

IDENTIFICATION:

SITE NAME Varsity Theatre

LEGAL DESCRIPTION North 40 feet of Lot 63, University Place Addition

OWNER(S) NAME Dundee Theatre Corporation

OWNER(S) SIGNATURE Denise L. Mahon
(signed owner's letter of support or petition can be attached in lieu of signature here)

OWNER(S) ADDRESS 1024 58th St., West Des Moines, IA 50266
(street address) (city) (state) (zip)

CATEGORY:

X STRUCTURAL/ARCHITECTURAL ___ LANDSCAPE ___ ARCHEOLOGICAL ___

COMPONENTS Movie theater building and parcel

USE (present) Temporarily vacant (past) Movie theater

DESCRIPTION:

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION 1917 ARCHITECT/BUILDER W. F. Ghormley/University

Motor Company

BUILDING TYPE:

Single-family dwelling ___ Industrial ___ Other institutional ___ Religious ___
Multiple-family dwelling ___ Educational ___ Public ___ Agricultural ___
Commercial X

EXTERIOR WALLS: clapboard ___ stone ___ brick ___ board and batten ___ shingles ___
stucco other _____ X X

STRUCTURAL SYSTEM: wood frame with interlocking joints ___ masonry load-bearing walls X
wood frame with light members (balloon frame) ___ iron frame ___ steel frame with curtain walls ___
reinforced concrete ___ other ___

CONDITION: excellent ___ good X fair ___ deteriorated ___

INTEGRITY: original site ___ moved--if so, when _____
from where _____

Information on alterations, additions (with dates & architect, if known) and any other notable features of building/site: No additions, marquee change and façade remodel 1958, marquee replacement and façade remodel 1973

RELATED OUTBUILDINGS AND PROPERTY: barn ___ other farm structures ___ carriage house ___
garage ___ privy ___ other _____

SURROUNDINGS OF THE SITE: open land ___ woodland ___ scattered outbuildings ___
commercial X industrial ___ residential ___ densely built-up ___ other _____

Prepared by James Jacobsen Date January 8, 2020
Address 4411 Ingersoll Ave. Des Moines, IA 50312
Telephone 515 274-3625 Email historypays@gmail.com
Organization History Pays

SIGNIFICANCE: (Indicate all sources of information for all statements)

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Not claimed at this time. See below.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Varsity Theatre is individually eligible on the local level for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It is significant under Criterion A, recreation and culture, for being the longest-serving single-screen independently-owned Des Moines suburban movie house. While this might sound like a substantial listing of qualifiers this is not the case. Its context is suburban because architecturally its counterparts all emerged in suburban settings at the same point in time, using the same style, and having the form of a building built for the sole purpose of showing movies. The single-screen qualifier typified its property type as this was the standard defining characteristic of its property type. The independent ownership is in fact its stronger claim to significance since almost every theater ended up in chain ownership. As for longest-serving, save for the semi-occasional closing for remodeling or repair, it outlasted every competing metro movie house. It is also significant under Criterion A, defense, for its World War I role as a mess hall and canteen for Drake University's Student Army Training Corps in late 1918. Criterion C is not claimed at this time due to the loss of the original marquee, although it is probable that given the survival of every other character-defining major theater feature, such a claim could be made. For now, reliance will be focused on the Criterion A claim. The period of significance is 1938-1970 and key dates are 1916, 1938, 1958 and 1973, these being the years of original construction, conversion as a theater, remodeling due to fire damage and the replacement of the marquee respectively.

Refer to attached continuation pages.

SOURCES (for primary and secondary sources give complete facts of publication: author, title, place of publication, date, etc.):

Refer to attached continuation pages.

Physical Description:

The Varsity Theatre occupies a prominent commercial street front opposite to and east of the Drake University campus, at 25th Street, near University Avenue. The building fronts west and has alley access to the east. The entire block is either commercial or parking.

The theatre is a combination brick and tile building. It has a 35-foot deep two-story west section and an 84-foot deep single-story east auditorium wing. The square marquee (1973) is full-width and is set between the two floor levels on that frontage. The roof is a bow-trussed form with raised parapet walls on all sides. The roof drains eastward via back downspouts on the west section and built-in surface gutters along either sidewall. The building has no perimeter fenestration due to adjacent buildings. There are twin rear (east) doors and that frontage is stuccoed. The electrical service is located on that wall and delivers power via a full-length horizontal raised conduit that is centered on the roof.

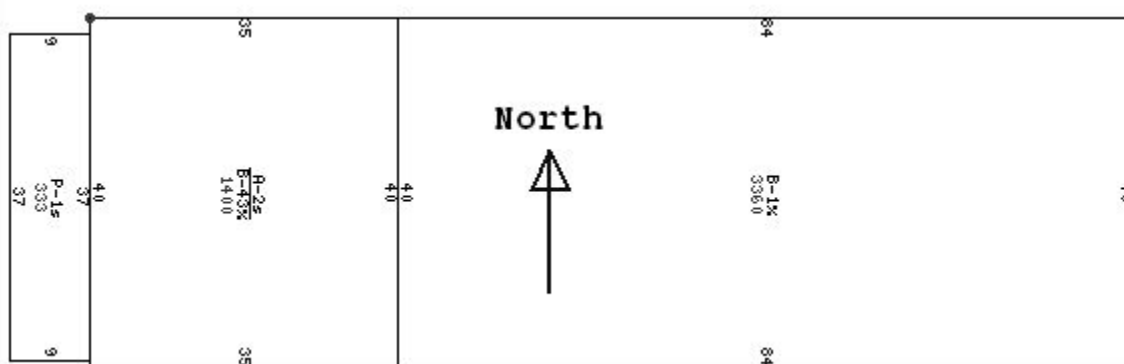


Figure 1: Building sketch (Polk County Assessor, 2020)

The upper façade is of the Streamlined Modern style while the remainder of the building is industrial utilitarian in its form, materials and design. The stylistic front has a white ceramic brick veneer that is ornamented with dark blue patterning (currently painted over but partially visible). The front parapet is stepped from each side (to hide the vaulted roof profile) and there is a capping of undetermined material across the parapet. The upper façade design consists of a large square single-light window that is centered on the second-floor level. A square panel of equal size above the window covers an unexplored part of the façade. The other design feature is a set of four vertical flush-set columns that consist of block glass capped with blue ceramic brick. The other feature of note is that the building front is advanced four feet beyond the buildings to the north and as a result, the white brick and parapet cap are wrapped around the northwest corner to cover this exposure.

The lower storefront is comprised to two sections. To the south a blank tile wall has twin metal framed exhibit windows set across its frontage. To the north, the theater entrance proper consists of two sets of twin glass windows. The side of the ticket booth is to the north (left) of these doors, while another service area has its own glass wall. A curtain now covers this window section. Multi-colored rubble stone covers the wall columns that flank the entry doors and ticket booth window.

The notable feature of this building is the rather impressive range of floor levels. Within the west part of the building there is the basement, the lobby proper, the raised entry lobby, the projection booth floor level, the upper lobby and office level and finally two uppermost areas that are on top of the projection booth. The auditorium floor as would be expected, descends as one progresses towards the stage and then slightly ascends to the stage/screen.



Figure 2: Current façade appearance looking southeast (Jacobsen, 2020)

The west two-story part of the building had a full basement but the easternmost portions are filled, making the basement 43 percent of the total floorplan. A warren of brick-walled rooms comprises a substantial former women's lobby, a west utilities and storage room (that extends the full width of the broad sidewalk), and a complex of south-end former women's bathrooms and hallways. The lobby has a north wall stone veneer treatment that matches the stonework upstairs. Three west glass sections comprise that wall and the ceiling is beamed to match the lounge. The bathroom finishes are impressively luxurious but are also substantially deteriorated. A Kewanee furnace remains in place along with a more recent one but the current building heating plant is on the second floor.



Figure 3: Current basement lobby looking north (Jacobsen, 2020)

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate the substantial drop in elevation between the sidewalk grade and the lobby proper with four intervening steps being required to reach the lobby from the entry lobby. The only historical components in the lobby are the continuation of the rubble rock column and wall treatments, a red and white patterned terrazzo floor that underlies the carpeting at least in the entry lobby area and the open north end stairs. The basement stairs are under those stairs. Modern bathrooms and a janitors/storage closet infill the remainder of the lobby plan. One rectangular bathroom protrudes into the auditorium along the south wall (see Figures 9-10).



Figure 4: Current lobby proper and west entryway with stairs, looking south (Jacobsen, 2020)

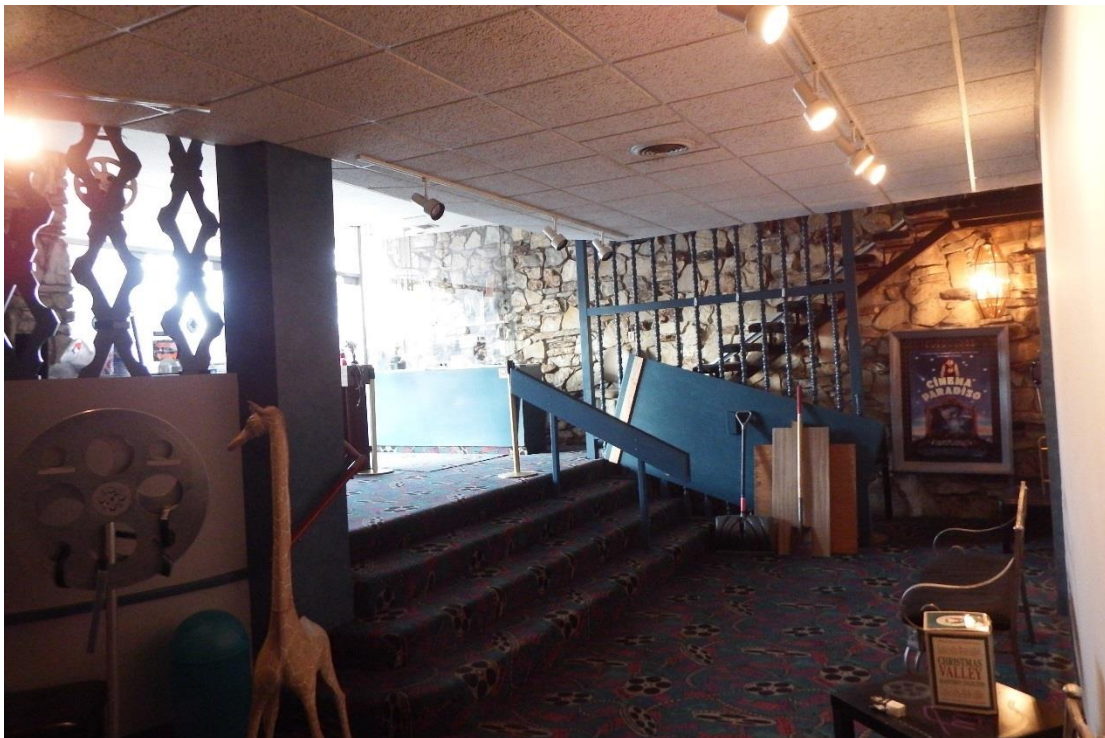


Figure 5: Current lobby proper and west entryway with stairs, note stairs leading to lounge, looking north (Jacobsen, 2020)



Figure 6: Current auditorium, looking southeast (Jacobsen, 2020)

The auditorium consists of a unified open rectangular space. Seating is arranged in three sections with two aisles (the sections consisting of four, ten and four seats each). There are two types of seats based on their aisle sides. The rear seating continues under the projection booth (see Figures 9-10). The auditorium walls are covered with acoustical tile mounted on furring strips. The side walls are of tile construction with some brick infilling. The walls are unadorned and the wall planes are uninterrupted. The ceiling has the same tile covering and there is a broad slightly recessed ceiling panel. The attic (access not located, access status not determined) void contains substantial heating and cooling vents and ceiling fans are arrayed along each sidewall.

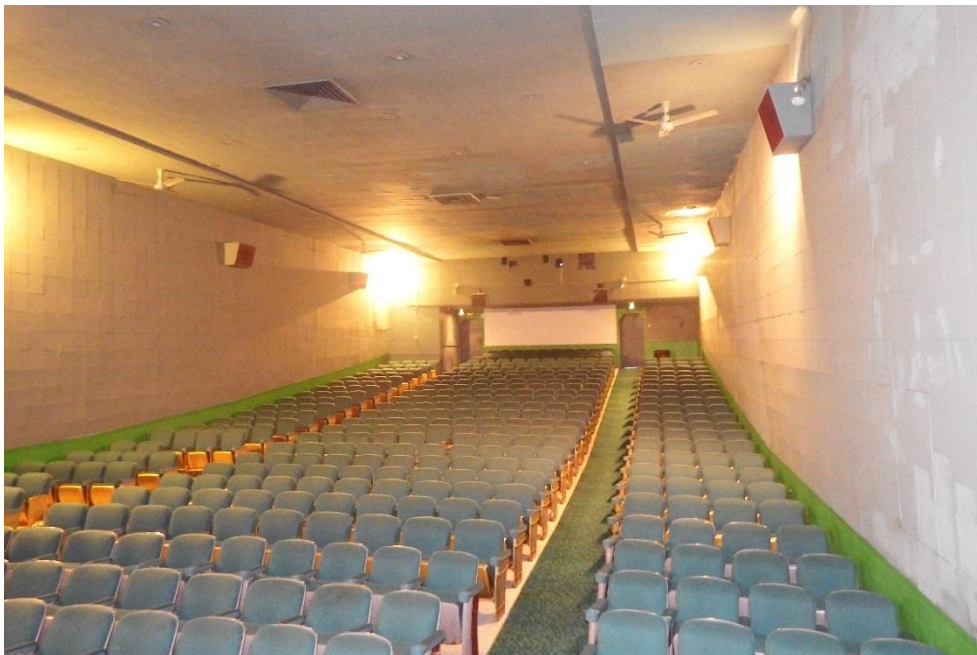


Figure 7: Current auditorium, looking east (Jacobsen, 2020)

The stage has a convex shape and there is no structural proscenium. The curtains serve this purpose on each side. The east end wall and exposed corner interior walls evidence a mix of brick and tile construction along with evidence of a removed concrete floor as well as a former northeast corner basement stairs location. Emergency exit doors flank the stage. Auditorium floors are covered with linoleum (Figure 8) while the aisles are carpeted. A bathroom intrudes into the southwest corner of the auditorium under the projection booth.



Figure 8: Current auditorium stage and screen, looking north (Jacobsen, 2020)

The projection booth extends full-width across the plan from the standpoint of the auditorium (there is a storage area on the south end and a hallway access to the north). The booth exterior (east) wall is covered with acoustical tile and there are a number of projection and one window openings.

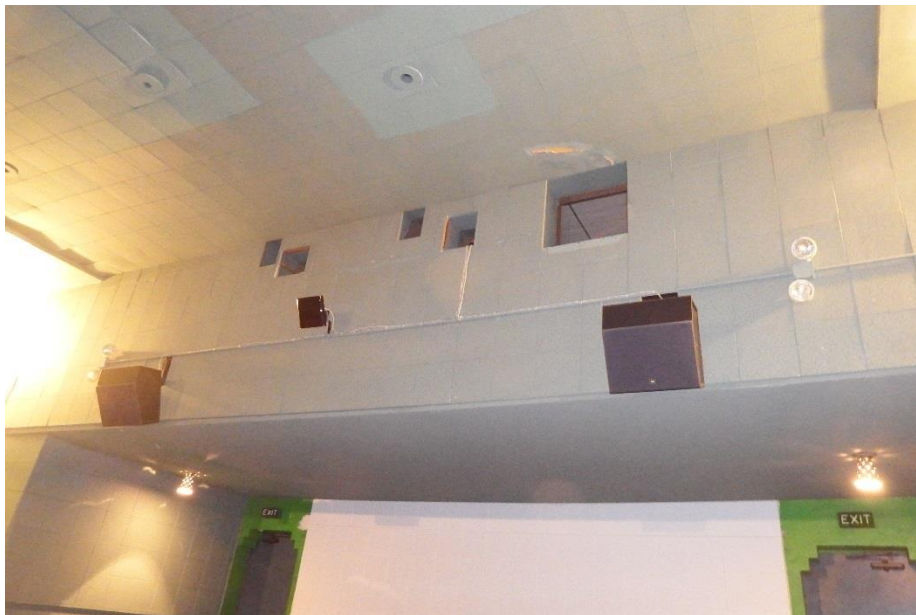


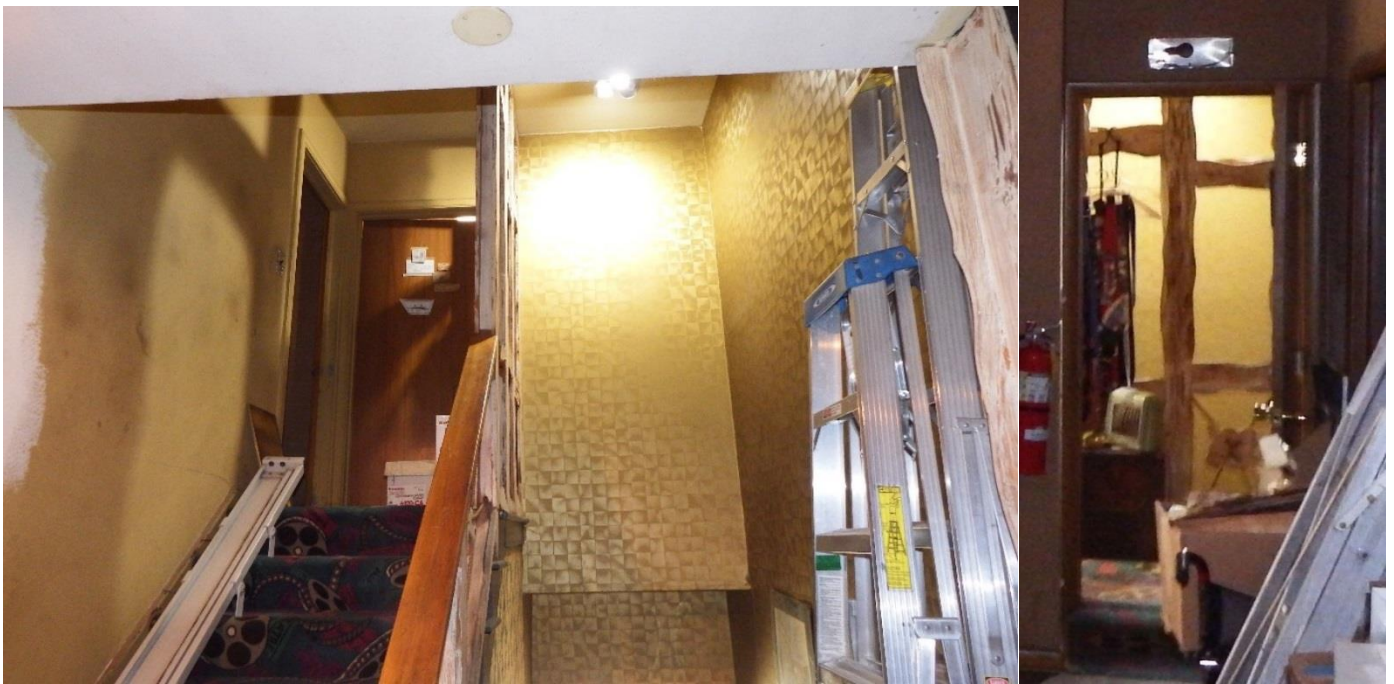
Figure 9: Current auditorium projection booth, looking southwest (Jacobsen, 2020)

The west auditorium door arches are of some interest, both having stepped arches (Figures 9-10).



Figure 10: Current auditorium under projection booth, looking south (Jacobsen, 2020)

The walls in the north-end stairway are covered with faux copper finished panels. Figures 11-12 illustrate a painted rusticated decorative system that includes rope-hung shields. These flank the stairways and comprise the hall walls.



Figures 11, 12: Left-current stair landing, projection booth is to the left, stairs lead to lounge and office, looking west;
Right, reverse perspective looking south to “crying room” location north of projection room (Jacobsen, 2020)



Figure 13: Current projection booth interior, looking south (Jacobsen, 2020)

All of the second-floor walls are of lathe and plaster composition. The projection booth is an open rectangular space with storage to the south and the hall landing to the north as noted. One feature of interest is the presence of metal drop-covers over each south booth opening, presumably a fire-protection method but minimally a light-containment system. The booth floor is covered with linoleum.



Figure 14: Current projection booth interior, looking north, note metal drop shields over lights (Jacobsen, 2020)

The second-floor lounge is of very special interest. Its beamed ceiling is replicated in the basement lounge. The lounge is otherwise ornamented with a south-end stone fireplace, book shelves, bamboo texturing across the south wall, a substantial angled display window on that same wall, and the north wall contains two projection slots (Figure 16).



Figure 15: Current lounge interior, looking southeast, not original light fixtures (Jacobsen, 2020)



Figure 16: Current lounge interior, projector slots in north wall, looking northwest (Jacobsen, 2020)

There is a small office located in the northwest corner of this floor. To the south there are three areas. To the northwest is the office with east bay window constructed for Dick Davis (1973). It has two floor levels (presumably due to the projection booth void below) and is finished like living quarters (but sans bathroom or kitchen) and the large bay window to the east projects substantial light. To the east of the lobby and to the south of this area is a hallway that contains two HVAC units. The projection booth headroom presumably rises to the east of this area. There are access doors to the north and south. Finally, there is a storage area (Figure 18) to the southeast. The point of interest here is the survival of what is surely a plain and well-used industrial wooden floor. At the east end of this area stairs ascend in two turns to a loft storage area.



Figure 17: Current lounge interior, east wall, note bamboo wall covering, display area, looking northwest (Jacobsen, 2020)



Figure 18: Current lounge interior, east hall off of south end (note wood flooring) leading to current heating plant and storage, roof access via window, looking east (Jacobsen, 2020)

The roof covering is covered with a sealed rubber membrane. The roof as noted drains eastward and the south gutter is set more deeply than is the north one. Figure 19 depicts the differential fenestration on the east wall of the two-story west section of the building. The raised center window lights the storage loft and stairs. There is a centered rooftop box that is set against this same wall. It lacks any vents or indications of what its purpose is. Initial investigations indicate that the west roof is wood framed and lacks the metal bowstring arches found in the main roof.



Figure 19: Current roof overview, looking northwest (Jacobsen, 2020)



Figure 20: Current upper level east fenestration, looking northwest, building north chimney visible right of center (Jacobsen, 2020)

Alterations:

Date(s):	Description:	Source:
April 1917	Original Construction as auto garage	Assessor, building permit
October-December 1938	Conversion to movie theater	Multiple sources
1939	Air Conditioning	
January 1958	Fire in two-story area during on-going remodeling, loss of upper marquee, roof repair, façade changes, presumed overall interior remodeling basement to lounge, the acoustical tile wall and ceiling coverings likely date to this time.	<i>Des Moines Register</i> , January 23, 1958

Date(s):	Description:	Source:
1962-1963	Wider screen, removal of stage, new steps, men's bathroom reduced, becomes closet, more seats in auditorium, women's bathroom moved to basement, removal of lobby screens, removal of stone front of concession stand, probable conversion to 34mm four channel sound system, probable abandonment of old boiler with furnaces on second floor	Brian Fridley
March-April 1973	Replacement of marquee with current one, new open stair to upstairs,	Brian Fridley, based on new ownership and absence of advertisements
1982	Remodeling, seats from demolished Holiday Theatre	Des Moines <i>Register</i> , November 29, 1989
1993	Seats recovered, cup holders added, general remodeling, seating reduced to 470 seats	Des Moines <i>Register</i> , February 25, 1993
2015	Digital projector, current screen, sound system	

Integrity Evaluation:

Overall the theater building retains a fair degree of historical integrity. It retains most of the key components of a movie theater that date substantially from within its period of significance and what has been lost (the marquee) is commonly lost and the replacement marquee does continue to serve the function of calling out the building's historic function. In this instance removal of the paint from the ceramic upper front will considerably enhance the integrity of the original design. A vital source of continuity as it relates to design, materials, workmanship and feeling is the substantial degree of survival of the 1958 remodeling, particularly upstairs.

The building retains integrity of location. It fully occupies its original site with no additions, visual obstructions or the like.

Integrity of design is retained in its upper façade, the interior layout of spaces and the surviving 1958 remodeling.

Integrity of setting is strongly retained but planned adjacent higher-rise new construction that could surround the theater if completed, will compromise this aspect considerable. Setting is and will be retained by the survival of the adjacent Drake University campus across the street.

Integrity of materials is good, including the ceramic brick front, the 1958 remodeling materials in the lobby and lounge areas and in the core building, particularly its roof. Some ceramic brick in the storefront dates from the original garage façade.

Integrity of workmanship abides in the upper façade, in the 1958 remodeling and in the structural building itself.

Integrity of feeling is strong due in large part to the very recent closing of the theater operation. There is a strong public memory vested in the theater and is balanced between the more recent building remodeling's as well as those that date to the period of significance. Feeling is also potentially vested in the non-public parts of

the building that are currently not accessible due to storage. Rehabilitation will restore these areas to their historical appearance.

Integrity of association is vested in the readily recognizable theater façade and interior plan. Because of its recent closing, this is all the more the case. Remarkably at least one individual (Robert Fridley) who was associated with most of its theater history, is still alive and would of course readily recognize it.

Significance Summary:

The Varsity Theatre is individually eligible on the local level for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. It is significant under Criterion A, recreation and culture, for being the longest-serving single-screen independently-owned Des Moines suburban movie house. While this might sound like a substantial listing of qualifiers this is not the case. Its context is suburban because architecturally its counterparts all emerged in suburban settings at the same point in time, using the same style, and having the form of a building built for the sole purpose of showing movies. The single-screen qualifier typified its property type as this was the standard defining characteristic of its property type. The independent ownership is in fact its stronger claim to significance since almost every theater ended up in chain ownership. As for longest-serving, save for the semi-occasional closing for remodeling or repair, it outlasted every competing metro movie house. It is also significant under Criterion A, defense, for its World War I role as a mess hall and canteen for Drake University's Student Army Training Corps in late 1918. Criterion C is not claimed at this time due to the loss of the original marquee, although it is probable that given the survival of every other character-defining major theater feature, such a claim could be made. For now, reliance will be focused on the Criterion A claim. The period of significance is 1938-1970 and key dates are 1916, 1938, 1958 and 1973, these being the years of original construction, conversion as a theater, remodeling due to fire damage and the replacement of the marquee respectively.

