

There Were Many Theatres in 1909

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

In the spring of 1909, the buzz in town was about the theatre—No, not the Al. Ringling. The Ringling was not even rumored in those days. It was the Orpheum Theatre, at 139 Third Avenue, formerly the Electric Theatre.

There was plenty of buzz, about old news and new plans. Joe Ward, in his "Baraboo, History of the Commercial and Retail Districts", tells how Bert Mahony and John J. Ryan, after extensive redecoration, had sold the rather small Electric Theatre to A. Burr Robins and T.M. Buckley, who were now changing the name to the more glamorous name Orpheum.

The Orpheum

The word Orpheum refers to the Thracian musician whose music could move inanimate things, hence motion pictures. Ward reports that there then was legal action between the two partners that summer. Buckley was Treasurer of the Ringling Brothers Circus and the Electric theatre had been operated by his brother, Arthur.

Kathy Waddell, in her 100 year ago column, reported that the house had been remodeled, and would now seat 400 thanks to 200 new "opera chairs". In a few years the Al. Ringling Theatre would seat nearly 1000, but 400 seemed more than adequate in the summer of 1909.

There was a new stage, and dressing rooms were provided. Moreover, it was announced that vaudeville would be a feature of the Orpheum theatre every night. It appears that Robbins legal position had prevailed, for in 1910 we find that he sold the business to Booth and Malloy.

This partnership already owned the Gem Theatre at the former Bijou Theatre location, and new electric lighting equipment was now purchased for both theatres. Ward notes that they apparently owned their own dynamo at the McArthur Dam, with their own wires running to both theatres to provide power.

Ownership changed frequently in those days, for in February of 1912, Malloy sold ownership in both theatres to Booth. Apparently it was not profitable to operate both theatres, and it was the Gem at 142 Third Street which survived, the Orpheum now being closed.

A Furniture Century Begins

The next occupant of the property of the Orpheum on Third Avenue is of some significance, for it was to become a furniture store and funeral parlor,



The new silent movies spawned many Baraboo theaters, such as the Bijou, Grande, Elite, Orpheum, and Lyceum , but it was the Gem Theatre, 142 Third Street, that survived in 1915. It too would fail as the historic 1915 Al. Ringling Theatre came to dominate the entertainment venue. Ringling bought the Gem in 1923 and closed it.

operated by veteran furniture dealer Edward S. Ersell. The significance here is that for the next 97 years, and to this day, it would remain as a major retail furniture store.

Today's Ploetz Furniture has occupied this prestigious location since 1948, a total of 61 years. Leonard Ploetz purchased it from Schieble and Dyrud, a firm dating to 1915. They had purchased it from the Erswell, successor, Plummer Furniture.

It this recitation is mind boggling, it illustrates the importance and duration of location in the retail business. In 1965 Ward reports that Ploetz enlarged the size of the store by purchasing the property at 125 Third Avenue, now owning the 125, 127, and 129 locations on Third Avenue.

The Future of the Orpheum

The Electric and Orpheum had proudly presented state of the art pictures which actually showed movement. Today we may consider the early silent film as pretty hokey, but there were state of the art and highly regarded then.

Little could those folks imagine the changes coming, for across the square in just 6 years, Al. Ringling would build his masterpiece, first in the nation of the palatial silent motion picture theaters. It still dazzles visitors.

For 94 years and counting, artists of and qualifying above the vaudeville circuit would grace his stage, with world celebrates such

as Lionel Barrymore and Van Cliburn. Liberace would appear in the city as well as other showmen on the Ringling Stage.

Not only would the pictures move, they would talk, in color yet. Sound would not only improve, it would dominate a show, with almost unbearable of often pointless decibels.

But Baraboo's early 1909 movie entrepreneurs couldn't conceive of the industry of today. Neither did Al. Ringling, for that matter. In late 1915 he was writing to the producers, asking for better quality in the silent movies they were sending him. Had he seen one of our modern often promiscuous movies, perhaps he might have closed the theatre!

Clarification: Last weeks article on the descendants of Glenister Van Zile needs clarification. The children of his first marriage are Sandra Barrow of Baraboo and Glenda Moser of Janesville. The children of his second marriage are Sharon Jensen of Baraboo and Steven Van Zile of Reedsburg.

The granddaughter, Tanya, is the daughter of Steven. The great grandson who serves in Kuwait and whom we pictured with an MOAB is Jacob D. Fulkerson.