Focus On: The Art Theatre

When the Park Theatre (now known as the Art) opened in downtown Champaign in 1912, it joined the Crescent Theatre, the Crystal Theatre, the Lyric Theatre, the Varsity Theatre, and the Walker Opera House. Over the next few years, the Neil Theatre, the Orpheum Theatre, Theatre Belvoir (later known as The Rialto), and the Virginia Theatre opened. Only The Art remains as an operating movie theatre. The Crescent, the Crystal, the Lyric, the Neil, and the Walker Opera House are long gone; the auditorium of the Rialto exists as only a shell within the Russell Building, the Varsity is now the Harvest Church, the Virginia houses live performances, and the Orpheum is becoming the home of The Discovery Place, a children’s museum. The Park opened within a decade of the beginning of the movie theatre industry in the United States, and, as the Art, is still in operation as a movie theatre. Bravo!

The Park Theatre opened Wednesday, November 12, 1913. Three ushers seated the crowd of over 2,400 for the four seatings that evening, yet scores of people had to be turned away for lack of room. The opening night program included a world premiere by the Hinners Organ Company of Pekin, Illinois to get ideas for his new theatre. Cyril Dadswell was brought in to incorporate the best ideas into his design for the Park. The plans were drawn by Chicago architect Lewis E. Russell from Mr. Cooper’s designs. The construction, taking four months, was personally overseen by Mr. Cooper. The auditorium, a rectangle 100 feet long and forty-four feet wide, seated 600 when the theatre opened. The addition of a storage area along the rear of the auditorium has shrunk its length by a few feet. That and other seating changes have resulted in a present seating capacity of 347. The auditorium floor is raked for better viewing of the screen. There is no balcony. Two aisles divide the seating area into three sections.

The front of the building has three stories. The ground floor contained two storefronts and the theatre entrance. The second floor held the offices of Dr. Hugo Branyon and Dr. B.A. Smith, a dentist. Today, one of the storefronts is gone, the space incorporated into the lobby, and the second and third floors hold a total of four apartments.

The building, in the early twentieth century commercial style, is built of deep maroon brick. The decoration, in striking contrast, is all of glazed ivory terra cotta. The second and third story facade is divided into thirds. The original ground floor facade probably reflected a similar arrangement. Each third consists of a triple window grouping at both story levels with a third story spandrel panel outlined in terra cotta. Each window grouping is outlined on the vertical edges with terra cotta quoins that continue up from an embossed terra cotta band that runs the width of the building at the second story window sill level. It connects with a scallop shaped terra cotta cornice, a few more courses of brick, then a smaller scallop shaped terra cotta parapet. Terra cotta quoins run up both edges of the building. A terra cotta tablet is located just below the cornice on either side of the center window bay and at each edge of the building. The strong vertical line of the three window bays and the interven-
and associated equipment has long since been removed.

Alger Brothers bought the Park (and Princess, now known as the Urbana Cinema) in 1931. Alger did $15,000.00 worth of remodeling between July 16 and August 29, 1936. The remodeling included enlarging the lobby to twice its former size and moving the box office from within the theatre to the front. Lobby remodeling also entailed locating lounges on either side of the entrance and moving the manager's office from the left to the right of the entrance. The front of the theatre was covered with structural glass with chromium fixtures, adding a touch of art deco. In the auditorium, the walls were covered with an acoustical material, and new sound equipment was installed.

Alger air conditioned the building in the spring of 1937. Ten years later in July, 1947, it was updated from water cooling to mechanical refrigeration. A new marquee costing $2,067.00 was installed October 22, 1950. The contractor was C. Bendson of Decatur.

The Park permanently closed on Monday July 21, 1958. At the same time, Alger closed the Princess in Urbana, but continued to operate the Coed in Champaign. The Art Theatre Guild bought the Park and the Illini on September 25, 1958. The Park's name was changed, and the Art opened on Friday, October 3, 1958. The opening film was "The Red and the Black," based on the Stendhal classic, "Rouge et Noir." Among those present at the opening were Champaign Mayor Virgil Lafferty, who cut the ribbon; Louis Sher, Columbus, Ohio, president of the Art Theatre Guild; Richard Packer, manager of the Art and formerly manager of the Art Theatre Guild in Denver, Colorado; and Andrew Moraetes, manager of the Illini Theatre. The Art Theatre Guild had done some remodeling, including the revamping of the lobby and rest rooms, some new flooring, plumbing and wiring, and recovering of the seats. They must have also done at least minor changes to the marquee to change the name of the theatre. The Art Theatre Guild included extra touches such as free coffee and Coke and art exhibits in the lobby.

