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Published on Friday, January 26, 2007



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A Tale of Two Theaters

Reopening McGill's Theater will be just 'like old times'

By RUDY HERNDON
Ely Times Reporter

It's been three decades since the McGill Theatre last closed its doors, but the historic movie palace could soon be given a new lease on life as a performing arts center.

Owner Aaron Johnson and his mother Nancy, both of McGill, hope to restore the building to its original splendor. They envision the revitalized space as a venue for community events, children's theater, musical performances and screenings of classic movies.

"It's going to be like the old times," Aaron said.

But in order to bring the theater back to life, the family is going to need a lot of help: The building is in need of extensive repairs, including new roofing, flooring, wiring and seating.

The Johnsons are looking for volunteers who are willing to lend a hand with skilled tasks such as plumbing, electrical wiring and grant writing.

In addition to soliciting help from experienced volunteers, they hope to raise money for the restoration with fun-filled summer events at the park.

Nancy said that Aaron's lifelong love of movies, music and media factored into the family's plans for the theater.

Aaron, who has Down syndrome, has always sought opportunities for greater self-sufficiency, and a job at the performing arts center would enable him to make a living doing something he loves.

"This is truly a labor of love," Nancy said.

According to local lore, the theater was originally built by Kennecott as compensation for an employee who lost a leg in a job-related accident. The man went on to work for the company as the theater's manager.

Nancy believes the story is true because she once found three prosthetic legs on the property.

Unfortunately, those prosthetics were among the few mementos that survived years of abuse at the hands of vandals.

Former owner Josie Zakula lamented that constant acts of vandalism interfered with her efforts to



The McGill Theatre sits bordered and dormant; one of the last of its kind that once brought the outside world communities all over the West. But owner Aaron Johnson and his mother Nancy plan to return the theater to its former splendor.



renovate the theater.

"Every time we made improvements, kids got into the building," she said.

Zakula eventually sold the property to a man from Idaho. Unfortunately, the new owner had no interest in running a movie theater, and he went on to finish the job the vandals had started, destroying much of the building's original character.

He stripped the auditorium bare, and hauled many valuable items, such as stacks of classic movie posters, off to the landfill.

Yet in spite of all the damage it has sustained over the years, the theater has somehow managed to avoid the fate of its contemporaries.

According to the Web site cinematreasures.org, the McGill Theatre is among the last of the plain buff brick theaters that once existed throughout the West.

Two silent-era theaters in town that predated the McGill vanished decades ago.

The Park Theatre sat across the street in the space currently occupied by Al's Discount Store, while a second theater near the present-day site of the McGill Volunteer Fire Department Hall went up in flames.

The McGill Theatre may have begun its life as a silent movie theater, but it began screening "talkies" as soon as sound technology became widely available in the late 1920s.

McGill resident Bill Hoggan thinks the theater was built in 1927 or 1928, right around the time that Al Jolson's "The Jazz Singer" became a nationwide sensation as the first feature-length movie to include synchronized dialogue.

"It had a nice screen, and the projectors were the latest," Hoggan said.

McGill Town Board member Anne Schroeder has vivid memories of the theater during its heyday. It featured plush red velvet curtains and seats that accommodated up to 400 people.

Schroeder remembers that the balcony had a reputation as the place to neck among older teens.

"My mother would tell me stories about my aunts going down there with their various boyfriends," she said.

As a schoolgirl, Helen Angelopolous used to attend Sunday matinees at the theater. In those days, afternoon shows cost 10 cents and each ticket buyer was eligible for raffle prizes such as a free bag of groceries.

However, the theater's business began to fade with the advent of television.

It shut down in the late 1960s, but reopened for a short time a few years later.

During that brief revival, former owner Dave Hansen screened family-friendly fare, Westerns and Spanish language movies on weekends.

"John Wayne was always popular back then," he said.

The Duke might not pack 'em in like he used to, but other activities at a revitalized McGill Theatre most certainly would.

The pent-up demand for movies, live music and theatrical performances is expected to grow as new residents flock to the area, and a performing arts center would bring those events together under one roof.

If you would like to volunteer in the restoration of the building, contact Nancy Johnson at 235-7333 or 293-1050.

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