

# Part I: The Rialto Theatre – the dream of entrepreneur C.E. Lyons

CONNIE PETTERSEN

## Created for their viewing pleasure

The Rialto Theatre in Aitkin is nearly 70 years old. Charles E. "Charlie" Lyons, first owner of the Rialto, opened his newly built, modern movie house in April 1937. The front page of *Aitkin Independent Age* was dedicated to Rialto's premier: "The dream of Charlie Lyons came true, the most beautiful and complete play house of the northland ... It is independent and home owned, showing the best pictures of the entire production field ... Marking another milestone in the building of a greater Aitkin."

That wasn't just a line of advertisement, either. The new Rialto sported the latest in "talking picture" equipment from RCA. It was top-of-the-line with acoustics and air-conditioning. Everything was brand new and "the best to be had anywhere." It was quite a coup for a town the size of Aitkin.

In a recent interview at home, Kenneth Lyons, son of Charles E. and Josephine Lyons, talked about his childhood memories of the Rialto and his mom and dad:

"I was their only child,"



The Rialto Theatre, possibly in spring/summer 1947. The movie playing was "Song of the South," first released by Disney in November 1946. From the waiting line of people in short sleeves, this picture may have been the summer after the release. However, the date and photographer are unknown. If anyone has a better guess to the actual date, or can identify anyone from the picture, contact the NewsHopper: [hopper@emily.net](mailto:hopper@emily.net) or 218-927-6990. Note the barbershop to the left of the entrance doors, and another rental shop on the right.

Ken said. "My parents were imports from St. Paul and North Dakota. They came here around the time of the Big Fire near Carlton in 1918. That was also when Aitkin had its big flu epidemic. Apparently the imports that came in to town were tougher than some of the natives."

Charlie Lyons had previously owned theaters in Minot and Devil's Lake, North Dakota. He purchased the old Moveum Theatre from Becher Hungerford in 1918. The Moveum, located where the Office Shop is today, had opened in 1914 in Hungerford's building on Minnesota Ave. Years later, C.E. Lyons

held a contest to rename it and the Rialto was chosen from a theatre district in New York City in 1934.

By 1936, however, the re-named Rialto was obsolete. It was not equipped to project actor's voices for the new sound pictures. C.E. Lyons had been in the business long enough to realize

the industry was moving away from silent pictures to "talkies" filmed with RCA sound creations. He had been known to bring in the best made, and often first-run pictures of the time.

"Economic pressure dictated that Dad do something soon or lose his entertainment license because the old theatre was too small," said Ken Lyons. "That type of building, known in the trade as a 'shooting gallery' wasn't effective to the new innovation of sound, which occurred in the early part of the 1930s in Aitkin." Before that, silent films only required musical accompaniment, usually a piano or organ, depending on what a theatre owner could afford. Mildred Julum played piano at the old Moveum in the late 1920s and 30s.

C.E. Lyons was a true entrepreneur and risk taker – especially in a depressed economy as America was in 1936. Many were out of work and didn't have a spare dime for a cup of coffee, not to mention change for a theatre seat. For others, movies were a much-needed escape from everyday troubles. Going to a show if one could af-

ford it, was worth pinching pennies.

Modest about his accomplishments, C.E. was quoted in the *Age*: "Tell 'em it's the people's theatre – for it was their patronage that has given me the courage and made it possible to build." C.E. had been a resident of Aitkin about 19 years before deciding to build the new Rialto.

The April 30, 1937 *Age* also said: "Few would dare make the investment he has. The entire community will unite in extending best wishes and congratulations to Mr. Lyons ... the new building is as modern as tomorrow, 50 by 120 feet in size and having a seating capacity of 612. The two-story front is cut stone, polished granite, vitarlite and plate glass, and at night a blaze of glory in Neon and colored electric lights with illuminated titles of attractions showing from a heavy canopy. Either side of a large central lobby is a small shop and above is a very modern flat for residence of the owner."

The lobby was decorated with modern wainscoting, the floor of polished tarazza. Double swinging doors

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## Part I: The Rialto Theatre (continued from page 16)

opened into a carpeted foyer. Steps, also carpeted, led to a lounge below with modern lavatories. There was a "smoking room" for men, a "powder room" for women and a sound proof "crying room" above the foyer for parents with small children to watch behind plate glass without disturbing the audience. Theatre seats were plush gold fabric and walls were decorated with animal pictures. The mezzanine

had a manager's office and fireproof modern projecting room and the latest equipment.

Further description in the Age said, "The seating is placed slightly circling with a drop of more than three inches each row, assisting in visibility. And such seats! Black leather coil spring seats with soft velour backs in green and gold, harmonizing with the general color scheme ... at either side of the

stage is a rear emergency exit with the customary lettering in red light."

