Construction, architect, and builders

Entrepreneur Charles E. Lyons had his new Rialto built in 1936-37. It was across the street from the Moveum, which was a silent film era theatre he purchased in 1918. The Moveum was later called the Rialto after C.E. held a naming contest. However, by 1936, the old Moveum/Rialto was outdated. Not only was it too small, it had not been designed for “talkie” movies coming out of Hollywood.

Charles Lyons made a decision to build, keeping Rialto as the name for his new theatre. Ken Lyons, Charles and Josephine’s son, was about 12 when his father began planning the new, modern movie house. C.E. hired Perry E. Crossier, from Minneapolis, a well-known theatre architect.

“Construction started in the fall of 1936,” recalled Ken Lyons. Men dug the basement hole with shovels and teams of horses to evacuate the dirt. “They used a scoop upward to scrape up the ground and hauled it to a designated spot for pickup. None of the small contractors had big equipment then. It was too expensive.”

Ken remembers a problem before the building was erected. His father had steel beams shipped by rail. “They were over 50 ft. long with beams shipped by rail. “They put part of one beam on the bed of one truck and part of the same beam on the other truck bed,” said Ken. “One truck went in reverse, the other going ahead, moving them to the building site.” The builders then used a winch to get the beams in place.

The new Rialto was an investment in the local community. C. E. Lyons wanted to help the area economy and install it with building local talent as much as possible. “That was one of the stipulations of the agreement the contractor,” Ken said. “He was supposed to employ local labor unless there was some special skill or if something was not attainable here.”

Contractor W. F. Murphy used a number of local workers. Some known to help build the Rialto were Ed and Carl Wikelias of Atikin, who did basement excavation. Two local carpenters were Harold Hanson and Peter Christensen.

Healy Plumbing and Heating came from St. Paul, but Russell Jewell electric was from Crosby. Lampert and Russell Jewell electric was from Crosby. Lampert and Weisbeck Lumber companies were both local businesses providing a large part of materials. Some items also came from Atkin Electric and Furniture Company. The interior decorators were Dahlstrom & Weinberger out of Minneapolis National Theatre Supply Company in Minneapolis provided the screen, seats, carpets, draperies, and projection machines. RCA Manufacturing Company of Minneapolis furnished the air conditioning system. While other items came from Pittsburg Plated Glass of St. Paul and Baker Iron Works, Minneapolis.

“We operate the air conditioner, we ran air through what was called a washer,” Ken said. “The temperature of the city water was already 56-60 degrees. It cooled the air, and consequently we had no air conditioning.”

The seating capacity of the new auditorium was 612 patrons. Sometime in the 1950s, however, seats were removed when the old screen was replaced to accommodate wide-screen movies. It currently seats about 480.

Continued on Page 17...
Rialto Theatre

...Continued from page 16.

The Rialto was designed with two floors, featuring a small town-like office, later moved inside. Two small shops to the right and left of the entrance, were both operating businesses. Last week’s 1940s era picture of the Rialto showed a barbershop pole on the left of the entrance, which was probably the shop of Charlie Lowry. The other business on the right of the photograph was not identifiable, but Effie (Davis) Sullivan had a beauty shop at the Rialto building during the late 1930s, early 1940s.

Kenneth Lyons remembers growing up in the “show” business.

“It usually took about three to five months to get a new movie in to a small town like Aitkin, depending on how much you wanted to spend on it,” Ken said, who recalled it sometimes was pretty costly to get a first run film sooner than “the way we always had to think ahead of what was going on in the entertainment field.”

Ken worked for his parents at the new theatre, starting with more menial tasks like sweeping floors and cleaning bathrooms. “All seats were 25 cents, no tax,” said Ken. “Not cheap in comparison to what you could buy, it was maybe a dollar’s worth back then. You could buy a big hamburger for a dime. A pair of shoes cost 2.95, 90¢ of bread 10 cents.”

