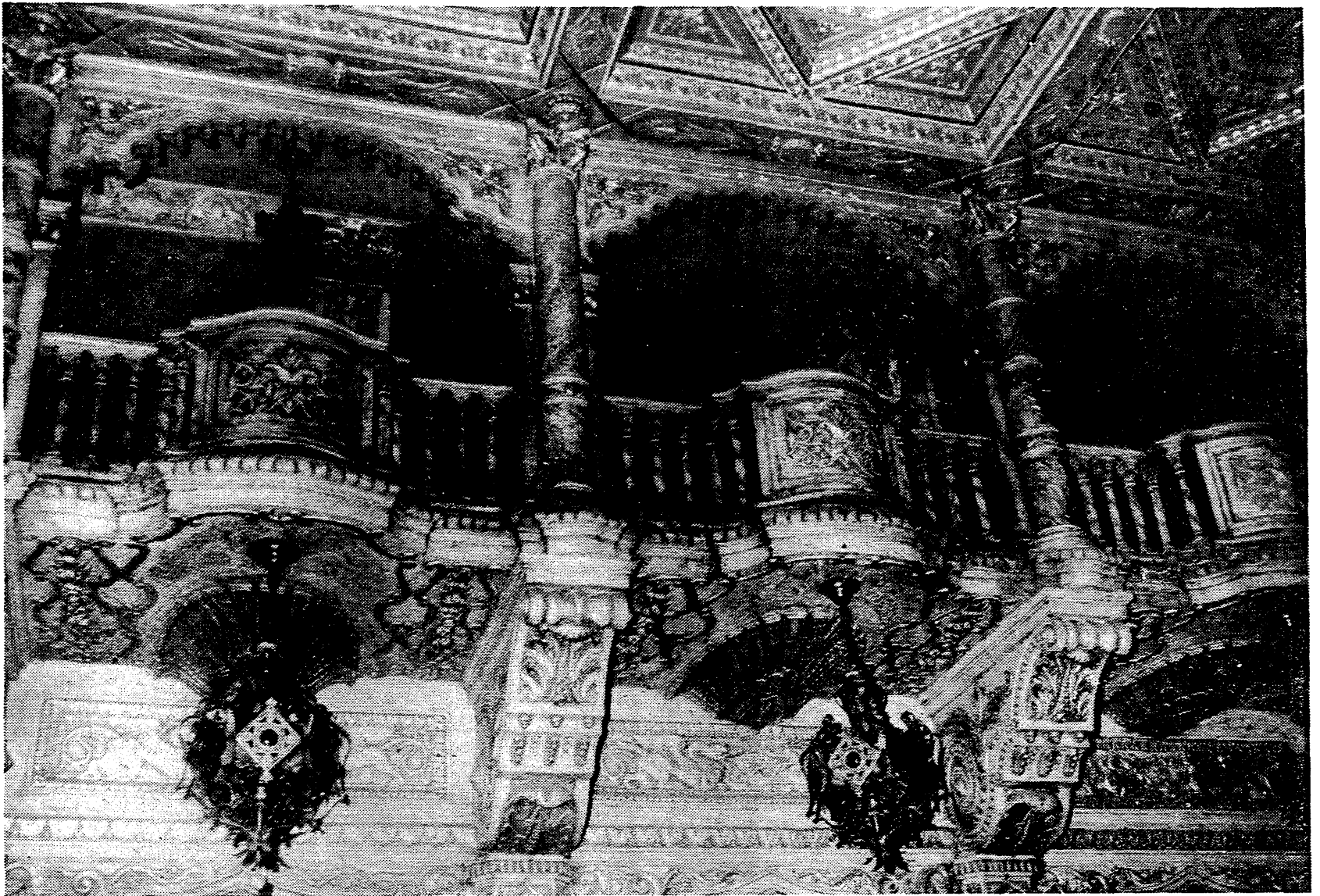


CORONADO

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Second story portico over outer lobby displays the immense detail in Rockford's grand old theater — the Coronado

Grand theater getting new life

By LEONA CARLSON

The Coronado Theater, showcase for three generations of stage and screen celebrities, will be the star of its own show on Sunday, Oct. 9.

