

## Playing the Palace

**I**t is the year 1916 in the growing city of Flint. W.S. Butterfield, the Battle Creek-based owner of the Bijou and Majestic Theatres in Flint along with theaters in Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Jackson, Ann Arbor, Lansing, Saginaw and Bay City, announced plans for a third theater in Flint.

The Palace Theatre seated 1,450 people at the corner of Kearsley and Harrison Streets. The estimated cost of construction was between \$75,000 to \$80,000. The theater was equipped with a proper-sized stage so any production could be staged and have a seventy-foot rigging loft. It was designed by Chicago architect John Eberson to resemble a Roman garden under an Italian sky with twinkling stars. This was an early example of the atmospheric theater that Eberson would perfect over the next few years. A decade later, the form reached its zenith with the Capitol Theatre—which Eberson designed—two blocks south of the Palace along Harrison Street.

It opened on August 30, 1917, with a five-act bill of live vaudeville entertainment. The dedication opening that night played to two capacity audiences totaling nearly five thousand patrons. Before the live acts, a six-piece orchestra played six short musical numbers, and a filmed travelogue with scenes of Norway was shown. The first live performers were the bouncing ball novelty act of the Alexander Brothers and Evelyn. They were followed by a singing duo who called themselves "A Couple of Nifties," Foley & O'Neil. Then there was a musical comedy called *The Smart Shop* starring Ed W. Rowland and Lorin J. Howard with Harry Kessler, Josephine Taylor and a chorus of six young women. They were followed by comedian Al Shayne,





A 1917 grand opening ad in the *Flint Journal* for the Palace Theatre. Courtesy of the Flint Public Library.

who called himself "The Singing Beauty." The headliners were a Chinese troupe, Long Tack Sam & Company, consisting of jugglers, magicians, musicians, contortionists and acrobats. A Pathé newsreel was made of the dedication, placed in a metal box and sealed in the cornerstone.

Over the years, notable performers who appeared on the Palace stage included Boris Karloff, Ethel Barrymore, Helen Hayes and Kay Francis. When the movies learned to talk in 1927, the Palace continued to offer live vaudeville and

silent movies until May 1929. After a one-night-only roadshow appearance by noted stage actor, dramatist and producer William Hodge on May 25, 1929, the theater was closed for a summer of refurbishing and retrofitting to wire the theater for sound and offer talkies. It had its grand re-opening on September 8, 1929, and featured talking movies while continuing to offer vaudeville acts from the RKO circuit. The first talking movie shown at the Palace was *The Sophomore*, starring Eddie Quilan, Sally O'Neil and Jeanette Loff. There was also a Paramount newsreel and three live vaudeville acts: Britt Wood, who called himself "the boob and his harmonica," the singing and dancing group the Gills and Clemens Belling with his Jolly Family, a European novelty act.

With the Great Depression in full force in 1931, the Palace closed temporarily after the final shows on June 6, 1931, with the feature *Girls Demand Excitement*, starring John Wayne, Virginia Cherrill and Marguerite Churchill, preceded by selected shorts. It reopened on February 15, 1934, with *Cat's Paw* starring Harold Lloyd preceded by such shorts as a Betty Boop cartoon, a Terrytoon, a comedy short and a Fox Movietone newsreel.

While vaudeville faded away, the live acts continued at the Palace into the 1950s, including the popular Cowboy Jamboree. But the ornate theater had started to look old-fashioned by 1950, so in May, construction began to renovate the Palace inside and out. After the last showing of *The Good Humor Man* starring Jack Carson on July 4, the theater was closed for a couple of months to complete the renovations.



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**GRINNELL'S**A 1950 grand re-opening ad in the *Flint Journal* for the modernized Palace Theatre. Courtesy of the Flint Public Library.



## HIDDEN HISTORY OF FLINT

The renovated theater reopened on September 7, 1950, with a special show featuring five local live acts, echoing the theater's storied history of offering vaudeville, with toe-tapper Rosemary Peck, accordion players Stephen All and Joyce Swanson, teenage singers the Three Chicks, tap dancers the McLaughlin Sisters and barbershop singing quartet the Antlers. The feature film was *Tea for Two*, starring Doris Day and Gordon MacRae. The renovated theater itself was the real star of the show. The noted architectural firm of C. Howard Crane and Associates, which designed many landmark theaters over the years, such as the Fox Theatre in Detroit, removed all traces of the theater's original design to make way for the new art deco motif. Outside, the mansard roof was removed, and the front was finished off with colorful red and yellow porcelain enamel tiles. Three thousand light bulbs lit up the new all-glass-front marquee and thirty-foot vertical sign. The theater is prominent on this book's back cover. Inside, the outer lobby was enlarged by removing a storefront to make way for a new refreshment stand. The foyer was enlarged by removing an expendable stairway and finished in walnut. The auditorium lost all of its ornamentation as well as the side boxes and gained modern recessed lighting with decorations by two local Flint men, Ray Wright and artist Elmer Peterson, who provided the attractive murals. Capacity was reduced to 1,350 seats, and several hundred latecomers had to be turned away.

In the 1970s, the Palace began to show more films catering to Flint's African American community, such as the pioneering 1971 film that began the decade's black cinema genre, Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which played at the Palace. The surprising success of *Sweet Sweetback* led the Hollywood studios to begin producing films catering to black audiences to try and duplicate that film's success, and it started a cycle of kung fu and black exploitation films playing at the Palace.

But with the development of the University of Michigan-Flint downtown campus, condemnation proceedings began on July 1975 by the Flint City Council due to the theater's complicated ownership. The theater closed with the double bill of the 1973 film *The Mack* starring Richard Pryor and the 1974 film *Foxy Brown* starring Pam Grier, with *Foxy Brown* the final film shown on Sunday, January 25, 1976.

When the city bought the theater and turned it over to the university, there were calls for the university to utilize the theater as part of the campus. It was determined that it would cost at least \$900,000 to renovate the Palace and bring the sixty-year-old theater up to code. Besides, they did not anticipate a need for an assembly hall as large as the Palace. When the demolition



company stripped the theater of salvageable material, it was discovered that the metal box from the cornerstone—which was removed just before renovations began in 1950 and stored in the theater's stage—was missing. It was believed that the newsreel in the box, which was filmed on unstable nitrate film, was unlikely to survive.

Demolition of the Palace Theatre began on February 11, 1977. After demolition was completed, the site was landscaped. Today, at the corner of Kearsley and Harrison is a University of Michigan–Flint sign as well as a diagonal sidewalk.