

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name Arcada Theater Building

other names/site number the Arcada

2. Location

street & number 105 East Main Street, and 12 South 1st Avenue not for publication

city or town St. Charles vicinity

state Illinois code IL county Kane code 089 zip code 60174

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State of Federal agency and bureau _____

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title _____ Date _____

State or Federal agency and bureau _____

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that the property is:

- entered in the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Arcada Theater Building
Name of Property

Kane, Illinois
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater
COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store
COMMERCE/TRADE/business
SOCIAL/meeting hall
COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater
COMMERCE/TRADE/business
COMMERCE/TRADE/specialty store
COMMERCE/TRADE/restaurant

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Spanish Colonial Revival
Moderne

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE
walls BRICK
TERRA COTTA
roof OTHER/Clay Tile
other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1926 - 1944

Significant Dates

1926

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Behrns, Elmer F. / Architect

Norris, Lester J. / Builder

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Theatre Historical Society,
St. Charles Historical Society

Arcada Theater Building
Name of Property

Kane, Illinois
County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
	Zone	Easting	Northing
4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Craig A. Frank, Owner/Partner and Michael A. Dixon, AIA/Architect

organization Arcada Enterprises date 12/31/93

street & number 12 South 1st Avenue, Suite F telephone 708-584-0820

city or town St. Charles state Illinois zip code 60174

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FPO.)

name Arcada Enterprises; Craig A. Frank, Gary R. Frank, Ruby M.H. Frank

street & number 12 South 1st Avenue, Suite F telephone 708-584-0820

city or town St. Charles state Illinois zip code 60174

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

Built in 1926, the Arcada Theater building is a three story, L-shaped structure occupying the southeast corner of First Avenue and Main Street (Illinois Route 64) in downtown St. Charles, Kane County, Illinois. The 26,320 square foot building was designed by Chicago architect Elmer F. Behrns as a commercial building to include shops, offices and a 1,009 seat theater. The exposed, main elevations on the north and west reflect the Spanish Colonial Revival style which was originally carried throughout the building. Brick masonry with beige terra cotta trim enhances the overall appearance of the building with full three story height terra cotta areas at the northwest entrance and at the marquee entrance on Main Street. The building's south elevation is unadorned, being primarily a massive brick wall with a loading dock for the stage. The fly loft towers to approximately six stories over the three story building.

The north facade of the Arcada faces Main Street. Some changes have occurred at the first floor level in the windows. Four large picture windows replaced two framed openings for the original drug store at that location. A canvas awning covers the heads of the windows. The window changes were made during a 1943 Art Moderne renovation. The marquee was replaced at this time. Formerly it was a rectangular canopy over the north entrance. Presently it is trapazoidal in plan with a tall name sign projecting up to below the roof line of the building. Original terra cotta trim is fully intact at the north entrance, framing a two story Spanish arched top window. Four terra cotta brackets appear to support the clay tile roof.

At the second floor offices, two pairs of triple windows are on the north facade, surrounded by terra cotta in a brown brick background. The two groups of third floor windows on the north are set in pairs with arched tops. The northwest corner of the building is clipped at a 45 degree angle. The original terra cotta which covers this corner is fully in place at the upper floors. A large french door type window is at the second floor with an elaborate terra cotta cap and an iron grille over it.

On the west elevation the window sets are continued, six pairs on the third floor and four triple units on the second floor. The northern most unit on the second floor is a double window instead of a triple.

The west elevation is virtually unchanged from its original appearance except for the canvas awning added at the west entrance. The two story, south part of the west side of the building has more restrained rectangular pairs of windows but has a balcony of wood at an arched door as a feature. On the first floor below this balcony is a grouping of three arched windows.

