

THE HISTORY OF THE SUNSET THEATRE

Summarized By Randle E. Brim

The historic premier theatre house in Asheboro, N.C. is the Sunset Theatre. Ground for the new construction was first broken on or about June 17, 1929. By the end of the “Roaring Twenties,” “talking” movie houses were being built to accommodate this new breakthrough in sound movie production. Asheboro’s first movie theatre, the Capitol Theatre, which opened December 19, 1922, had been built to show “silent” movies and to perform live on stage, known as vaudeville acts. It has been stated by several local writers that the Sunset Theatre was the first structure built in Asheboro for the sole purpose of showing movies. But perhaps *The Asheboro Courier’s* claim in 1929 was more historically significant when it stated that the Sunset Theatre was “one of the first in the State designed and constructed especially for ‘talking’ pictures.”¹ Upon completion in 1930, *The Asheboro Courier* also stated that the theatre was “the finest of its size in the State, and few, if any, cities in the State the size of Asheboro can boast of a finer play house.”²

Built for local businessman Kirby Cox, the theatre structure at 234 Sunset Avenue was designed to seat approximately 500 people and, it was designed by William C. Holleyman, Jr., a Greensboro architect (who also designed the Charles McCrary residence). A young local contractor, S.E. Trogdon (father of former Asheboro City Mayor Joe Trogdon), supervised the construction. Built of brick, concrete, and tile, the structure measures 50 feet wide, fronting on Sunset and extends 100 feet to the rear.³ Lumber and wood were purchased from the Home Building, Inc. of Asheboro. The brick was obtained from the Glenola brick works. Hardware and miscellaneous items were purchased from the Hughes Morris Hardware Company of Asheboro. The roofing materials and work were done by J.S. Wylie of Ramseur.⁴ Dewitt Kemp (father of current Randolph County Commissioner Phil Kemp), and his two brothers, Lloyd and Allie Kemp, hauled the timbers for the new theatre.⁵ Initial plans called for the structure to be completed in three or four months, but due to delays in the delivery of materials from time to time, it took almost nine months before the building was ready for occupancy.⁶

In 1929, the building was equipped with steam heat and a “modern cooling system.” This “modern cooling system” was described by a 1930 *Asheboro Courier* article as a “ventilation ... by means of air currents.”⁷ These air currents came through a large louver air vent box, about six feet by four feet, above each of the two rear interior exit doors to the left and right of the stage area. Felix Ward, Director of Asheboro’s Cultural & Recreation Services indicated in a recent interview that this system may have been some type of a “swamp system” or a forerunner to such a system.⁸ Indirect lighting was installed so as to prevent any glare. Stadium type seats, “deeply upholstered” were installed both on the main floor and in the balcony. The balcony seats did not hang over or lap the first floor seats. From the foyer entrance, one accessed the theatre proper, the steps to the balcony, and the ladies’ rest room and the ladies’ bathroom. The ladies’ rest room in 1930 may have been a powder room and a “rest area” separate from a ladies’ bathroom. The men’s “smoking or lounging room” was located in the basement. Today’s old basement shows an old door entrance from the theatre side,

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now sealed off. Also located in the basement were two separate showers for the barbershop room. ^{9, 10}

According to Felix Ward and his review of the building, the theatre experienced a major renovation in the 1950's, both to the exterior and to the interior. The much beloved long horizontal marquee replaced the smaller 1930's vertical marquee. The 1930's cooling system was replaced by a more modern system. A men's bathroom was probably added in the balcony area, replacing the men's bathroom and access to the basement. It may have been during the 1950's renovation that the theatre access to the basement was sealed off. The seats on the lower level were replaced by new and thicker seats. ¹¹

In 1985, local historian Mac Whatley, in his *Architectural History of Randolph County*, detailed the architectural elements of the theatre as follows:

The Sunset is an example of a "Moorish Picture Palace," designed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style popular in southern California. The tile roof and long marquee now give the façade a strong horizontal orientation. The marquee was added ca. 1950. Originally the entrance was sheltered only by a small copper canopy. Engaged pilasters supporting the bracketed cornice added vertical emphasis to the design. The stucco façade boasts well-done details such as window surrounds and pilaster capitols. The massive wooden brackets under the eaves are quite attractive. The interior has undergone many changes. Only the upper lobby has preserved much of the Spanish trim and wrought iron. ¹²

When the 1950's long horizontal marquee was removed, it exposed a horizontal continuum of six square cast stone friezes that had been previously and completely concealed. Two relief friezes depict the head and gear of an ancient helmeted soldier, maybe a Spanish soldier, a Conquistador. Four friezes show a type of a shield. The theatre's motifs, both exterior and interior, reflect a Spanish Colonial Revival style. According to Mac Whatley, this was a "style born out of silent motion pictures. It owes more to old Zorro movies than to Mexico or Spain. Also, "...the conquistador busts and the helmets and armor, etc. were considered part of the Spanish Colonial heritage of southern California." ¹³ This same Spanish soldier head and helmet is depicted in molded plaster reliefs above the two rear interior exit doors to the left and right of the stage area. This similar style and motif of a Spanish soldier and armor are also reflected in the El Capitan Theatre, located in San Francisco, California, which opened on June 29, 1928. ¹⁴

The Sunset Theatre structure was designed to include a small store front room on both sides of the theatre's entrance. To the left of the theatre entrance, a room 16 feet wide by 30 feet in depth was built for a barber shop with showers in the basement. The first proprietor of the Sunset Barbershop was Raymond Allred. Whereas the right side of the theatre entrance, a room of the same dimensions was built for a small restaurant. The latter room, for most of the theatre's history, was the Little Castle Grill. Based on old Asheboro City business directories, it was operated from the late 1930's through the mid 1950's by Hal Johnson Sr. and assisted by his brother Vernon. Both these two side store rooms had separate entrances directly from Sunset Avenue. ^{15, 16, 17}

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Dr. E.L Moffitt and Mayor C.C. Cranford were present for the formal opening to dedicate the new theatre to the City of Asheboro.¹⁸ The opening of the new movie house occurred on Thursday evening, March 6, 1930, at 7:30 p.m., with all seats being 50 cents. Initially, the regular admission for matinees was 10 and 35 cents, and nights were 10 and 50 cents. Admission prices would have fluctuated over the years. For the first night, Friday and Saturday matinees and nights, was the premier showing of the “talking” movie, “THE BIG PARTY” starring Sue Carol, Dixie Lee, Whispering Jack Smith, Richard Keene. Also shown that first night were the following Sunset Briefs: Fox Movietone News, “The Lunkheads,” and the cartoon “Merry Dwarfs.” On the following Monday and Tuesday and billed as the “all talking melodrama” was shown “The Night Ride.”¹⁹ On March 17 and 18, 1930, the “Lone Star Ranger” was shown and billed as “Zane Grey’s first all talking picture.”²⁰ During these first few weeks and months of “talking” movies at Sunset was probably the first time that many Randolph County and Asheboro residents had ever seen a “talking” movie.

To usher in the era of their talking movies, MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) embarked their trademark roaring lion, Leo, on a worldwide tour. This is the celebrated lion who roars his supremacy from the “Ars Gratia Artis” wreath at the beginning of all the MGM motion pictures. Leo came to Asheboro on Saturday, January 10, 1931, and made a parade tour of the main streets of Asheboro, terminating at the front of the Sunset Theatre at 4 p.m. Leo performed his roaring voice antics with the direction of his trainer, Capt. Volney Phifer, being inside the lion’s cage.²¹

