

Civic from page A1

early 1960s.

"Another example was in 1989, when Hohler transformed the balcony into a second auditorium. Life changes, so does business."

"There's not a market in Farmington for children's movies anymore," Hohler said. "During the early '60s there were 22 elementary schools in Farmington and Farmington Hills." Today, there are 13 elementary in the Farmington district, plus a few in nearby districts.

Families are smaller, with endless entertainment options for them to consider. According to Hohler, those competitors make it a tough task to keep the Civic viable.

"You have cable TV, and videos. . . It's common sense. Movies aren't what people go on to a regular basis today. Some people do, but not nearly as many."

Even so, he remains dedicated to his customers and to a place that reeks with nostalgia. Walls are covered with murals of Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne. The dark red carpeting covers up creaky steps to the balcony. Popcorn is popped fresh daily, not poured out of a large, plastic

bag.

And a showcase on the second floor features a movie projector from the 1940s, the kind needing a projectionist to run. Today? Film is threaded off a platter, by employee Leslie Oglesby on this particular night, through a maze of rollers, before it is readied for showing.

The link to the past will remain as long as Hohler is actively involved.

"I'm committed to this place," he said, awaiting that evening's showing of "The Lost World" and "Austin Powers" on the two screens. "I've been here forever. As long as it can survive I'll be here."

But Hohler doesn't expect his daughter, Jennifer, or son, Jason, both in their 20s, to keep the family string going after he retires. The business is too tough, too fragmented to make a decent living. There are way too many screens for people to choose from — 68 within seven miles of the Civic's front door.

"And, if they build those other 20 in Livonia, that's 88 screens."

So, why does he hang on during a period marked by the grand opening of such multiplexes?

"I enjoy the public," Hohler said. "I enjoy presenting movies and watching audiences react to them. But, like everything else in life, you have to support yourself doing it."

That means juggling his movie lineup on a weekly basis. Tonight ends the two-week run for Mike Myers' 1960s spoof, "Austin Powers." Tomorrow opens a flick he has been trying to get for several months, "The English Patient."

Hohler had to wait until the first-run movie houses were done with it — not once, but twice, a rarity in today's industry.

"There's no strategy to it anymore. Distributors tell sub-run theatres when a movie is available for you to start playing. . . Some weeks you have two or three to pick from, some weeks zero."

Unfortunately, many of the picks are artistic and commercial zeroes anyway. "Many times they're junk. . . So it's almost about making a guess at what your audiences will want to buy."

As a safety net, Hohler is planning on presenting several special events at the theatre every year. In June, comedian Soupy

Sales performed. A Gallagher II show in late October (featuring the less-known of the Gallagher brothers) likely will be followed by a December concert featuring "The Gaylords," a Detroit-area singing group popular during the heyday of theatres such as the Civic — when going to a movie on a weekend evening was an event people planned well in advance.

Still, Hohler figures about 2,000 people still show up each week to watch second-run movies, sometimes only a couple weeks before they're available in video stores. Who are these people?

"The bulk of our people are people who just like to get out of the house," he explained. "They like seeing the movie on the big screen, but they don't like paying \$7 for a ticket."

Instead, they pay two bucks. For that, they get a cinematic experience rooted in the past and a chance to savor Farmington's present. As for the future, Hohler hopes to keep the Civic and the downtown vital through his work on the DDA.

(For more information about Civic Theatre events, call 248-474-1951.)

Father's foresight helped land the Civic in town

By TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

The Civic Theatre became reality thanks to the foresight of Greg Hohler's father.

In the late 1930s, Farmington was a rural community nestled along Grand River. But its potential caught the eye of Edward J. Hohler, who daily made the long, slow trek along Grand River from his residence in Walled Lake to Detroit — where he worked at an Associated Theatres-owned movie house located at W. Warren Junction.

"It was his idea to build a theater in Farmington," said Greg Hohler. "He drove through Farmington on Grand River every day."

The intersection of Grand River-Farmington, particularly, was of prime interest. So, one day, Edward J. Hohler and the owner of Associated Theatres, Alex Schrieber "took a drive out there." The only other suburban theater they saw on the drive was the Redford Theatre at

Lahser, which today hosts organ concerts and other events sponsored by a non-profit organization.

With movies the primary source of out-of-the-home entertainment for families, Schrieber decided to build a theater in Farmington. To do so entailed tearing down an existing, two-story commercial building and erecting a bona fide movie house "from the ground up."

"My dad said he'd like to manage it," Hohler said. And so, the Hohler era at the Civic began, officially on Sept. 20, 1940. The first movie shown to the general public was "My Favorite Wife," starring Cary Grant.

During the early 1950s, when there was talk of closing down the Civic, Edward J. Hohler stepped up and purchased it from Community Theatres, a company that took over Associated during the 1940s.

Edward J. Hohler kept the theater going until 1973, when Greg Hohler took over at the helm.

Few theaters around since mid-'60s

Only 15 of 105 single-screen movie theaters listed in a metropolitan daily movie guide, from the week of Nov. 25, 1964, are open today. Two of those, the Fox and the Palms in Detroit, no longer show films. Following is a breakdown of the other 13 theaters, complete with the featured attraction 33 years ago and the number of screens on site today (in parentheses):

Civic-Farmington (2): Walt Disney's "Moonspinners" with Hayley Mills.

Allen Park (4): "Roustabout," Elvis Presley; "Kisses for My President," Fred MacMurray.

Birmingham (8): "Roustabout," and "Kisses for My President."

Main-Royal Oak (3): "Pajama Party," Tommy Kirk, Annette Funicello; "Robin and the 7 Hoods," Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin.

Norwest (2): "Topkapi," Melina Mercouri, Peter Ustinov; "The Pink Panther," Peter Sellers.

Penn-Plymouth (1): "Roustabout."

Shores-St. Clair Shores (1): Walt Disney's "Moonspinners" with Hayley Mills.

State-Wayne (4): "Roustabout" and "Kisses for My President."

Terrace (4): "Topkapi" and "The Pink Panther."

Woods (6): "Roustabout" and "Kisses for My President."

Wyandotte-Annex (1): "Topkapi," and "The Pink Panther."

Wyandotte-Main (1): "Roustabout" and "Kisses for My President."

Ford-Wyoming Drive-In (9): "Roustabout" and "Kisses for My President."

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The hipbone's connected to the thighbone.

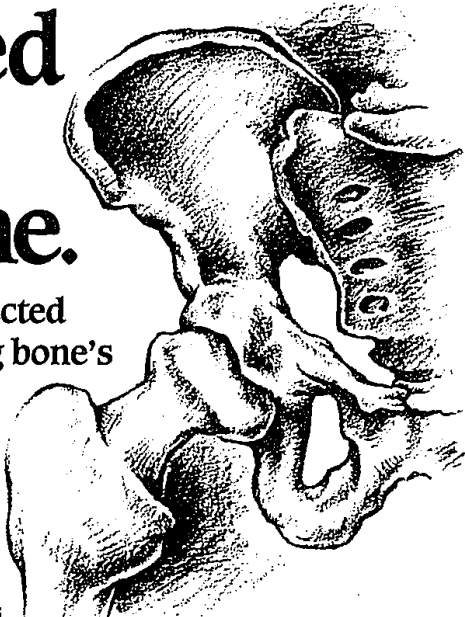
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