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THE IRONWOOD THEATRE AS SYMBOL

By

Marianne Triponi

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ABSTRACT

THE IRONWOOD THEATRE AS SYMBOL

By

Marianne Triponi

This thesis examines the Ironwood Theatre, built as the showplace of Michigan's remote Upper Peninsula in 1928, as a product of social history, economic history, and art history. Contracts, building estimates, United States Census Reports, city directories, letters, interviews, site study, blueprints and newspapers form a picture of Ironwood in the twenties, identify the client, create a history of the building and a biography of the architect, N. Albert Nelson. Architectural Forum (1925) and R.W. Sexton's Modern Theatres of Today (1927) as well as scholarship on early decades of the motion picture industry, establish a national pattern of exhibition style and movie palace architecture with which to compare the Ironwood Theatre. The Ironwood Theatre aspired to the national standard of architecture while serving as a symbol of culture, legitimacy, community status and the personal achievement of the American Dream.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Roderick Nelson for his exceptional cooperation and generosity; the Ironwood Theatre Preservation Committee for not cleaning out their vaults; Jo Ann Fleming at the Carnegie Library in Ironwood for keeping an excellent verticle file; Dr. Kathryn B. Eckert of the Bureau of History of the State Michigan for providing a primary copy of N. Albert Nelson's applications, and John Seaman for helping to solve the puzzle. Special thanks to Dr. Sadayoshi Omoto for inspiration and encouragement; to the Art History unit of the Department of Art at Michigan State University for support, especially Dr. Webster Smith, Dr. Paul Deussen and the readers of the thesis, Dr. Linda Stanford and Dr. Phylis Floyd.

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INTRODUCTION

In Middletown, the only systematic study of cultural life in the twenties, the Lynds' defined the typical American city: the population should be around 30,000 with few foreign-born and the climate should be temperate.[1] Ironwood, Michigan, when compared to Middletown, Indiana is too cold, too remote and too ethnic to be considered mainstream by the Lynds' standards. How and why did Ironwood, so small and physically isolated, choose to build the Ironwood Theatre, a true movie palace in 1928?

The movie palace has been regarded by art historians as little more than an entertaining, eclectic, dishonest and garish novelty of the 1920s, divorced from the phenomenon of film. In reality, the movie palace was the symbol of the movie industry, the structural embodiment of an economic empire struggling for moral, social and artistic acceptance. Ben Hall's The Best Remaining Seats in the House (1961), a classic work on the movie palace of the twenties, was not scholarly or historical. Hall did not attempt to explain the movie palace beyond the obvious escapist implications of the decor. David Naylor in American Picture Palaces (1981) and Joseph Valario and Daniel Friedman in Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Re-Use (1982) have dealt with the movie palace in broader terms. For the first time, Naylor, Friedman and Valario delved into historical precedents and

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[1]Helen Merrill Lynd and Robert S. Lynd, Middletown: a Study in Contemporary American Culture, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company), p. 7.

structure, yet none of these writers have fully evaluated the movie palace's place in the community and in the movie industry. No art historian or preservationist has yet to equal the brilliance of Garth Jowett's Film the Democratic Art (1976) or his collaborative effort with James Linton, Movies as Mass Communication (1980) or Douglas Gomery's articles on the economics of the film industry in the Seventies or Lewis Jacobs' The Rise of American Film (1939) or Albert McLean's American Vaudeville as Ritual (1965). Each of these individuals has made enormous contributions to their own fields of communications, economics, history and social history while writing penetrating observations (not essays) on the role of movie palace architecture.

The real function of the movie palace everywhere can readily be established by examining the case of Ironwood, an atypical community trying to build a typical movie palace.

PART I

IRONWOOD IN 1928

CHAPTER 1

IRONWOOD'S BACKGROUND

Geographic Background

Ironwood, Michigan is located on the western border of Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the eastern border of Wisconsin (fig.1). The citizens of Ironwood identify more closely with Wisconsin than they do with Michigan. Little wonder when one considers that Hurley, Wisconsin, Ironwood's twin city is within walking distance from downtown Ironwood. Detroit is, in fact, 613 miles from Ironwood; farther than Duluth (110 miles), Minneapolis (236 miles) or even Chicago (412 miles). Ironwood is the center the Gogebic Range which includes thirteen small cities in Wisconsin and Michigan within a fifty mile radius of the city.[1]

Ironwood is 1,500 feet above sea level. The land is rocky and wooded. The soil is loamy. Lake Gogebic and Lake Superior are nearby as are numerous mountains. Native trees include ironwood, maple, birch, elm, ash, pine, spruce, balsam, hemlock, tamarack and cedar. Lake Superior sandstone and brownstone are also plentiful.