The new theatre’s owner, Kirby Cox, leased the movie house to J.F. White, Jr., president of the White Amusement Company, the then operator of the Capitol Theatre. Community conscious from the beginning, White extended courtesies to important local groups. Only a month after the theatre opened, White invited the entire local military company to attend his theatre in full uniform and formation to view the showing on April 18, 1930, of “The Cock-Eyed World,” a story of two soldiers. In extending this courtesy, White stated that “we are taking this means to express our appreciation for what your organization is doing for the community and the young men of the community.”²² When the First Baptist Church burned in 1933, White permitted the Sunset Theatre to be used as a place of worship until the church structure was completed. During that time, couples were married in the theatre.²³

Through most of its history, W.P. (“Dick”) Stone was the public face to the Sunset Theatre. He was always seen at the theatre in a dark suit with a necktie and wearing a wide-brimmed hat. His additional trademark was normally a non-lit cigar. Stone began his movie career with J.F. White when the Capitol Theatre opened in 1922 as the operator of “the picture machine”. When the Sunset opened in 1930, Stone moved over to the new theatre and assumed similar responsibilities. Vernon Johnson assumed Stone’s job at the Capitol. White continued to operate the Capitol Theatre which continued to show “silent movies” and movies of lesser quality.²⁴ Then in 1941, Stone was promoted as the general manager of the Sunset Theatre. Stone ran a “tight ship!” He did not tolerate “hollerin’ and whoopin” nor tossing popcorn from the balcony. He would not hesitate to toss people out. Stone retired in 1968.²⁵

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Of the three movie houses in Asheboro, the old Capitol Theatre, the Carolina Theatre, and the Sunset Theatre (which co-existed for several years), the Sunset Theatre was locally known as the “family theatre” showing the best family type movies. It was the theatre that showed all the latest Disney movies, for they were Stone’s favorites. The Sunset Theatre was where the parents wanted their children to attend. This was probably due in part to the long operating manager, Dick Stone, who apparently exercised much individual discretion over the movies shown at the Sunset, especially beginning in the 1960’s. This was obvious from an interview with Stone’s daughter, Emily Redding, with Bob Williams in 1985, writer for the *Courier-Tribune*. Concerning her father, Redding stated,

He would go up into the projection booth and cut the dirty parts out of the films. It made for some hilarious scenes on the screen. You would see the couple headed for the bedroom door and the next thing you knew they were standing out in a pasture or something and you wondered what had happened. What had happened was that Daddy had snipped the bedroom scene. He came from a time when if the couple went into the bedroom all you saw was the wind rustling through window shades. ²⁶

The premier Sunset Theatre closed in 1975. It then re-opened under a different management under another theatre name, “The Flick,” before being renamed the Sunset Theatre. The facility finally shut down as a movie theatre in 1981. In 1983, Jeff Schwarz purchased the facility from the K.D. Cox family and rented the building out for a variety of events including concerts and church services. In 2000, the George Washington Carver Community Enrichment Center purchased the facility. For several years, this local non-profit group operated the facility as a performing arts center. In 2005, the City of Asheboro purchased the facility, and it is now operated by Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services. City funds were used to stabilize the building, replace the roof, acquire space for expansion and purchase a new marquee. ²⁷

Author and writer Chip Womick states that two changes “have met with the greatest outcry.” One was replacing the old horizontal marquee with the new digital marquee. And two was replacing the original theatre entrance with a new entrance to the adjacent building on the east side. ²⁸ But renovations since 2005 have revealed the possibility that the original façade of the Sunset Theatre was never designed for the two marquees that were subsequently added. When the 1950’s long horizontal marquee was removed, it exposed a horizontal continuum of six square cast stone friezes that had been previously and completely concealed. Obviously, the original designs were never intended to be covered over.

The now removed and much remembered long horizontal marquee that stretched across the width of the theatre was added around 1950. The 1929 Sunset Theatre did not have an extended marquee. Local historian Mac Whatley has written that research indicates that originally the entrance was sheltered only by a small copper canopy. This canopy is much like the canopy of the “McCrary Hosiery Mill #2” that can still be seen hanging over a door entrance facing the Salisbury Street side just west of the

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railroad tracks. Sometime during the 1930's, the first marquee was built on top or "sandwiched" atop the original existing canopy thereby covering two of the original cast stone designs.²⁹ The theatre canopy covered only the theatre entrance, excluding the two front side rooms, and it did not cover any of the stone friezes.