The multiple property documentation form "The Historic Development of Iowa Movie Houses, 1880-1975" (Schwenk, 2010) focuses on movie houses that were built to provide film and live stage entertainment and thus did not physically evolve into a movie theater by default. Its sub-contexts apply directly to these later-date movie houses. Five sub-contexts have direct application, these being the;

- rise of the Motion Picture, 1900-1930
- State-wide Impact of [the] Era of Centralization and Domination of Movie Theater Chains, 1920-1948
- Movie Theater Development in Iowa in the Great Depression and the War Years, 1930-1946
- Iowa Movie Theaters in the Post-World War II Period and [the] Era of Suburbanization, 1946-1975
- Evolution of Movie Theater Design in Iowa, 1900-1975

The relevant Criterion A contexts are Entertainment/Recreation; Social History and Commerce and these have three applicable significance tests:

A-2: the building illustrates the first three decades of the 20th Century where communities developed sufficiently to support a movie theater:

A-3: the building is associated with local periods of community growth

A-7: the theater introduced new features or technological features

Building History:

The earliest commercial use of the future theater parcel took the form of a frame coal and feed store (Figure 19) that was built in 1899. Lon and Frank Kuntz actually owned the parcel from 1903 through 1917. As late as 1916 Charles W. Bowers and William J. Schliemann occupied it with B & S Coal and Feed Company.¹

¹ Des Moines *Daily News*, November 25, 1898; January 1, 1901; August 12, 1899; Des Moines *Capital*, July 19, 1899; Iowa *Unionist*, August 30, 1912

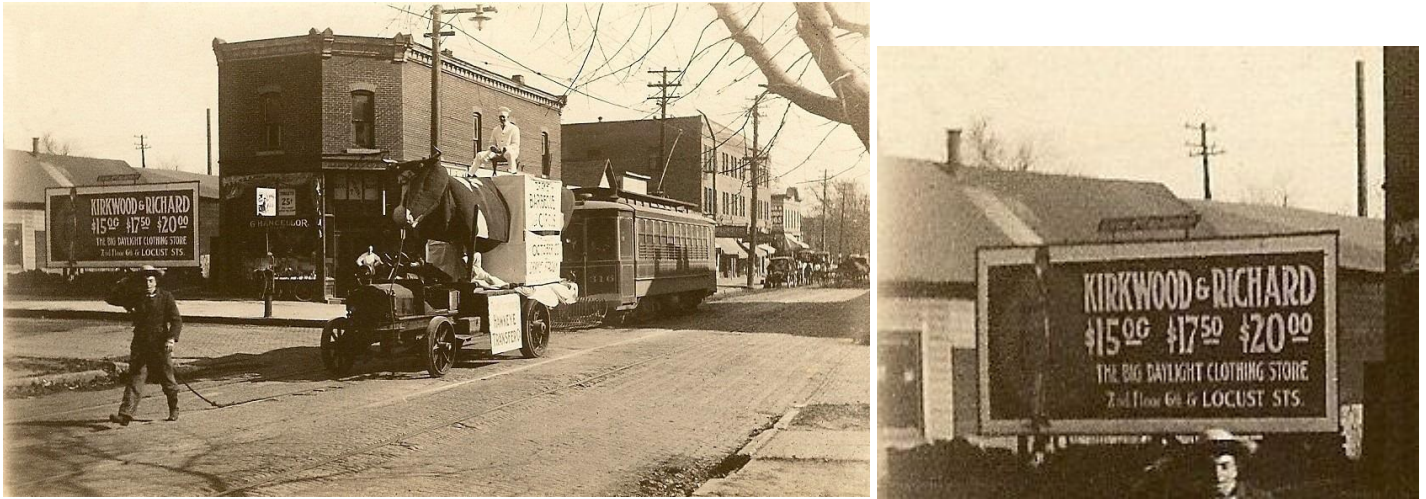


Figure 21: Coal and feed store (far left), 1915 Drake Barbeque Circus Parade (Courtesy of Earl Short)

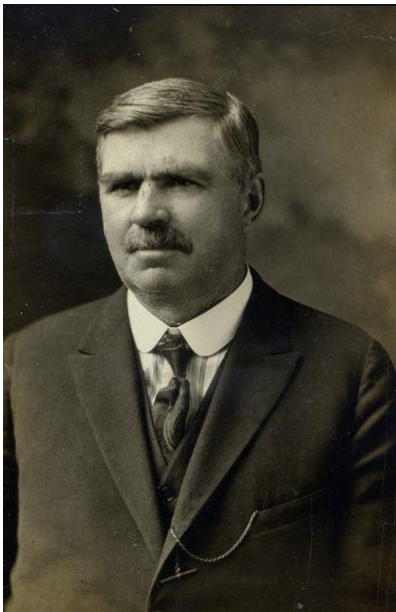


Figure 22: William Fairfield Ghormley (1858-1933)

Des Moines insurance man William F. Ghormley (and his wife Frances Ellen Gardner Ghormley) acquired the parcel on January 22, 1917 and would retain that ownership through the spring of 1929. Ghormley was a successful insurance man and his son Hugh graduated from Drake University and the family lived north of the university. Ghormley presumably funded the construction of a spec building, the present theater that same spring. The imminent onset of the First World War likely challenged or hastened its completion. The initial tenant of the garage building was the University Motor Company, first operated by James Clark Blackburn and then by partners Roy Berlie Howard (1882-1942) and William Guy Agee (1884-1958). Blackburn came to the city from Shenandoah and was a Drake graduate. Military service removed him from the automotive trade. The war also reduced garage hours with a daily enforced shut-down at 6 p.m.²

² Harlan, Vol. 4, p. __; Blackburn of Tau Psi Fraternity married Margaret Medbury of the Beta Chi Sorority in late 1916 (Des Moines *Daily News*, November 25, 1916; June 14, 1918).



DES MOINES.—The University Motor Co. has erected a new sales and service station at 2316 University avenue and is now ready for business. The first floor affords ample floor space for thirty cars and also contains an accessory department. The second floor is devoted to repairs, while the basement is used for storage. Studebaker and Overland cars and Redden truck makers will be handled. James C. Blackburn is manager of the company.—

Figures 23, 24: Right-James Clark Blackburn (1892-1933)
(<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55688592/james-clark-blackburn>); Right-*Automotive Topics*, Volume 45:10, p. 1,138, April 14, 1917)³



Figure 25: The newly-built University Motor Company building, looking east
(*Des Moines Register*, March 24, 1917)

The new building was termed a “automobile sales and service station” and as such was not simply a garage, nor is it advertised as such. Figure 25 depicts the white ceramic brick front with blue ceramic trim in the horizontal lines, sills and cornice front. The vehicular door is at the south end. The building ground floor could store 30 automobiles and there was still room for an accessory department, show room and there was a

³ The incorrect address was taken directly from the Register article (Figure **), both relative to the street and number but all other facts are clearly corroborated. This account also shows that Blackburn was associated with the University Motor Company and not an earlier entity.

extant) and despite the closing down of the program nationally the Drake unit finished out the school year with their training and the city directory reference dates to 1919, implying that the program continued at least into the spring of that year. As such, the building is the only surviving building that played a role in the Drake SATC and very likely is one of but a few such surviving buildings nationally. The program survived just two months due to the rapid and fairly unexpected conclusion of hostilities. Still the significance of the association lies in its representation of the degree to which all American institutions were, in some manner, drawn into war-related preparedness.⁵



Figure 29: The original theater building extant, looking northeast, mid-1919
(Des Moines Register, June 8, 1919)

Figure 29 documents the substantial commercial upbuilding of University Place at this time. The figure is one of three published at this same time showing the solid building up of University Avenue between 24th and 25th streets. In mid-May, a month before the 1919 photo was taken, William E. Nelander and his Nelander Garage had replaced the departed military trainees. This firm remained until July 31, 1921, when it was replaced by the Duffield Motor Company in 1922. Nelander joined that firm. George Duffield, the company founder, established the city's third Ford dealership, selling and repairing automobiles. Duffield remained at least until mid-December 1921 when he relocated to 20th Street and Forest Avenue, a few blocks north.⁶

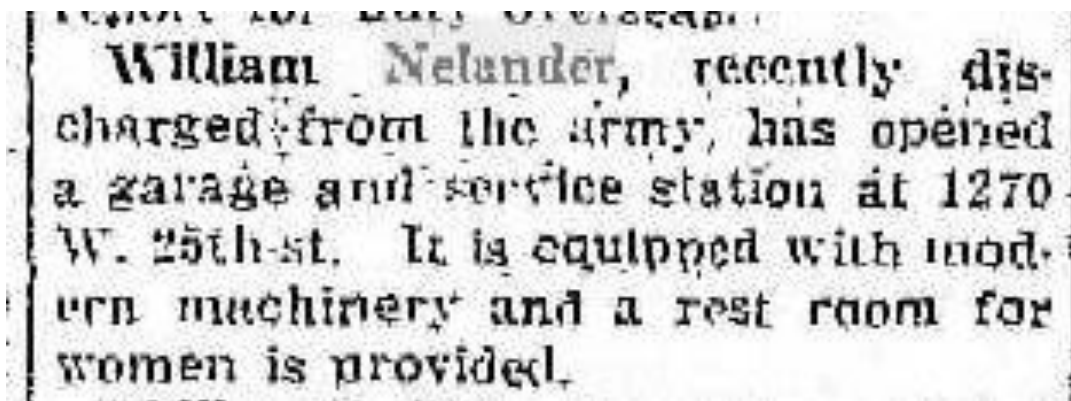


Figure 30: Nelander returns to the auto trade, 1919
(Des Moines Daily News, May 10, 1919)

⁵ The Student Army Training Corps (Circular), Second Edition (<https://cudl.colorado.edu/MediaManager/srvr?mediafile=MISC/UCBOULDERCB1-58-NA/1511/i7375352x.pdf>). Sundell was a restaurant operator in Mason City (1900) and Minneapolis (1930). As of 1920 he was a hotel steward in Des Moines (Census records). There was a brief delay due to the onset of the Spanish Influenza in mid-October. The corps consisted of about 300 students (see Des Moines Register, September 10, October 13, 15, November 13, 1918).

⁶ Des Moines Register, July 31, 1921, December 11, 1922.

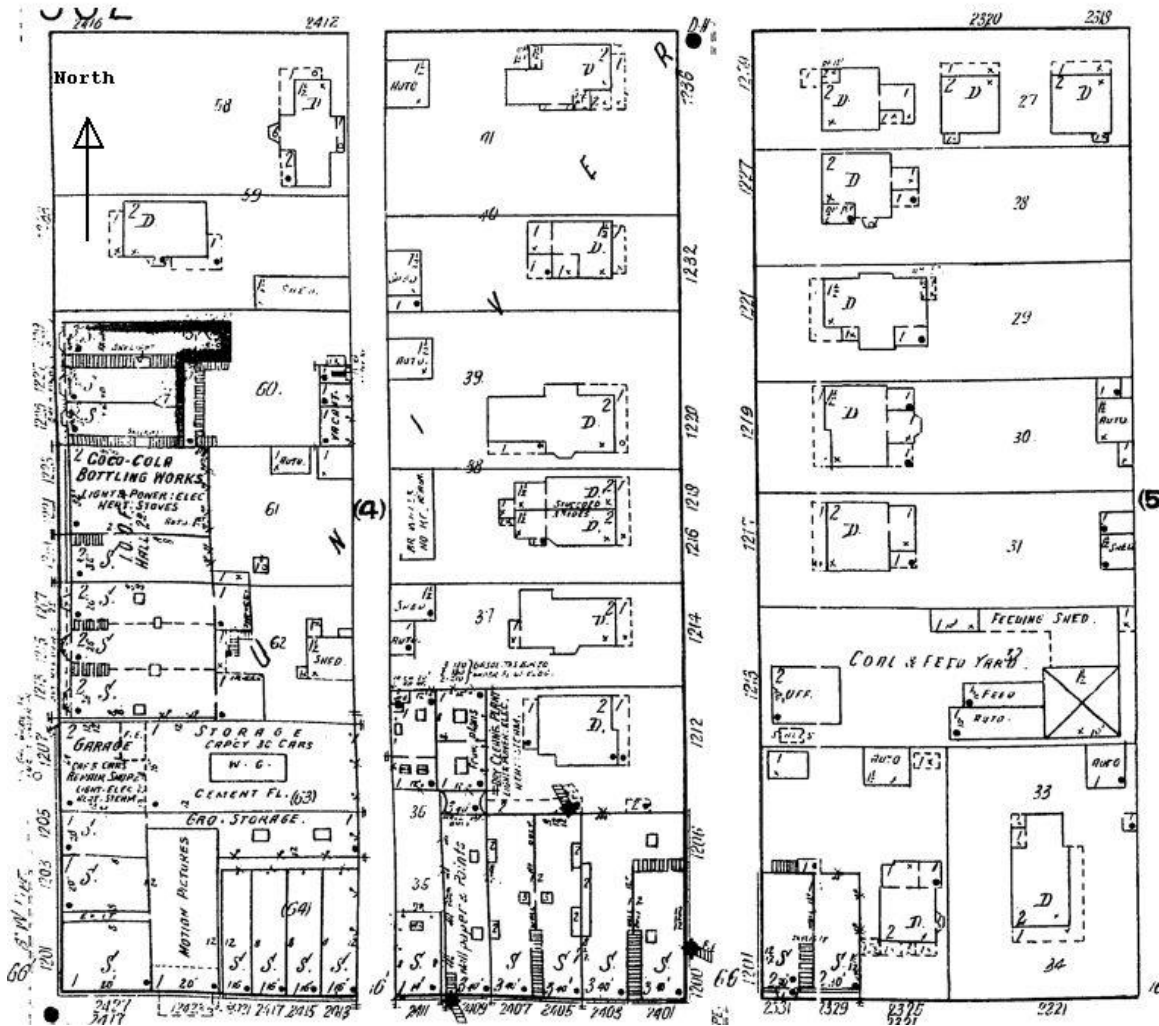


Figure 31: Details, 1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map

Figure 31 provides some solid structural information. First, this sketch conforms to the profiles of the subject building. There is a substantial freight elevator set into the northeast corner of the two-story front section. While it hints that automobiles were being brought upstairs from the garage proper, it begs the question as to whether there was a basement with elevator service. Note the concrete floor in the garage area. A substantial rectangular wire glass skylight illuminated the garage. Otherwise the building used electric lights and steam heat. There was east/rear wall fenestration with no indication that there were exit doors there, which is improbable. As for the block, the garage building was part of a substantial commercial presence that

occupied the lower west and most of the south block frontages, with residences otherwise predominating. Finally, the Coca Cola Bottling plant, shown at 1221 University, a few doors to the north, would be relocated to the subject building in 1923 (see below).

Ford
THE UNIVERSAL CAR

A New Sales Agency
We have been appointed a direct factory representative by the Ford Motor Co.

Our new sales and service station will give you careful attention. It is equipped with new and late equipment for Ford repairing. The mechanics are thoroughly trained Ford men.

PRICES

	Price F. O. B. Detroit	Selling Price Des Moines
Touring	\$415.00	\$479.94
Touring, starter, demountable rims	510.00	578.86
Roadster	370.00	433.08
Roadster, starter, demountable rims	465.00	532.00
Coupe, starter, demountable rims	685.00	771.49
Sedan, starter, demountable rims	760.00	839.17

Time payments if desired. \$28.25 a month and a small payment down and the car is yours.

Duffield Motor Co.
1207 25th Street Phone D. 488
Opposite Drake Campus

Figure 32: Duffield Motor Company advertisement, 1921
 (Des Moines *Daily News*, July 29, 1921)

William Allan Turner (1871-1937) was born in Ohio and served pre-war as a railroad freight agent in Pennsylvania and Kentucky. He helped build the Camp Turner army cantonment in Louisiana in 1917 and became involved with the Coca Cola Company in 1918 when he moved to Des Moines to take charge of the local bottling plant that was newly-established at 1221 25th Street just north of the subject building. Campbell would oversee the plant operations through mid-1937 and moved operations to it in 1922-23. He was in attendance at the January 1920 annual meeting of the Iowa State Bottler's Association in Des Moines and his initial bottling plant location was most certainly that shown on the 1920 Sanborn Map (Figure 26) just north of the theater building. The 1923 city directory first locates his plant (and his office) in the subject building in 1923 and it remained there into 1938. His wife Pearl Lindsay Turner worked with him as secretary and treasurer. Turner died in Greenville, Ohio on July 31, 1937. It is not known if his demise impacted the removal of the plant, which was in charge of William T. Campbell as of the following year.⁷

⁷ Who's Who in Des Moines 1929, p. 261; *American Bottler*, Volume 40, p. 119, March 1920



Figure 33: The “New” Coca Cola Bottling Plant, looking east
(Des Moines Register, November 3, 1935)

HOME OWNED...HOME OPERATED



THE NEW
Coca-Cola
Bottling Plant

**Gives added protection
to the water used in Bottled Coca-Cola**

1307 West 25th
Telephone 5-1299

The purity of the seasons, the fickleness of climate, the whims of the weather—none of these can affect the water you drink in bottled Coca-Cola. Because we have installed new and modern scientific equipment to further protect the purity of the water we use and to safeguard its taste despite the unusual conditions which have prevailed all over the country this year. Now, neither time nor drought can change or lower the quality or purity of the water we use in our bottling plant. You're safe when you drink bottled Coca-Cola. You can be sure it is pure and wholesome. And you will enjoy the happy buoyancy of its sparkling refreshment.

HEALTH AUTHORITY APPROVES CARBONATED BEVERAGES

"High type, superior carbonated beverages necessarily contain absolutely pure water," says an official bulletin of the Food and Drug Administration, U. S. Department of Agriculture, "as they show the public is consuming these beverages it is eliminating the chance of drinking impure water which is often the cause of illness."



Ice-Cold Bottled Coca-Cola. In Showrooms Else. It Ought to Be in Your Ice Box at Home. Order a Case Today. It Will Please Your Guests, Delight Your Family.

Coca-Cola Bottling Co.
William T. Campbell, President

YOU ARE INVITED TO INSPECT OUR PLANT ON TUESDAYS AND FRIDAYS

Figure 34: The “new” Coca Cola bottling plant, 1935
(Des Moines Register, November 3, 1935)

The property changed hands. Property owner Ghormley likely took a mortgage on the property to remodel the building for the bottling plant and the Valley National Bank took temporary ownership on February 11, 1929. The bank transferred the property ownership to the Riley Investment Company on January 2, 1932. Mary Maxine Riley took title on May 2, 1938.



Figures 35, 36: Right-William Allan Turner (Who's Who in Des Moines, 1929) and left, William T. Campbell (*Des Moines Tribune*, December 26, 1938)

Figure 33 depicts a “new” bottling plant but city directories as noted locate the firm in the subject building beginning with the 1923 directory. The 1935 image depicts the selfsame building as it appeared when it was built in 1919, the only difference apart from signage being the infilling of the former south-end garage door with an office front and entrance. What was new was the plant ownership, William T. Campbell and Crawford Johnson having purchased it from William Turner in early July 1935. The company served seven Iowa counties. Campbell was an experienced aviator, having served as such during World War I when he finally commanded Love Field at Dallas, Texas. He had held a national position with the Coca Cola Company that entailed inspecting prospective bottling plants across the country, all of which he did using his own plane.⁸

The Coca Cola Company now began to substantially increase its Des Moines presence. Most notably the division headquarters relocated to the city from Omaha the same month that the bottling plant changed ownership. Eight district representatives worked out of the downtown office. Des Moines was also the meeting place for the west and midwestern company representatives, 1,000 of these converging on the Hotel Fort Des Moines for three days in late March 1937. Manager Campbell welcomed them and collectively the attendees consumed 17,664 bottles of their favored beverage during their stay, an average of six bottles per representative per day.⁹

The plant was remodeled at this time, at least in terms of installing a sand and hydroarco filter and water softener that processed the municipal water. The plant presumably received the syrup ready-made and the machines combined an ounce of the syrup with the filtered water. At full summer capacity the equipment finished 200 cases an hour, being busy each weekday. Things slowed in the winter but the plant supplied a market within a 50-mile radius of the city. In November 1935 a special company party drew the district representatives, warehouse workers and wives and friends to tour the remodeled operation and to honor their new manager. By the fall of 1936 the plant was supplying 14 counties and the sales success so impressed the national office that a sound film was produced to present the successful merchandising approach to other distributors across the country. Greater sales required additional production space and in late March 1937 the

⁸ *Des Moines Register*, July 7, 1935.

⁹ *Des Moines Register*, July 28, 1935; March 28, 30, April 6, 1937.

building to the north was leased so as to allow a doubling of production. Two new warehouses were also constructed and a third was leased in outlying towns. The truck fleet expanded to 16 trucks. By March 1939, the bottling plant had relocated to 1485 Keosauqua Way and had a new manager.¹⁰

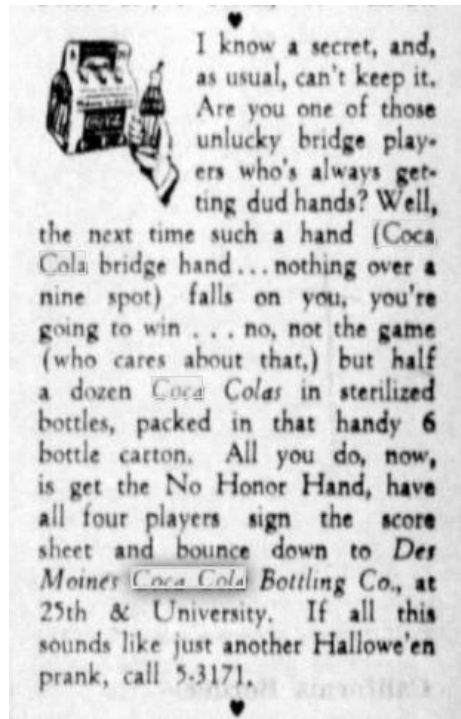


Figure 37: Free Coke for a Coca Cola bridge hand (Des Moines Register, November 1, 1936)



Figure 38: Coca Cola advertisement (Des Moines Register, October 4, 1938)

¹⁰ Des Moines Register, November 7, 10, 1935; September 17, 1936; March 26, 1937; March 22, 1939. The trucks were housed at 2315 University and in a private garage.



Figure 39: Coco Cola Signage on south wall of the building; view northeast from campus entrance (1935 Quax, p. 194)

It was finally the tremendous success of Campbell's "reign" that the quarters at 1207 25th Street were simply way too small and there was no room to expand. So quarters that would finally measure 210 feet by 120 feet were partly occupied in September 1938 and fully so by December. New machinery increased plant capacity to 75,000 bottles daily. The move left the subject building vacant and ready to be repurposed.¹¹

The Origin of the Varsity Theatre:

The word varsity as a noun references the best players on a collegiate sports team while the same word as an adjective more generally relates to a university or college. Consequently, a movie house that is associated with a university commonly takes on Varsity as a name.

Cecil Gerny Mulanis established the original Varsity Theater in an existing commercial storefront at 2429 University Avenue in early 1933. He obtained a building permit for the conversion in late October 1933 and the movie house opened in mid-December. Located just around the corner from the subject building, the north wall of the first theater abuts with its south wall. Nothing more is known aside from the fact that Mulanis made a substantial investment in converting the building for theater use. Figures 31 and 32 depict its appearance in 1933 and today. There is no 1934 city directory listing for the movie house but Mulanis appears as its manager in 1935-37.¹²

¹¹ Des Moines *Tribune*, December 21, 1938.

¹² Des Moines *Register*, October 31, 1933, November 3, 1933.



Figures 40-41: The original Varsity Theatre (left) and the building today (https://www.yelp.com/biz_photos/varsity-theatre-ames?select=-U5GpMiVrRKAFYNZCaz0qw and Jacobsen, 2020)

Elias Garbett (1876-1955) was born in England and came to Des Moines ca.1937. He, with his son Elias Mason Garbett (1901-1955) quickly established an early chain of movie houses. The theater group started with the Avalon, added the Forest Theatre (13th and Forest Avenue) which was built in 1937, and then the Varsity. Elias Junior is listed as the Varsity’s manager in 1938.

The context for the Varsity’s establishment was that of the appearance of suburban single-screen movie houses. These emerged in the commercial nodes of the developing Des Moines suburbs and those that were opened prior to World War II all used a streamlined modern style. Table 1 summarizes each of these theaters.

Table 1: Single-screen Des Moines Suburban Movie Theatres, 1914-41

Theater	Dates	Seats	Architects	History	Status
ISIS , 1600 E. Grand	1914-1926			Earliest non-downtown house, too early for context	Extant
Ideal , 2447 E. Walnut St.	1916	500		Earliest non-downtown house, too early for context	Extant
Varsity , 2429 University Ave.	1933-1938			First true suburban movie house, no marquee	Extant
Roosevelt , 831 W. 42nd	1934-1953	800		Stone arched front, no marquee	Extant, no integrity
Uptown/Capri , 4115 University	1935-1990s	700		Reopens as Capri 1960	Extant, complete loss of integrity
Gem/Beaver , 2706 Beaver Ave.	1936-1957	400	W. D. Holtzman?	Might be built as theater with hall above, had marquee	Extant, loss of integrity
Lincoln/Holiday , 3400 S.W. 9 th	1936	500		Reopens as Holiday 1956	Non-extant
Avalon , 3965 E. 9 th	?-mid-1940s	500		There is confusion with this building, there is a 1946 replacement at 9 th & Hull but the surviving building looks like a period design	Extant? No marquee or interior

Theater	Dates	Seats	Architects	History	Status
Forest, 1343 West 13 th	1937-1954	580	Wetherell & Harrison ¹³		Extant, no marquee or interior
Hiland, 423 E. Euclid Ave.	1938-1968	700	Wetherell & Harrison		Extant, no integrity
Varsity, 1207 W. 25 th	1938-2018	605	Wetherell & Harrison		Extant, new marquee
Easttown, 1536 E. Grand Ave.	1941-1983	250			Non extant

The great majority of the new suburban theaters were constructed by the Tri-States Theaters Corporation, headed by A. H. Blank. In fact, this corporation was the first in the city to extend its movie house presence outside of the downtown, building the Roosevelt Theater in 1934. What is of particular interest is that the Varsity Theater was not affiliated with Tri-States but used their favored theater architects.