The first floor of the Arcada primarily contains commercial shops along with the auditorium. A 94 foot long by 12.5 foot wide two story arcade of four arched openings with ornamental iron balustrades at the second floor originally led from the Main Street vestibule to the auditorium doors. Constructed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style, the two story hall was reduced to a one story space in 1943 when the second floor was extended across to provide additional office space. This first floor arcade remains today in the Art Moderne style of 1943, reflecting the popular style which broke the revivalist tradition. A tea room on the second floor, with a kitchen,

was located at the west side of the building, south of the main staircase. The hand painted cypress ceiling remains as original.

The third floor of the Arcada originally contained a parlor, check room, kitchen, dining room and the hall for the Masonic Lodge. This floor remains virtually unchanged in appearance from its 1926 configuration. The large hall is simply adorned with a chair rail, picture rail and a crown molding. The lights are original wrought iron fixtures.

Ingress and egress to the building is available from the First Street side and under the marquee on Main Street, both leading to the theater entry doors at the intersection of the two hallways. The Spanish influence which was carried throughout the building was obvious in the colored floor tile of the hallways. These hallways were changed to the striking Art Moderne patterns which exist today during the 1940's renovation. In the arcade, the doors are full glass with display windows stepped to the recessed door in very geometric patterns, typical of the Art Moderne style. Floor patterns are geometric with triangle highlights at the entrances to the shops. Original interior walls are typically a rough texture plaster. Ceilings are divided with plaster beams decorated to appear as wood. Supporting beams are artistically ornamented with Indian head capitals which were designed by the building owner and builder, Lester Norris. They are visible at the second floor offices.

Three pairs of restored leather covered doors with brass buttons lead to the auditorium from the arcade through a foyer area. At the foyer a coffered ceiling made of plaster is still highlighted with original iron light fixtures. A concession counter was added to the foyer area in 1978 to meet the needs of a movie theater.

In the auditorium, looking toward the 27 x 75 foot stage, the proscenium features a patterned plaster frame with decorative brackets. Niches are placed at the center of the two side walls consisting of three arches in stone patterned plaster which each have a suspended bell. The bells were used as chimes in conjunction with the organ. They also originally swung in synchronization with the organist's control.

The ceiling of the auditorium has a centered octagonal opening with the effect of a Spanish court, being a balcony appearance above. The ceiling consists of two massive main beams supported from ornamental plaster corbels and from which are supported plaster sub-beams, giving a coffered wood effect. The beams are decorated and glazed with varied colored designs. Between the beams the ceiling has a tapestry pattern in light colors. This ceiling is unchanged since its construction in 1926.

Plaques of the Spanish Main face the front of the balcony, which has an ornamental iron railing. Lighting in the balcony is provided by five ceiling lights suspended from grilles.

The chairs in the Arcada, installed by American Seating Company, had leather cushioned seats and tapestry backs. These 1,009 seats were changed to 900 velour covered seats in 1968. On both sides of the stage are exit niches which contain wrought iron gates.

In the basement, under the stage area, were seven dressing rooms, five of which remain unchanged today. The stage was equipped with a trap section with steel beams supporting fifteen removable panels in the stage floor. It is still visible under the present fixed stage floor.

The projection room is located above the balcony, accessed by a vertical ladder. The room is 11 feet wide by 20 feet long. The projection throw is 92 feet to the screen.