A new entrance is required to accommodate a handicap-accessible entrance and handicapped bathrooms to comply with ADA standards. Using an adjacent structure, also owned by the City of Asheboro, it was decided to create this new entrance. The new entrance at the adjacent structure will connect to the historic theatre via the interior east and west walls of the former Little Castle Grill. The new entrance will include a lobby, accessible restrooms, concession stand, a hallway leading to the theatre for the patrons, dressing rooms for actors, and a new accessible hallway to the stage area.³⁰

In 2008, the City added a new digital electronic marquee above this new entrance. According to Felix Ward, it was no accident that the 2008 digital marquee bears a striking resemblance to the 1930's theatre marquee. It was decided and designed to be similar to the 1930's marquee.³¹ With the 1950's marquee removed, and the 1929 frieze motifs exposed, the façade of the old Sunset Theatre now bears a closer resemblance to the original appearance, minus the original canopy covering and the 1930's ticket booth and door entrance.

The theatre's rich history rekindles fond memories for many area residents. One of those residents who had fond memories of the Sunset Theatre was Edgar Cheek. Cheek was a professional local sign painter who had his shop on the opposite side of the street from the theatre. In 1985, Cheek shared some of those fond memories with Bob Williams, a writer for *The Courier-Tribune*. From the theatre's early history, Cheek began painting art work on their banners and displays that were posted all around the city. His duties also included pulling the curtains, "sweeping up, shining the brass, taking up the tickets and firing the boiler ... and basically living there." Getting in free, he recalled that from the 1930s through the 1950s, he saw thousands of films. Cheek felt that the theatre was a piece of history worth preserving. He said, "It would be just terrible to see it torn down."³² A cousin to Cheek, Hal Hussey, who grew up on Dixon Street, often went by Cheek's paint room to watch him paint the art advertisements for the upcoming movies.³³ C.H. Bunting, at the age of 82, recently shared his theatre memories with Chip Womick for an article in *The Courier-Tribune*. From selling popcorn to ticket collecting to operating the projectors, Bunting often glued Cheek's large painted posters on the theatre's exterior west side next to Hop's Bar-B-Q Restaurant. Concerning renovating the historic theatre, Bunting stated, "I just hope they fix it up real nice and people go enjoy it." Many former attendants and city residents have echoed similar sentiments.³⁴

Since the management by Asheboro Parks and Recreation, several new programs have commenced, such as "Friday Night Bluegrass," "Kids Summer Movie Series," and "October Thriller Thursday Movies." Other concert, performing arts, and movie events are consistently held. The theatre also serves as a host to governmental functions, such as the 2020 Land Development Plan Information Session held in August 2009. In fiscal year 2008-2009, nearly 20,000 patrons attended one of the theatre's many events.³⁵

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As the Sunset Theatre begins its ninth decade along with its transformation into a performing arts center, it is poised to become the vibrant centerpiece of the downtown's revitalization effort. The City of Asheboro has invested more than one million dollars in seed money and is partnering with the local affiliate of the nonprofit North Carolina Community Foundation to make gifts to the project tax deductible. To complete the renovation and expansion of the historic Sunset Theatre, the city projects that 1.2 million dollars will be needed.³⁶

Through the city partnering with the Community Foundation of Randolph County, and the work of the Sunset Theatre Capital Campaign, through its co-chairs, Ann M. Hoover, Bill Hoover, and former mayor David Jarrell, the theatre is moving closer to becoming a first-class performing arts center. A recent matching gift of \$500,000 from the Edward M. Armfield Sr. Foundation lifted the spirits of the local project leaders. "We're ecstatic with the receipt of this challenge gift," said campaign co-chair and former mayor David Jarrell. "With this grant, we can now see the light at the end of the tunnel for this fund-raising effort," stated Bill Hoover, campaign co-chair. Summing up the significance of this gift, Asheboro Mayor David Smith stated, "The Sunset Theatre is one of downtown's anchors, and as goes the Sunset, so goes downtown. It's that important."³⁷