Figures 42, 43: Left-Beaver Theater, looking south (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/100838479139622486/>); Right-Hiland Theater, looking northwest (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/756252962407426823/>)

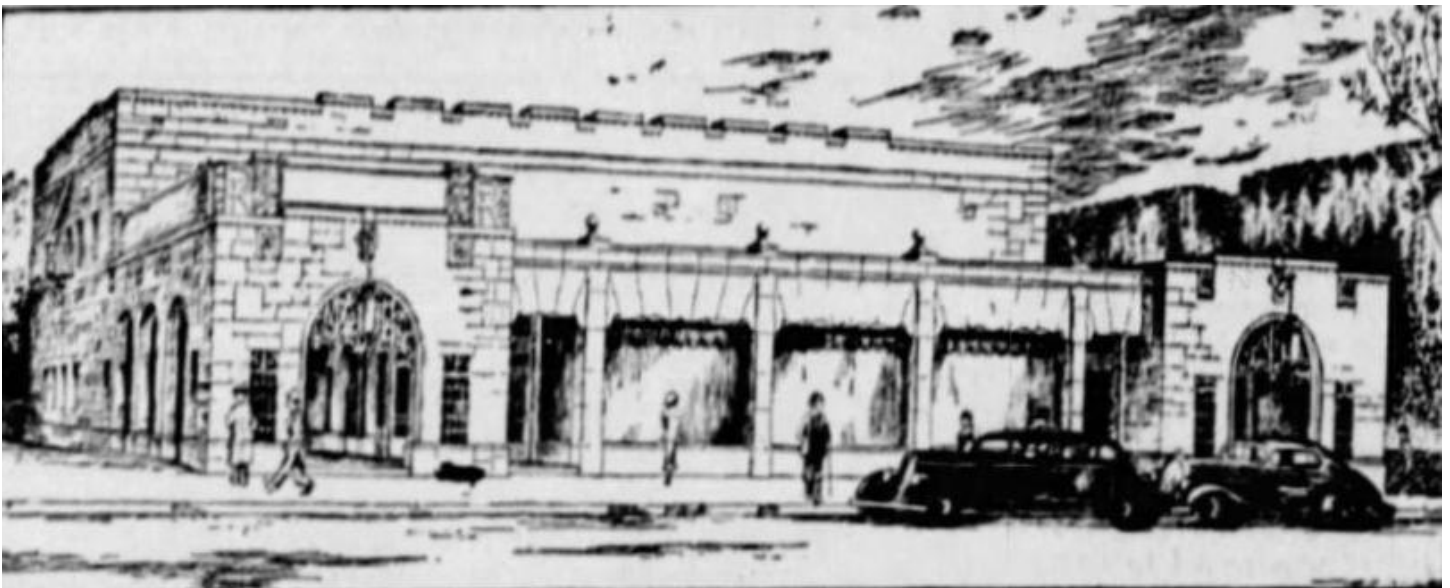


Figures 45, 46: Left-Ingersoll Theater, looking northwest (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/115545546661508466/>); Right-Forest Theatre, architect's sketch, looking southeast (Des Moines *Tribune*, April 22, 1937)

¹³ Wetherell and Harrison also designed the Iowa City Varsity Theatre in 1932 (Iowa City *Daily Iowan*, September 23, 1932).



Figures 47, 48: Left-Uptown/Capri Theatre, looking northwest (*Des Moines Register*, May 18, 1998); Center-Eastown Theatre (*Des Moines Register*, May 28, 1941);



Right 49: Roosevelt Theater (*Des Moines Register*, August 25, 1934)

Design and Remodeling of the Varsity Theatre, 1938:

The Varsity Theatre Corporation obtained ownership of the property on October 1, 1938 and a building permit for work valued at \$11,000 was taken out on October 10. Architects Wetherell and Harrison were engaged to design a theater out of the former bottling plant. Their plans fortunately survive and contain considerable information about the building, before and after its conversion.

The Garbett's it was reported in late October 1938 "have purchased a two-story brick building for a motion picture theater. Work is already underway on the structure, which faces the Drake University campus and is around the corner from the Varsity Theater on University Avenue." The new owners, it was noted "have not as yet decided whether the Varsity will be abandoned." The account implied that a name for the new theater was not yet determined given the uncertainty, real or not, that the smaller Varsity might be retained in service.

The seating of the new theater was given as from 550 to 600 seats and it was hoped to open about mid-December. The Varsity Theatre Corporation assumed ownership on October 1, 1938.¹⁴



Figure 50: The new movie house
(Des Moines *Tribune*, October 21, 1938)

Figure 51 depicts the empty bottling plant in the early stages of theater conversion. White ceramic brick is visible at either end of the storefront. A curiosity is that structural supports for a new front door have either been added or more likely represent a later façade change made by the previous tenant. The south end storefront has largely been left in place at this point. The accompanying newspaper account noted that a projection booth and upstairs office would be added. Most important the contractor for the work was named, along with a cost of conversion, \$15,000. John Widerberg (1881-1951) was a Swedish-born Des Moines contractor who had just built the Hiland Theater.¹⁵

The Architects and Their Remodeling Plans:

Edwin Henry Wetherell (1894-1977) succeeded his father who had partnered with Roland Goucher Harrison in 1925. He was educated at Drake University and the University of Illinois and saw military service during World War I. Theater design was a specialty of the firm, at least prior to World War II. Harrison (1888-1988) was born in Des Moines, was the son of a carpenter. A champion golfer, his nickname was “Tip.” He

¹⁴ *Box Office Magazine*, October 29, 1938, p. 23.

¹⁵ *Des Moines Register*, May 18, 1932, September 21, 1938; August 25, 1945; August 18, 1946, September 18, 1951. He was initially Chicago-based when he got a contract to do the electrical work for the new Camp Dodge National Guard hospital in 1932. He was most proud of five churches that he built in the city. His final major job was converting the Harbach Funeral home for Still Osteopathic Hospital in 1945.

worked in several major architectural studios and was trained at the Harvard Graduate School of Architecture from 1915 to 1916.¹⁶

ALTERATIONS IN BUILDING AT 1207- 25 TH ST - DES MOINES - VARSITY THEATRE CORP - OWNERS - DES MOINES	BUILDING NO 791
	SHEET NO 201 ONE SHEET
WETHERELL & HARRISON-ARCHITECTS 506 SHOPS BLDG- DES MOINES-IA	FILE 7-2
	DATE 9/10/38

Figure 52: Architect's drawing plate (original renovation plans)

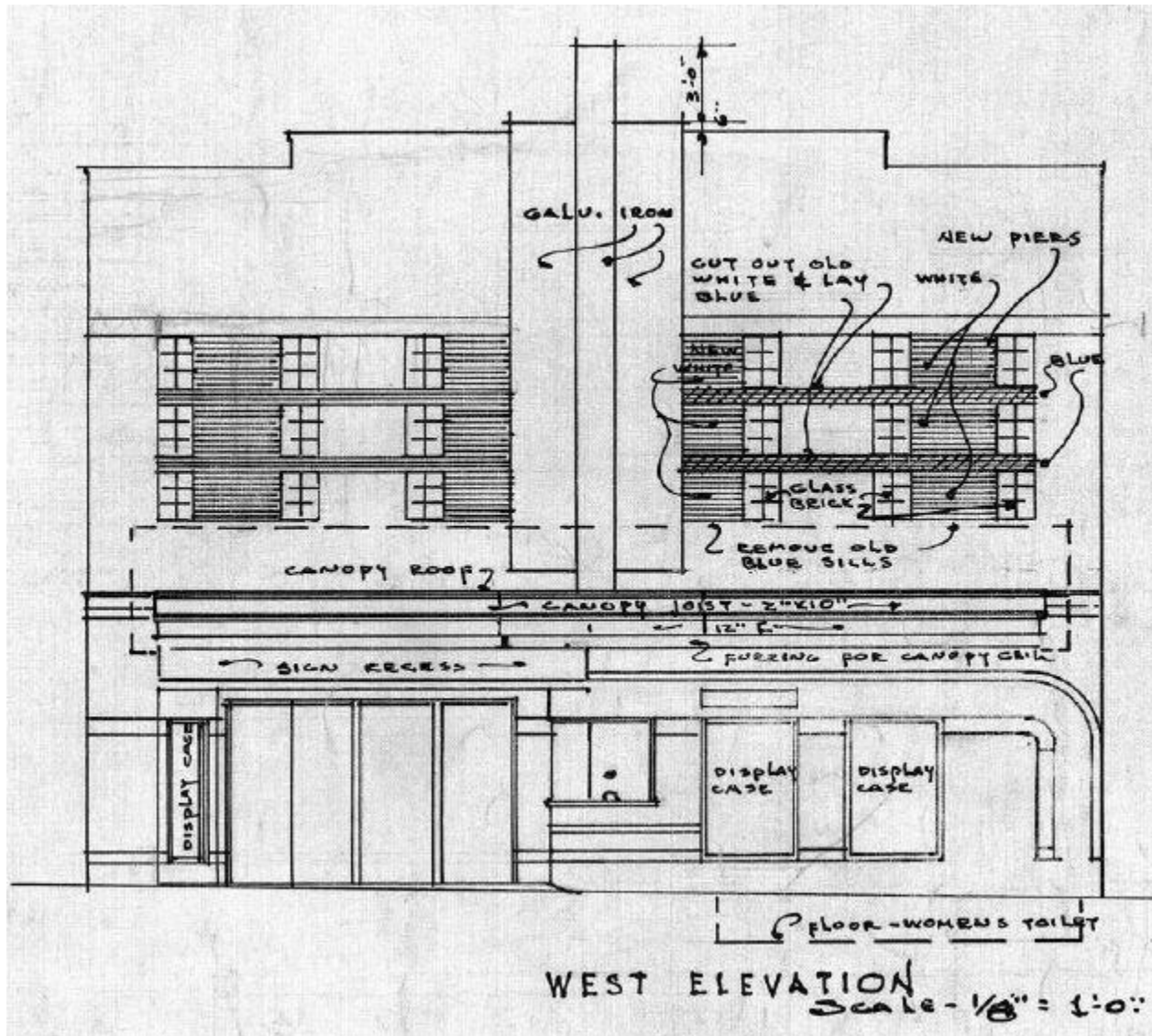


Figure 53: Front elevation, original plans, looking east (original renovation plans)

Figure 53 depicts an alternative upper façade design that was not finally installed. Starting top to bottom note that the original parapet line was likely used with the upper part of vertical marquee element forming the raised central section of the parapet. That component is shown with no coloration or signage and is of galvanized iron sheathing on a wood frame. The envisioned windows consisted of six sections of glass brick or block separated by white ceramic piers. Each window pair was unified by adding two rows of blue brick

¹⁶ Shank, pp. 78, 175-76.

“beams.” Note the instruction to “remove old blue sills” which indicates that the original ceramic brick façade had an established use of blue ceramic brick trim at least as window sills. Note the absence of color references to the remainder of the upper façade. The storefront proper was also not built as first planned. There were three display cases and a single centered ticket booth. The location of the north end booth was a simple closet. The black carrara glass front was patterned to have a downward white carrara curve at its south end. Finally note the considerably lower floor level of the front women’s restroom relative to the at-grade entrance.

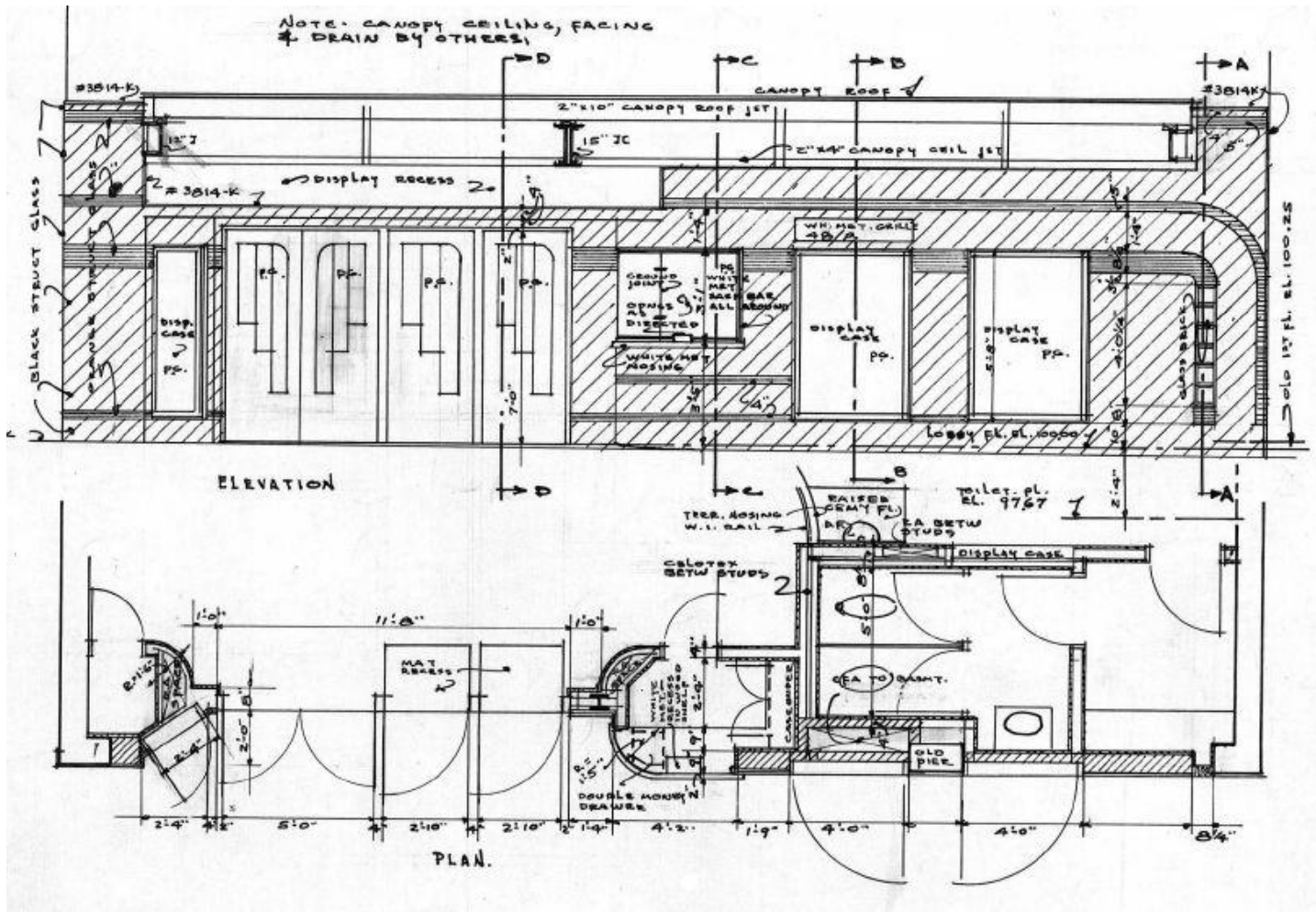


Figure 54: Storefront and front lobby plan (original renovation plans)

Figure 54 documents that the entry doors were constructed as designed. The storefront/ lobby plan shows one retained pier from the original storefront. It too shows a storefront plan that was changed. The inclusion of a restroom across the front of a movie house plan was not common but the expected small leasable commercial space was disallowed by the elevation problem in this case. It is curious that only the storefront interior had fireproof celotex blocks employed.

Figure 55 is the only known original original upper lobby photo and as such is most important. The walls shown correspond with the “shaded walls” that newspaper accounts referenced. Figure 81 from the 1958 fire depicts the auditorium sidewall waincot pattern. The ticket booth entrance is through the open door to the right of the rounded column. A free-standing popcorn machine is in the north end of the lobby alongside that entrance. The image documents the terrazzo floor pattern employed in the upper lobby and the ornamental railing right of center matches the photographs. The addition of a floor mat shows which door was most commonly used and the scuffed door kickplates show that they were well-kicked.

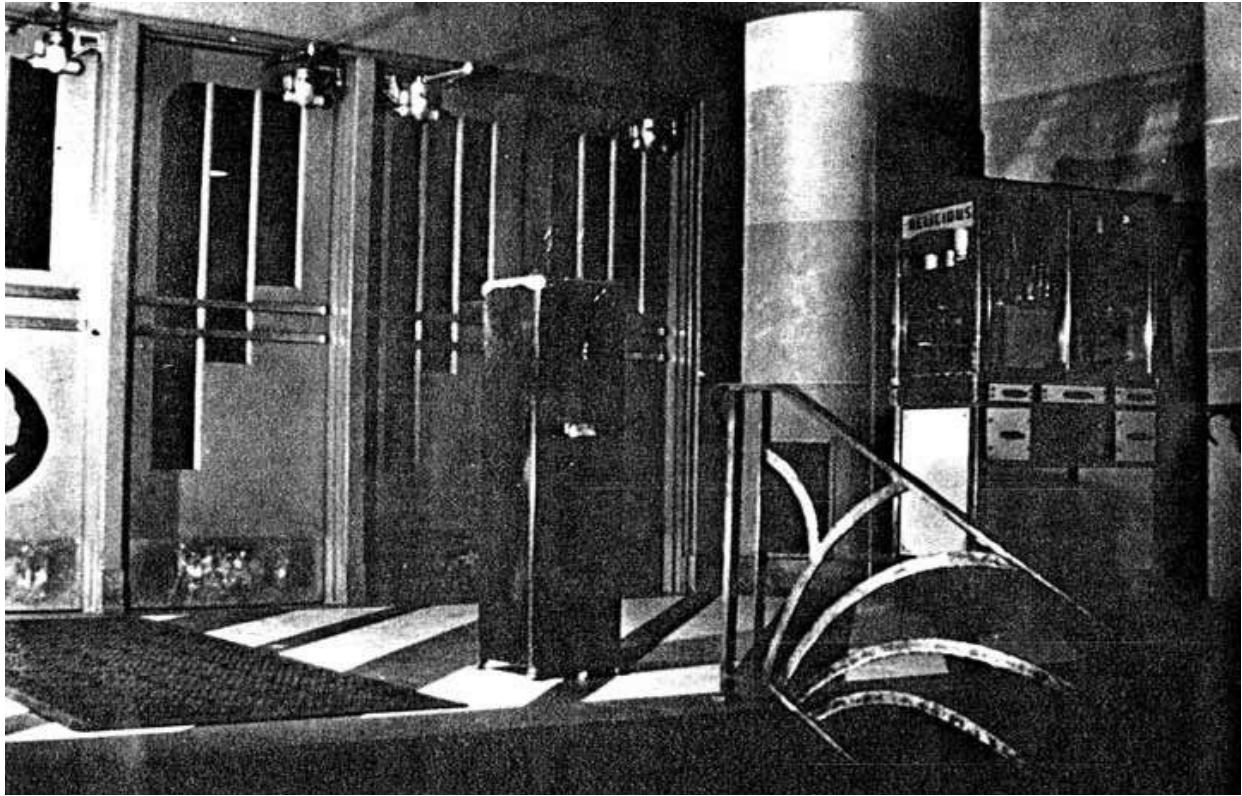


Figure 55: Entrance photo looking northwest, ca.1939

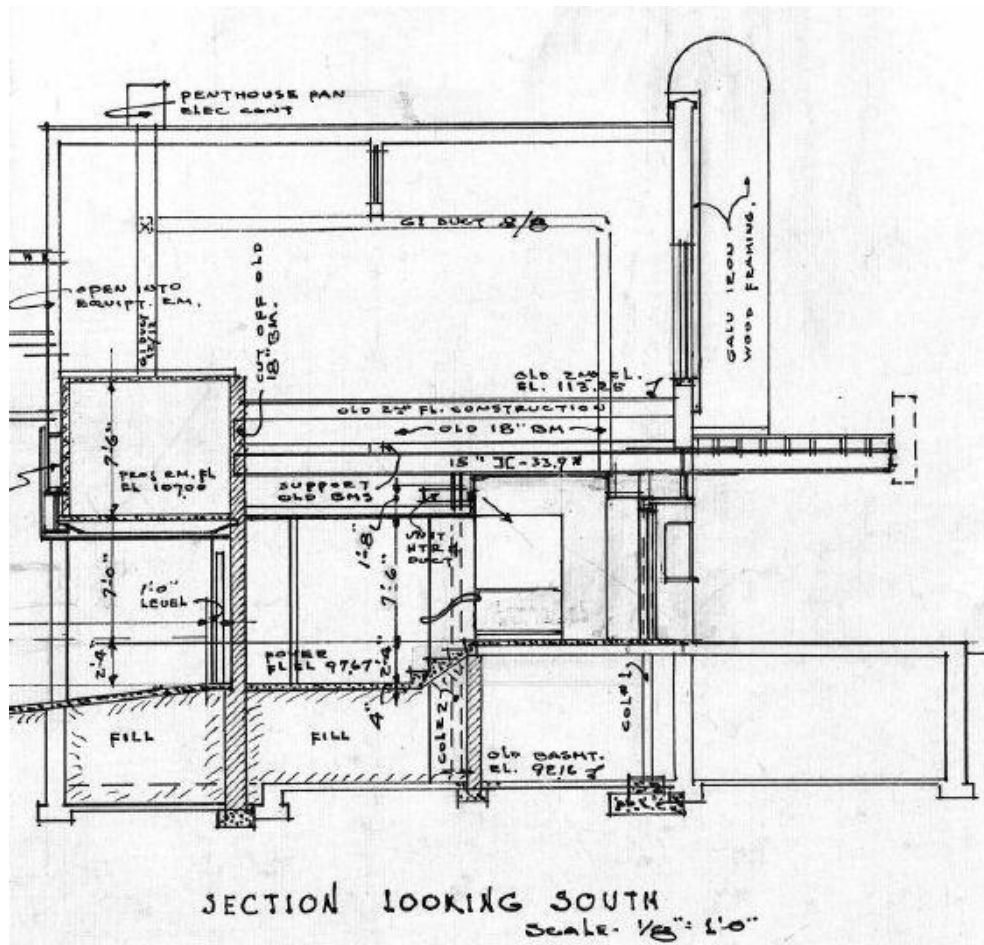


Figure 56: Sectional view across front lobby and second floor (original renovation plans)

A key matter relative to Figures 56 and 68 is that of devining where the original floor levels were and how they were adapted for theater use. The original first floor level is represented by the straight line eastward continuation of the lobby floor level. The second floor level is noted as running just below the top of the projection booth. Directly related to this point is the question why the lobby and foyer floor levels were so differentiated. Clearly excavation or floor lowering for the theater began at the point where stairs would link the lobby and foyer. Lacking demolition plans and recalling the presence of a freight elevator in the northeast corner of this part of the building as of 1920 questions outnumber answers. The freight elevator would have occupied the easternmost bay of this figure (note that the majority of original basement rooms were simply filled in for theater purposes. The major structural issue in this figure was the introduction of the substantial projection room between existing floor levels. The west wall of the booth had to be supported by new footings and a wall while the east wall had to cantilevered above the auditorium and could not simply use the pre-existing east interior wall. By introducing the booth there was also now no support for the new second floor (see the Room Schedule, Figure 58 indicates that the architects separated the building elevations into first floor and mezzanine levels). A massive steel beam was added, being centered on the plan. It was tied into the booth's west wall supports and extended beyond the façade to support the marquee. Finally note the extent to which the building furnace room extended under the sidewalk to the west.

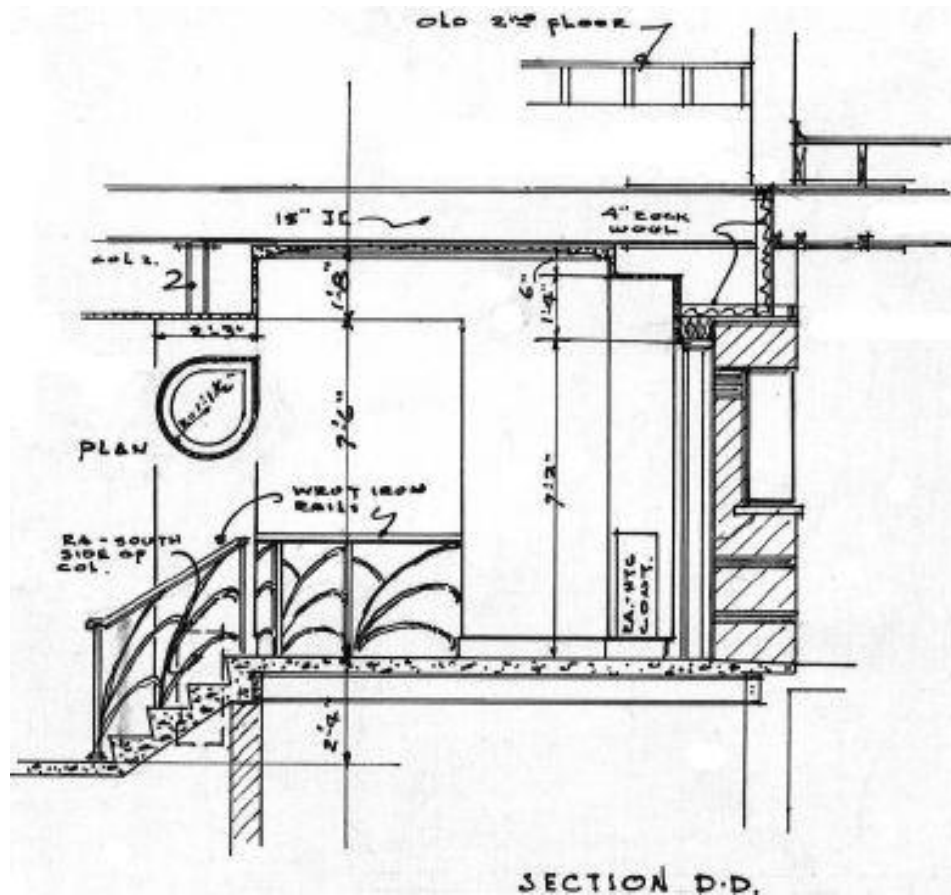


Figure 57: Sectional view across stairs and upper front lobby, looking south (original renovation plans)

The section line for Figure 57 is depicted in Figure 47. The image shows lobby ceiling heights and profile and also hows the new concrete floor and stairs.

Figure 58 depicts how little of the basement was initially used. The west part of the basement (under the sidewalk) did not at this time extend south to the parcel line. Old sewer lines were retained although most of the area to the east was filled. The building chimney is located along the north wall. Note that absence of any reference to a public use of this space. The slop sink reference makes this the realm of the building janitor.

