have discontinued making silent films.”

The new system required the walls to be padded and other adjustments be made in the hall so that the audio would sound “almost natural.”

However, even with the addition of new “talkies” to the theater, it appears that the Majestic had closed down by February, 1933, when a fire broke out in the stairs of the balcony on the third floor. According to the report in the *Nashville Herald*, “The second and third floors have not been in use, and it is strange as to the source of the occurrence.”

It was in December, 1936, when the “golden era” of the Majestic Theater really started, when the theater underwent a dramatic remodeling that established the more familiar facade and marquee.

The *Nashville Herald* reported, “The view to the visitor from either the gallery or the main auditorium is one of beauty and the simplicity in color and lighting effects is most restful and pleasing . . .

Carpets cover the aisles in the auditorium. It will be comfortably heated and the complete comfort of the patrons is further made sure by the installation of upholstered seats throughout the main section.”

The theater was owned by J. Henry Gaskins, Jack Randall was the manager, Johnny McLeod was the movie operator, and Mrs. Jack Shaw was the cashier

With a newly renovated building offer-



ing the latest studio films, the Majestic opened its doors from 3:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. daily, and Saturday shows continuous from 1:30 p.m. until 11:30 p.m.

With the entry of the United States in WWII, the theater became the favorite entertainment center of the townspeople and soldiers alike. Mr.

L.A. Stein of Jacksonville purchased the theater along with several other theaters in small, South Georgia communities. Managers of the Stein organization were often moved from one location to another.

Majestic managers were: Maude Holloand, 1937; R. Frank Lineberger, 1938; Burma Jones, 1940; W. Eddie McLeod, 1940; and Nell McLeod, 1943 until the end of the war. During the war years, the theater hosted War Bond drives, often adjusting their show hours to accommodate changes in War Time, winter, summer and planting-harvest seasons.

*Sometime prior to the remodeling of the Majestic theater in 1954, the United Bank made the unfortunate change to their building front, removing the classic columns, and eliminating the ornate brickwork from the top of the structure.*

In 1946, Eddie McLeod once again took over operation of the theater, and in September, added Sunday matinees and evening showings. This brought about outrage from some of the local church members.

Even though the profits from the Sunday showings were to be used to build the VFW clubhouse, a petition signed by 35 of Nashville’s most prominent citizens threatened a law suit if the Sunday showings proceeded.

Mr. McLeod called their bluff and ran several Sunday showings, but sure enough the citizens group filed a request for an injunction to stop the showings. In October, Mr. McLeod reluctantly ceased