

Part III, Rialto Theatre – a modern, living museum

CONNIE PETERSEN

The nearly 70-year-old Rialto in Aitkin came by its name when first owner, Charles E. Lyons, held a contest to rename his Moveum Theatre. Built in 1914, the Moveum was a silent picture-era theatre located where The Office Shop is today.

C.E. Lyons bought the Moveum in 1918. By 1936, the renamed Moveum/Rialto was obsolete. Lyons built a state-of-the-art, air-conditioned sound theatre across the street, keeping the newer name. An economic risk in a depressed American economy, it became a magnet to attract consumers (see the Rialto I and II www.newshopper.net).

Kirk Peysar, current proprietor of the Rialto, was interviewed July 15 during the blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean 2 – Deadman's Chest*, a record-breaking film for him. As of July 1, he's owned the theatre 20 years, but has been associated with it since 1975.

"I started working at the theatre 31 years ago today," said Peysar, "It was a teenager job." He set up films and ran two projectors during the

show. "There was a process to make a seamless presentation on the screen so viewers didn't know we changed from the first projector to the second."

Today the Rialto is automated and movies run from a single reel. "When a film reaches us, it comes five to nine reels to the crate," Peysar said. "We splice those into one large reel that runs non-stop...or hopefully non-stop," he added, grinning.

The new projection system eliminated a need for a full-time person in the sound booth. Someone still threads the projector and keeps an eye on it, but one person can usually handle the projector and a trickle of customers coming out to get concessions.

Peysar has four part-time staff, depending on crowds. During admission "rush" they sometimes have three to four people working, selling tickets and concessions. About a year ago, Peysar removed the adjoining north wall to a small rental office to make the new concession area. He took great lengths to ensure the design be as close to 1937 era as possible, down

to paint color and authentic stripes on doors.

Lloyd and Laura Bellefeuille owned the theater when Peysar started in 1975. They



Kirk Peysar beside his old movie camera found while antique shopping with family at a Minneapolis architectural salvage warehouse. It was coming off a freight elevator to be put it out on the floor without a price tag, but after one look, Peysar said, "Well, that's going to Aitkin."

leased from Ken Lyons, son of C.E. Lyons, from around 1955, eventually purchasing it. Their son, Mark and daughter-in-law, Pat operated it in 1974.

When Peysar worked at the Rialto as a teen, he never dreamed he would be owner. "It was just a job," said Pey-

sar. "I became interested in movies in sixth grade at Rippleside Elementary. My sixth grade teacher, Elyse Groehler had me as her

chief projectionist if we had filmstrips." Pat and Mark Bellefeuille eventually sold the Rialto in 1980 to the Richard Sands family. Peysar managed it about three years while attending college in Brainerd. "In the mid-1980s, the economy was really bad nation-

wide," said Peysar. "It was ten times worse in Aitkin. Movie business plummeted. The theatre wasn't doing well. I think if it were up to the Sands, they would have closed in the fall of 1986. There just wasn't the business."

The Sands returned to the Twin Cities, selling to almost 26-year-old Peysar. "I took over July 1, 1986 thinking my whole business plan was just keeping the doors open and probably not making money." It became a significant struggle into the early 1990s just to keep operating.

A lot of small town theatres were closing due to a variety of economic circumstances, including new Cable TV and VCRs. Not only was the economy bad, movie business in general was in a major slump. Conditions were probably similar to C.E. Lyons' tough economic times in 1918 when he first purchased the Moveum during Aitkin's influenza epidemic and the year of the Cloquet fire.

It took several years before things began changing. Movies got better and people returned to theatres. "I think

one thing that helped keep this place running over other small towns closing theatres is that Charlie Lyons built such a magnificent building," said Peysar, who did extensive research to find that theatres the caliber of the Rialto in 1937 were only in metropolitan areas. "It was a jewel out in the countryside."

Peysar loves history. He has movie memorabilia in the showcase at the Rialto, collects antiques and lives in a 102-year-old house he enjoys maintaining. "That's the key," he said, referring to preserving the Rialto and his home, "it's all in the maintenance." When the Rialto began seeing profits in the mid-1990s, Peysar poured them back into renovations, something not done during a depressed economy. He repaired the roof and updated systems. Out came the swamp cooler, replacing it with modern air conditioning.

However, Peysar couldn't part with the old swamp cooler, even when repairmen offered to remove it. "I ran that equipment, the sprayer, and not many had that op-

(continued page 15)



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Part III, Rialto Theatre – a modern, living museum (continued from previous page)

portunity," he said. "Movie theatres were among the first buildings to have air conditioning. It's not bothering anybody down there. I don't

self and a couple staff." The green chairs in the hallway to the auditorium were purchased in 1927 by C.E. Lyons from Aitkin Elec-

have any pictures to know for sure what was there," he said, expressing great interest in knowing if anyone has any Rialto pictures. Renovations like replicating the black lobby tile were done after comparing old photographs from Ken Lyons.