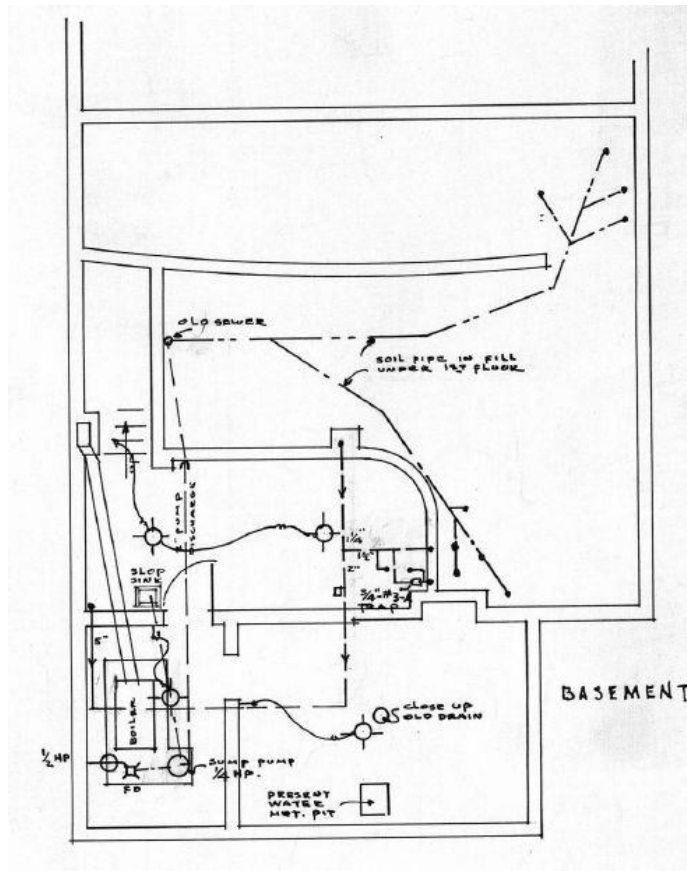


Figure 58: Basement plan (original renovation plans)

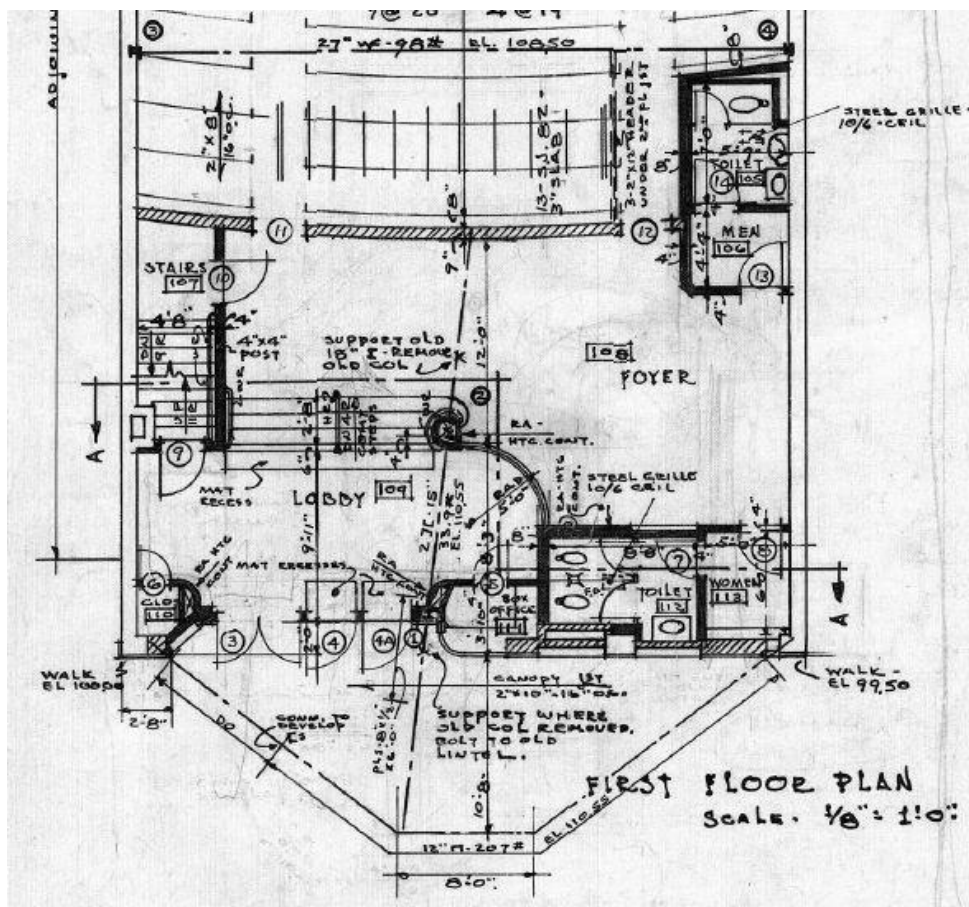


Figure 59: First floor (west end) plan (original renovation plans)

Figure 60 shows the marquee perimeter, lobby, stairs and a much larger foyer. The surprise relative to oral history was learning that the men's restroom originally intruded into the southwest corner of the auditorium. It might have served a structural purpose of supporting the south end of the projection booth. The plans indicate a number of floor recesses that would receive floor mats (inside the front doors and across the top of the stairs leading down to the foyer). Note how the curved south lobby wall overlays the same wall form in the basement.

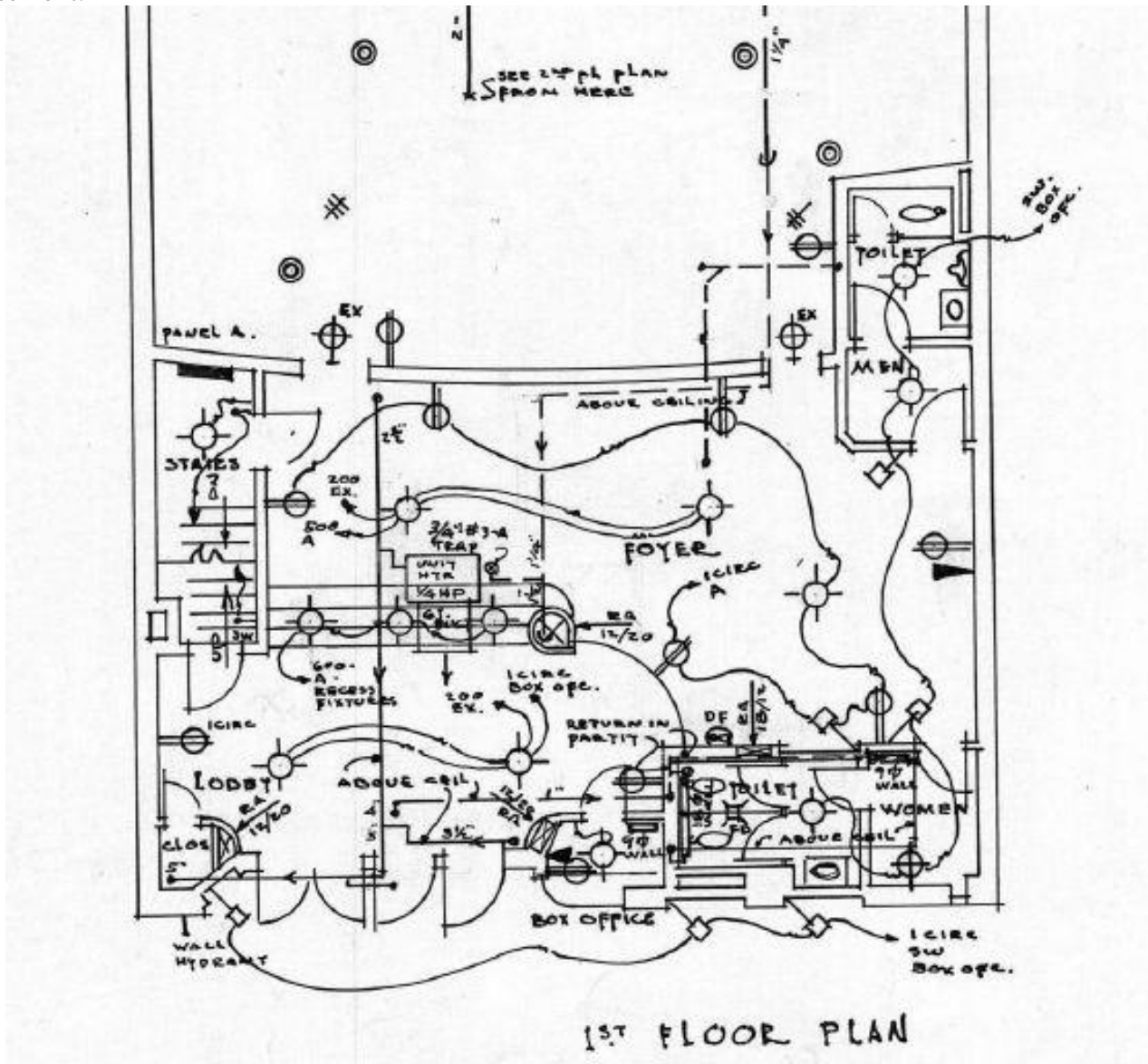
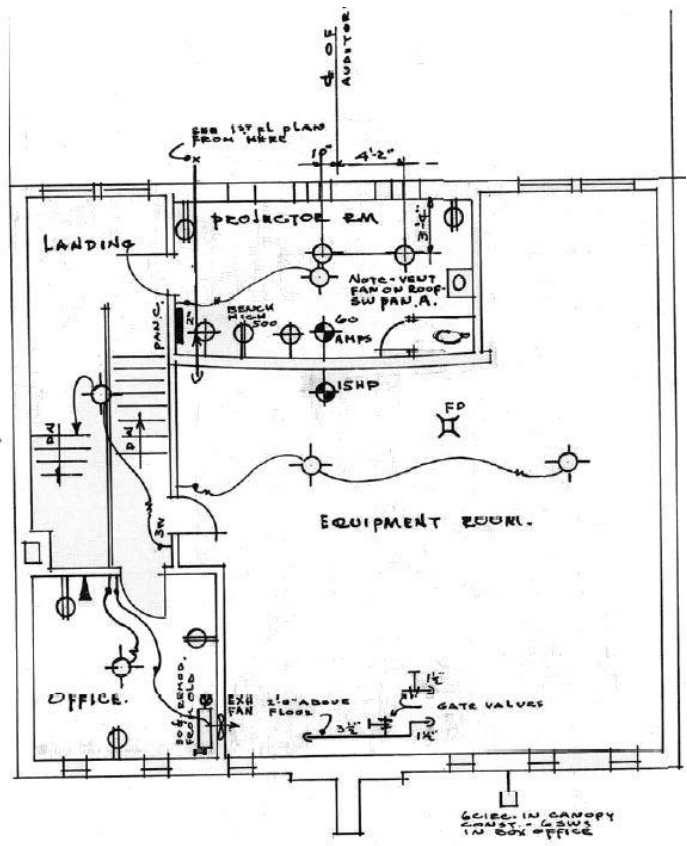
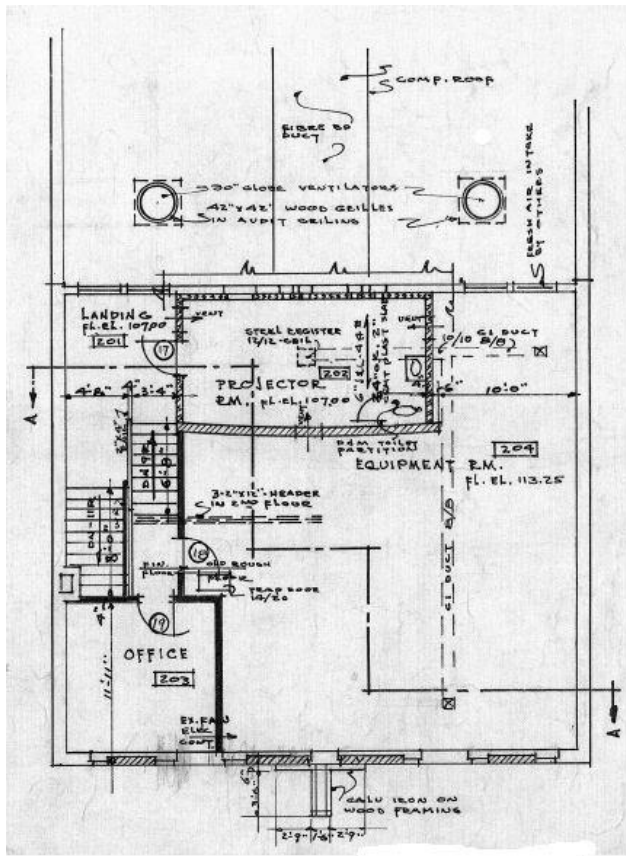


Figure 60: First floor (west end) lighting plan (original renovation plans)

The lighting plan for the lobby-foyer illustrates how those spaces were interpreted. Note particularly the three light fixtures set above the stairs that linked the lobby and foyer. The auditorium lights depicted were aisle floor lights.

Figure 61 lays out the second floor level that consisted of the projection booth and lounge-office floor levels. Section A-A is Figure 54 (see below). An equipment room and office filled up the remainder of the second floor space. Note the slightly curved west wall of the projection booth. Note also that that the two roof vents shown over the west end of the auditorium were the sum total of such vents (see Figure 54).



Figures 61, 62: Second floor and projection booth plans (original renovation plans)

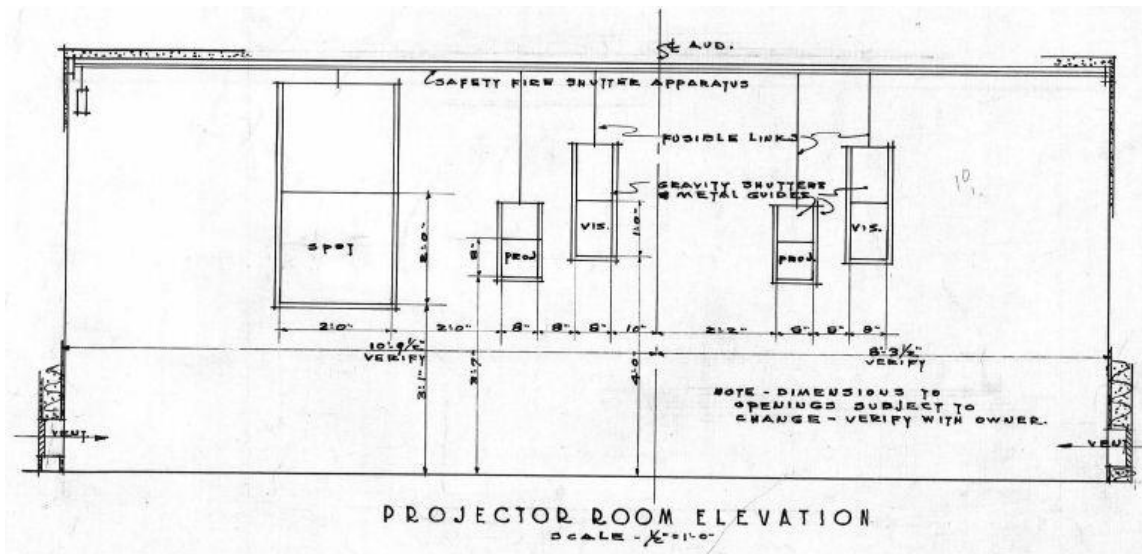
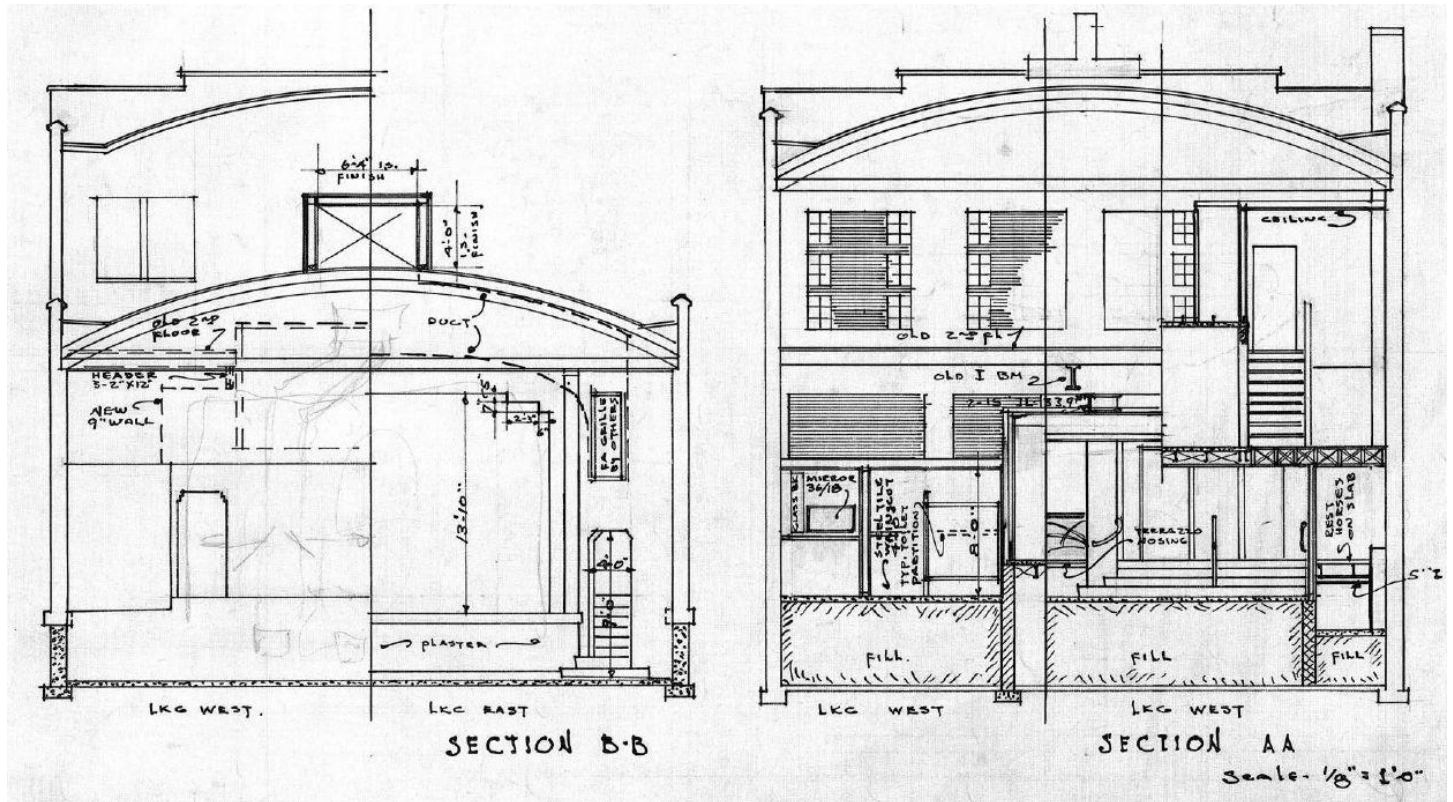


Figure 63: Interior projection booth elevation, looking south (original renovation plans)

The projection booth as depicted matches the as-built down to the metal drop doors. The cadence of window and projection slot openings has proven very useful in confirming the identify of a number of period auditorium photographs. Two projectors were envisioned from the start, certainly an industry standard at the time to allow for uninterrupted projection.

Figure 64 (see Figure 54 for section line BB plan location) offers a sectional view across the auditorium. The left half looks west and shows the projection booth and one of the auditorium doors. The right half looks east and shows a stage with proscenium. The upper part of the figure shows the east wall windows, indicating that the existing south window is an original window opening. It also shows the mystery roof-top box set

against the same wall. Most curious the figure shows new footings and foundation walls that would clearly indicate that there was no existing basement under the future auditorium Figure 57 (see Figure 47 for section line AA location) offers twin westward views. That to the left appears to show two infilled overhead garage doors on the façade. It also shows that the original second floor level was retained for the second floor level. The right-hand first floor details are not understood. The inserted steel I-beam is also shown in section. The right hand depiction shows the new floor level support for the projection booth.



Figures 65, 66: Sectional views, left at the east end of the plan and right, at the east wall of the west two-story section (original renovation plans)

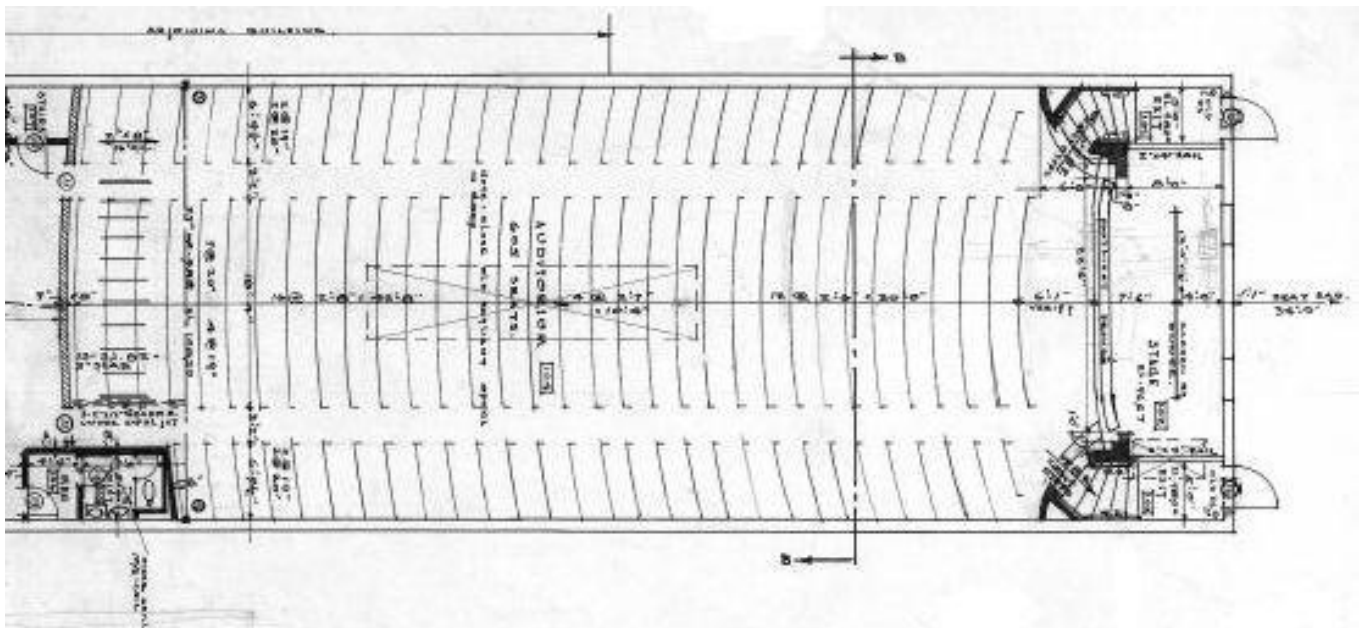


Figure 67: Auditorium plan (original renovation plans)

Figure 67 shows the auditorium with 605 seats. Most notably the narrow elongated skylight is marked for removal. The general seat and aisle layout is shown.

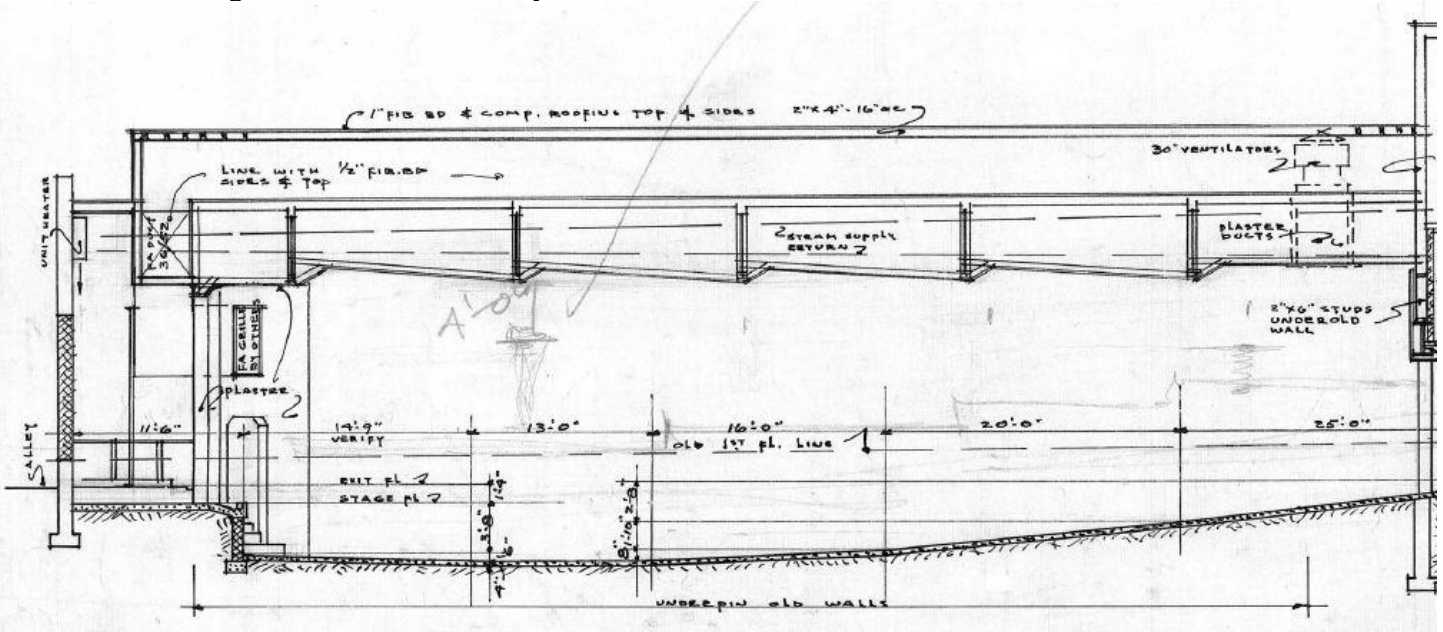


Figure 68: Auditorium sectional drawing (original renovation plans)

Figure 69 nicely supplements the preceding figure but again questions are raised and answers are harder to find. Because it is a centered sectional view it does not show sidewall footings, which would be helpful. The original at grade floor level is shown as a line. The raised level of this line relative to the alley grade to the east seems to explain why there were apparently no rear vehicular doors during the earlier building history. The argument for a full basement appears to be furthered by the height of the original floor. There are just two roof vents, both of which are located at the west end of the auditorium. The drawing presumably shows parapet walls as the uppermost building line but the apparent terminus of the roof or parapet wall at the east end is confusing, as is the provision for a stage, proscenium and short flyloft. Finally the irregular ceiling patterning is not readily understood.