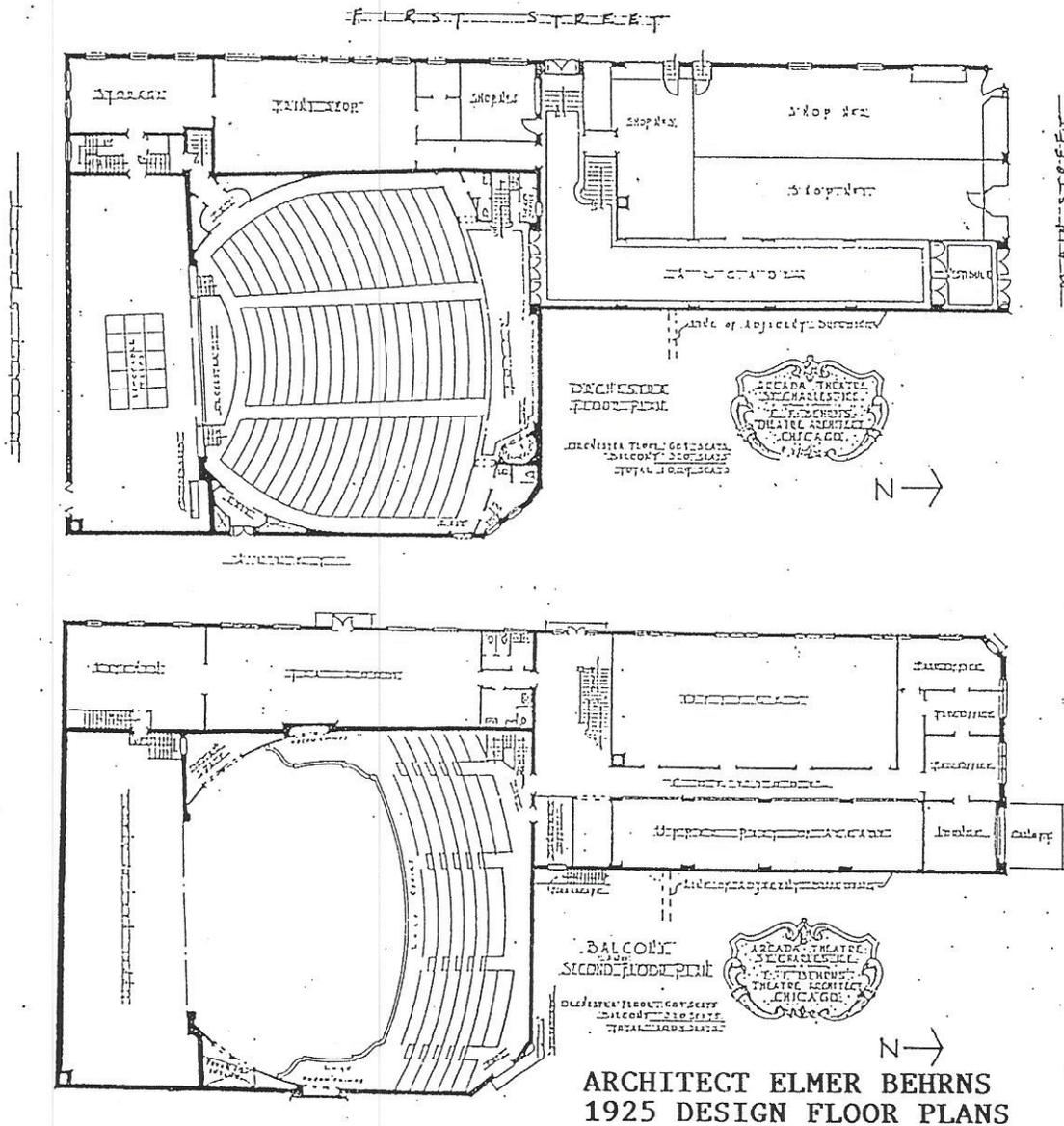
The Arcada Theater building sits prominently on Main Street in St. Charles, Illinois, as an example of Lester Norris's confidence in the future of the city. In 1926, he spent \$500,000 to build this 1,009 seat theater in a town of about 5,000 people. Built to last, the steel structured building has heavy masonry exterior walls of tan brick with beige terra cotta trim and engaged spiral columns at the windows. The red fire flashed Spanish tile decorative roof hides a built in gutter at a sloped composition roof. Two inaccessible exterior balconies enhance the visual interest of the west elevation.

The Spanish Colonial Revival style has been maintained with much integrity on the exterior of the building, in the auditorium and throughout the second and third floors. The change in the arcade to Art Moderne in 1943 from the marquee to the theater doors is an upgrade which reflected the attitudes of the time and is important to the Arcada's history. The Art Moderne influence holds a high level of design integrity.