Mirrors polished, stars twinkling, clouds drifting, sun rising, Grand Barton pipe organ thundering full tilt — the venerable old showhouse will celebrate its 50th birthday by re-creating the premiere which opened the \$1.5 million "Wonder Theater" Oct. 9, 1927.

The golden anniversary show will consist of matinee and evening presentations of a full-scale old-time vaudeville show, silent movie and organ music, plus a special demonstration of the uncommon talents of the theater itself.

That part of the show will activate the 120,000 electric bulbs and other special effects which simulate the sun, moon, stars and clouds over a setting straight out of the Arabian Nights.

The celebration is sponsored by the Land of Lincoln Theater Organ Society and the theater management, who are urging the Rockford community to join them in planning a night to remember for the elegant old movie and vaudeville house.

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LOLTOS IS THE the non-profit organization of theater-organ buffs who have donated more than 6,000 man hours to restoring the Coronado's grand old Barton organ to mint condition, sponsoring numerous silent film and organ shows, and rejuvenating other parts of the theater.

Representing Kerasotes Theatres, owners

Next artist at Coronado

The next hands and feet to play the Coronado's Grande Barton Theater Pipe Organ will be those of Alexander Schreiner, organist for the Mormon Tabernacle, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Dr. Schreiner plans to arrive a couple of days early to get the feel of the venerable restored instrument and will join the Rockford Symphony Orchestra in concert Thursday, Feb. 24.

A highlight of the concert is expected to be Schreiner's own "Concerto for Organ and Orchestra," one



Schreiner

of the few works written of this kind.

Dr. Schreiner is heard by millions each Sunday morning on broadcasts of the Mormon Tabernacle services. He began playing there in 1921 and in 1929 played the first of the national radio program one of the oldest continuous broadcasts in existence.

He accompanied the 400-voice Mormon Tabernacle Choir on its recent European tour and is the author of four several books on organ music and has been listed seven times among the nation's top radio artists in the Musical America radio polls.

The Rockford Symphony concert will include Symphony No. One ("The Titan") by Mahler, Organ Concerto No. 10 by Handel and the Schreiner concerto.

of the Coronado, in sponsoring the 50-year celebration are Dennis Morlan, district manager of the theater chain, and Paula Christianson, the Coronado's first female manager.

The co-sponsors envision the anniversary celebration as a recreation of Rockford in the 1920s, and they are seeking memorabilia of the city and the theater from oldtimers in the community.

If suitable pictures are obtained, tentative

plans call for projecting them on the screen as a visual presentation of the past.

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PICTURES, CLIPPINGS AND recollections may be mailed to anniversary historian Vera Walling, 1019 Franklin Place, who hopes to compile a detailed record of the early years when stars such as Gertrude Lawrence and the Marx Brothers headlined

the Coronado bookings.

Orrill Dunn, past president of LOLTOS, remembers them well. As a stagestruck boy, Dunn was a steady customer at the Coronado in the days when vaudeville and movies regularly attracted overflow crowds to the theater.

Four complete shows were staged daily, with the price of admission ranging from 35 to 50 cents for adults and 10 to 25 cents for children. The theater had a dress code in those days, he said — but no popcorn, candy or soft drinks.

"You almost always had to wait in line to see the show," Dunn recalled. "The line looped around from the entrance to the back of the inside lobby and then to the front of the lobby where the head usher stood.

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"WHEN A SEAT or two or three opened up anywhere, the aisle ushers would signal the head usher and then lead the way down the aisle and indicate the empty seats with canes and flashlights."

The signal system involved a panel of buttons on the lobby wall outside the aisle door. Operated by the ushers, the buttons activated a corresponding master panel at the head usher's station.

The ushers' signal system has long been inoperable, but Dunn said LOLTOS plans to restore it to working order.

Among the organization's previous projects was restoration of the cloud effect on the theater's auditorium ceiling.



Coronado . . .

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Dunn said the Coronado's cloud machine had disappeared, but LOLTOS replaced it with another which they unearthed in the old Capitol Theater on S. Main Street.