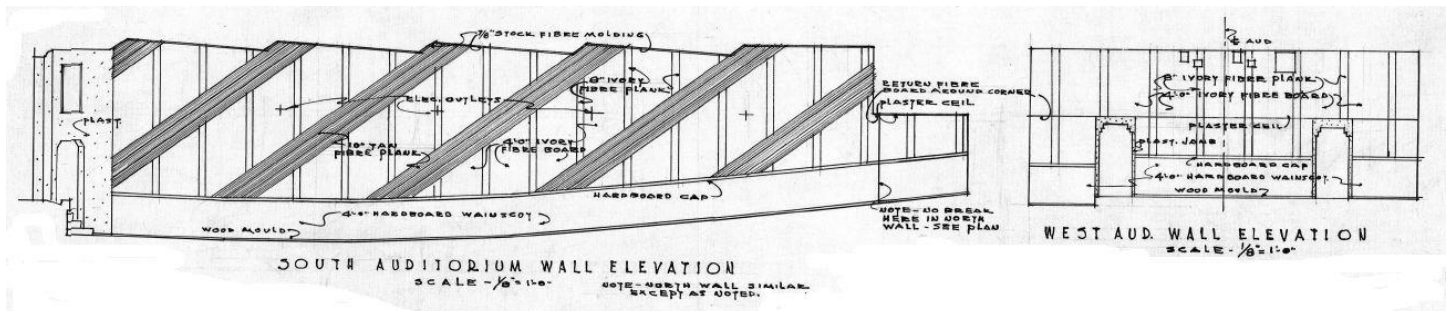


Figure 69: Auditorium south sidewall elevation plan (original renovation plans)

Figure 69 offers the only depiction of at least the planned auditorium wall treatment. The west wall use of vertical patterning is similar to the post-1958 decorative motif.

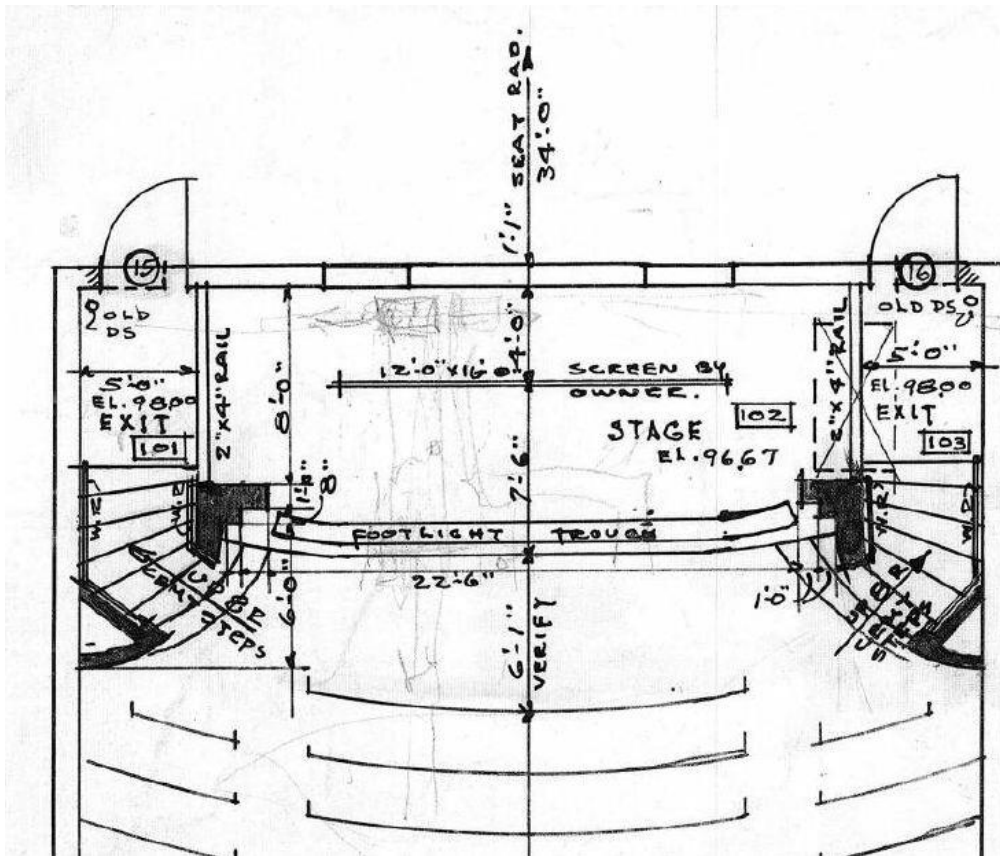


Figure 70: Auditorium stage and screen plan (original renovation plans)

Even the consideration of a full stage comes as a surprise and it cannot be determined to what extent any of this was actually built. The initial screen measured 12 feet by 16 feet. The east wall depiction appears to confirm the Sanborn Map-based determination that there were no east end overhead doors in the building.

ROOM SCHEDULE														
FLOOR	ROOM	MARKED	FLOOR			BASE		TRIM		CEILING		WALLS		REMARKS
			CEM'T.	TILE	TERR.	WOOD	CEM'T.	TILE	WOOD	PLAST.	PIPE BR.	UNFIN.	PIPE BR.	
FIRST FLOOR	EXIT	101	✓											
	STAGE	102	✓											
	EXIT	103	✓											
	AUDITORIUM	104	✓											CARPET STRIPS 27" APART IN AISLES
	TOILET	105	✓											
	MEN'S ROOM	106	✓											CARP. STRIP
	STAIRS	107	✓											NO PLAST. ON MASONRY WALLS
	BOYER	108	✓											CARP. STRIP
	LOBBY	109	✓			TERR.								
	CLOSET	110	✓											
	BOX OFFICE	111	✓											
	TOILET	112	✓											
	WOMEN'S RM.	113	✓											CARP. STRIP.
MEZZANINE	LANDING	201	✓	WOOD										
	PROJECTOR RM.	202	✓											
	OFFICE	203	✓											FURD. CEIL. TO WDW HEADS
	EQUIPMENT RM.	204	✓	old floor										

NOTE - CARPET STRIPS FOR AISLES IN AUDITORIUM. RECESS FOR CARPETS 2'-3" X 3/8" AS DIRECTED.

Figure 71: Room schedule showing materials (original renovation plans)

Theater Conversion Progress Reports:

Interim progress reports are not found apart from a December 24 report that finishing touches were being applied for the Christmas Day opening. The full extent of the building interior noted that it had “a modernistic curved foyer with shaded walls.” The building remodeling contractor is not identified. Robert Snyder Jr. was the first manager and would serve as such through 1942.¹⁷



Figure 72: The completed Varsity Theatre announcement and appearance, looking northeast
(Des Moines Register, December 25, 1938)

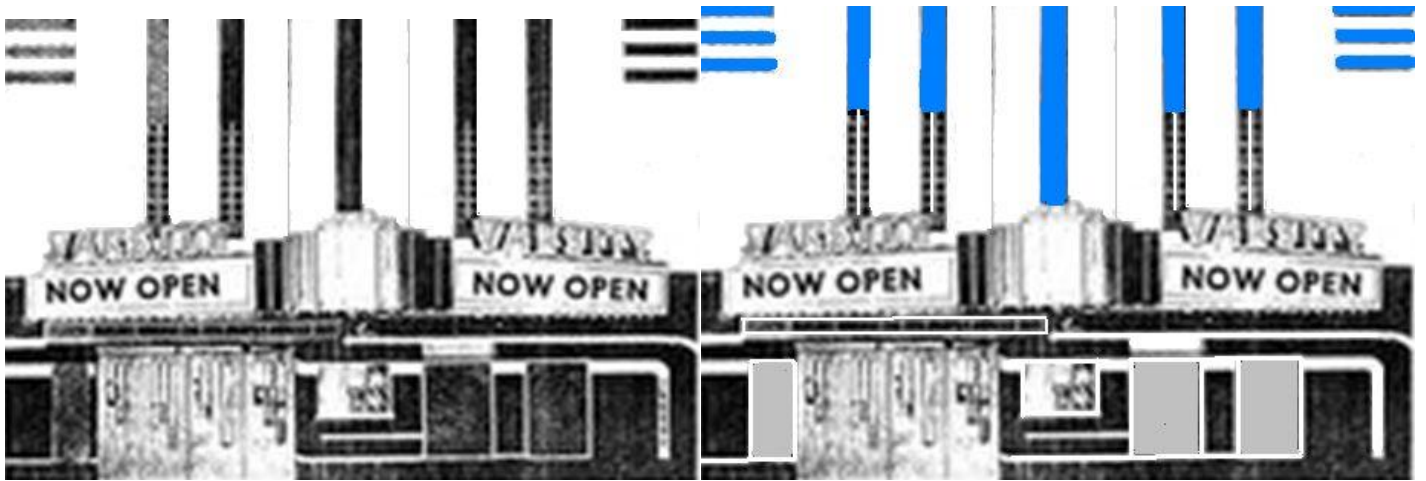
¹⁷ Robert Snyder (1903-?) was the son of Delbert and Bessie Snyder. His father was a realtor (1915-1920 Census records). S. F. Paulsen was the contractor for the Forest Theater which had the same architects.



Figures 73, 74: Opening day Varsity movies; Left-Three Loves Has Nancy (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_Loves_Has_Nancy); Right-Sinners in Paradise (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_Paradise)



Figure 75: Façade view of the new theater, 1938, looking east (Courtesy of Denise Mahon)



Figures 75B, 75C: Left, cleaned up version. Right, color added

The NEW Varsity...is not just another theatre but is a setting as picturesque as the locality it represents a charming place to spend your entertainment hours leisurely unobtrusively. This modernistic designed theatre with its unique lighting effects and its six hundred and five comfortable upholstered seats is a revelation. The temperature and humidity is perfectly controlled by a complete air-conditioning system.

ON TOP AGAIN FOR 1939

ARCTIC NU-AIR

WASHERS AND BLOWERS

Our Washers and Blowers have excelled all other makes so far in 1939, not in conversation but by actual installations. Why do we excel? That is easy to explain. First, our company is one of the oldest concerns making theatre ventilation. They specialize in theatre air conditioning. They do not make equipment undersize to sell for price only. They do not make equipment of light weight or construction so that their dealers can make the huge chain store profit. But still the price on their equipment is but a few dollars higher than the light weight cheaper equipment. Many a theatre man has not only taken out cheap equipment but they have also taken out cheap makes of cooling coils.

Why experiment when you can buy the best equipment for just a few dollars more? Buy the equipment that over sixty per cent of the best theatres in the country are using.

OUR 1939 IOWA INSTALLATIONS TO DATE:

LYRIC THEATRE, WEST DES MOINES, IA. VARSITY THEATRE, DES MOINES, IA. IOWA THEATRE, WATERLOO, IA. STRAND THEATRE, MARSHALLTOWN, IA. PALACE THEATRE, WATERLOO, IA.	PRINCESS THEATRE, MOUNT Ayr, IA. GRAND THEATRE, KNOXVILLE, IA. STATE THEATRE, LENOX, IA. TOY THEATRE, TIPTON, IA. CEDAR THEATRE, MECHANICSVILLE, IA.
--	--

For Quick Delivery, Phone or Wire

DES MOINES THEATRE SUPPLY CO.

1121 HIGH STREET PHONE 3-6520 DES MOINES, IOWA

Figure 76: The first Varsity Arctic Nu=Air cooling system
(Box Office, May 6, 1939, p. 73)

While Manager Snyder actually kept the theater in operation, Elias M. Garbett was its owner and also was responsible for the Forest, Lincoln and Avalon theaters in the city. Garbett was of a nervous disposition and *Box Office Magazine* that when he sat down to book films for the four theaters and his staff scurried for files “when the smoke dies away, a terrific beating has been dished out, with Garbett’s cigar on the receiving end.” The same source poked him once again noting “the owner of that dark wavy hair dashing from D[es] M[oine]’s Avalon to the Forest to the Lincoln to the Varsity is E. M. Garbett, who owns the houses, too.” Theater receipts at the Varsity “took a January [1940] toll” during midyear university examinations. Dr. H. Leigh Baker, Dean of the College of Education recommended ping pong or a dance as abstractions but added “A long walk or a movie aren’t bad, but in the former you may keep thinking about the test and in the latter you don’t get the proper physical relaxation.”¹⁸

The theater gained some newsprint when its cashier, Esther Hughes, was robbed at gunpoint in late October 1939. The two burglars, Irwin Bokman and George O’Halloran were pursued by manager Snyder and three theater customers and were eventually arrested. The temporary gain was \$55.¹⁹



Figures 77, 78: Left, cashier Esther Hughes, right, the three-man theater posse, left to right, Bert Anderson, Robert Elgin and Connie Sullivan (a Drake fraternity man)
(Des Moines Register, October 8, 22, 1939)

¹⁸ *Box Office Magazine*, January 27, July 6, 13, 1940, pp. 46, 52 and 45 respectively.

¹⁹ Des Moines Register, October 8, 22, 1939. Esther Elizabeth Hughes Thompson (1920-2009) was still theater cashier as of 1940 and died in Osceola, Clarke County. The robbery made *Box Office Magazine* on October 28, 1939 (p. 58).

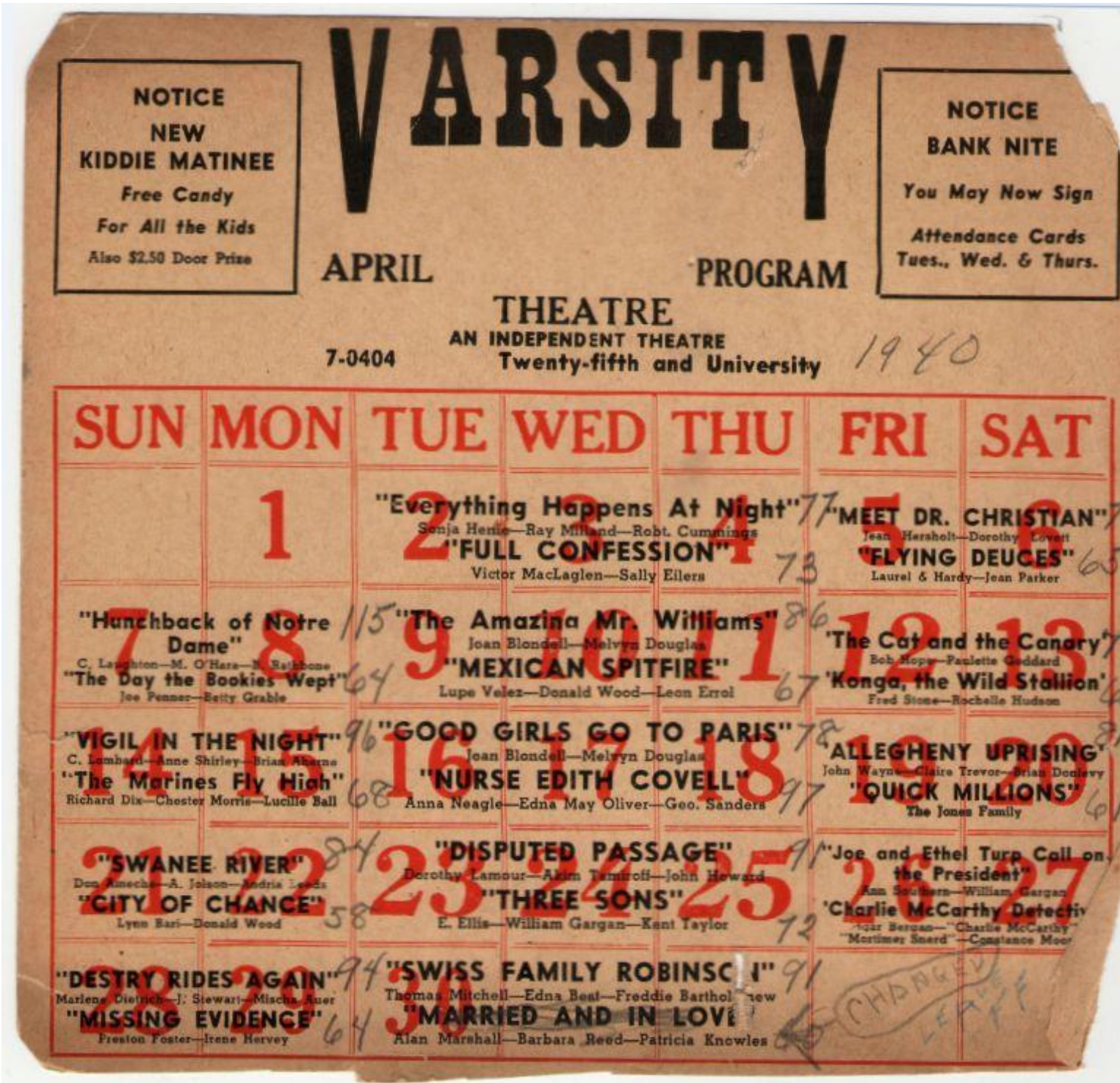


Figure 79: Monthly film schedule, April 1940 (note tallies of tickets sold)
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Hayden Peterson was theater manager 1943-46 and again in 1952. George D. Bloxham was manager 1947-49 and was the booker for United Theaters. Directories specify no manager in 1950. Tom Black was manager in 1951 with Peterson returning as noted. Then in 1953, a new name was first associated with the Varsity, one Robert L. Fridley. The only incident and a rather minor one occurred in late February 1945 when an intoxicated (and unidentified) 14-year old boy overslept the end of a film showing and became a guest of the police.²⁰

²⁰ Box Office Magazine, February 24, 1945



Figure 80: View east from campus (1943 Quax)

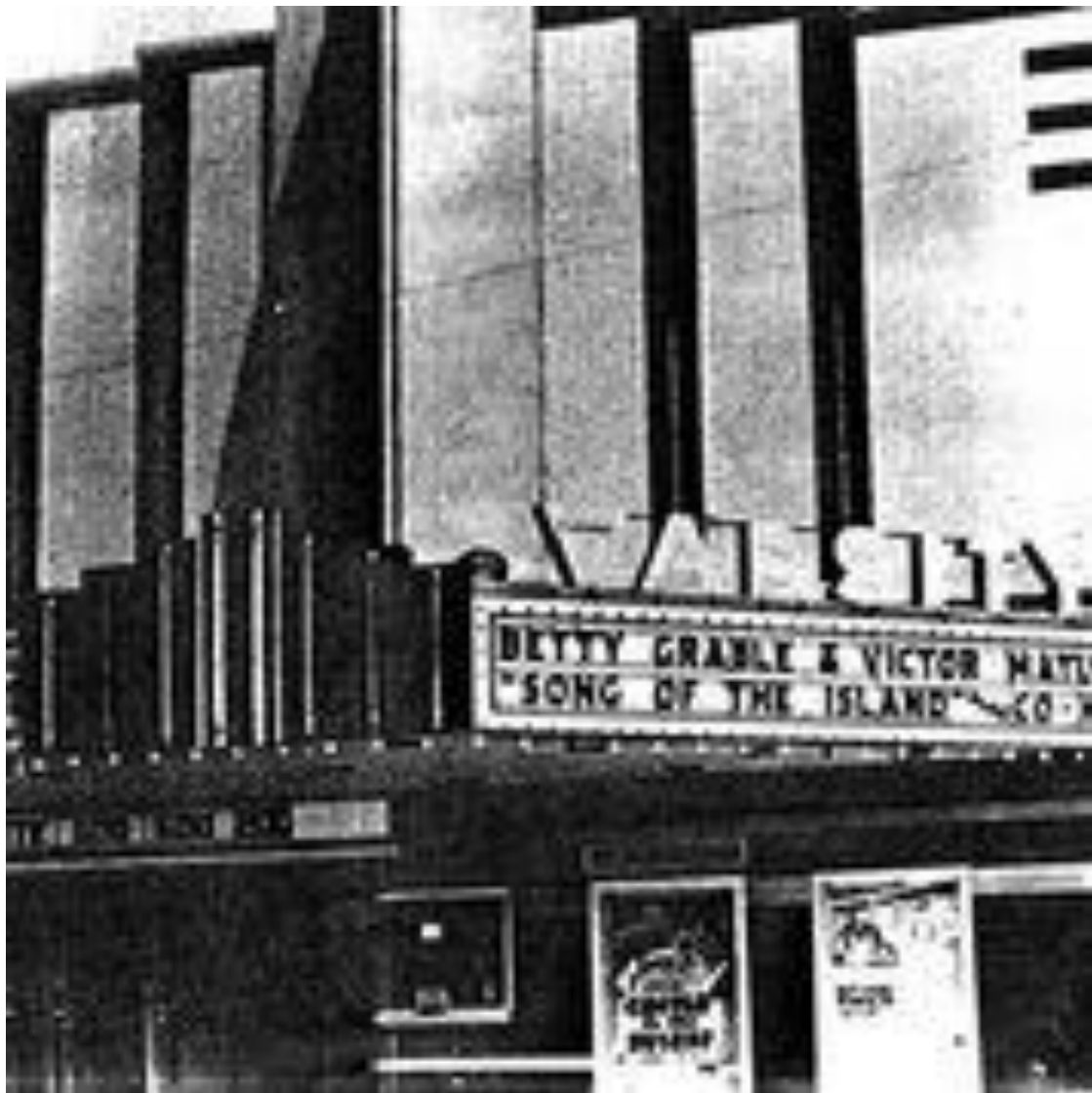


Figure 81: Theater façade looking northeast, 1942
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)



Figure 82: University bookstore, Varsity Theater, view east from campus (1943 Quax, p. 159)

Figure 82 shows the north wall theater chimney. An illusion is created here that the adjacent building to the south is three-stories high. It is not, the taller building is across the alley to the southeast. Two rooftop vertical elements are not explained.

PROGRAM FOR OCTOBER, 1946 AT NEIGHBORHOOD

VARSITY

UNIVERSITY AT 25th ★ **Information Call 7-0404**

Doors Open: Monday thru Saturday, 1:45; Sunday, 12:45. Admission: 30c Anytime



KIDS 16¢
ADULTS 30¢

BOYS and GIRLS
CARTOON CARNIVAL
COMEDY and FUN SHOW

JUST ONE PERFORMANCE ONLY

★ **Saturday Morning, October 5th, 9:30 A. M.**
DOORS OPEN AT 9 A. M.

You'll See...

- TOM and JERRY
- POPEYE
- BUGS BUNNY
- 3 STOOGES
- MIGHTY MOUSE
- SPORTS and OTHERS

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
ALWAYS THE BEST IN ENTERTAINMENT		1 THE DARK CORNER <small>Lucille Ball, Mark Stevens</small>	2 THE GAY SENORITA <small>Jinx Falkenburg, Jim Bannon</small>	3	4 SINGLE FEATURE PROGRAM BAD BASCOMB <small>Wallace Beery, Margaret O'Brien</small>	5 TAKIN' THE BREAKS—Russ Morgan Band THE WATCH DOG—Color Terrytoon CANINE CHAMPION—Sport Reel
6 RENEGADES—Technicolor <small>Evelyn Keyes, Willard Parker</small>	7 KANSAS CITY KITT <small>Jean Davis, Bob Crosby</small>	8	9 ARIZONA <small>Jean Arthur, William Holden</small>	10	11 THE WELL GROOMED BRIDE <small>Ray Milland, Olivia DeHavilland, Sonny Tufts</small>	12 THEY MADE ME A KILLER <small>Robert Lowery, Barbara Britton</small>
13 SMOKY—In Technicolor <small>Fred MacMurray, Anne Baxter</small>	14 FOLLOW THE BAND <small>Frances Langford, Leon Errol</small>	15 JOE PALOOKA, CHAMP <small>Leon Errol, Elyse Knox</small>	16 LOVE, HONOR & GOODBY <small>Virginia Bruce, Edward Ashley</small>	17	18 THE AWFUL TRUTH <small>Irene Dunne, Cary Grant</small>	19 DANNY BOY <small>Buzzy Henry, Sybil Merritt</small>
20 SINGLE FEATURE PROGRAM THE GREEN YEARS <small>Charles Coburn, Tom Drake</small>	21 HAIR RAISING HARE—Bugs Bunny COLLEGE QUEEN—Color Musical	22 DIXIE—In Technicolor <small>Bing Crosby, Dorothy Lamour</small>	23 Close Call for Boston Blackie <small>Chester Morris, Lonny Merrick</small>	24	25 MIRACLE OF MORGAN'S CREEK <small>Betty Hutton, Eddie Bracken, Wm. Demarest</small>	26 IT COMES UP LOVE <small>Donald O'Connor, Gloria Jean</small>
27 SO GOES MY LOVE <small>Don Ameche, Myrna Loy</small>	28 DRESSED TO KILL <small>Paul Rathbone, Nigel Bruce</small>	29 SUSPENSE <small>Belita, Barry Sullivan</small>	30 RED DRAGON <small>Sidney Toler</small>	31	Nov. 1 O. S. S. <small>Alan Ladd, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Patrick Knowles</small>	2 JITTERBUGS <small>Laurel & Hardy, Vivian Blaine</small>

ber . . . LUCKY EVERY FRIDAY . . . Just For Fun!