The Arcada Theater is representative of an "atmospheric" style auditorium. The atmospheric style auditorium dates to 1922 with the opening of the Majestic Theatre in Houston, Texas, designed by John Eberson. Eberson came to the United States from Austria and settled in St. Louis. He travelled to small towns selling ideas and plans for small opera houses. It was in the 1920's that Eberson made his mark.

Bored with the sameness of turn of the century theaters and early movie palaces with their academic interiors, classical motifs, crystal chandeliers, red plush carpets, domes and marble staircases, Eberson devised a unique theme that became known as "atmospheric."

The Arcada Theater Building is an excellent example of the use of traditional revival styles in a modern commercial building. Lester Norris's choice of this style for his building shows his interest in architectural trends of his time. His interest in architecture has had a great influence on the downtown area of St. Charles and includes the 1940 Art Moderne St. Charles Municipal Building which, with Col. Edward Baker, was his gift to the city.



The Arcada Theater Building is eligible under Criterion A for Entertainment, providing a significant contribution locally. The Arcada opened September 6, 1926, Labor Day, with a silent movie and a number of vaudeville acts. The Arcada has provided continuous live and/or moving picture entertainment to the present day, interrupted very briefly only twice for remodeling. The Arcada is also eligible under Criterion C for Architecture as a fine example of a small suburban movie palace of the 1920's and as a good example of an atmospheric type theater executed in the Spanish Colonial Revival style. The Arcada's design combines the skill and experience of Elmer F. Behrns with that of local philanthropist and student of art and architecture Lester J. Norris, owner and builder. These smaller theatres represent a transition in the development of the moving picture and, at the same time, show the popularity of vaudeville entertainment. The Arcada was built at the peak yet at the end of vaudeville and transitioned rapidly through the advancement in motion pictures. The period of significance ends at 1944, the arbitrary cut-off date for the National Register.

Entertainment

Entertainment and social activity in St. Charles began in 1836 with the erection of a schoolhouse on East Main Street when much of the social life moved out of the cabin and into town. The first socializing outside the home took place at hotels and inns. Travelers taking the stagecoaches from the west would stop in St. Charles overnight before the last, day-long leg to Chicago.

The first hotel - the Burchell - was built in 1837 at East Main Street and First Avenue, where the Arcada Theater Building now stands. On July 4th, 1838, the new owner celebrated the completion of a large addition with a grand ball. This was the first of many balls which were to fill the hotel with music and laughter for the next 40 years.

The Banking House of Bowman and Baird (1850's - 1860's), located on the southeast corner of Main Street and Second Avenue in the building where the St. Charles Office Supply now operates, contained a second floor Opera House. For years much of the serious business of the town was carried on at the bank. The Opera House above was the social center of the day, holding many happy gatherings.

In the late 19th century, the Main Street block between Third and Second streets was lined with saloons and taverns and known as Whiskey Bend. Among the most popular night spots from the 1920s through the '40s were the Oasis, the 222 Club - at 222 W. Main Street, the Walnut Room and the Club Arcada.

The Club Arcada, located in the Arcada Building adjacent to the theater, was modeled by owner Lester J. Norris on the famous El Morocco in New York. Decorated with black-and-white zebra upholstery and palm trees, Club Arcada was known as "an outstanding" supper club, "with a very fine orchestra for dancing." The supper club's elegant menu - blue with silver lettering - changed daily.

During the past century, much of St. Charles entertainment has centered, in particular around three theaters - The Star, Idle Hour and Arcada. In the past decade a fourth can be added, Pheasant Run Playhouse.

However, there were others - a small movie house operated by Issac Zimmerman is well remembered by his son, William Zimmerman present owner of the Ford, Lincoln and Mercury garage. The house was in operation in about 1922. It was located on 3rd Street, in back of the Quiller clothes shop on Main, Mr. Zimmerman said. It featured both vaudeville acts and silent movies. Johnnie Olson was the projectionist. It was not very successful and did not last long.