THE GROUP ALSO overhauled the stage piano, helped the stage crew restore rheostats for dimming the house lights, and recently did a housecleaning job on the two-story wall of mirrors in the inner lobby, having discovered a long-forgotten but like-new scaffold in the theater's labyrinth of storerooms.

The mirror now reflects more clearly than ever the giant chandelier, intricately-carved pillars, gilt-edged settees, gold-painted iron balusters, gargoyles, frescoes, panels, paintings, busts, sweeps and flourishes which transform the Coronado's incredible lobby into never-never land in the oldtime tradition of escapist theater.

At one end of the mezzanine lobby, guarding the entrance to the four-sided Moorish-type portico over the outer lobby, one gilded instrument, long silent, is the lone survivor of three grand pianos which once graced the theater.

DUNN SAID THE lobby piano was used to entertain the crowds as they waited for auditorium seats to be vacated.

The pianos were manufactured in Rockford by the Schumann piano company, of which Willard Van Matre was an owner.

Van Matre also headed the Rockford Enterprise Co., which built and originally owned controlling stock in the Coronado.

He also was the first occupant of the soundproof living quarters positioned on the floor above the theater lobby. The owner's home is one of 18 apartments housed in the theater building. One of its pluses is the view from the front windows of movie-goers approaching the theater, often waiting in line to enter the theater, in the days when Van Matre lived there.

Local contractors constructed the building, starting in 1925 and finishing in 1927. Sources differ on the cost of construction, but estimates place the figure between \$1.5 and \$2 million.

THE ARCHITECT WAS Frederic Klein, who also designed the old Rialto Theater on S. Main Street, as well as many other theaters in the Midwest.

Early newspaper accounts report that all materials except the cooling plant and light-control panel were obtained locally.

Installed at a cost of \$18,000, the 7- by 15-foot lighting panel controls all 120,000 bulbs in the auditorium.

Decor of the theater defies description, combining Arabian, Spanish, Chinese, Turkish, Italian and Aztec features in a splendid melange of turrets, towers, domes, arches, recesses, balconies and frescoes.

Vari-colored illuminated structures extend from the rear of the balcony on both sides to the proscenium arch which frames the stage in grand style. At the front of the auditorium, massive chandeliers flank the stage.

THE CHANDELIERS ARE capable of descending from the ceiling for easy bulb-replacing — but most of the theater's lighting facilities are not so handy.

The "stars" in the Coronado's bright blue ceiling "sky," for instance, require a trip to the attic. Incidentally, like everything else in the theater, there is nothing haphazard about

the way the stars are scattered. Insiders point out the galaxy is a deliberate arrangement patterned on the constellations.

Even more of a challenge to replace are the lights in the proscenium arch, which require steeplejack tactics.

In order to seek out a burned-out culprit over the stage, a bulb-changer must scale a ladder, ascend to the dizzying height of the arch and pick his way along the steep walkway which follows the curve.

THE STAGE CREW claims the remote recesses of the area still harbor milk bottles left there by the workmen who lunched

HILDING NELSON, THE Coronado's first building superintendent, said in a 1970 interview that the figures were inspired by the shapely dimensions of the wife of the Austrian artist who created most of the theater's adornments.

An early newspaper report credits the molds, casts and sculptures in the place to Arthur Butner, an employe of Walter Scott Bell Theatrical Plasterers of Rockford.

According to the newspaper account, all the Coronado's palatial plaster work was done by the Bell Co., which also did the plastering at the Oriental and other Chicago theaters.

The huge confection of lights and crystal suspended over the inner lobby between the two nudes is said to weigh two tons and to be

On center stage, outlines are clearly visible of trapdoors which facilitated wondrous disappearing acts performed by black-caped magicians; the Great Blackstone among them.

At the front of the stage, elevators raise and lower the Coronado's orchestra pit as well as the Golden Voiced Barton Theatre Pipe Organ, which was installed by the Bartola Organ Co. of Oshkosh, Wis., at a cost of \$75,000 in 1927.

