

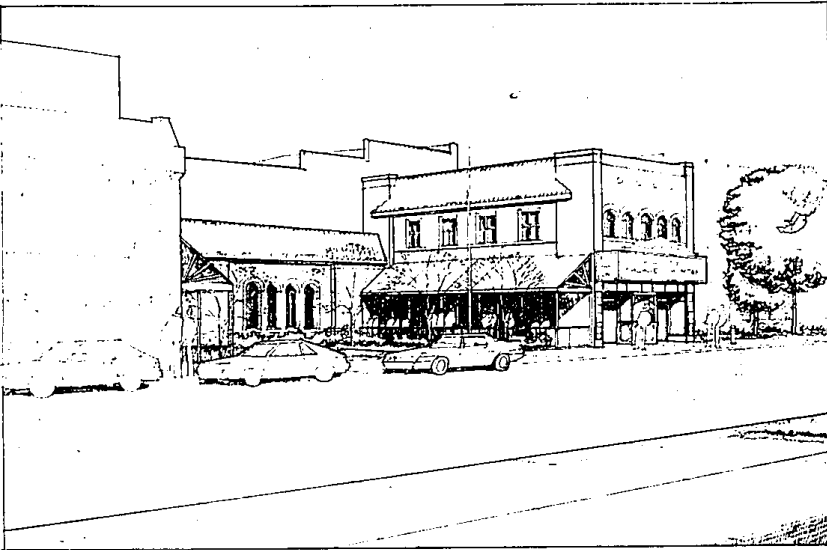
Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



Thursday, June 22, 1989 O&E

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New life for theater

By Bob Weibel
special writer

THIS IS THE STORY of a theater that once was the talk of Western Wayne county. Today, it's all but forgotten. The final chapter, however, is yet to be written.

If a group of concerned citizens are successful, the story will tell of a theater that literally returned from the grave to live again with laughter and applause.

Back in 1924, when most of the area was rural farmland, when Michigan Avenue was the main highway between Detroit and Chicago and when the village of Wayne was the hub of activity, local businessmen built a theater and hotel complex. It included five stores along Michigan Avenue and a bowling alley in the basement.

The Wayne Theatre, by all accounts, was one of the most beautiful ever built in a small town. It seated 850 (825 on the main floor, 225 in the balcony) and featured excellent acoustics, a full orchestra pit and a flyloft for stage curtains.

ADS CALLED IT "The Pride of Wayne." They promised the latest in photoplays (that's what they called movies in those days) and the best in vaudeville on Saturday and Sunday. Opening night was Saturday, Aug. 27, 1927. Newspaper articles tell of patrons lined up for more than a block when the doors opened at 8:30 p.m. A standing-room-only audience saw Marion Davies in "Tillie the Toller," an Our Gang comedy, "Yale vs. Harvard," a Paramount News short, and five vaudeville acts. The shows were a hit. Soon, it was the most popular theater around.

The Woodward Theatre Company, headed by Henry S. Koppin, operated the theater. Koppin managed 26 theaters in Michigan that were popularly known in the Midwest as the Koppin Vaudeville Circuit. Many of the big acts that toured Detroit, such as Al Jolson and Fred Astaire, also played Wayne.

Special radio nights included a broadcast of the Jack Dempsey-Gene Tunney fight. And radio station WWJ regularly presented "The Oklahoma Cowboys" live from the stage.

But, alas, the stock market crash of 1929 caused Koppin to close his chain of theaters. A few months later, Walter Shafer reopened the

Wayne Theatre and operated it with his sons, Charles and Martin, as a movie house until 1951, when it was closed. The Shafers had recently opened the larger, more modern State down the street. As with the vaudeville that once was so popular, the Wayne Theatre soon became but a fond memory.

THE LOBBY WAS converted into a music store. Occasionally, high schools used the stage. Eventually, however, the seats were removed, and the auditorium was partitioned into music and dance rehearsal rooms. It remained that way until April 1985, when a fire destroyed the lobby and the stores along Michigan Avenue. The theater itself sustained only minor smoke damage.

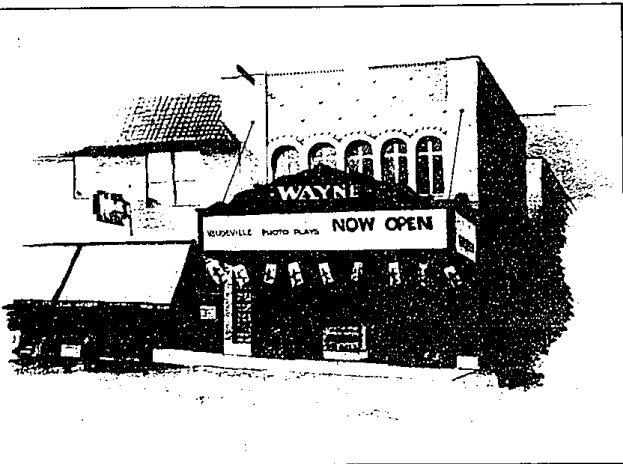
It sat vacant and fenced for nearly two years. Finally, a group of theater buffs, headed by Dave Carrick of Westland, formed a nonprofit corporation to restore the theater. "We call ourselves the Palace Theatre Company, after the Palace Opera House that was built in Wayne in 1898," Carrick said.

An open house was held Aug. 27, 1987 (50 years after opening night) to announce restoration plans. These include rebuilding the lobby, refurbishing the auditorium to its former splendor and creating a performing arts center in the Western Wayne County area. "We also plan to establish a professional, equity acting company, similar to the Attie Theatre in Detroit," Carrick said.

"So far we've done a lot of clean-up work, staged two successful haunted-theater fund-raisers and recently signed a purchase agreement. We have also applied for foundation grants, and a benefit concert is tentatively planned for Sept. 23 at Cherry Hill High School," he said.

"We have letters of endorsement from surrounding communities and hope to involve a wide variety of people in the restoration. The Wayne Theatre is one of the few remaining vaudeville houses in the Detroit area. Only a miracle saved it from a fiery demise. It's a true historic treasure. We want to save it from the wrecking ball and preserve a part of our heritage for future generations."

For more information, call the theater at 738-SHOW, or write Palace Theatre Company, 35164 Michigan Ave., Wayne 48184.



Sketch (above) shows new Wayne Theatre proposed by the Palace Theatre Company. (Left) a recent drawing depicts the theater as it originally looked, back in 1927. It was the home of vaudeville and "photo plays." Later, it became a movie house, which closed in 1951. Then, the facility was used for a variety of purposes, until a fire in 1985. Now a non-profit corporation is buying the theater, planning to renovate it and turn it into a performing arts center for Western Wayne County and to establish a professional, resident acting company. The theater is expected to be in operation by next summer.

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