Karl Gartner seemed to remember a movie house called the Bijou but couldn't recall where it was located. According to a history compiled by Alice L. Davis there were two other "halls" - Minard's and Irwin - which were also used for the presentation of various forms of entertainment. Minard's Hall, according to Miss Davis, who sets the date at about 1890, was located on the Southeast corner of 2nd Avenue and Main Street and was used for plays, concerts and religious gatherings. Activities went from the sublime to the ridiculous. The hall was the entertainment center where Charlotte Powers put on her home talent plays, where Negro minstrels were held, where politicians thundered out their orations, where small theatrical companies, gave tragedies and comedies, and where the African Americans, who had their own Baptist Church, held services and did their immersing in the nearby Fox River.

For the Star and Idle Hour it would be the golden age of the silent movies; for the Arcada the exciting, and at the same time, painful era of the "talkies" and the demise of vaudeville. Although there is considerable information available on both the Idle Hour and Arcada theaters, there seem to be very little, save a few exterior snapshots of the Star.

Located at 18 East Main Street, the Star had an impressive entrance and for the most part was considered a "nickelodeon." According to Mrs. Althea Potter a man by the name of Pete Alleman was manager of the Star.

The Idle Hour Theater first opened in 1914 as the New Theater and was built by the late Dr. C.A. Potter, F.C. Hunt and John Christensen, who leased it to the firm of Kelly and Nelson of Joliet and Lemont. The brick building seated 325 and had a large foyer with the entrance on East Main Street, where Stapleton Photography is today, and a wide corridor leading into the theater. The exit was where the entrance now is to the law offices at 7 South 3rd Avenue.

The Idle Hour Theater was opened for business in 1914 with a five reel movie called "A Wonderful Night". Admission was 10 cents for adults and kids got in for a nickel.

According to a plaque in the Idle Hour building - now the offices of the law firm of Clancy & Krippner - the theater was erected in 1900 on the corner of East Main Street and 2nd Avenue. F.C. Hunt, Dr. C.A. Potter and John Christiansen were the owners and the ones who first leased the theater to two men from Joliet by the name of Kelley and Nelson.

It is possible that between 1900 and 1914 the theater was used to present traveling shows, minstrel shows and even locally produced shows together with early one reel "peep-shows" - Kinetoscopes which went on public display on April 14, 1894 in New York and quickly caught on in America, Paris and London.

The Idle Hour would play serials that end in "cliff hangers" so that patrons would have to come back the next Saturday to see the continuation. The theater had one and two reel movies and stage performances. Names such as the Otte and Oliver juggling act and comics headed the vaudeville bill for such pictures as "Mother's Influence," "Out of Deputy Hands," and "Hello Mable," a Keystone comedy. Prices were five and 10 cents and two shows were given on Sunday.

The theater kept going until 1926 when the Arcada Theater was opened by Lester Norris. Norris had purchased the Idle Hour during the three years of building the Arcada. The very last bill of the Idle Hour advertised Lon Chaney in the "Road to Mandalay," Aug. 26, 1926.

The Arcada Theater

The Arcada became known as one of the outstanding vaudeville houses in the Fox River Valley. The very finest acts on the circuit vied for the opportunity of playing the Arcada after a week at the Palace in Chicago. The large modern stage with innovative lighting and controls also featured a trap door, for aquatic and disappearing acts. The Arcada had the finest organ outside Chicago and it was noted that the Chicago Theatre added the same organ fully two years after the Arcada.

Innumerable acts, brought back many times as favorites of the patrons, made up the weekend fare at the Arcada. In the early days it was said that patrons would journey from Chicago to St. Charles for the weekend in order to see a show at the Arcada Theater, dine in the adjacent Club Arcada and stay at the elegant Hotel Baker. (The Hotel Baker was built two blocks away in 1927 by Colonel Baker, the Uncle of Lester Norris's wife, Dellora.) Additional entertainment such as bowling and gaming could be found at the Arcada Recreation Center, located one block behind the theater.

