

Era from page A1

two-story wood frame building housing the A & P Store. The site selection was assured by the fact that Alex Schriber and the property owner, Louis Rose, a Detroit builder and developer, were business associates. The architect who designed the building was

Howard C. Crane, designer of the Fox Theatre and many other Detroit-area movie houses of the 1920s and 1930s. The wood frame structure was torn down, and the Civic Theatre was constructed.

Construction began in late 1939. Finally, on Thursday evening Sept. 20, 1940, the Civic Theatre came alive with entertainment. The front page of the Farmington Observer (now The Farmington Observer) recounts the event as follows in its Sept. 26, 1940 edition with the headline, "Theatre Opening Draws Gay Crowd."

At one of the brightest, gayest affairs ever seen in Farmington, more than 400 persons gathered Thursday evening to celebrate the opening of the new Civic Theatre. Bright lights, colorful gowns and an atmosphere of "opening night" anticipation made it a long-to-be remembered night in Farmington.

Festivities opened with a dinner at Huck's Bedford Inn at 6:30 after which the guests trooped back to Farmington to witness and be a part of the ceremonies in front of the theater.

With spectators crowded around the entrance, the guests arrived, to be introduced over a microphone.

While most of the guests arrived at the theater in a conventional manner, some very definitely didn't. A prize for the persons arriving in the most unusual conveyance went to Glenn

Leland, Ed Pierce and George Naudin, who amazed spectators by riding up to the theater marquee in an antique stagecoach, powered by a tractor.

After guests had taken their seats inside the theater, a number of men connected with the new show house were introduced, and Mayor Leo F. Gildemeister, on the behalf of the city, greeted the theater.

The Farmington Civic Theatre was launched with that opening night. However, it became a money producing entity the following night when the movie "My Favorite Wife" was shown starring Cary Grant, with an admission price of 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children.

During the war years of 1941-1945, the Civic along with movie theaters across the country became the focal point for the home war effort, offering patriotic films, and breaking news of the war via newsreels. Just after the running of each newsreel, the movie would be stopped and ushers and usherettes would circulate through the auditorium with canisters, selling savings stamps.

A war bond booth was constructed on the sidewalk in front of the theater, and prior to the movie on nights when President Franklin Roosevelt would broadcast to the country, his radio

address would be heard live over the theater's sound system. On select days the theater would be used as a drop off point for scrap metal drives and Howard Otis, a local gas station owner, would show up with his pick-up truck to transport the collection to the scrapyard.

Patriotic fever ran high during the war years and frequently bond sales were held from the stage of the theater. During one of these nights in 1942, my dad was selling war bonds from the stage, and Al Rose, proprietor of the Farmington Bakery, said he would buy a \$1,000 bond if Eddie would enlist in the Marine Corps. As most of my dad's friends and relatives had already started serving their country, he took Al up on the offer. This resulted in a period of about three and a half years, in which the Hohler family was absent from the theater management—the only time in its history.

During these difficult times in the 1950's the theater was kept alive largely through the success of children's matinees on Saturday and Sunday. Gradually the Civic saw a return of its audience as fascination with TV ebbed in the late 50's.

Chocolate was at a premium during the war, and Virginia also remembers that whenever the theater was lucky enough to get Hershey Bars, they would sell out of them the same night.

Upon the exhilarating end of WW II, and my dad Eddie Hohler's return to stateside in 1946, he resumed his role as the manager of the Civic for Associated Theatres. In 1949 the theater was sold to Community Theatres and my dad continued managing with business as usual.

However, in 1951 the Civic was in financial crisis. The advent of television brought on a dramatic decline of the theater industry. The Community Theatres scheduled the Civic for closing. Determined not to let the Civic go belly up, my dad with the assistance of Louis Rose, the building owner, took the risk of buying the business from Community Theatres. The Civic was snatched from the jaws of destruction and my dad grasped his long-held dream of being a movie exhibitor.

Recollections During this absence the theater continued to serve the Farmington community, offering dish nights, ovenware nights and cosmetic nights. Virginia Harris, Farmington Hills resident and longtime employee,

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Patriotic times: Movie buffs also were reminded of the ongoing war effort.

It was then the Civic's turn to entertain, and they did it with a brand new movie, "Hired Wife", plus several patriotic short subjects, and cartoons.

The event was sponsored by the Farmington Exchange Club, with the co-operation of other clubs, organizations, and officials of Farmington and Livonia townships.

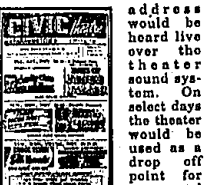
The president of the Farmington Exchange Club, Dr. Leo H. Halsted, a longtime Farmington resident, served as the master of ceremonies. "The Hired Wife," a newly released first-run movie

showed at the premiere Sept. 20, 1940. Everyone who attended the theater that opening night signed a signature board which is now on display on the mezzanine level of the theater. This board had disappeared back in the early 1950's, but was returned to the Civic in 1989 by John Baessler, a longtime Farmington resident, who found it in a garage sale and recognized its importance to the community.

The war years

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Golden era: This 1940 newspaper ad publicized movies by big stars.

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