



If these walls could talk Eagle Theatre building marks 100th anniversary

By ERIC JOHNSON
NEWS-REVIEW ASST. EDITOR

While the face of downtown Eagle River has changed, buildings and businesses coming and going with the inexorable passage of time, the Eagle Theatre Building on Wall Street is an architectural survivor, a familiar sight for passing motorists and pedestrians on downtown's low-rise streetscape for a century now.

Developed in late 1921 by Three Lakes resident Joseph Gorski, plans for "a modern motion picture building in Eagle River" were announced in the Sept. 7, 1921 Vilas County News. Plans called for construction of a single story brick and tile building measuring 30 by 150 feet.

The year 1921 was a boom year for construction in Eagle River, with more than 20 residential and commercial structures built in the North Woods village, in addition to dozens of remodelings and expansions.

Said the Oct. 26 News of the development activity, "It speaks for the prosperity of the county seat of Vilas County as a place where confidence in the upbuilding of the residence and business section . . . is such that the man with money is not afraid to invest."

An anticipated Nov. 1 completion date would be pushed back to mid-December and still later into mid-January 1922. On Jan. 11, 1922, the News announced the Eagle's upcoming Jan. 14 debut.

"The Eagle Theatre just completed has no equal as a motion picture theater in this whole northern section," the News said. "Modern in every appointment it will give the public perfect service in shows and the management expects to keep the highest class of plays now in production."

First pegged as an \$18,000 development, the \$20,000 Eagle Theatre at 211 E. Wall St. made its gala Saturday, Jan. 14, 1922, debut with a 2:30 p.m. grand opening matinee showing of Fox Film Corporation's silent drama "Blind Wives," a "9-reel thriller" starring Marc McDermott and Estelle Taylor, based on Edward Knoblock's international stage success "My Lady's Dress." A bonus silent



The enduring circa-1937 Eagle Theatre marquee offers a retro nostalgic clue to the building's 1922-'73 run as a first-run movie house. —Staff Photos By ERIC JOHNSON

short comedy reel was also shown. The matinee was followed by evening shows at 7:15 p.m. and "shortly after 9 p.m." according to News coverage of the event.

Making its debut under the theatrical management of Chicagoan Edward Janicki, the Eagle was one of three entertainment venues in the 672-resident Vilas County seat village, joining the Dreamland Theatre and the Lyceum Opera House. Jasper Roderick's Dreamland, opened in 1916 as Eagle River's first movie house, closed in 1922 or 1923, eclipsed by the Eagle. The one-story Opera House, in operation by 1894, was home to live musical and theatrical performances, motion pictures and roller skating until it was razed in 1924.

"During the 1920s, the Eagle Theatre was open year-round on weekends and some evenings," said current building owner Jim Holperin, an Eagle River native and Class of 1969 Eagle River High School alumnus who would serve in Madison as 34th District State Representative, Wisconsin Tourism Secretary and 12th District State Senator. "The first building in Eagle River erected specifically as a movie theater, the Eagle also hosted minstrel shows, vaudeville, educational programs, plays and musical shows presented by local musical groups."

Eagle founder Gorski passed away in 1923, with ownership of the Eagle passing to his estate.

In a late 1927 refresh of the theater as plans were laid for the rival Vilas Theatre (1928-), Holperin said the Eagle was redecorated and updated with a new pipe organ and leather seats.

But as the Eagle had supplanted Dreamland and the Lyceum Opera House earlier in the decade, Holperin said the opening of competitor Eagle River Amusement Company's larger Vilas Theatre across the street at 214 E. Wall brought "stiff competition," with the Vilas quickly eclipsing the older, smaller and more modestly appointed Eagle.

Billed by the News-Review as "very beautiful and entirely worthy of the best recreational region in the middle west," the 485-seat Vilas Theatre opened July 19, 1928, with a showing of "My Best Girl," starring "world's sweetheart" Mary Pickford.

Previewing the Vilas' grand opening, the News-Review called the theater "a revelation of beauty" with its larger 16-by-36 foot stage, indirect lighting, soaring arched ceiling, panel and ornamental plaster pillar walls, carpeted aisles, upholstered Spanish leather seats, eye-catching old ivory, gold, peacock blue and Spanish red color scheme,

and velour stage curtain and valance accented with a "handsome" 12-inch border of Spanish design. The theater was also equipped with a Kimball grand piano for live musical performances. Eschewing the traditional theater organ in the waning days of silent films, the cutting edge Vilas employed a state-of-the-art four record Merritt synchronophone phonograph system that synchronized recorded music with the film projections.