Through the years many stars have appeared at the Arcada: George Burns and Gracie Allen, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, Olivia De Havilland, the John Phillip Sousa Band, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Vincent Price, Lee Remick, Jeannette McDonald, Walter Slezak, and Maria Von Trapp performing in the "Sound of Music".

"I am not exactly sure, but I do seem to recall that when Burns and Allen played the Arcada it was their final performance as a vaudeville team. Of course, they went on to radio and films but it was at our theater that they ended their vaudeville careers," said the late Dellora Norris in 'The St. Charles Parade', a magazine commemorating the city's sesquicentennial.

As a theater, the Arcada went through the same changing times as other theaters. The first silent movies were accompanied by the organist on the live organ. Then the equipment changed from "silent pictures" to "sound." "Sound" meant that many pictures released in late 1926 and 1927 were synchronized with music on discs but contained no dialogue. "Sound" appealed to the movie goers and they were soon demanding "voices."

The first acclaimed talking picture was released in 1927 by Warner Brothers when they presented Al Jolson in "The Jazz Singer." Also in 1927 the first pictures with sound-on-film, Movietone, were shown. In 1928 came the first talking picture "The Lights of New York". The Arcada kept pace, and vaudeville was presented less frequently. However, the Arcada was one of the last in the nation to maintain vaudeville after the "talkies" had taken over.

Most of the houses throughout the country went to "talkies" as the movies out-did themselves with musicals so elaborate and so filled with talent no single act on the current circuit could compare. As vaudeville faded, the organ and the sing-alongs with the bouncing white ball were used to help lure the public into the movie house. The theater was used for stage plays and musicals through the years, as well as for "silents" and "talkies". In the '30's and '40's, it was popular for theaters to present a combination of vaudeville and movies.

In 1936, the organ was replaced with a new, expanded, instrument made by the Geneva Organ Company. The new 3 manual, 16 rank organ was installed along with an electric lift to raise the player out of the orchestra pit. The 16 rows of pipes in the music chambers are fitted in with a variety of other music making devices. A full sized piano is played electrically from the organ keyboard. Drums, tambourines, castanets, blocks and a bird whistle all add to the sound effects. Additionally, to produce the ultimate in concert sound, a third sound chamber was installed at the rear of the auditorium to produce an echo effect.

Various organists of great talent were employed including the well known Howard Peterson. Peterson's organ concerts were broadcast on Chicago radio stations throughout the '30's, and he remained with the Arcada until the use of the organ was discontinued in 1941. The organ then remained silent for many years, except for two rare occasions in the '60's when the Chicago Area Theatre Organ Enthusiasts, CATOE, did some repair work enabling it to be used in an organ concert and a Playmaker production.

Elmer F. Behrns

The architect selected by Lester Norris to design the Arcada was Elmer F. Behrns, 605 North Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois. Mr. Behrns was well accomplished in the art of theatre design. He had previously been a staff architect for the firm of Rapp and Rapp. Much of the training and experience obtained by Mr. Behrns occurred while in the employ of Rapp and Rapp and their influence on his style is apparent in the Arcada design.

Prior to designing the Arcada, Mr. Behrns had recently completed the Chicago Tivoli Theatre. By 1930, he had designed a number of other Illinois theaters. The Princess, in Woodstock, held 1000 and had a Moorish theme. The Pekin, in Pekin, was Chinese in design and held 1000. The El Tovar, in Crystal Lake, with 1000 seats, and the York, in Elmhurst, 1200 seats, were both of Spanish architecture. The largest of the group was the Egyptian, in DeKalb, designed to hold 1600, and was of an Egyptian Motif.

Hans Jensen, contractor, was awarded the principle contract of carpentry work. The Albert Pick firm was selected as painting contractor but, after defaulting, was replaced by the W.P. Nelson firm of Chicago.