Business continued to improve. In 1995, Peysar accepted a chance of a lifetime from Universal Pictures. "We were able to get a three-film package deal, all with national release dates," he said. The opportunity was a 'take it or leave it' offer with a high price tag.

"The first film was *Casper*," he said. "Business was fantastic, a first for Aitkin to have a national release." It opened Memorial weekend. Summer people were still around and were very surprised Aitkin had a movie not yet in the Twin Cities.

When Peysar reported the business results to Universal, which he was required to do, the studio was shocked. "I think their response was 'we would have never dreamt Aitkin could do that kind of business.' Film companies are all about returns and watching numbers."



Beside the display case with movie memorabilia is a green chair that C.E. Lyons purchased from Aitkin Electric Company and Furniture in 1937, the same as in the old photographs.



The remodeled concession stand, a perfect blend of past décor and modern design that allows for new products.

The second film package release was July 4 weekend. "I opened *Apollo 13*, and it rained every day for a week. It did twice the business *Casper* did, which was huge," said Peysar. Again Universal was impressed with what the little town of Aitkin could do. For the next 11 years, *Apollo 13* remained the Rialto's highest grossing attendance record, shattered in July 2006 after opening *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*.

The third Universal film was *Waterworld*, which did a thriving Aitkin business. After three successful opening movies, Peysar used that as leverage through his booking agent to approach Disney, Warner Brothers, Paramount, and Sony Pictures.

"I showed them what we did with *Apollo 13*, *Casper*, and *Waterworld*. We can do it! Give us the films. Give us a chance." The other studios were reluctant at first, but the Rialto eventually got them all.

Twin City tourists and summer residents are a large portion of the Rialto's audience. Ticket prices are \$6 for adults and \$4 for children.

(continued page 18)




Snapshots from former owners Ken and Lois Lyons have been used to remodel the Rialto as close to the 1937 period as possible.

need the space. It can be a part of the history of a living museum."

A community group over the course of two summers reupholstered 300 seats. "Dee Hoffman and Bev Midthun were two principle organizers," Peysar credited. "We got a crew, all volunteer labor, I think some service groups pitched in with an army of good people along with my-

tric Company and Furniture. "Every year I get offers to buy these chairs because they are so comfortable, but I say, 'No, those are original furnishings.'" Although the Rialto has not been registered for historic designation, it is eligible.

The auditorium murals are seaweed, fish and sailboats and Peysar was told they are largely original. "I don't



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Rialto Theatre – a modern, living museum (continued from page 15)

“People can’t believe the Rialto has the same films at a significantly less ticket price,” Peysar said, who often gets calls mid-week asking about their upcoming movie and people respond, “See you this weekend.”

Extremes in weather bring people in, with rain sending the biggest crowd. Excessive heat causes people to seek a couple hours of air

two locals, Boyd Bremner’s son along with Ed Dallas, in it. *Mighty Duck’s III* had Bob Lake’s family as extras.”

When asked how he likes operating the theatre evenings and weekends after a full-time job as Aitkin county auditor, Peysar smiles. His eyes sparkle and his face lights up. He looks at his remodeled-to-period lobby and said, “This is not work!”



The lobby of the Rialto with geometric art deco design.

conditioning. “What I’ve seen when it’s real hot like this, it doesn’t matter what the film is,” Peysar said. “I say, ‘It’s \$6 for air conditioning and a free movie!’”

Over the years, Peysar continues to offer national release titles and to improve the theatre. The new concession stand enlarged the lobby, handles crowds faster and features more choices.

“It’s amazing how many films have connections to Aitkin,” Peysar said, giving examples of Pete and Brekka Lowe as chefs for the cast of *Pirates of the Caribbean 2* and upcoming *3*. “Aitkin also provided the airplane in *End of the Spear*. *Iron Will* had

He sometimes admits it can be “very long hours.” If it were just a job, he didn’t think anybody could do it for so long. But with his keen interest in the movie industry, a love of history and antiques, operating the Rialto is more like being curator of a living museum.

Rich in history, well kept during a period of struggle like an oyster makes a pearl or a diamond forms after intense pressure, the Rialto remains an original – a gem to a grateful community.

“It’s my hobby, or love,” Peysar added. “To me, this is not work at all.”

Kirk Peysar obviously loves the Rialto, and it ‘shows.’

Sign up for safety

The issue of 911 addresses was the subject of conversation at a recent meeting with representatives from First Responder groups across Aitkin County. The lack of 911 signs actually up and marking the unique addresses set the tone of that conversation.