NOTE: The writer has summarized the above article from the below footnoted sources. Much of the earlier information came from articles in the old *Asheboro Courier*. Much of the later information came from the *Courier-Tribune*. The writer obtained structural details from interviews and a detailed tour of the Sunset Theatre building by Felix Ward, Director of the Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services. The last several paragraphs came from the City of Asheboro, as written by Justin Luck. The Randolph Room of the Asheboro-Randolph County Public Library provided information from its vertical file(s). Additional articles were located from microfilm by the writer.

Footnoted Sources:

1. *The Courier* (Asheboro, N.C.), "Ground Is Broken For New Theatre Structure In City," June 20, 1929.
2. *The Courier*, "Sunset Theatre Will Open Latter part Of Next Week," February 27, 1930.
3. *The Courier*, "Ground is Broken ...," June 20, 1929.
4. *The Courier*, "Sunset Theatre Will Open ...," February 27, 1930.
5. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Reminiscing On The Theater's Place In Their Hearts," April 18, 2010.
6. *The Courier*, "New Theatre Here Will Be Ready For Occupancy March 1," February 13, 1930.
7. *Ibid.*

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8. Interview with Felix Ward, Director of Asheboro Cultural & Recreation Services, June 29 & July 1, 2010.
9. *The Courier*, "New Theatre Here Will Be Ready For Occupancy March 1," February 13, 1930.
10. *The Courier*, "Ground is Broken ...," June 20, 1929.
11. Interview with Felix Ward
12. Lowell McKay Whatley, Jr., *The Architectural History of Randolph County, N.C.*, Page 216.
13. Lowell McKay Whatley, Jr., E-mail Transmission, June 24, 2010.
14. Internet Article, *Cinema Treasures*, "El Capitan Theatre, San Francisco, CA.

15. *The Courier*, "Ground is Broken ...," June 20, 1929.

16. *The Courier*, Advertisement Page, Page 8, March 6, 1930.
17. Asheboro City Business Directories, 1937-1950's, Randolph Room, Randolph County Library.
18. *The Randolph Tribune*, "Sunset Theatre Opens Tonight," March 6, 1930.
19. *The Courier*, Advertisement Page, Page 8, March 6, 1930.
20. *The Courier*, Advertisement, March 13, 1930.
21. *The Courier*, "Famous Movie Lion to Arrive In City Saturday, Jan. 10th," January 8, 1931.
22. *The Courier*, "Local Guardsmen To Be Guests Friday Eve Sunset Theatre," April 17, 1930.
23. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Reminiscing On The Theater's Place In Their Hearts," April 18, 2010.
24. *The Courier*, "Sunset Theatre Will Open Latter Part Of Next Week," February 27, 1930.
25. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Memories Fill The Sunset," By Bob Williams, August 21, 1985.
26. *Ibid.*
27. The Sunset Theatre, City of Asheboro, Justin Luck.
28. Chip Womick, *Remembering Randolph County*, Page 96.
29. Lowell McKay Whatley, Jr., E-mail Transmission, June 24, 2010.
30. Interview with Felix Ward
31. *Ibid*
32. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Memories ...," By Bob Williams, August 21, 1985.
33. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Reminiscing On The Theater's Place In Their Hearts," April 18, 2010.
34. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Three Asheboro Residents Share Memories From Working At The Sunset Theatre," By Chip Womick, April 18, 2010.
35. The Sunset Theatre, City of Asheboro, Justin Luck.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *The Courier-Tribune*, "Sunset Theatre Receives Armfield Donation," July 13, 2010.