Lester J. Norris

The Influence on the design and operation of the Arcada by the owner, Lester J. Norris of St. Charles, cannot be understated. Lester Norris was a wealthy local citizen who took three years of planning and \$500,000 to construct the Arcada and personally served as the builder. Norris, a graduate of the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, was an established commercial artist and former cartoonist with the Chicago Tribune, who designed carved Indian heads to ornament ceiling beams in the arcade. Ornamental hand-wrought iron gates were imported from Venice, Italy, for the foyer. Mr. Norris also had cypress wood cut and hand painted in Florida and shipped north to line the ceiling of the second floor Red Parrot Tea Room. Special tapestry chairs for the auditorium were secured through Lester's uncle, Bert Norris, who operated the long-established family business, Norris and Sons Furniture Store and Mortuary, in St. Charles. Lester Norris drew the artwork for the theatre programs. Norris's financial backing, along with the management of Theatre Manager William L. Pracht, had much to do with the fact that the Arcada was able to function as an independent and would book the top acts which would arrive one week after opening in Chicago. The Arcada did not need to "wait in line" for acts to progress through the suburban circuit before coming to St. Charles.

The Arcada Building

The idea of combining theatrical, commercial and/or residential spaces in one building was not new in 1926 when the Arcada was built. This idea had its roots in later Victorian small-town opera houses that were very often on the second floor or in the back of a city hall, lodge or other commercial structure. Early movie palaces were often placed prominently in multi-purpose structures and office buildings, usually where property was at a premium - as in larger cities - or where cost was a factor as in neighborhoods and smaller towns, such as in St. Charles. As early as 1889, the famous auditorium theater in Chicago was incorporated into Adler and Sullivan's noted Auditorium Hotel, while the State Lake Theatre was incorporated in Rapp and Rapp's State Lake office building of 1917. The Tivoli Theatre in nearby Downers Grove Illinois was designed with street level storefronts and a second story hotel and a bowling alley in the basement. The larger Rialto Square Theatre (1926 Rapp and Rapp) in Joliet, Illinois similarly offers street level storefronts, a basement bowling/billiards hall, and several floors of professional office space. The DuPage Theatre, located app. 18 miles to the East in Lombard, Illinois, is the Arcada's closest atmospheric neighbor and contains seven storefronts (originally six). In Aurora, Illinois, the Paramount Theatre (1931 Rapp and Rapp) located app. 10 miles to the south of the Arcada was built without commercial space but a strip of stores was added alongside its auditorium within a few years.

The Arcada is therefore representative of the theatrical/commercial type building common in the 1920's and is the only such facility to have been built in St. Charles and is typical of the atmospheric style of movie palace, already developed by 1926. The Arcada remains the only atmospheric suburban movie palace within a 10 mile radius of St. Charles.

The Arcada began with the Helmer drugstore in the front corner (1st Avenue and Main Street) with two other retailers adjacent. The Chas. Belyea Men's Wear Shoppe was located on First Avenue south of the drugstore, with the Chronicle Publishing Company also on the ground floor in the space that later became the Club Arcada. The Sandaccarry Soda Shoppe was located on the second floor, overlooking the entryway. A women's wear shoppe and the Red Parrot Tea Room, along with some business offices, completed the available space along with the third floor lodge hall. In small town St. Charles, the theatre's stores were an integral part of St. Charles commerce.

The Arcada brought to its small community, theatre, entertainment and culture especially during the lean years of the depression. It offered an escape close to home.

Additional History

In the mid-'60's, a well known Chicagoland theatrical producer, Marshall Migatz, gathered together name personalities and presented the Standing Room Only series of fine Broadway musicals. When the ladies of the Calvary Episcopal Church in Batavia decided to bring in top talent at popular prices to earn money for a church project, they didn't know how appropriate was the name they had selected. Cornelia Otis Skinner, world-renowned actress and writer, began the series in October of 1965. As she walked onto the 27' by 75' stage before the performance to test the sound equipment, she told the stage crew that the acoustics were nearly perfect. She said that she had played great theaters all over the world and the Arcada ranked among the best. She went on to perform without the aid of a microphone.

