

Dutch treat

Bellefontaine's classic Holland Theatre to be renovated

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BELLEFONTAINE — When the going gets tough, the tough build a movie theater so they can peer into the flicker of a happier place.

Such was the case in Bellefontaine in 1931.

The Logan County city, like the rest of the country, had been caught in the slow stranglehold of the Depression for two years.

But when Schine Theaters of New York decided in 1930 to build a movie theater on East Columbus Avenue, things looked good.

For the first time in a long time.

Schine's Holland Theatre — its unique Dutch architecture included working windmills inside — was whipped up in just four months.

A newspaper ad declared, "An Achievement of Construction. An Expression of Confidence."

Like all the classic movie theaters, though, the Holland eventually fell on hard times. The plaster inside seemed to fall with it.

This year marks the theater's 70th birthday, and a group of Bellefontaine volunteers are working to give it one heck of a gift:

An \$8.5 million face-lift.

The group, Logan County Landmark Preservation Inc., is restoring the Holland to its original state, complete with working windmills.

It's no coincidence the economy, while nowhere as bad as 1931, is slumping. Tough times are here again, and so is the Holland.

"When times get tough, people like to be entertained," Chuck Croutwater, the retired Bellefontaine school teacher who's president of the county preservation group, explained recently. "You want to see the rainbow. And entertainment can do that."

So far, Logan County Landmark Preservation Inc. has \$500,000 in grants and donations to renovate the theater with, he said.

That should be enough to at least get the building open, he said. The group soon will undertake a fund-raiser for more cash.

The Holland closed in 1998 as a multiplex. In its life, it screened everything from "Gone With the Wind" to "Lethal Weapon 4."

It sat empty for a year before the plan to save it was hatched. It was a defensive move.

"We didn't want it to become a parking lot," Croutwater said. "And there was a threat of someone showing X-rated movies in it."

On Dec. 28, 1999, long-time Bellefontaine



THE INSIDE of the Holland Theatre. The blades on the windmill turn.

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taine businessman Richard Knowlton bought the building for \$135,000, and restoration of the Holland Theatre got under way.

"Everybody wants to save it as the Holland," Croutwater said. "They've got so many memories. They talk about necking in the balcony."

The group has removed the trash and the multiplexed theaters — walls had been erected throughout to

separate each theater — installed a new roof, tuck-pointed the brick, replaced drainage spouts and restored the building's heat and water.

The Holland, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places last May, will eventually look like it did back in 1931.

There will be an illuminated Dutch cityscape, stars that shine in the ceiling and a machine that projects clouds onto the ceiling.

"It's the only one of its kind in the world," Croutwater said of the theater, which was patented by Schine after it was completed.

A vertical marquee outside will complete the massive project by 2005, even though donations have slowed since Sept. 11, he said.

"Right now, it's our goal to just get the theater open," Croutwater said, adding that lavish extras, like a curtain, will come later.

By the way, the theater's original curtain was removed during World War II because "it looked too much like the Japanese flag."

The theater is slated to open in May while the work continues, Croutwater said.

The finished product, he said, will be the Logan County Arts Center,

housing school plays and nationally known performers.

When the Holland was built, a stage was built with it for vaudeville.

"Take the Kuss Auditorium," Croutwater said. "It's a nice building, but it doesn't have a lot of personality. This has personality."

"That's why it's worth saving."

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