Under the stage was a basement with the oil-burning boiler. According to the Age, "A curtain of water through which the air is washed and cooled as desired, or put through a powerful heat radiator and driven by electric fan into the building. A large subway under the auditorium floor carries the return air to the heating plant. It is air con-

ditioned to the last word ... a palace of pleasure." C.E. Lyons had considered the patrons' comfort and pleasure foremost in the design of the Rialto to create a delightful atmosphere for their viewing pleasure.

### Community excitement

The Age listed many businesses offering their congratulations to the Rialto: Some of those era businesses were: R. Lee Stowe, Dutch's Place, Seavey & Son, People's Service Station, Larry's Cabin Camp, Cuyuna Oil, Sanford's, H. P. Hunter, Aitkin Motor and Sales, Royal Clothing House, Hanlon's Pharmacy, Aitkin Co-Op Creamery, Aitkin County Farm Bureau, First National Bank and Barber Shop, The Potter Co., Vic's Café, Northern Service Co., Aitkin Bakery, Aitkin-Deerwood Telephone Co., Independent Oil, McGown Motor, Urbinati's Confectionery, W.K. Baird, Aitkin Café, Farmers National Bank, Molgren's Sandwich Shop, Gateway Service Station, Farm Service Stores, Young's Grocery, Harry's Cash Grocery, Elkay's Style

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Charles E. Lyons, pictured on the right at his downtown Moveum Theatre, purchased in 1918 (where Office Shop is today). Note the lot behind shows either a house or Aitkin Creamery in the distance. Dates of the silent films playing make this photograph of the Moveum probably circa 1925, although the actual date is unknown. Life's Greatest Game, was released in 1924, a silent film about baseball. Peter Pan was released Christmas week 1924 starring Betty Bronson as a talented Peter Pan. North of Six, (back wall poster) is a silent B&W cowboy movie released in 1924. It starred Ernest Torrence, Jack Hold, Noah Beery Sr., plus Lois Wilson. Wilson won an Alabama beauty contest sponsored by Universal Pictures before her stardom. She became a superb amateur photographer taking great shots of the cattle drive during the movie staged by Blakely Ranch on the open prairie west of Houston.

## A bit of theatre history ...

Silent pictures were not completely silent – although there were no spoken dialogues in silent films, theatres provided musical accompaniment, i.e., dramatic scenes had scary music to increase tension. Small town theatres used a piano, while larger cities could afford an organ. Vaudeville, however, was probably more entertaining to many, until the invention of using films with sound effects and voices of the actors.

In 1926, Warner Brothers and Western Electric used a wax record for voices and synchronized it with a film projector. Their first sound movie Don Juan was a box office hit using sound effects and a musical score by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. However, other studios were not impressed and did not think films with sound would catch on.

All that changed when Warner Brothers released The Jazz Singer in October, 1927 starring Al Jolson. It was a huge financial risk of a half million dollars using Western Electric's Vitaphone sound system. The Jazz Singer made cinematic history as the first feature-length Hollywood "talkie" using spoken dramatic dialogue.

The Jazz Singer was based on a popular Broadway play about a Jewish boy attempting to become a Broadway star. Jolson was already a popular singer and profits reached \$3.5 million dollars, changing the silent picture industry forever.

Warner Brothers immediately became a top studio. Hollywood directors changed their minds about sound films and began making talkies. A year after its original release, The Jazz Singer was awarded a special academy award. Hollywood had come of age.

Talkies proved disastrous for vaudeville. They also ruined careers of musicians who played in theatres and those popular silent screen stars who had poor diction, foreign or other accents, or bad voices. (see MGM's 1952 Singing in the Rain starring Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds about a silent film star played by Lina Lamont whose irritating, squeaky Bronx accent had to be dubbed over for a "talkie" movie).

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## Part I: The Rialto Theatre (continued from page 17)

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The first film at the Rialto on April 30 and May 1, 1937 was "Fifty Roads to Town" starring Don Ameche, Ann Sothorn. "Seventh Heaven" was their second attraction, playing Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, starring Sim-

one Simon and James Stewart. A Rialto ad in the Age also promoted an upcoming film: "'Horse Power in Action' the new motion picture with sound. Don't miss it. Coming Saturday May 8th, 1937." All movie seats were 25 cents and patrons were invited to inspect the building after the show.

Part II - Early History of the Rialto will continue with "Construction Phase and Town Memories." Thanks to Ken and Lois Ly-

ons for sharing their data and pictures. Thanks also to Aitkin Co. Friends of the Arts' for their pamphlet for the Rialto's 60th anniversary celebration June 25, 1994. Readers willing to

share their memories or pictures of attending the Rialto over the years, are asked to submit them to the NewsHopper by e-mail at: hopper@emily.net or call 219-927-6990.

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