Another of the SRO performers to be impressed with the mechanics and sound effects of the Arcada Theater was the late Basil Rathbone, a cultured gentleman of 70 when he appeared here, and an actor of "the old school". He said that the Arcada was one of the few theaters in the country to measure up to the acoustics of the English theaters of 50 years ago. "In those days," he said, "there were no microphones. In order to be heard, an actor had to develop the quality of his voice and project it across a perfectly constructed sound chamber." Rathbone was also impressed with the way the scenery at the Arcada was 'flown'. He explained that this means that a very high loft area above the stage area is the resting place of props and scenery which can be lowered and raised for rapid changes of scene. There were 35 lines of rigging, and the model equipment was the first to be installed in the North by the Vollandts of St. Louis. In addition, all booth equipment was to be the same as the Chicago Theater.

The SRO series was preceded and followed in the '60's and '70's by a community theater group, the Playmakers. During this period, audiences were treated to a variety of productions such as "Annie Get Your Gun", "Bittersweet", "Brigadoon", "Carousel", "Girl Crazy", "The Merry Widow" and "Time of the Cuckoo". The shows were acclaimed by local audiences but were discontinued after 1979 due to rising costs.

In 1971 Bill Barry of Glen Ellyn and Doug Christensen of Lombard convinced the Arcada management that they could make the organ playable again. They began the process of re-leathering the organ and rebuilding the relay contacts. Missing pipes were found and returned to the theater, and the group completely restored the organ console with its color-lighted panels. After two years of work, CATOE began a series of concerts which filled the house once again with organ aficionados. Their labor of love to maintain the organ continues to this day, and the organ is played frequently before movie presentations.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Frank, Craig; Arcada Theatre/Souvenir Program, with artwork adapted from original programs designed by Lester Norris in 1926. Current program by Craig Frank produced in 1993.

Harris, Kenzie B., Illinois History: The Theater in Illinois.

Pearson, Ruth Sean, St. Charles through History, 1978.

St. Charles Chronicle articles

June 11, 1925, Arcada Building is Spanish in Architecture.

December 24, 1925, Arcada Organ is Purchased; Special Type.

March 18, 1926, Arcada Stage Equipment is Already Here.

May 27, 1926, Big Pipe Organ for Norris Theater Now Being Installed.

June 17, 1926, Arcada Nears Completion as Work is Pushed.

July 8, 1926, Arcada Work is Being Pushed, Fast as Possible.

August 19, 1926, Opening Date of Arcada is on Labor Day.

August 26, 1926, Arcada to be Brilliant in Copious Lights.

September 2, 1926, Arcada Opens; Last Frontier

October 7, 1926, Arcada Opens; A Multitude in Attendance.

November 18, 1926, The Arcada as Others See It is Retold Here.

St. Charles Chamber of Commerce, St. Charles, Illinois: The Beauty Spot of the Fox River Valley, 1927, Page 25.

10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

All of Lots 5 and 6 in Block 2 of the Original Town of St. Charles, on the East side of the Fox River, and that part of Lots 3 and 4 in said Block 2, described as follows: Beginning at the Southeast corner of said Lot 4; thence Northerly along the Easterly line of said lot, 29.05 feet; thence Easterly, parallel with the Southerly line of said Lot 3, a distance of 0.32 feet to the center line of a one foot wide party wall; thence Northerly along said center line 37.25 feet to a point on the Westerly line of said Lot 3 which is 34 feet Southerly of, as measured along said Westerly line, the Northwest corner of said lot; thence Northerly along the center line of said one foot wide party wall to a point on the Northerly line of said Lot 4, which is 0.28 feet Westerly of the Northeast corner thereof; thence Westerly along said Northerly line 50.01 feet to the Northwest corner of said Lot 4; thence Southerly along the Westerly line of said Lot 4, a distance of 100.30 feet to the Southwest corner of said lot; thence Easterly along the Southerly line of said lot, 50.295 feet to the point of beginning, in the City of St. Charles, Kane County, Illinois.

Boundary Justification

The property boundary as described coincides with the exterior footprint of the Arcada Theater building.