"It is no exaggeration to say that The Vilas is without doubt one of the most beautiful small theaters in the state," the News-Review said. "The Vilas Theatre is an example of craftsmanship of which every artisan who had a share in its building may be proud. As a place of entertainment for the people of the finest section of the north woods country, it is a compliment to their sense of appreciation of the beautiful and it will stand as a monument to the good taste of the builders and their faith in the future of the region."

In response to the competitive pressures posed by the Vilas Theatre, then Eagle owner N.C. Emmons laid plans in March 1929 to add an 80-seat balcony, but soon after sold the theater in April 1929 to rival Eagle River Amusement Co. owners William and Margaret Ashton and August LaRenzie, who subsequently closed the competing Eagle, converting it into an automobile repair garage.

But the Eagle got a second act in 1935 when the Ashtons returned the building to use as a complementary sibling theater alongside the Vilas, hiring Rhinelander engineer Nicholas Rowinski and Madison architect John J. Flad, the latter an apprentice under internationally-renowned Wisconsin architect and designer Frank Lloyd Wright. Holperin said building modifications included the Spanish Colonial-styled addition of two stories containing four rental apartments and a "penthouse" apartment at the rear of the second floor — The Ashton Apartments. The renovated Eagle also included a basement bowling alley and pool hall, two



Vintage projection and sound equipment fills a basement storage room in the Eagle Theatre building, which is celebrating its centennial anniversary this year.

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WTC nears \$80,000 goal for '21 season

By MICHELLE DREW
NEWS-REVIEW ASST. EDITOR

Donations to Warm The Children, a program sponsored by the Vilas County News-Review under the auspices of the Eagle River Rotary Foundation to provide winter clothing for children in need, have now reached 89% toward the 2021 fundraising goal of \$80,000, according to program coordinator Toni Ruthven.

"It's great to see the donations steadily coming in," said Ruthven. "With people still donating last year during the pandemic, it's gratifying to know that as we come back to a normal year of Warm The Children, people are still realizing the importance of this program. People can know that when they donate to this program, they are taking care of children in the community and, especially around this time of the year, helping to alleviate at least some stress for these families."

Ruthven noted that she is continually thankful for the volunteers who donate their time every year to take these families shopping.

"Last year, a lot of our shoppers were unable to help and people stepped up to fill that need. We are thankful that many shoppers returned



this year, ones that have been with the program from the beginning and those who were new last year saying they wanted to do it again," she said.

New shoppers continue to be added to the WTC program, explained Ruthven.

"Already I've had three new shoppers call and say they wanted to shop for us again. For anyone who wants to help this worthwhile program, but funds may be a little tight this year, consider donating an hour of your time as a volunteer shopper. If you take only one child shopping, that's not only a great help to

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Live nativity set Friday, Saturday

Christ Lutheran School in Eagle River will hold its annual "Journey to Bethlehem" live nativity this Friday and Saturday, Dec. 3 and 4.

Free outside performances will be held every 20 minutes from 6 to 8 p.m. with the last performance of the evening beginning at 7:40.

The grounds of Christ Lutheran School will resemble

the town of Bethlehem as Christ's birth is re-enacted with bible narration, live actors and real animals. Everyone is welcome to attend this event.

Christ Lutheran School is located on the corner of Third and Spruce streets in Eagle River.

Call (715) 479-8284 for more information.

Not that you asked, but...

By Eric Johnson



Time paradox

An interesting question was posed the other day — the sort of question, in the words of the 1968 Noel Harrison song, that appeals to the circles that I find in the windmills of my mind.

"If you had a time machine, would you rather go backwards 500 years or forwards 500 years? The only catch is you can't come back."

The big question is how screwy do you want your life to be? Both prospects are scary. You'd be a fish out of water with either choice, making a retro leap back to Robin Hood and his band of merry men in Sherwood Forest, or jumping forward into the unknown, making the sci-fi hyperspace leap to the *Enterprise* at best or the post-apocalyptic world of the simpleton Eloi and cannibalistic Morlocks at the worst. I'd rather sell the time machine to some schmuck who thinks doing either option without the ability to come back is a good idea.

The immediate first thought to cross my mind is what kind of crappy time machine is that anyway? Great Scott! If Doc Emmett Brown can craft a time machine out of a DeLorean in 1985 — "if you're gonna build a time machine, why not do it with some style?" — you have to do better than a stationary one-way time machine in the modern world of 2021, the advanced, modernistic age of flying cars, hoverboards, self-tying Nikes and Black and Decker rehydrators.

I can see good cases both for and against going back a half-millennium to 1521 or forward a half-millennium to 2521, although the way things are going there might

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