In 1971, the Art switched from art to "adult" movies. When the larger theatre chains began to invade owner Louis Sher's market niche by showing art films, he switched to a new niche and began showing "adult" films.

In September, 1986, owner Louis Sher, who had since moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, closed the Art and put the building up for sale. The Art was the last "adults-only" theatre in Champaign-Urbana.

John Manley purchased the building for $50,000.00 on January 15, 1987 because he liked the building. He repainted the auditorium, painted and papered the lobby, scrubbed the seats, relaid carpet, rewired the theatre and projection room, and hung a new screen. On Thursday, February 12, 1987, the New Art opened. The film shown was "Turtle Diary" starring Ben Kingsley and Glenda Jackson. The Art was once again showing true art films. In the beginning, films were shown on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays. The films were programmed by Ron Epple of the Expanded Cinema Group. The schedule was later expanded to seven-days-a-week.

John Manley has passed away, and his partner, Tom Angelica continues to operate the Art. The loyal and devoted patrons of the Art Theatre depend on it to fill a niche the large chain theatres do not fill. The Art Theatre shows films with limited distribution, primarily art and foreign films. New audience members are always welcome to visit the Art to enjoy the films unavailable elsewhere, to enjoy the atmosphere and architecture, or both. Support by the public is vital to encourage and continue the useful lives of our historic buildings.

This article was written by PACA Board Member, Perry Morris. Morris is chair of the Theatre Documentation Committee which is researching and recording all of the historic theatres in Champaign County. A documentary video is in production.

Patton Woods Nature Preserve

This year is the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the Patton Woods Nature Preserve. This 14-acre woodland is located in the northeast corner of Champaign County at the intersection of Ford-Champaign County Line Road (3600 N) and 2500 E. Once continuous with the forests of the Middle Fork River, Patton Woods is now separated by 1/2 mile of farmland from the river to the south and west of the woods. The Middle Fork Forest Preserve extends to the south and east of Patton Woods. The preserve is formally known as Grandma Jane Patton's Timber Nature Preserve and contains an interesting cultural as well as natural history for this part of Champaign County.

Jane Patton was an early pioneer of this area, arriving in 1854 along with husband, David, from nearby Fountain County, Indiana. She became known as "Grandma" Patton to family and friends and homesteaded a relatively large area, perhaps 2000 acres, in Champaign and Ford Counties. The site of the homestead and the graves of David and Jane Patton are within two miles of the woods. Much of the cultural history of the period is summarized in a 100-page book she published in 1904, Remembrances of a Pioneer. Unfortunately, only six copies of the original book exist and all are kept in close watch by the Patton heirs. But recently, the Ford County Historical Society has reprinted the book and those interested may contact Dr. Wilbur Sauer, Paxton.

Although much of the book is devoted to family lineage, there are several stories describing the many adversities of pioneer life. Some of these included the high infant mortality rate. When lacking undertakers, Jane was frequently called upon by neighbors to dress and prepare their babies and young children for burial. "I have helped take the measure of a great many people for a coffin, for I was a born leader in taking care of the sick and caring for the dead. I remember a little baby just a few days old that I took on my lap and dressed for the grave, when I was not more than seventeen years old. I think this..."
will sound strange to some.” Indeed it does, but early deaths came not only to the infants, but also the pioneer mothers who rarely received medical attention during childbirth.

The hardships extended to accidents and disease, sometimes fatal, but rarely without complication. Cited in her book were falls from horses and wagons, “dropsy” (fluid accumulation), malaria, encephalitis, pneumonia, consumption (tuberculosis) and many unknown “afflictions.” Because of the lack of drainage systems in this early agricultural period, standing water and marshy conditions were not uncommon in the prairie, especially in spring and fall. So diseases such as malaria and encephalitis, which are carried by mosquito vectors, were not uncommon to the pioneer.

The remedies in some cases sounded worse than the “affliction.” When a small splinter passed into the finger of Grandma Patton and an infection (“blood poisoning”) began to develop, physicians from Paxton and Clarence were consulted. She describes how they made several incisions (“splits”) along her finger to allow drainage. “I had to have medicated water poured in every two hours and take whiskey and strychnine every four hours. I would sometimes look at my hand and wonder if it would ever get better.” The infection was serious enough it required 59 home visits in a period of about 10 weeks in 1901.

The early agriculture of this area included crops such as melons, squashes, pumpkins, and corn. Cattle and hogs were also raised and allowed to pasture among the prairie grasses.