THE SPLENDID OLD instrument is said to have 6,000 pipes and 100 miles of wire in its construction. Dunn said it is the only theater pipe organ in operation in a theater in Illinois, outside of Chicago.

LOLTOS has restored the instrument completely, and the Coronado organ now is known by theater-organ enthusiasts throughout the country as one of the finest of the species.

Dunn described the project as a labor of love and said it would be impossible to put a price tag on the improvements the group has made.

"We probably spent in the neighborhood of \$8,000 on pipes and other materials for the organ," he estimated. "But the big cost would have been labor, and that was all donated."

"At \$10 an hour, I suppose you could say the labor on the organ alone would have cost in the neighborhood of \$40,000." He said the group plans to add three more ranks of pipes to the instrument.

ALL FUNDS FOR restoration of the organ and improvements in the theater are taken from profits on the organ shows LOLTOS sponsors periodically. Morlan said the theater owners' major recent improvements in the theater include new carpeting throughout the main floor lobby, complete re-bulbing, "using the exact type of light bulbs used in the theater originally," and an ongoing attention to an efficient maintenance program.

"The actual working facilities of the theater are in excellent condition," Morlan said. "Kerasotes has put a tremendous amount of money into maintaining the place. 'I don't want to guess how much, and I don't even want to think about it.'"

But he thinks the Coronado is worth the expense.

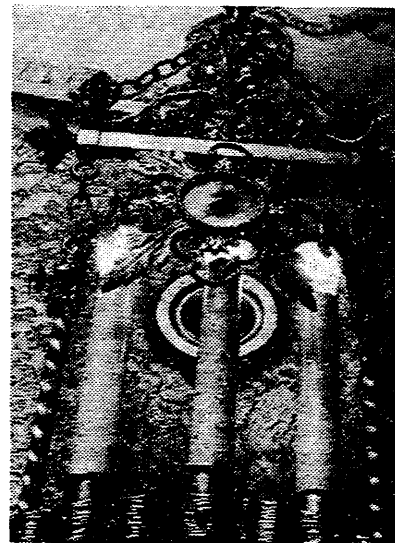
"With so many people talking about civic centers and that type of thing, I think it's unfortunate that people here don't really know what facilities they have available."

"THE CORONADO IS in nearly as good condition today as it was the day it was built. My hope is that in the future we can expand its availability and use it more for legitimate theater. I don't think you're going to find any theater in this vicinity with the Coronado's features."

The American Theater Organ Society apparently agrees with that assessment. The group will have its international convention in Chicago in July, and a trip to Rockford to see the organ and the theater is first on the agenda. Judging by the reaction of most of the performers who play the theater, the organ society is likely to be impressed by what they see.

"I've never seen anything like it," said a wide-eyed baritone from the Canadian Opera Company, which staged "La Traviata" for the Community Concert Association in January.

The singer was on the inactive side of the alternating casts that night, to his dismay. "To think I won't get to sing here," he lamented. "To think I missed singing in this theater. . ."



Marked attention to detail characterizes the entire interior of the Coronado theater. Decoration at upper left lends an Illinois touch to the theater — it's Abraham Lincoln.

there while they were constructing the theater 50 years ago.

The rest of the theater holds other surprises.

In the lobby, for example, lurking here and there among the plaster ribbons, swirls, flourishes, circlets and nudes are several sculptured likenesses of the familiar, sober visage of Abraham Lincoln, the last person one would expect to encounter there, considering the martyred president's best-membered connection with theater (He was shot to death in one).

For contrast: Gazing impassively on the lobby from ceiling-high perches right and left of the mirror wall are a pair of well-turned nudes.

a replacement for the original fixture, which allegedly was dropped by workmen during installation.

ORIGINALLY, THE AUDITORIUM of the theater was equipped with 3,000 seats, but about 600 were sacrificed when new, larger seats were subsequently installed.

Backstage, remnants of oldtime theater recall echoes of the times when vaudeville stars danced and sang and tight-rope across the Coronado stage. Toward the back of the stage on each side, metal lids conceal supports which once held posts to anchor tightropes.