

A Brief History of the Colonial Theater

By Linda Guay, Idaho Falls Arts Council

In the 1880s, when Idaho Falls was still known as Eagle Rock, valley residents would flock to the town to be entertained by wandering road shows that would stop here on their way to Montana from Salt Lake City. The first motion picture in town was shown in an unused hall in 1907 and a year later the Scenic Theater opened on Park Avenue. A ticket was 5 cents and people stood to watch the two reel silent movie while a lecturer explained the story.

In 1890, the town of Eagle Rock changed its name to Idaho Falls, a far more cosmopolitan sounding name. The entertainment scene took off in Idaho Falls thereafter, and more movie theaters followed; the oldest theater still in existence is the Centre Theater, built in 1913. Residents of the growing town began talking about building a “proper” theater to host the highly popular vaudeville shows. In 1919, three local men – C.A. Spath of the Farmers and Merchant Bank, Dr. C.M. Cline, and S.K. Mittry, a local contractor – put up the money and materials to build the Colonial Theater for \$175,000. The theater was built of steel, reinforced concrete, and brick on a foundation of basalt, some of which can still be seen in sections of the original basement. The new theater featured a handsomely designed ivory-colored terra cotta face in a neo-classical Greek style and was billed as the largest and finest theater in the state of Idaho when it opened on November 10, 1919. It had the largest stage in the Intermountain West, an orchestra pit, and eight dressing rooms. The theater housed 1400 luxurious mahogany seats upholstered in leather; 600 of those seats and four box seats were located in the balcony which was reached via a “modern” ramp rather than “old fashioned” stairs. Because the theater was designed in the era before modern electronic amplification, the acoustics were (and still are) superb. A whisper on stage can be heard in the top of the balcony.

The first performance in the new theater was the play “John Ferguson.” Mr. C.H. Lewis was the first theater manager, presenting vaudeville, dramatic plays, road shows and some early moving pictures. Although vaudeville shows and plays were extremely popular, the Great Depression severely impacted attendance as people could no longer afford the \$1 or \$2 ticket prices – the 10 cent ticket to the motion pictures, some of which were the newfangled “talkies,” was much more affordable. So the theater underwent a bit of a conversion; a large projection screen was installed and the theater name was changed to the Paramount Theater, part of a chain of theaters owned by the Hollywood studio. The first moving picture shown in the Paramount Theater in November 1929 was “Welcome Danger” starring Harold Lloyd.

The Paramount still hosted the occasional live stage performance into the 1940's and 50's, most of which were local productions. There were also the occasional celebrity visits, including one from the famous comedy team Abbot and Costello, selling war bonds. Through the 1960's and 70's the Paramount continued showing the latest in motion pictures. In those mid-century years, the "usherettes" would often dress in costumes that reflected whatever movie was being shown.

The ageing theater suffered a gradual decline over the years and by the 1980's was operated as a discount theater showing previously-run movies. By 1990 it was in such disrepair that it was closed, presumably forever. There was talk about tearing the old theater down and building a much-needed downtown parking garage in its place. But a few fans saw the beauty and potential of the great old place underneath the decaying façade and pigeon droppings. In 1990 a group calling itself the Idaho Falls Arts Council was formed, with a mission to promote, advocate, and present a broad spectrum of visual and performing arts in Eastern Idaho. The restoration of the old Colonial Theater was their first task. In November 1994, the then-owners of the old theater, Dick Clayton, Sr. and his son Steve, donated it to the Idaho Falls Arts Council. It took the Arts Council three years to raise \$4.5 million and renovate the building, returning it to the beautiful visual and performing arts center it is today.

During the renovation, workmen discovered documents that appeared to be original building plans for the Colonial Theater, stuffed inside a downstairs wall. And a local tradesman informed the Arts Council that there was a beautiful stained-glass window hiding under the tiles above the marquee at the entrance of the theater. The window may have been covered over during an earlier remodeling in 1952, when Fox Motion Picture Studios bought the Paramount Theater. Renovation workers lifting the soggy carpet in the lobby rediscovered the elegant black and white tiles running the full length of the theater lobby. The tiles were in poor condition, however, and reproductions were made to fill in where necessary. Inmates from the county jail's work-release program who were assisting with the renovation uncovered the original 1919 Greek neo-classical border which runs along the entire ceiling in the lobby. Arts Council staff cleaned and restored the border to its original beauty and decided to return the theater to its original name, the Colonial Theater, where live theater would again reign.

On March 13, 1999, the beautifully renovated Colonial Theater celebrated its Grand Opening with blues and jazz legend Ray Charles. Currently the Theater hosts between 16 and 18 live professional performances a year as well as dozens of local and other performances presented by local groups who rent the Theater.

As one of only three historic theaters left in Idaho, the Colonial Theater stands proudly in its 450 A Street location in downtown Idaho Falls, its classic charm of a bygone time proving a beautiful setting for the best of contemporary performing arts.