Figure 83: Monthly film schedule, October 1946 (Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

JUNE 1947						
VARSITY						
Doors Open: Monday thru Saturday, 1:45; Sunday, 12:45. Admission: 30c Anytime						
UNIVERSITY AT 25th			★	Information Call 7-0404		
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
1 Laugh! Scream! Roar! THE SHOWOFF Marilyn Maxwell, Marjorie Main PLUS—Romancing Musical Treat! SUSIE STEPS OUT David Bruce, Nita Hunter	2 RED SKELTON	3 Technicolor Comedy Romance! Betty GRABLE, Dick HAYMES THE SHOCKING MISS PILGRIM Anne Revere, Allyn Joslyn PLUS—Backstage Thrills! QUEEN OF BURLESQUE Evelyn Ankers, Carleton Young	4 THE SHOCKING MISS PILGRIM Anne Revere, Allyn Joslyn PLUS—Backstage Thrills! QUEEN OF BURLESQUE Evelyn Ankers, Carleton Young	5 Flaming Drama of Lawless Kansas! TRAIL STREET Randolph SCOTT, Robert Ryan Anne Jeffreys, "Gabby" Hayes PLUS—A Big Laff Hit! Laurel & Hardy PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES	6	7
8 Funniest of All Hardy Hits! LOVE LAUGHS AT ANDY HARDY Mickey ROONEY, Lewis STONE Bonita Granville, Lina Romay PLUS—Tender Touching Drama! CHILD OF DIVORCE Sharyn Moffett, Regis Toomey	9 LOVE LAUGHS AT ANDY HARDY Mickey ROONEY, Lewis STONE Bonita Granville, Lina Romay PLUS—Tender Touching Drama! CHILD OF DIVORCE Sharyn Moffett, Regis Toomey	10 Technicolor Musical Fantasy! John PAYNE, June HAVER WAKE UP AND DREAM Charlotte Greenwood PLUS—Thrilling Mystery Hit! DANGEROUS MILLIONS Kent Taylor, Dona Drake	11 WAKE UP AND DREAM Charlotte Greenwood PLUS—Thrilling Mystery Hit! DANGEROUS MILLIONS Kent Taylor, Dona Drake	12 It's A Knockout Riot! WALLACE BEERY THE MIGHTY McGURK Dean Stockwell, Edward Arnold PLUS—A Musica-lulu of A Show! BEAT THE BAND Frances LANGFORD, Gene Krupa's Band	13	14
15 COLOR Epic of the Golden State! CALIFORNIA Roy MILLAND, Barbara STANWYCK Barry FITZGERALD PLUS—A Top Comedy-Mystery! THE FRENCH KEY Albert Dekker, Evelyn Ankers	16 CALIFORNIA Roy MILLAND, Barbara STANWYCK Barry FITZGERALD PLUS—A Top Comedy-Mystery! THE FRENCH KEY Albert Dekker, Evelyn Ankers	17 She Loved all the Wrong Guys! Ida LUPINO, Robert ALDA Andrea King, Bruce Bennett THE MAN I LOVE PLUS—Action Every Minute! SAN QUENTIN Lawrence Tierney, Barton MacLane	18 THE MAN I LOVE Ida LUPINO, Robert ALDA Andrea King, Bruce Bennett PLUS—Action Every Minute! SAN QUENTIN Lawrence Tierney, Barton MacLane	19 The Story of the Atomic Bomb! THE BEGINNING OR THE END Brian Donlevy, Robert Walker Tom Drake, Beverly Tyler PLUS—A Swell Family Hit! GAS HOUSE KIDS Robert Lawery, Billy Halop	20	21
22 Year's Dramatic Sensation! ANN SHERIDAN NORA PRENTISS Kent Smith, Bruce Bennett PLUS—A Three Ring Comedy Riot! VACATION IN RENO Jack Haley, Anne Jeffreys	23 NORA PRENTISS Kent Smith, Bruce Bennett PLUS—A Three Ring Comedy Riot! VACATION IN RENO Jack Haley, Anne Jeffreys	24 The Sensation of Suspense! THE VERDICT Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre PLUS—Adventure of the West! William Elliott, Vera Rolston PLAINSMAN AND THE LADY Gail Patrick, Andy Clyde	25 THE VERDICT Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre PLUS—Adventure of the West! William Elliott, Vera Rolston PLAINSMAN AND THE LADY Gail Patrick, Andy Clyde	26 Drama of the Secret Service! James CAGNEY, ANNABELLA 13 RUE MADELEINE Richard Conte, Walter Abel PLUS—Roaring Excitement! Roy Rogers and Trigger RAINBOW OVER TEXAS	27	28
29 Strange! Sinister! Laraine Day, Brian Aherne Robert Mitchum, Gene Raymond THE LOCKET PLUS—Romantics Enter Politics! Phillip Terry, Ann Savage THE DARK HORSE	30 THE LOCKET Laraine Day, Brian Aherne Robert Mitchum, Gene Raymond PLUS—Romantics Enter Politics! Phillip Terry, Ann Savage THE DARK HORSE	ATTENTION, BOYS AND GIRLS! Here's a real FUN TREAT for you on Saturday Afternoons at our Matinees. Attend our Saturday afternoon shows at 2:00 P. M. and see new Technicolor Cartoons, Sport Reels or other subjects you will enjoy plus our regular Double Feature Program! There's always a Big Show at the Varsity!				

Figure 84: Monthly film schedule, June 1947
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Robert Lloyd Fridley (1917-living) and Beverly C. Mahon (1922-2009):

Robert (Bob) Fridley was born in Fayette County, Iowa the son of Lloyd J. and Laura A. Fridley. His father was an auto salesman but his abandonment of the family in the early 1930s made his son the family bread winner. Robert's first theater experience at age 14 and for two years he was "working the Jack Rabbit Circuit" "taking films and portable equipment to small towns...for one-night stands." He could rent a film for a day for \$5-10, charge adults a quarter and kids a dime and "business would be brisk until the novelty wore off and then I'd have to try new towns." Finally, he ran out of towns and money and got a job with the Poster Exchange (later National Screen Service) and this is where he met Bev Mahon. By 1940 was already working in Des Moines as a theater manager. During the Second World War he served for three and a half years in the Army Transportation Corps, serving with the Special Service Division which managed army theaters. This is how he recalled his service in 1989. His actual film service, as related by his son Brian is somewhat less grandiose. First, he was rated 4F so he could manage the first theater operated by the Fridley-Mahon partnership undisturbed until draft standards were loosened. His theater service was confined to the five theaters at Fort Miles Standish in Massachusetts his superior officer found a way to keep him stateside when it was time to go

closer to the front. Postwar he studied film making at the University of Southern California. He didn't graduate but he did get married. Bev Mahon was born in Fayette County, the son of Elton C. and Georgia G. Mahon. Pre-war he was associated with several Des Moines movie houses and worked as a booker for Paramount Pictures. His wartime service placed him in the Army Air Corps in the Pacific Theater. The two men partnered and operated a theater in New Sharon Iowa beginning in 1941. In mid-February 1949 they purchased the New Holland Theatre in Pella, Iowa. The pair had established a reputation for producing locally-themed newsreels in their first theater. Their New Sharon house had, by 1949, been "remodeled and completely modernized until now it is one of the finest small-town theatres in the state." They promised to run newer films as was exemplified by their initial opening shows. Presumably Mahon did the managing while Fridley was out in sunny California. He was managing the Pella theater as late as 1955.²¹

Fridley added Des Moines to his theatrical ventures with the purchase of the Varsity as noted but the 1953 Des Moines City Directory lists him as its manager while his ownership dated only from June 30, 1954. He recalled in 1989 that over the next six years he had replaced everything but the furnace in the building.²²



Figure 85: Film theater partners, Fridley and Mahon, 1949
(Pella Chronicle, February 17, 1949)

²¹ Pella Chronicle, February 17, 1949; Des Moines Register, November 29, 1989, interview with Brian Fridley.

²² Des Moines Register, November 29, 1989

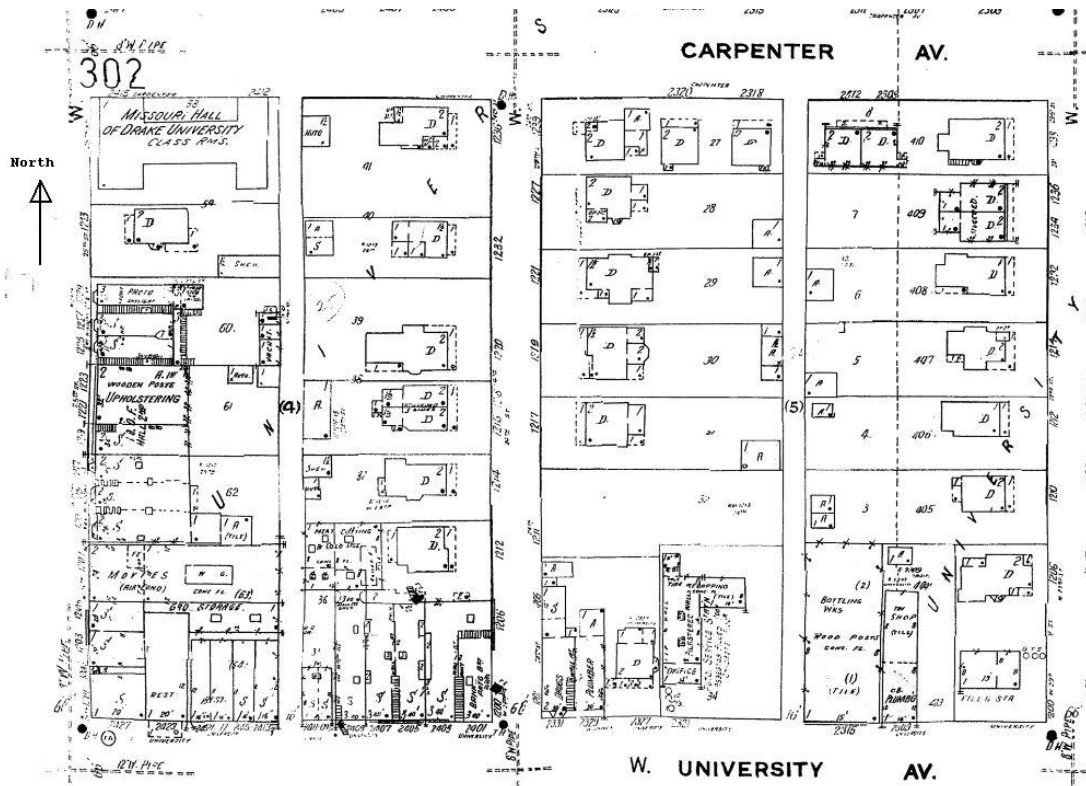


Figure 86: Detail, updated (1950) 1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map (the building is visible at the lower left)

The updated fire insurance map simply changed the building use without updating its structural details, retaining both the freight elevator and the skylight.



Figure 87: Ca.1950 photo looking southeast Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

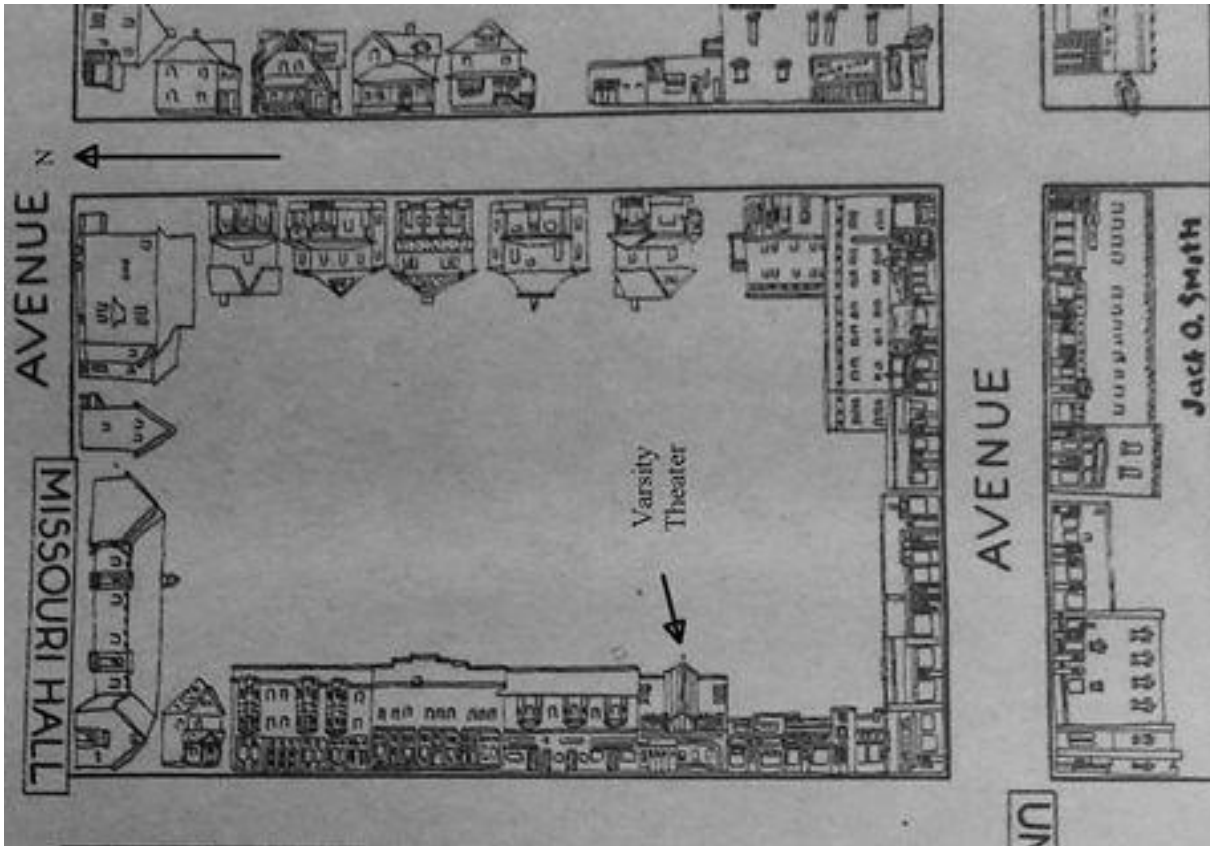


Figure 88: Sketch of Dogtown, Jack O. Smith (1950 Quax, inside covers)



Figure 89: The Varsity Theatre is sold to Fridley-Mahon (Des Moines Register, May 2, 1954, p. 11-L)

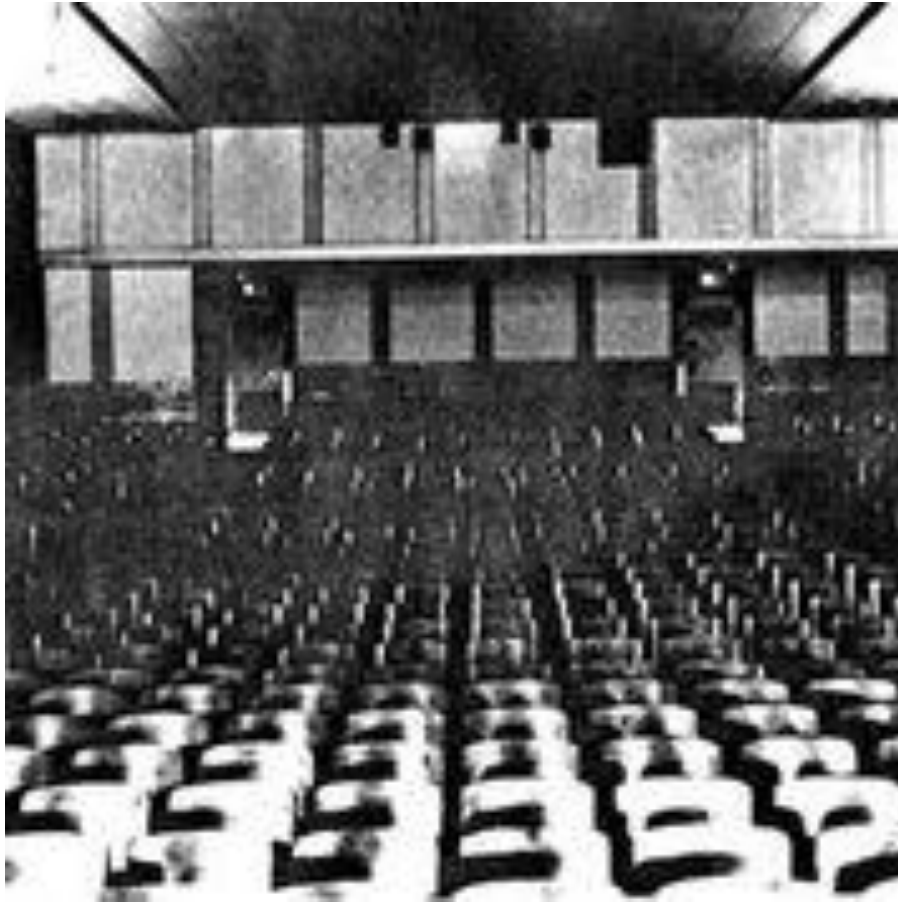


Figure 90: Auditorium interior, looking west, ca.1950
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

Figure 81 depicts a more formalized auditorium ceiling design scheme with a more complex recessed central ceiling section. Does this area mark the location of the removed skylight?

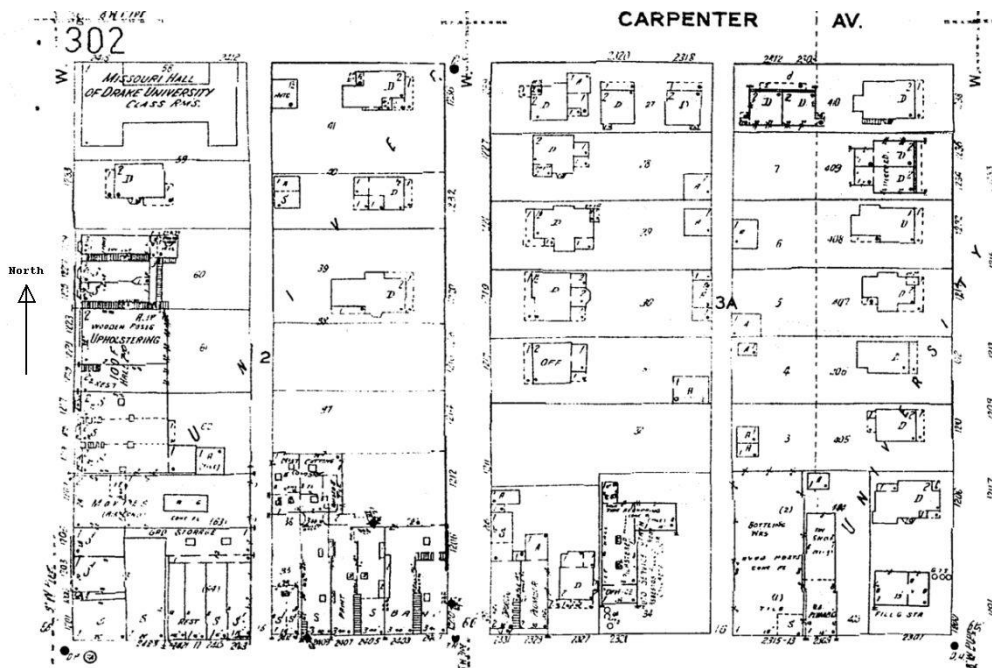


Figure 91: Detail, updated (1957) 1920 Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map
(the building is visible at the lower left, again no building updates)

The January 1958 Theater Fire:

City directories list both Fridley and Mahon in conjunction with the Varsity Theatre in 1954-55 and 1962. Otherwise only Fridley is listed as manager. Sources indicate that the Varsity was his special passion during the years 1953-1975. Mahon came to the city permanently in 1956 to run the Holiday Theatre located at 3402 S. W. 9th Street in South Des Moines. Fridley, as noted, changed all but the furnace at the Varsity (the original furnace is still in the basement) and he apparently didn't change the décor or the façade. The theater was in the midst of a substantial remodeling when a substantial fire damaged the building. The fire in fact was caused by a workman's lightbulb. Curiously the fire had been lost to history. All that we know was that it caused substantial damage (\$30,000), that the fire burned through the roof at some point and to some extent, and that the theater interior necessarily was smoke and water damaged. Figure 76 offers the only visual indication of the auditorium damage, showing the rearmost seating in the theatre with fallen insulation. The original stepped wall wainscot pattern is visible. A ladder is leaned up against the damaged projection booth and light is penetrating the newly-burned hole in the roof. Clues found in the surviving building indicate that the fire did not burn downwards as all walls and floors are pre-fire. The most probable advance of the fire was at the roof/attic level with a westward direction. It is possible that it damaged the upper façade and the vertical marquee element. Initial roof inspection above the two-story part of the building appears to indicate that the roof is all or partly new with wooden beams and not iron/steel trusses (the presence of these is not indicated by any source apart from Figure 59, the architect's remodeling plans from 1938).



Figure 92: Fire damage in the east auditorium, looking northeast
(Des Moines *Register*, January 23, 1958)

\$30,000 Fire At D.M. Theater

DES MOINES (AP)—Flames shooting through the roof of the Varsity Theater near the Drake University campus attracted home-bound motorists during the evening rush hour Wednesday.

The fire broke out while the theater was closed and caused damage estimated at \$30,000.

Owner Bob Fridley said the blaze started in or near a wall by the projection booth. Firemen brought it under control in about 45 minutes.

\$30,000 FIRE HITS THEATER

A fire at the Varsity Theater, 1207 Twenty-fifth st., Wednesday caused damage estimated at about \$30,000.

PICTURE:
Page 3

The fire was discovered by Theater Owner Bob Fridley, 40, of 6023 University ave., about 4:30 p. m. Flames shot skyward through the roof.

Damaged Interior

The interior of the theater was damaged extensively by fire, smoke and water. A large hole was burned through the roof.

The theater was not open at the time.

"We tried to put it out but couldn't," Fridley said.

After about 45 minutes

firemen quelled the blaze. One resident of a near-by apartment had vacated his rooms because of smoke.

He was Prof. James J. Fiderlick, of 1215½ Twenty-fifth st., a drama teacher at Drake University.

Blame Light Bulb

The theater does not normally open for business on week nights until 6:30 p. m.

"We won't be having any shows for several days at least," Fridley said.

City Fire Marshal George Soderquist said a 300-watt light bulb apparently started the blaze.

Soderquist said workmen hung the bulb through a porthole in the projection booth; its heat ignited some fiberboard.

Figures 93, 94: January 22, 1958 theater fire; Left, Carroll Daily Times, January 30, 1958; Right, Des Moines Register, January 23, 1958

Bob Fridley left the fire out of his 1989 recollections. The theater and apparently a minimally functional projection booth were lightly enough damaged that the theater was up and running by February 7 when its advertisements reappeared. The clue to what was happening in the theater and indeed explaining the cause of the fire is explained in the news report that accompanied the theater's reopening (Figure 83). Remodeling was already underway when the fire hit and it was the worker's bulb that caused the blaze. The theater was able to function as unidentified remodeling continued for an additional month. Fridley light-heartedly thought that

Varsity to Open Again Friday

The Varsity Theater, 1207 Twenty-fifth st., will reopen Friday evening after being shut down for repairs since fire caused an estimated \$30,000 damage last Jan. 22.

R. L. Fridley, owner, said work will continue on "extensive remodeling" of the theater. That job should be finished within three weeks, he said. The remodeling work was underway at time of the fire.

Figure 95: The theater reopens, remodeling work continues (Des Moines Tribune, February 6, 1958)

the theater would be out of service for at least “several days.” An examination of the existing building indicates that the projection booth shell survived so the fire must have burned westward through the second-floor level, damaging the upper façade and marquee. A grouping of post-remodeling shots logically documents the new interior and storefront decorative theme. The interior gained a fieldstone wall veneer that employed a range of brown colored stone. Front ceilings basement to second floor (save for the lobby-foyer) gained faux beams and these in combination with natural fiber wall coverings, blonde colored trim, faux copper patterned walls in the upper stairway, all reflected a Mid-Century Modern style. The same stonework covered two north end storefront columns (flanking the entrance) and the upper part of the marquee was removed and a square single-light window was added. The 1938 entry doors were replaced with glass doors but the black Cararra glass storefront remained intact. The interior plan was substantially altered. A second service area was added to the northwest lobby, the lobby and foyer were carpeted, bathrooms were added in the basement and it is stated that concessions were relocated to that point as well. A lounge was created in the former equipment room on the second floor. It had a south end stone fireplace and films could be shown using twin projection slots in the intervening north office wall. The west wall of the auditorium gained a vertical design that echoed the beam pattern. Auditorium and lobby-foyer ceilings were plastered with recessed lights having a star-like random distribution (still in place).



Figure 96: The remodeled façade and marquee, looking northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

At this point it is assumed that a second square single-light window capped the lower one and lighted the attic level above the office and lounge. This latter space has yet to be accessed. A panel covers this potential upper light.



Figure 97: The remodeled façade and marquee, looking southeast and northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

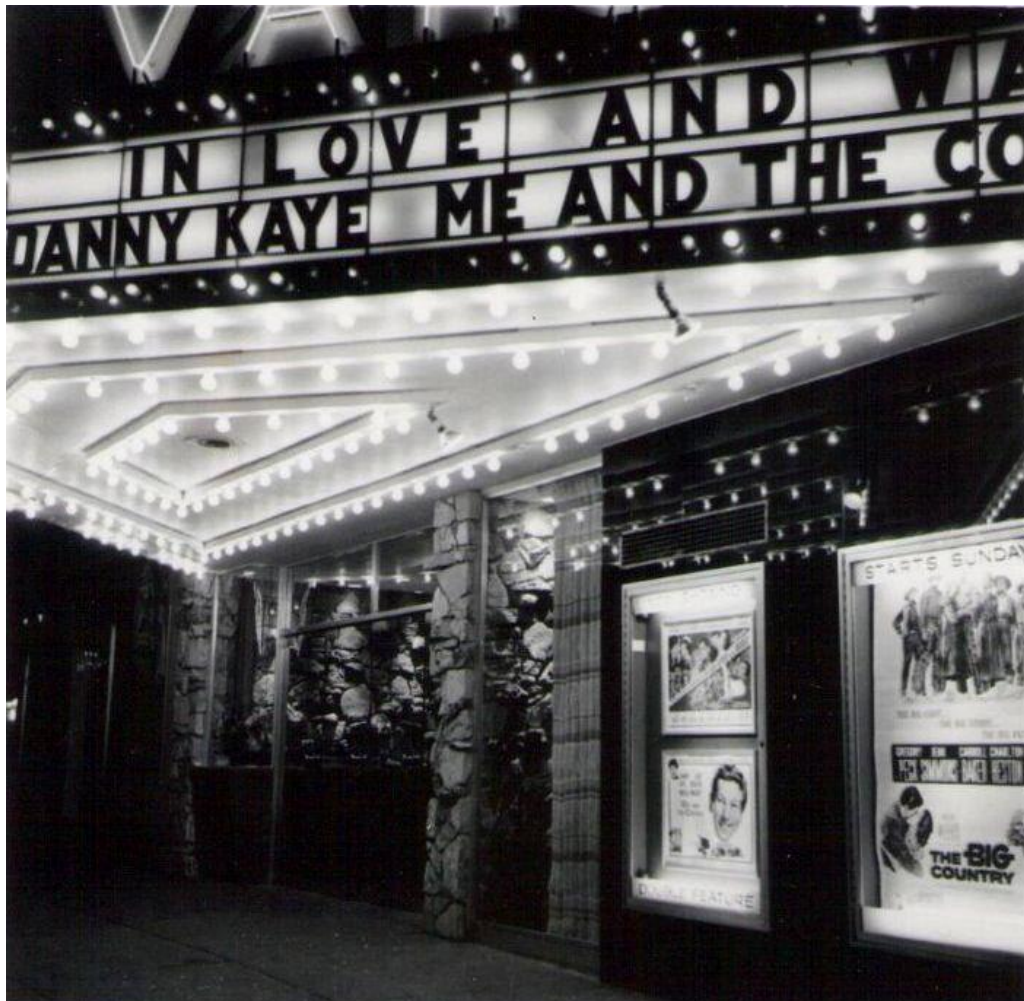


Figure 98: The remodeled façade and marquee, looking southeast and northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 99: Remodeled marquee and front, looking north, September 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 100: Remodeled marquee and front, looking southeast, September 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 101: Lobby ticket booth, looking northwest, October 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

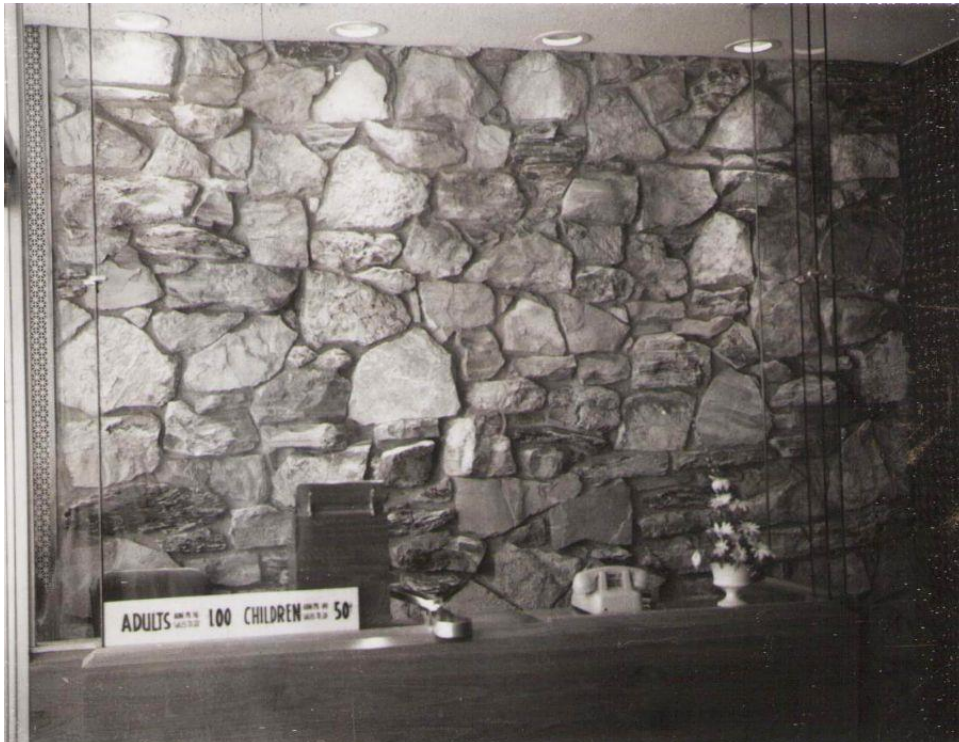


Figure 102: Lobby ticket booth, looking north, October 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 103: Lobby glass doors, ticket booth, stairs, north wall, looking northwest, October 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 104: Lobby concession booth, looking southwest, October 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

The glass backdrop in the concession stand matches that extant in the basement lounge. The curious stair balusters visible in the upper left corner of Figures 95-96 rounded off the east end of the concession. This same motif was used on the other stairs and survives about the second-floor level.