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AITKIN COUNTY BOARD MEETING AGENDA AUGUST 8, 2006

- 9 a.m. 1) Dale Lueck, County Board Chairperson
 - A) Call to Order
 - B) Pledge of Allegiance
 - C) Board of Commissioners Meeting Procedure
 - D) Approval of Agenda
 - E) Public Requests for Future Agenda Items
- 9:02 2) Review Minutes
 - A) 8/1/06 Meeting
- 9:03 3) Routine Business
 - A) Correspondence File August 1, 2006 – August 7, 2006
 - B) Approve 7/25/06 Board Meeting Minutes
 - C) Commissioner Warrants
 - D) Payroll Report – Current Department Totals
 - E) Application for Exempt Permit-Form LG220 of The Ruffed Grouse Soc. Aitkin Chapter at The Landing – Aitkin Township
 - F) Affidavit of Lost Warrant – Darwin Kliever in the amount of \$36.80
 - G) Authorize Signatures on 2006 Federal Emergency Management Performance Grant
- 9:05 4 Board Discussion
 - A) Committee Updates
- 10:00 BREAK
- 10:10 5) Cindi Korpela, Public Health Supervisor, Scott Turner, County Sheriff and Kirk Peysar, County Auditor
 - A) Amendments to Tobacco Ordinance
- 10:20 6) Scott Arneson, County Administrator
 - A) 2007 Budgets
 - i) Commissioners
 - ii) Central Services
 - iii) Motor Pool
 - iv) Administration/Human Resources
 - v) Maintenance
 - vi) Buildings and Structures
 - vii) Veterans Services
 - viii) Economic Development
 - B) 2007 Appropriation Requests
 - i) Senior Companion
 - ii) H.A.R.T.
 - iii) Kinship of Aitkin County
 - iv) Seven County Senior Federation
- 11:00 7) Mark Jacobs, Land Commissioner
 - A) 2007 Budget
- 11:30 8) Don Niemi, County Assessor
 - A) 2007 Budget
- 11:45 9) Terry Neff, Environmental Services Director
 - A) 2007 Budget
- 12:00 ADJOURN

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NOTICE OF HEARING

August 5, 2006

NOTICE OF HEARING

THE PLANNING COMMISSION WILL ASSEMBLE FOR A HEARING OF CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT APPLICATIONS ON AUGUST 21, 2006 AT 4:00 P.M. IN THE AITKIN COUNTY COURTHOUSE, AITKIN, MINNESOTA 56431. THE FOLLOWING APPLICATION WILL BE REVIEWED.

THOMAS BRAND, 38800 305TH ST., AITKIN, MN 56431 is requesting a Conditional Use Permit to operate a small engine repair and small parts retail shop in an area zoned Shoreland (Ripple). LOT 3 & 4 BLK 2 & UND 1/43 INT IN OUTLOT D OF WOODLAND DEVELOPMENT. Section 20, Township 46, Range 26. Aitkin County, Minnesota 56431

PERMIT #34356C

FLOYD DROPPS AND CENTRAL SPECIALTIES, PO BOX 275, HILL CITY, MN 55748 are requesting a Conditional Use Permit to operate a portable asphalt plant in an area zoned Farm Residential. W 12 NE; SE NE LESS 20.06 AC & N 1/2 SE LESS 20 AC. Section 24, Township 52, Range 26. Aitkin County, Minnesota 56431

PERMIT #34426C

AITKIN COUNTY ZONING 3.4

LAKE SIDE MEETING NOTICE

August 5, 2006

REGULAR MONTHLY MEETING CHANGE

Notice is hereby given that the regularly scheduled meeting on Thursday, August 10, 2006 will be changed to Tuesday, August 15, 2006, at the regular time of 8 p.m. at the Malmø Community Hall.

Chris Springer
Lakeside Township - Clerk 1.2

NOTICE OF HEARING

August 5, 2006

SYNOPSIS OF BOARD MINUTES

August 5, 2006

SYNOPSIS OF BOARD MINUTES SYNOPSIS OF THE AITKIN BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS MEETING OF JULY 11, 2006

In pursuance of MN Statute 375.12, Subd. 1.

The meeting was called to order at 9:01am.

Present at the meeting were Vice Chairperson Brian Napstad, Commissioners Paul Bailey, Jon Olson, J.E. “Reggie” Lee, County Administrator Scott Arneson, Confidential Administrative Assistant Tiffany Gustin.

Motion carried, Lee/Olson, to approve the amended agenda.

Motion carried, Bailey/Olson, to acknowledge meeting minutes.

Motion carried, Lee/Bailey, to approve Routine Business.

Motion carried, Lee/Bailey, to approve a 3.2 malt liquor license.

Resolution adopted, Lee/Bailey, to acknowledge board consensus on the approval of a large assembly application.

Resolution adopted, Lee/Bailey, to authorize signatures on the Supplemental Federal Boating Safety Grant.

Motion carried, Lee/Bailey, to reissue a lost warrant.

Motion carried, Bailey/Lee, to approve the purchase of a compact tracked loader, trailer and accessories from Aitkin Implement for \$56,581.00.

Resolution adopted, Bailey/Lee, to award S.P. 01-090-01 to Central Specialties at a cost of \$2,743,579.05

Motion carried, Bailey/Olson, to set a public hearing regarding a tax abatement request for the Southwest Area Project for 8/1/06 at 2:00pm.

Motion carried, Olson/Lee, to approve the final plat of Shores of Mille Lacs.

Motion carried, Lee/Bailey, to adjourn the meeting at 12:09pm.

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