Weeds, as we know, them were non-existent. These non-native plant species were brought from Europe and Asia by the pioneers themselves either accidently or intentionally. Lacking the normal checks of a balanced ecosystem, the introduced plants soon spread rapidly to become a real pest for not only the farmer, but homeowner and backyard gardener as well. Forests, like those near the Middle Fork River and “prairie groves,” like the 10-Mile Grove near Paxton, were important sources of fuel and building materials for the area pioneers. Indeed, part of Patton Woods, along the south border, bears evidence of tree cutting for fence posts prior to the area becoming a nature preserve.

In 1976, Patton Woods became a preserve of the Nature Conservancy. This 14-acre tract of oak and hickory forest was a gift from Jane Patton’s grandchildren to honor the memory of this venerable pioneer. The Nature Conservancy then contracted Parkland College to become managers or stewards of the property. Under the lease agreement with Parkland, the woods is to be used for research and educational purposes. The woods is home for a wide variety of plants and animals including deer, gray squirrel, raccoons, and migratory birds. Nearly 200 species of plant have been identified including the rare and endangered long-bracted orchid, Habanera brachata.

Most of the large trees in the woods are white and red oaks with shagbark and bitternut hickories scattered among them. A well developed midstory in the forest includes slippery elm, prickly ash, sassafras, and various berry shrubs. The spring blooming wild flowers are perhaps the real treat of these woods. During the months of April and May there is a succession of blooming among the many wild flowers which includes spring beauty, purple trillium, duchman’s breeches, rue anemone, mayapple, jack-in-the-pulpit, and many others.

Each spring there is an “Open House” for the public on the last Sunday in April. Visitors are invited to visit the woods on that date and bring their cameras. There is a self-guiding nature trail and trail guide booklets for the visitors. The trail is a 1/4 mile loop with numbered stations corresponding to information in the guide booklet. The woods is open all year since there is no fence or gate. Visitors may find the fall and winter are also excellent times to wander the paths at Patton Woods.

Visitors are encouraged to stop by the Natural Science Department Office (217/351-2284), Room L-117, Parkland College, 2400 West Bradley Avenue, Champaign, to pick up a brochure and trail guide booklet before driving to Patton Woods.

Earl Crutzburg is a PACA member and biology teacher at Parkland College. He has been the land steward of Patton Woods for the Nature Conservancy since 1976.

Please remember to fill out and return the enclosed survey.

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**Membership Application P.A.C.A.**

**MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY:**

- □ Adult ........................................ $10.00
- □ Student (½ time or more) .................. $5.00
- □ Senior Citizen ............................. $5.00
- □ Family (includes all members of a household with no more than two members being over age 21) ........ $15.00
- □ Additional Contribution .................
- □ Up to 50 members ........................ $50.00
- □ Over 100 members ...................... $100.00

**NAME** ............................................

**ADDRESS** ........................................

Make checks payable to: PACA, Box 2555, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61825

Contributions are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.
Miscellany

For the Record: How the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record Document America's Heritage is a traveling exhibit sponsored by the National Building Museum that will be at the University of Illinois from October 8 through November 14. The exhibition includes a documentary video, drawings, and photographs that demonstrate how historic structures are recorded. Scotty's Castle, a Spanish-style mansion in Death Valley, California, and the Avery Island Saltworks in the bayous of Louisiana (where Tabasco sauce is made) are the featured projects.

The Discovery Place, Inc. is sponsoring a benefit Fine Art and Antique Auction on November 20. For more information or to donate an item, call Carolyn Baxley at 217-384-4838.

The PACA Board of Directors is conducting a survey to obtain your opinions about our programs and projects. Responses will be used to help us formulate future plans, projects, and activities. Please take a moment to fill out and return the enclosed survey. Since response to these types of surveys is typically low, your returned survey will be especially meaningful to the Board! Thank you for your time and 29¢ stamp.

The 1989/90 and 1990/91 3/4C Option at Leal School won the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois' Preservation Education Program Award. Teachers Colleen Brody and Nancy Coombs accepted the award on behalf of their classes at last June's Illinois Preservation Conference held in Peoria. The award was based on the student enthusiasm created by the teachers during an innovative study of architecture and historic preservation as a special focus of Illinois history. The effort resulted in two guidebooks written and illustrated by the students: Children, Architecture, and History: A Child's Walking Tour Guide of Urbana and Children, Architecture, and History: A Child's Guide of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. These books are available from Leal School or at area bookstores.