Ken remembered that Jerry Safford wrote the Aitkin Independent Age premier article the Lyons family kept nearly 70 years, along with Old Movieum and Rialto pictures. As time went by, Ken moved up from just sweeping floors to other jobs like selling tickets and popcorn. “Mom also helped out at the theatre,” Ken said. “We were always open weekends and holidays and worked pretty much every evening. It’s best to clean up right after the motion picture scene concluded!”

Arthur Woodrow Jr. was one of the Lyon’s projectionists. “Arthur managed to master both silent and sound pictures,” said Ken. Walter Wagner was the other projectionist and Andrew Hendricks was an usher for 10 years or more. Other Rialto employees Ken recalled were Joann Carlson, Eva and Lorena Boudreau, and Lucille Wise who all sold tickets.

After high school graduation, Ken went off to college to attend Drake University in Des Moines, taking government finance and accounting. He also served four years in the military during WWII, returning to Aitkin when his dad needed help after the war.

In Aitkin, Ken met Lois Sugrue who was working as a waitress downtown at Sweetman’s ice cream store (where the Newshopper is today). Ken was a good customer there and soon the couple began dating. They married and raised a son named Charles. C.E. Lyons died suddenly in 1952 from a stroke. Ken and his mother ran the theatre many years after the death of his father. Ken recalled operating the Rialto about 15 years total “in an intermittent relationship” before and after WWII.

When asked if any memories stood out in his years at the Rialto, Ken recalled a number of occasions...Continued from Page 16.

The Rialto Theatre

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Rialto Theatre

...Continued from Page 17

18


1950 flood as 'quite a mess' with portions of the theatre under water and the base- ment unusable. 'The furnace room was under at least 10 feet,' Ken said. The down- stairs area and restrooms flooded out the carpet had to be thrown away. 'Fortunately it was just one flood, then they built the dike after the house was out of the harm.' • I sold the Rialto around 1954 to Lloyd and Laura Bellefeuille, Ken recalled. The Bellefeuille family ran it a number of years before selling to Richard and Mimi Sharrer. • Ken Nelson said, 'My uncle Pete Christensen was a carpenter and helped build the Rialto. I'd go to the Rialto often and if I'd see a good looking girl, I'd ask her if she wanted to go to the movies.' • Kit Julum recalled going to the old Moveum where her sister Mildred Julum played the piano. Mildred sat down in a pit to accompany the silent films in the late 1920s and 30s. 'I was about four or five years old,' Kit recalled. 'We still have some of the music.' The following memories are from Aitkin Co. Friends of the Arts' brochure: 'The Rialto Theatre – 60th Anniversary Celebration, June 25, 1994.' • 'I'll never forget the effect of all the lights on the mar- quee at the Grand Opening. It was quite a spectacle for a kid from a farm without electricity.' John Tholen • 'Lloyd would let them in for free to see the movie a second time. He figured if they liked the movie that well, they shouldn't have to pay again.' Laura Bellefeuille, former Rialto owner. • 'I am pleased to be able to provide the community with movies shown in a tradi- tional setting. As Charlie Lyons said, 'It's the people's theatre.' Kirk Pysar, Rialto owner since 1986.

Correction

The wrong photograph was displayed last week of the Moveum Theatre. Above is the correct photo: Charles E. Lyons by his Moveum Theatre, purchased in 1918 (where Office Shop is today). The building showing in the background (l) is either a house or Aitkin Creamery. Life's Greatest Game, was released in 1924, a silent film about baseball. Peter Pan came is today). The building showing in the background (r) is either a house or Aitkin Creamery. Release by Universal Pictures and reached stardom. She became a superb amateur photographer with shots of the movie's cattle drive staged by Blakely Ranch west of Houston. Release dates of the silent films make this photograph probably circa early spring 1925.

Part III of the Rialto Theatre is an upcoming article with current owner. Kirk Pysar thanks to Ken Lyons and Carl Sharrer for sharing Rialto his- tory and pictures. Thanks also to Karrie Butler for her 1994 Aitkin Co. Friends of the Arts pamphlet. Readers are invited to share memories or pictures of the Rialto over the years by either stopping at the Newsbr- op, e-mail hopper@emily.net or call 218-927-0990.