Figure 105: Lobby concession booth, looking south, October 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 106: Foyer, new rectangular windows, looking southeast, October 1958
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

The west auditorium wall gained two rectangular windows between the twin entrances. Figure 106 shows the men's bathroom entrance and a bulkhead set above the south foyer wall with recessed lights. Figure 107 shows a faux ashlar stone wall treatment, a display case and the entry to the women's bathroom and probable storage to the south. Note the same ornamental motif in the upper right corner.

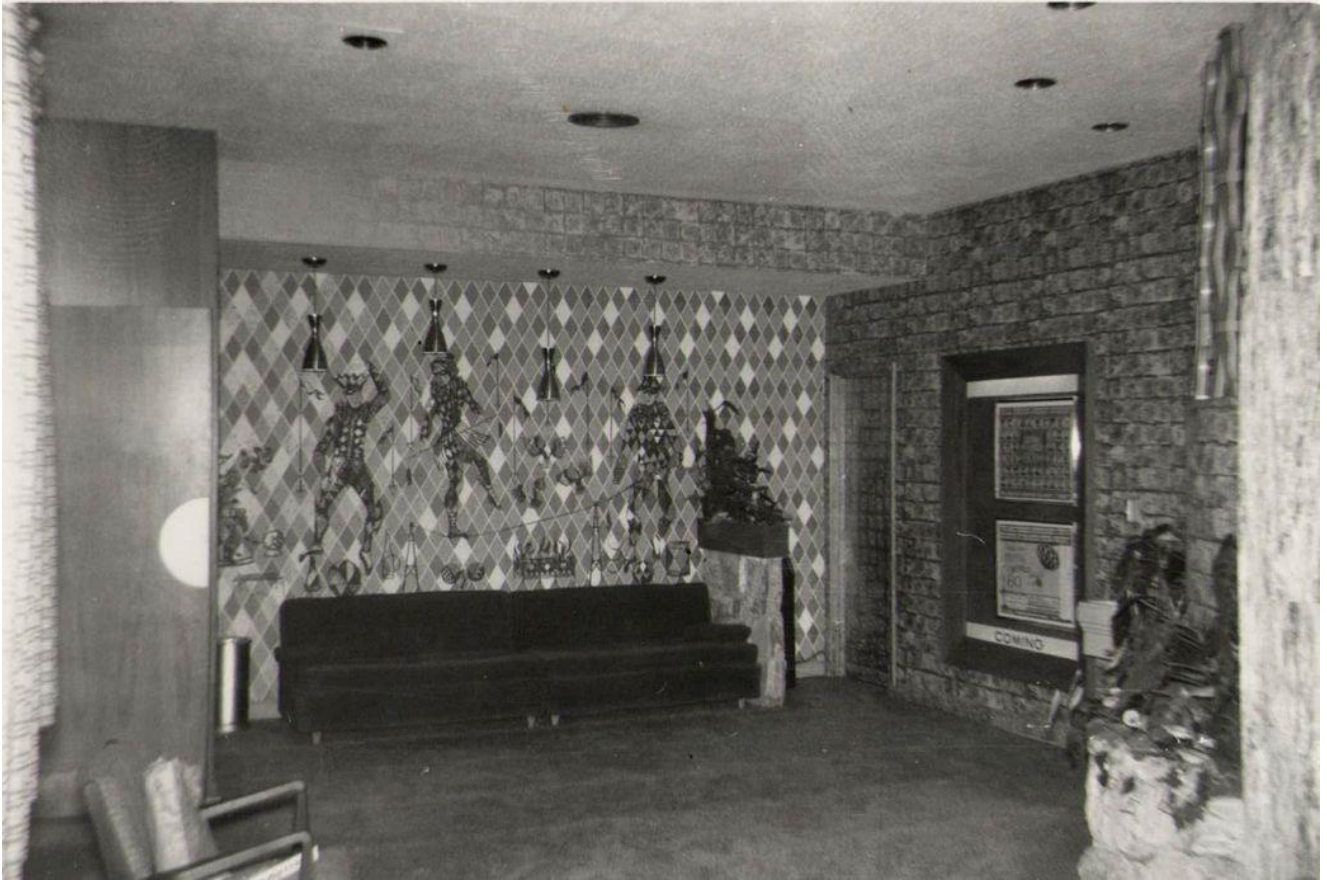


Figure 107: Foyer pictures, looking southeast and southwest 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figure 108: Foyer, children's matinee, looking southwest 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

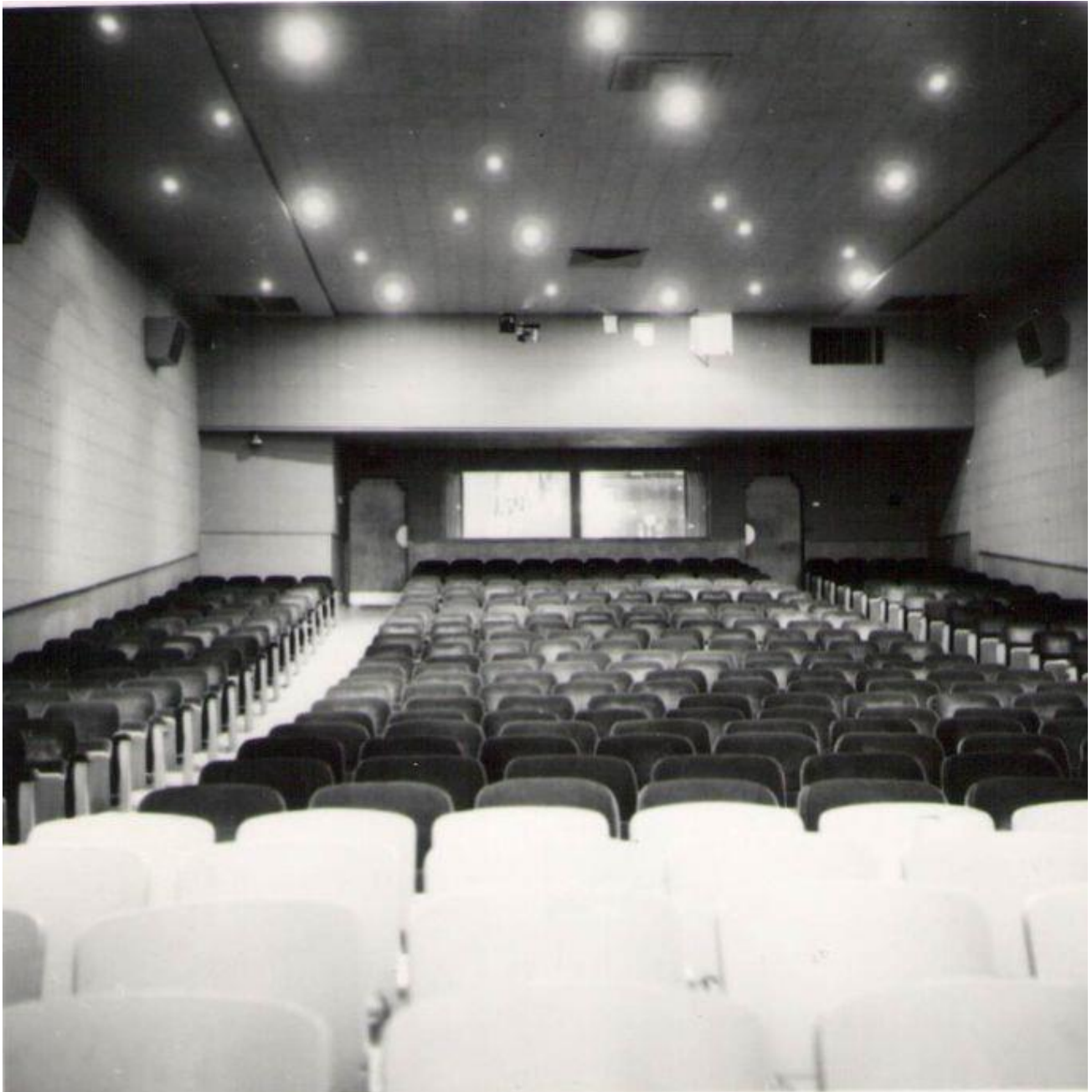


Figure 109: Auditorium, looking east 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



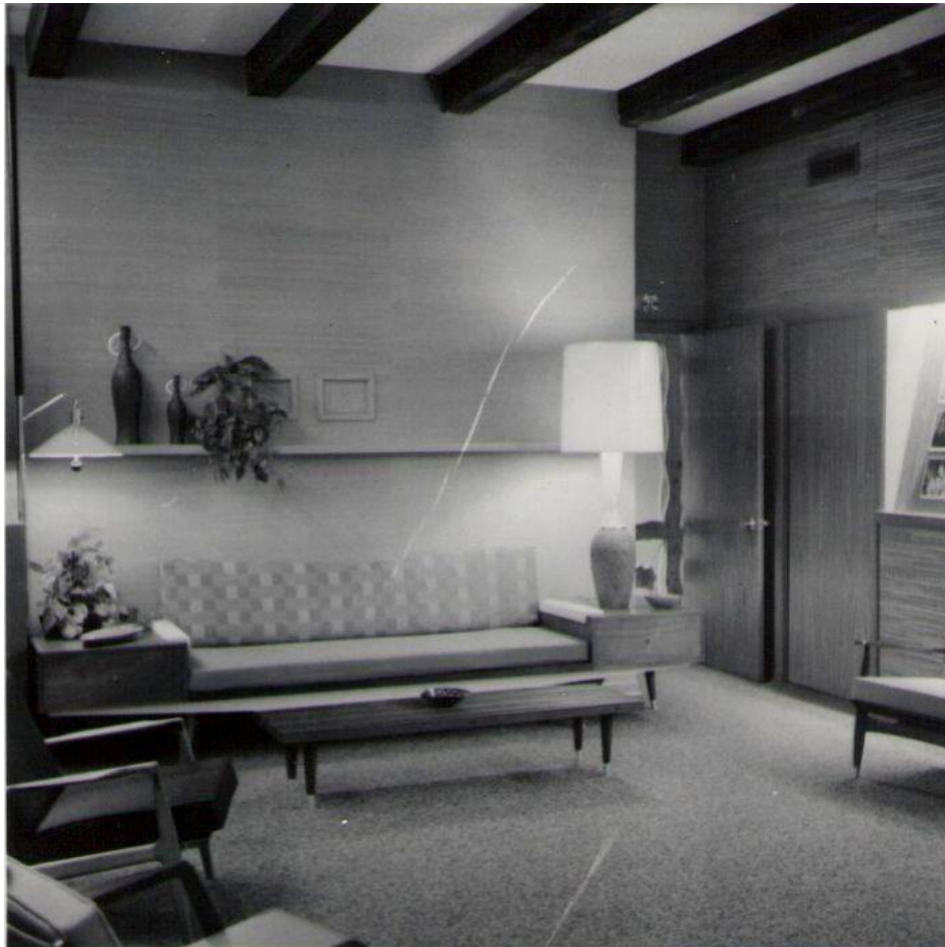
Figure 110: Auditorium, looking east 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

The same starlight-like ceiling lights remain in place today as do the wall speakers. The present-day ceiling fans are not visible. The original stage with angled side entrances appears to remain intact.



Figures 111: Auditorium picture, looking east, 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Figure 111 depicts the existing auditorium west end interior and the “crying room” window in the hallway north of the projection booth. Disruptive infants could be moved to that point and the mother could watch the show. Note the added west wall windows and a wainscot treatment or perhaps simply a chair rail that marks the lower edge of the acoustical tile.

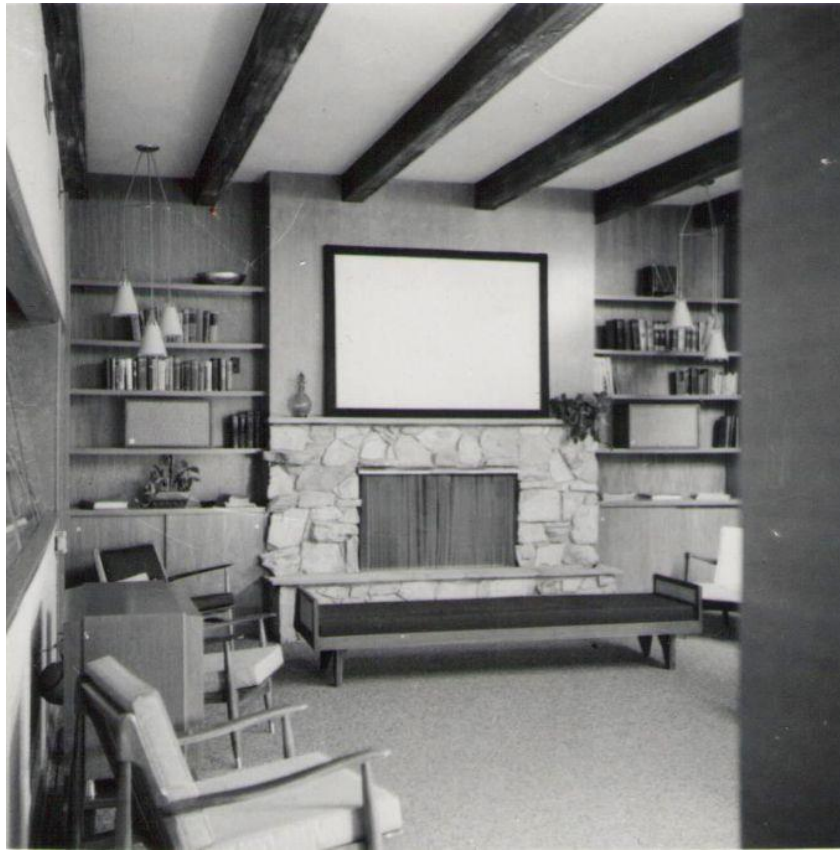


Figures 112: Upstairs lounge north room, looking northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

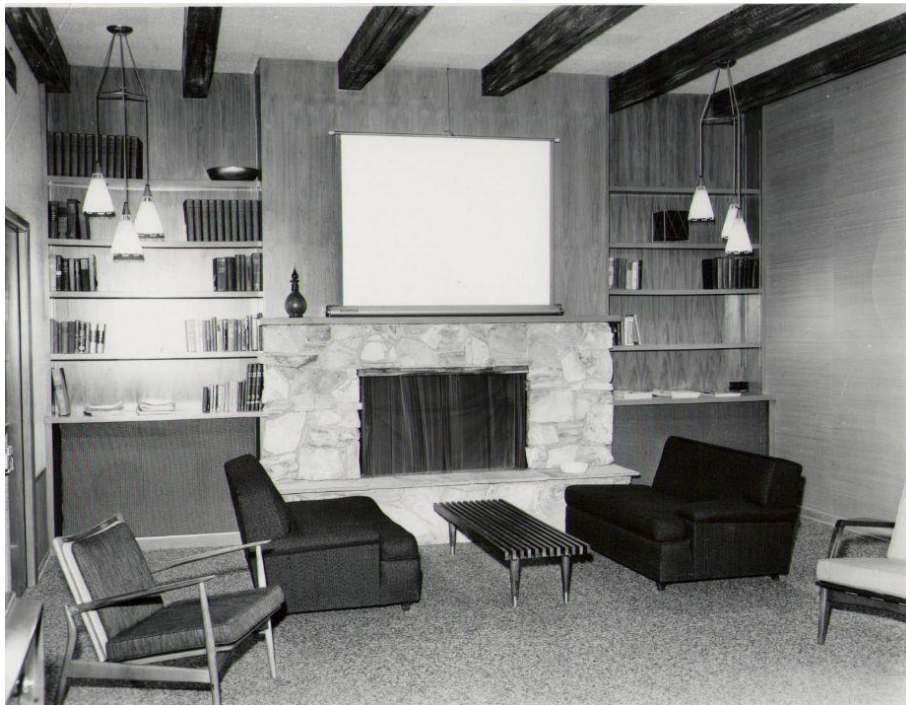


Figures 113, 114: Lounge pictures, looking northeast and southeast 1958
(Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

These lounge views document the still-extant interior. The slatted coffee table in Figure 91 is still present. Note the new north window, curtains, ceiling beams, the east sidewall angled display boards and the bamboo patterned east and west wall treatments.



Figures 115: Upstairs lounge north room, looking northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)



Figures 116: Upstairs lounge north room, looking northeast, 1958
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Theater Operations, 1958-1970:

The Varsity mythos of today holds that Bev Mahon was the art and social justice film proponent while Bob Fridley was more the conventional crowd-pleaser. Mahon held forth in his Holland Theatre and Fridley in the Varsity. The available evidence would argue that both men were in their own way passionate about their entertainment medium and that both were in their own way innovative marketers and prescient survivors in an industry that was rapidly changing in the face of competition from television (televised sports in particular) and social change in general.

The Varsity can be arguably credited with serving as Fridley's point of inspiration in building his regional movie house empire that would, at its zenith entail some 70 screens and three states. In his 1989 interview with the Des Moines journalist Gordon Gammack, Fridley provided some insight into his life-long zest for films. On his very first date in Los Angeles with his wife-to-be he gave Myrna Blanchfield he showed her a newly-released Cinescope movie. Then they did the midnight overview thing and he proposed and they married a day later (well she was from Iowa). He valued films that "really made you laugh [or] really made you cry." He contrasted leaving a filming "with my head in the clouds" and doing so "feeling that you have been dragged through some slime." Eschewing films that overly focused on "profanity, vulgarity and sex" he sought out more redeeming works. He also personally favored creating more opulent theater interiors. While "too glamorous from a practical and economical standpoint...I get the most satisfaction that way." Fridley recalled that at this time a theater operator spent a third of his take obtaining films (individually costing from \$800 to \$1,400), another third for other overhead costs, leaving a one-third profit. Concessions could cost \$300 a week with a 50 percent profit. Election nights and periods of public mourning (after the Kennedy assassination) brought folks to his theatre while Monday night football was "murder" on the turnout. Fridley had a unique perspective on his industry given his training in film-making and he would co-sponsor at least one film of his own (see below). His inability to control his product, unique to films, was a source of considerable frustration and despite his best efforts, some of his researched selections were regrettable after the fact. A film had to be sold locally by the manager he noted, "...many people, taken aback by the content of many films, have to be pre-sold on a picture before they'll go." And getting back to the varied quality of films he recalled "One week a fantastic hit; then, maybe starvation."²³

Based on available *Box Office* articles from 1962-63, Fridley was gaining national attention in the theater industry for his customized promotions and his filling his theater seats with "little old ladies" who came in droves to see his "operettas." But first, a bit of contradictory evidence vis-à-vis his claimed striving for better entertainment. Faced with official forms of film censorship local theater managers adopted a self-censorship approach based on film scorings by the National Legion of Democracy. Only one manager ran afoul of its restrictions, and yes, that was the Varsity with its "The Five Day Lover," a 1961 French sex comedy.²⁴

Fridley drew *Box Office* plaudits for his promotional efforts that paired a children's animated film "Gay Pur-ee" with Harold Lloyd's "World of Comedy." Fridley was managing the Capri (located half a mile west of the Varsity) in addition to the Varsity. He designed and distributed two-sided "herald's" at eight schools, tied one side in with a kiddy matinee and ten cartoons shown at the Varsity and further tied the campaign in with the music album. A local children's television show gave away some of the albums and a cat food label gained free admission for a child. He earned a Showmandiser citation in March 1962 for his original ads for "Pocketful of Miracles." In mid-April 1963 *Box Office* once again celebrated Fridley's response to a public perception that family films were lacking. The film "A Pocketful of Miracles" was rolled out under the pitch "Must a Movie Be Sexy to Be Fun?...If you think Hollywood Can't Make Wonderful Movies for the Whole Family Anymore—You Haven't Seen This One!...Laughter Guaranteed or Your Money Back."²⁵

²³ Des Moines *Register*, November 29, 1989; "There are theaters: Then there's the Varsity"

²⁴ *Box Office Magazine*, June 25, 1962, p. 5

²⁵ *Box Office Magazine*, April 23, December 7, 1962, p. 2; April 15, 1963

Fridley of course simply signed up for a national alternative programming option that was developed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the fall of 1962 under its umbrella Perpetual Product Plan. Reissues had long been the curse for local exhibitors. During the 1950s studios sold off their film libraries to television and by the early 1960s old films were freely available on that medium. Operettas were grouped and generic promotional packages addressed each series. Exhibitors paid a percentage of the take rather than a flat rate and the films were double-billed being shown on the same night (Fridley chose Tuesdays) over multiple weeks. Fridley gets the credit for recognizing that his market matched this new approach. *Box Office* had taken note of Fridley's use of the "MGM Operetta Series by mid-December 1962. Fridley could adapt the series and in this first *Box Office* notice, he had added "The Jolson Story" as a follow-up. Meanwhile Bev Mahon was also running the operetta series (he chose Wednesday nights, usually a slow evening, perhaps doing so to minimize conflict with the Varsity?) at the Holiday Theatre. In the latter part of January, a second six-week-long series was offered at the Varsity, but on Thursday nights with three daily showings. Despite frigid weather "dedicated operetta fans...came out like blossoms on a summer day." Fridley reprised Jolson once again, taking advantage of his patrons "who had acquired a once-a-week celluloid music habit." *Box Office* credited Fridley's Jolson effort noting it was "not a moment too soon either... "Jolson" now is making the rounds on the living room TV sets." The *Box Office* notice identifies Bob Smith as the Varsity's assistant manager. After one show Smith started his car and it burned to a crisp. *Box Office* quipped "No injuries—but no auto."²⁶



Figures 117, 118: Operettas at the Varsity, right, the first 1962 film series (Des Moines Register, October 4, 1962); Left, musicals continue, late 1967 (Des Moines Register, November 12, 1967)

Emboldened by his operetta series successes, Fridley appears to have crafted his own classic film series in late April 1963. Packaging six films as the "Fabulous Series" he showed them successively each Tuesday

²⁶ *Box Office* Magazine, December 10, 1962, p. NC2; January 21, 1963, p. NC3; February 4, 1963, p. NC1; February 25, 1963, p. NC7. The same source (April 1, 1963, p. NC2) reported a general statewide pattern that larger movie houses were doing well, small towns not so much. In contrast it added "The Varsity in Des Moines is giving a second-go-round to MGM operettas, which did crescendo business there for 12 Thursday afternoons and evenings." This was presumably in reference to the January operetta series? See Brian Hannan, *Coming Back to a Theaters Near You: A History of Hollywood Reissues; 1914-2014*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2014. Another Varsity employee and projection operator, was John H. Greenland who departed in early 1968 to partner in running a hometown theater in Eldon Iowa (Des Moines Register, February 16, 1968).

with a matinee and two evening showings. A buck could get a seat in a single showing and a fiver covered all six. Children paid fifty cents.²⁷

On September 23, 1963 *Box Office* identified the core of Fridley's new weekly film viewer. It reported "Bob Fridley, Varsity at Des Moines, who has substantial success in showing old operatta films, reports his audiences have been predominately female, with of a lot of them with white or gray hair. He has staged no flashy campaigns, and runs only a newspaper ad announcing the series, following up with ads on the weekly one-day showings." It didn't hurt that seniors got in on the cheap. Note the "Golden Age" reduced ticket price of \$.75 noted in Figure 89.²⁸

authenticity to scenes depicted.

At The VARSITY THEATRE . . .
 Perfect Summer Entertainment!
 Enjoy Every One of Them in Refreshing
 Air-Conditioned Comfort!

**6 WORLD FAMED
 OPERETTAS RETURN!**
 EVERY TUESDAY AT 2, 6, 8:15
 EACH OPERETTA—ONE DAY ONLY

NEXT TUESDAY, July 28 Victor Herbert's "SWEETHEARTS" JEANETTE MacDONALD NELSON EDDY • COLOR	TUESDAY, AUG. 18 Sigmund Romberg's "MAY TIME" JEANETTE MacDONALD NELSON EDDY
TUESDAY, AUG. 4 MARIO LANZA "THE GREAT CARUSO" IN COLOR	TUESDAY, AUG. 25 Kern & Hammerstein's "Showboat" IN COLOR HOWARD KEEL KATHRYN GRAYSON MARGE & GOWER CHAMPION
TUESDAY, AUG. 11 RUDOLF FRIML'S "ROSE MARIE" IN COLOR • HOWARD KEEL ANN BLYTH • BERT LAHR	TUESDAY, SEPT. 1 FRANZ LEHAR'S "THE MERRY WIDOW" MAURICE CHEVALIER JEANETTE MacDONALD

ADULTS \$1.00 CHILDREN 50c

**WHY THE SUMMER'S
 "MOST DISCUSSED"
 MOTION PICTURE IS
 "BLACK LIKE ME"**
 THE CURRENT CRISIS HAS THRUST THE SPOTLIGHT UPON JOHN
 HOWARD GRIFFIN'S COURAGEOUS STORY OF WHAT IT IS REALLY
 LIKE TO BE A NEGRO.



ACTUALLY FILMED in the SOUTH UNDER
 A FICTITIOUS TITLE ('No Man Walks Alone')
 TO AVOID INCIDENTS & AROUSING SUS-
 PICION.

**NO DOUBLE TALK but the
 VERY, VERY BLUNT UN-
 VARNISHED FACTS about
 the "SYSTEM"**

Sunday 2:15, 4:15, 6:20, 8:20, 10:25

VERY EASY HOLIDAY THEATRE
TO REACH 3400 SW 9th

Figure 119: Operettas at the Varsity, "Black Like Me" at the Holiday
 (Des Moines Register, July 26, 1964)

By October 1961 Fridley was cooperating with the local non-profit Cinema 77, a promoter of foreign and artistic films. The 1961-62 eight-film series cost \$6.00 and the films ran monthly on a Wednesday evening with two showings. The first film was "The 400 Blows" a French Cannes Film Show award winner. The other films were Scandinavian, Indian and Continental. Figures 91-92 illustrate additional artistic/foreign film that

²⁷ *Box Office Magazine*, April 29, 1963, p. NC3. The six films were "David Copperfield," "Pride and Prejudice," "Annie Get Your Gun," "Little Women," and "Easter Parade."

²⁸ *Box Office Magazine*, September 23, 1963, p. 1

were shown as series at the Varsity in late 1964-early 1965. It is probable that these came pre-packaged like the operettas.²⁹

<p>The VARSITY Theatre Announces AN ART FILM SERIES FOR THE DISCRIMINATING FILM GOER</p>	
<p>Next Wed., Thurs., Jan. 13-14 INGMAR BERGMAN'S "WINTER LIGHT" (SWEDEN)</p>	<p>WED., THURS., JAN. 20-21 GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S "MAJOR BARBARA" REX HARRISON • DEBORAH KERR • WENDY HILLER • ROBERT MORLEY</p>
<p>Tues., Wed., Thurs., Jan. 26-27-28 "PURLIE VICTORIOUS" (GONE ARE THE DAYS) GODFREY CAMBRIDGE RUBY DEE • OSSIE DAVIS</p>	<p>WED., THURS., FEB. 3-4 "KNIFE IN THE WATER" (POLAND) WINNER OF THE INTERNATIONAL FILM CRITIC'S AWARD</p>
<p>WED., THURS., FEB. 10-11 JOHN HUSTON'S "BEAT THE DEVIL" HUMPHREY BOGART GINA LOLLABRIGIDA PETER LOBBE • R. MORLEY</p>	<p>WED., THURS., FEB. 17-18 THE FRENCH CLASSIC "CHILDREN OF PARADISE" JEAN LOUIS BARRAULT ARLETTY</p>
<p>SHOWINGS at 7 & 9 P.M. ADULTS \$1.00</p>	<p>WED., THURS., MAR. 3-4 MAURICE EVANS JUDITH ANDERSON "MACBETH"</p>
<p>TICKETS SOLD AT THEATRE ON NIGHT OF PERFORMANCE</p>	

<p>The VARSITY Theatre Announces AN ART SERIES OF 6 FOREIGN FILMS FOR SIX CONSECUTIVE MIDWEEKS</p>	
<p>STARTING THIS TUES., WED., THURS., OCT. 13-14-15 WITH INGMAR BERGMAN'S Most Controversial Production "THE SILENCE" (SWEDEN) AND INGGRID THULIN</p>	
<p>WED.-THURS., OCT. 21-22 "THE EASY LIFE" ITALY: VITTORIO GASSMAN "Sweetest of the season" -N. Y. POST "The most beautiful thing" -NEW YORKER</p>	<p>WED.-THURS., OCT. 28-29 "DIMKA" (RUSSIA) "A little bit of heaven" -N. Y. TIMES "A beautiful, beautiful film" -N. Y. TELEGRAM</p>
<p>WED.-THURS., NOV. 4-5 HAROLD PINTER'S "THE GUEST" "The best of the very best" a work of balanced art" -N. Y. POST</p>	<p>WED.-THURS., NOV. 11-12 JEAN PAUL SARTRE'S "NO EXIT" VIVECA LINDFORS BEN PIAZZA (ARGENTINA)</p>
<p>SHOWINGS at 7 & 9 P.M. ADULTS \$1.00</p>	<p>WED.-THURS., NOV. 18-19 "THE MUSIC ROOM" (INDIA)</p>
<p>TICKETS SOLD FOR EACH PERFORMANCE AT THEATRE</p>	

Figures 120, 121: Varsity art film series selections, 1964-65
 (Des Moines Register, October 11, 1964; January 10, 1965)

Finally, the new and interesting physical addition to the theater layout was the provision of the living room-like lounge on the second-floor level. *Box Office Magazine* once again offers documentation that this space was utilized for very important regional industry meetings and it can only be assume that the room hosted a broad range of similar and other special small events. Films could be previewed there on a small screen. The Allied Independent Theatres Association of Iowa, South Dakota and Nebraska had reaffiliated with the national association and held its first board meeting subsequent to that reunion, at the Varsity on June 11, 1962. The split, dating to May 1961, had lasted about a year. Agenda items included the opening of Des Moines and Omaha association offices, creating a large film buying and booking combine, the COMPO-Marcus plan of picture promotion and insurance matters. A second meeting took place on July 9 and started at 3:00 p.m. so that attendees could "complete their work on Film Row." What was termed a "regional meeting" took place on August 13 at the Varsity. The last reported Varsity meeting dated to April 15, 1963.³⁰

Beginning in the mid-1960s a new wave of new suburban theater construction began, these being multi-screen shopping mall-based designs or open-air drive-in theaters. Fridley began to assemble his movie theater empire at this time. The impetus might well have been circumstantial. The theater in Lake City burned in August 1964 and Fridley rebuilt it. At the time he owned the Varsity, Capri and the Ida Grove theaters. In July

²⁹ Des Moines Register, October 8, 1961

³⁰ *Box Office Magazine*, May 28, 1962, p. NC1; May 21, 1962, p. 7; July 2, 1962, p. N1; August 6, 1963, p. NC1 and April 15, 1963, p. NC2. Only limited ranges of this source are available on line. COMPO was the Council of Motion Picture Organizations. Ben Marcus was a major theater owner in Wisconsin and tested a cooperative and comprehensive advertising approach that penetrated markets on the local level, shared costs top to bottom and leveled the playing field between exhibitors of large and lesser theaters (see Brian Hannan, *In Theaters Everywhere: A History of the Hollywood Wide Release; 1913-2017*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2017, pp. 122-32). Film Row, between 1022 and 1123 High Street was where all of the state's motion picture distributors and film exchanges were located. Theater managers spent a lot of time there.

1965 he partnered with Dick Davis and Clay Rusk to build the Plantation Drive In at 63rd Street and Grand Avenue. Partner Davis even got his own office added to the theater (Figure 113). It boasted the Midwest's largest screen (50 feet by 120 feet). By 1970 he controlled 24 theaters. A curiosity was his closing of his own Estherville theater due to lack of business. He then rebuilt it in luxurious fashion with new seats and elaborate décor.³¹

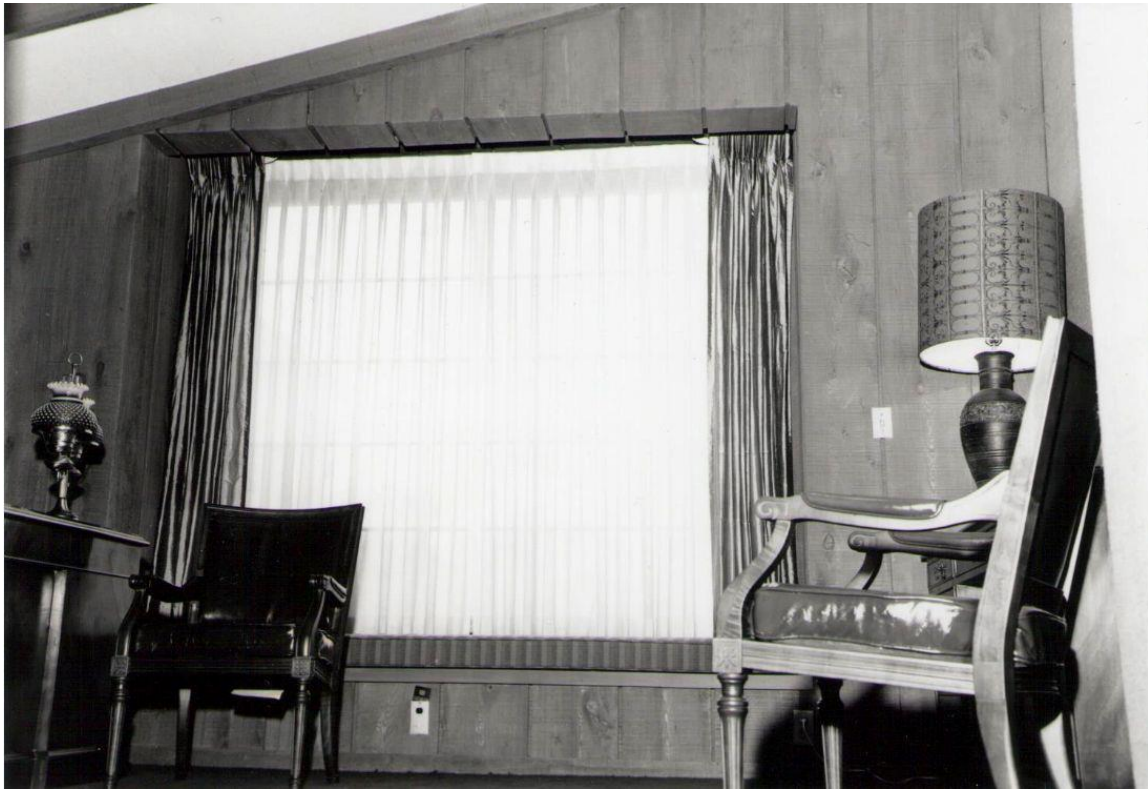


Figure 122: Office and bay window built into northeast corner of second floor, looking northeast, 1963 (Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Recalling Fridley's training in film-making post-war it is worthy of note that he co-sponsored at least two film projects partnering with Richard Davis. The first film, about a jewel heist was "Every Girl Should Have One" starred Alice Faye and Zsa Zsa Gabor. Brian Fridley remembered it never actually saw a theater screen but it indeed did and was even retitled for the Brazilian market. It was distributed by the Robert Fridley Productions Company. His second film, produced by the Miraleste Company and released December 16, 1977, was "The Hazing." The theme was a fraternity hazing gone wrong and it was rated as adult entertainment. Fridley and his partner neither wrote nor directed the film but they did fund its creation and that is a bit of a milestone for a couple of exhibitors.³²

³¹ Carroll *Daily Times*, August 22, 1964; Des Moines *Register*, July 4, 1965; Estherville Daily News, March 10, 1970. Eventually Fridley would own or manage 70 theaters.

³² https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_hazing; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Every_Girl_Should_Have_One



Figures 123: Fridley, front center, with cast and staff of “Every Girl Should Have One” in California, 1978
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

Varsity Theatre Operations, 1971-2018:

This period post-dates the building’s period of significance but it is important of course because most of the public affection for the theater is based on living memories from these years. The building history post-1970 represents two broader sub-themes; the passage of the Varsity’s managerial torch to Bev Mahon in 1976 and the continued operation of the theater well past any other comparable Des Moines suburban single-screen movie house.

The only salient physical change to the Varsity was the replacement of what remained of its original marquee with the present on in the late September-early October 1973. The only indicator was the absence of theater newspaper ads from August 28 through October 4. The Register noted on the latter date that the theatre would reopen the next day (showing “The Day of the Jackal” and “Pete and Tillie”). Bob Fridley continued to manage the theater into 1975 and Mahon appeared as manager that latter year. The Dundee Theatre Company acquired building and business ownership on September 2, 1975 although final ownership resolution, by quit claim deed, lingered until August 24, 1978. The apparent driving force behind the new marquee was the acquisition of operational control over the Varsity and four other Fridley-owned theaters in Des Moines by Irwin Dubinsky, a major theater chain owner from Nebraska. Fridley in exchange became an operating partner for six city theaters that were acquired by Dubinsky, excluding the Varsity. Fridley was in fact not the manager when the actual manager, Patrick Neal, was robbed at gunpoint of \$1,200 when he went to deposit the night receipts at the nearby bank on February 2, 1975.³³

³³ Des Moines Register, December 19, 1972; October 4, 1973; February 3, 1975. The evidence for the marquee replacement at this point is based upon an ad that noted the Varsity was reopening on October 5, 1973. The Des Moines Register, November 22, 1977, reported that Fridley had sold the Varsity and Plantation Drive-In to Dubinsky “a few years ago” but the sale does not appear in country transfer books.

1974

The VARSITY THEATRE Presents

The GOLDEN AGE OF MOVIES!

TO MAKE NOVEMBER A MONTH TO REMEMBER!

6 OF THE GREATEST
LOVE STORIES
EVER FILMED

**EACH LOVE STORY — ONE DAY
ONLY AT 2, 6, & 8:15 P.M.**
(EXCEPT FOR "WUTHERING HEIGHTS")

<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. Oct. 31 and Nov. 1 thru 6—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"WUTHERING HEIGHTS" LAURENCE OLIVIER — MERLE OBERON</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">—NOW thru Monday— The Incomparable Greta GARBO</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"Mata Hari" & "QUEEN CHRISTINA"</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. ONLY, Nov. 7—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RONALD COLIMAN — GREER GARSON</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"RANDOM HARVEST"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Wed. thru Mon. Nov. 8-13 Fredric March — Myrna Loy — Dana Andrews</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"The Best Years of Our Lives"</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. ONLY, Nov. 14—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">JEANETTE MACDONALD — BRIAN AHERNE</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"SMILIN' THROUGH"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">—WED. thru MON. NOV. 15-20—</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="border: none; width: 50%;">CLARK GABLE — SPENCER TRACY — CLAUDETTE COLBERT</td> <td style="border: none; width: 50%;">NORMA SHEARER — JOAN CRAWFORD — ROZ RUSSELL</td> </tr> </table> <p style="text-align: center;">"BOOM TOWN" & "THE WOMEN"</p>	CLARK GABLE — SPENCER TRACY — CLAUDETTE COLBERT	NORMA SHEARER — JOAN CRAWFORD — ROZ RUSSELL
CLARK GABLE — SPENCER TRACY — CLAUDETTE COLBERT	NORMA SHEARER — JOAN CRAWFORD — ROZ RUSSELL		
<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. ONLY, Nov. 21—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GREER GARSON — WALTER PIDGEON</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"Blossoms in the Dust"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">—THUR. THRU SUN., Nov. 23-26—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MATINEES ONLY AT 2 — Danny Kaye</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSON"</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. ONLY, Nov. 28—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">NORMA SHEARER — FREDRIC MARCH with CHARLES LAUGHTON</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"The Barrets of Wimpole Street"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">—WED. THRU MON., Nov. 22-27—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CHARLIE CHAPLIN'S Masterpiece</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"CITY LIGHTS"</p>		
<p style="text-align: center;">—TUES. ONLY, Dec. 5—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"GREEN DOLPHIN STREET" LANA TURNER — VAN HEFLIN — DONNA REED</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">—WED. THRU MON., Nov. 29 - Dec. 4—</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TWO MARX BROTHERS FILMS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"A NIGHT at the OPERA" & "GO WEST"</p>		

ADULTS \$1.50 • GOLDEN AGE \$1.00 • CHILDREN 50c

Figure 124: Six Golden Age films on successive Tuesday evenings, 1972
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

The VARSITY THEATRE presents HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN ERA!

At 25th and University, Des Moines, Tel. 277-0404 4 Weeks of FUN • September 17 thru October 22, 1974

WHEN GOING TO THE MOVIES MEANT ABOVE ALL — ENTERTAINMENT! ENJOY THOSE WONDERFUL, CRAZY, HEART-WARMING YEARS AS WE BRING ALIVE A CAVALCADE OF MEMORABLE MOVIES!

Sunday • Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday • Thursday • Friday • Saturday
<p><i>THE GOLDEN ERA</i> — "When the filmmakers of the '30's and '40's could take an audience by the scruff of the neck and make it shriek with laughter, weep with sorrow, or shake with terror. Giants they were, who thrilled the world with their works." — Frank Capra</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— September 24 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">NELSON EDDY ILONA MASSEY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"BALALAIKA" Frank Morgan • Chas. Ruggles</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— September 25-26-27-28 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">TWO OF THE GREATEST CO-STARRING TEAMS IN TWO VERY ENTERTAINING COMEDIES!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SPENCER TRACY • KATHARINE HEPBURN</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"WOMAN OF THE YEAR"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">— PLUS —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">WILLIAM POWELL • MYRNA LOY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"THE THIN MAN"</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">— September 29-30 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">KATHARINE HEPBURN as JO in "LITTLE WOMEN"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Plus the Most Beloved Star of all and Her Rough Co-Star</p> <p style="text-align: center;">MARIE DRESSLER • WALLACE BERRY in "TUGBOAT ANNIE"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 1 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ALICE FAYE BETTY GRABLE JOHN PAYNE Jack Oakie</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"TIN PAN ALLEY"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 2-3-4-5 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BETTE DAVIS • LESLIE HOWARD • HUMPHREY BOGART The Picture that made Bogart a Star!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"THE PETRIFIED FOREST"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">— PLUS The Excellent Production of AYN RAND'S — "THE FOUNTAINHEAD" GARY COOPER • PATRICIA NEAL</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">— October 6-7 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">BETTE DAVIS in Her Academy Award Winning Role and Henry Fonda</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"JEZEBEL"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">HUMPHREY BOGART • INGRID BERGMAN</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"CASABLANCA"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 8 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ELEANOR POWELL ROBERT TAYLOR JACK BENNY</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"BROADWAY MELODY OF 1936"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 9-10-11-12 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Gene Kelly • Debbie Reynolds • Donald O'Connor</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"SINGIN' IN THE RAIN"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">— PLUS The High-Spirited 1948 Version of the 1927 College Hit — "GOOD NEWS" June Allyson • Peter Crawford • Mel Tormé</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">— October 13-14 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2 OF THE GREAT GANGSTER FILMS Edw. G. Robinson • Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"LITTLE CAESAR"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">JAMES CAGNEY • HUMPHREY BOGART</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"THE ROARING TWENTIES"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 15 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FRED ASTAIRE GINGER ROGERS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"The BARKLEYS OF BROADWAY" Oscar Levant • Billie Burke</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 16-17-18-19 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2 HILARIOUS STAR-STUDDED LAUGH HITS! SPENCER TRACY • KATHARINE HEPBURN in</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"ADAM'S RIB"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">plus CLARK GABLE • MYRNA LOY • WALTER PIDGEON With Judy Holiday</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"TOO HOT TO HANDLE"</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">— October 20-21 • Triple Feature —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">7 GREAT COMEDIANS IN 3 LAUGH RIOTS!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Laurel & Hardy in "The DEVIL'S BROTHER"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Buster Keaton • Jimmy Durante • Polly Moran</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"THE PASSIONATE PLUMBER"</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Marie Dressler and Polly Moran in "REDUCING"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">— October 22 —</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COLE PORTER'S "KISS ME KATE" HOWARD KEEL • KATHRYN GRAYSON • ANN MILLER</p>	

EVENINGS CONTINUOUS FROM 6:30 P.M. • SUNDAY CONTINUOUS FROM 2 P.M. • ADULTS \$2.00 • GOLDEN AGE \$1.00 • CHILDREN 75c
Except: TUESDAY MUSICALS at 2, 6 & 8:15 P.M. • ADULTS \$1.50 • GOLDEN AGE \$1.00 • CHILDREN 50c

Figure 125: Four-week film schedule leader, September-October 1974
(Courtesy of Brian Fridley)

The theater story now returns to Bev Mahon, who, it will be recalled, had largely managed the Holiday Theatre from 1956 until 1982. Once he focused his attention on the Varsity, the iconic history began to emerge, with Mahon himself stating in 2008 that he had taken over the Varsity management in 1954, and more recent claims credit him with opening the Varsity in 1939 when he was aged 16. As the city directory entries reflect, the management of any movie house is a complicated history. What will be accepted for now is that Mahon had sole control over the Varsity beginning in late 1975 and the back story describes without detail some sort of falling out between Fridley and Mahon. Fridley himself noted in a 1989 interview that he still shared “some operations” with Mahon. The split, based finally on conflicting personalities, entailed a court case and finally a bidding war for the Varsity. At one point, Fridley was satisfied with the price and told Bev “You just bought yourself a theater.”³⁴



Figure 126: The Holiday Theatre opens on Southwest Ninth Street (Des Moines Register, December 28, 1956)

Mahon’s film philosophy paralleled that of Fridley in that he thought films ought to possess substance and that the viewer should “learn something from [a film] without their being boring or dull.” One of his favorite stories was that during the summer of 1980 lacking a replacement film, he ran “Local Hero” for 22 consecutive weeks, lacking any suitable replacement. He also famously kept concession prices the lowest in the city. An early story dating to his Pella theater days was his having his employees cut tiny scissor holes in the paper popcorn bags so that the young men would be unable to create explosions with their bags at the end of a show. In 1982 Mahon’s penchant for not pausing between film showings, let alone even turning on the theater lights. The theater was described as being “dank and dark” with frayed red carpets, sticky floors, roof leak drips and the like. The same source recalled “Sometimes the reels are shown in the wrong order, but nobody seems to mind. “Stevie” was shown out of sequence for the first several days of its run before anyone bothered to mention it to the manager.” Mahon threatened to shut down operations after Thanksgiving of that year to install salvaged seats and equipment from the demolished Holiday Theater. He probably did so given the mix of seat types in the front of the auditorium. The unnamed reviewer hoped that the manager would not “change the eclectic film fare at the Varsity, which ranges from “The Lacemaker” to “Diner” to “Das Boot” to “La Cage Aux Folies II” to every film Laura Antonelli ever made.” Bev recalled in 2008 “You’ve heard of people who

³⁴ Des Moines Register, November 29, 1989; interview with Brian Fridley.

are uncouth; well, our audience is pretty couth... We have a lot of regulars who come here. They're the reason we are open."³⁵



Figure 127: Bev Mahon and his Varsity Theater, looking east, 2008 (Courtesy of Denise Mahon)

There were at least a few real coups. One came in early 1993 when “The Crying Game” played at the Varsity for ten weeks. At this time exhibitors still bid for films and there were but two independently owned Des Moines theaters not controlled by Carmike Cinemas (affectionately referred to as “the monopoly” by Mahon. Carmike outbid him for a fall 1992 commitment so Mahon reserved “The Crying Game.” Its producer, Miramax was desperate to get exposure and promised a separate copy to any theater running it before December 18. The film was a foreign film, had six Academy Award nominations and by the time it hit the Varsity screen it was rated the fourth most popular film in the country, and here it was only at the Varsity in Des Moines. While most producers and exhibitors at the time split the film revenue evenly, this one had a much higher tariff at 70 percent. Still with the long run, Bev remodeled the 470-seat auditorium, added cup-holders and new seat covers.³⁶

Amistad was the other miracle film, shown starting on Christmas Day, 1998, another first exposure in the city. By this time bidding was a thing of the past and Dreamworks, the producer, in some manner met Bev half-way in matching his audience with the film. Mahon was always loath to discuss how he worked his magic in getting films fearing a self-jinx. Of course, “Amistad” was much more akin to Mahon’s film tastes, being a story about the revolt of slaves aboard a slaver ship, and consequently did not raise any surplus funding for any other theater improvements.³⁷

“B. C.” or “Mr. Varsity” died on March 27, 2009. His daughter Denise Mahon stepped up and kept the theater in operation until November 2018, outlasting any other comparable Des Moines movie house.

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³⁵ Des Moines *Register*, November 18, 1982; December 25, 2008

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³⁷ Des Moines *Register*, January 2, 1998

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Property Information:

Legal Description: The North 40 feet of Lot 63, University Place Plat

Appendix:

Table 2: Property Ownership Transfers (all warranty deeds unless otherwise noted)

Grantee	Grantor	Filed	Instrument	Notes
Jennings, A. C.	Dewey, Hetta J.	2-9-92	7-25-91	Lot 63
Williams, F. O.	Jennings, A. C.	3-26-97	3-1-94	Same
Jennings, Jas. Sr.	Williams, F. O.	5-29-97	4-3-97	same
Jennings, Nettie C.	Jennings, Jas. Sr.	9-30-98	9-22-99	Apparent error, says Lot 60?
Kuntz Bros.	Jennings, Jas., Nettie	3-1-03	5-19-02	Same, appears to read N55' of S55' of Lot 60
Gormley, Wm. F., Frances Gormley	Kuntz Bros.	2-3-17	1-22-17	N40' Lot 63
Staves, Grace D.	Kuntz, W. F., wife	1-15-17	10-18-16	S20' Lot 63
Valley Nat. Bank	Ghormley, W. F., Frances E.	3-11-29	2-11-29	N40' Lot 63
Riley Invest. Co.	Valley Nat. Bank	1-18-32	1-2-32	N40' Lot 63
Riley, Mary Maxine	Riley Invest. Co.	11-16-38	5-2-38	N40' Lot 63
Varsity Theatre Corp.	Riley, Mary Maxine	Same	10-1-38	N40' Lot 63
Fridley, Robert L., Mahon, Bev	Varsity Theatre Corp.	10-18-54	6-30-54	N40' Lot 63
Dundee Theatre Co.	Fridley, Robert L., Myrna	9-5-75	9-2-75	N40' Lot 63-QCD
Dundee Theatre Co.	Fridley, Robert L., Myrna	same	8-24-78	N40' Lot 63-QCD