The average annual temperature in Ironwood is 42.8°. The city has an annual snowfall of 135" of snow and an annual rainfall of 34.8" of rain.

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[1]The cities in Michigan are Ontonagon, Wakefield, Bessemer, Watersmeet, Ewan, Lake Gogebic. The cities in Wisconsin are Ashland, Hurley, Mercer, Manitowish Waters, Sayner, Boulder Junction, and Minocqua.

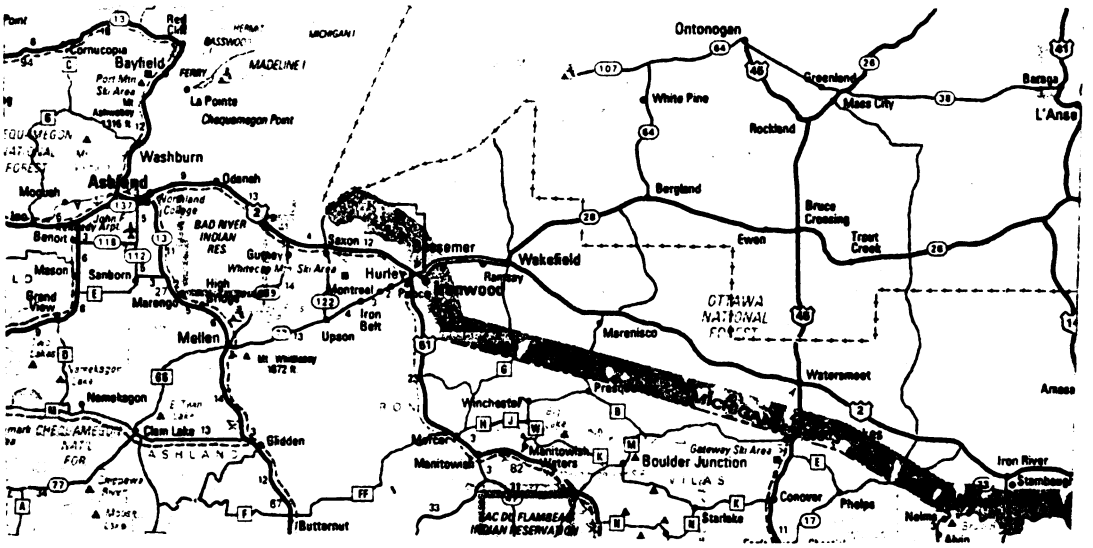

Fig. 1. Map of Ironwood.

History of Ironwood

Gogebic County was settled by James Kirk Paul in 1843. In 1845, the United States Geological Services surveyed the region, but it wasn't until 1872 that the Gogebic Range was mentioned in Brooks and Pumpelly's first volume of the Michigan Geological Survey: Description of the Wilderness District as being heavily timbered with an abundance of iron ore.

The first body of marketable iron ore was discovered in Gogebic County in 1881 by Richard Langford at the Colby Mine. In 1883 Bessemer, seven miles east of Ironwood, began mining. The Oglebay Norton mine owned by Northern Company of Cleveland, opened in Ironwood in 1884. The next year, the Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western Railroad entered Gogebic County and Ironwood experienced a population boom.

Ironwood's first immigrants were mostly Germans, Italians,

Swedes, Finns and French Canadians employed at the Big Norrie, East Norrie, Newport, Aurora and Ashland mines. The largest and best producing mines were within the Ironwood city limit.

On June 4, 1886, Bessemer Township separated from Ironwood Township. In 1886, Bessemer, the smaller of the two cities, was named the Gogebic County seat.

In 1887, Ironwood's population was about 7,000.[2] The majority of Ironwood's foreign-born miners spent their leisure time in one of the town's fifty saloons which were open twenty-four hours a day. There was a correspondingly high crime rate abetted not only by liquor but by the absence of law enforcement. It was not until 1892 that Ironwood organized a police department.[3]

On September 15, 1887, a fire leveled the Ironwood Business District. The town was quickly rebuilt in Lake Superior brownstone. The Panic of 1893 paralyzed the iron industry and the region. Lumbering and farming increased in the region. By 1895, iron production resumed.

In the 1920s, the mining industry was the major employer in Ironwood. According to the Gogebic Range Directory of 1927, the Gogebic Range shipped out 167,098,I92 tons of ore. Since the 1930s, the mining industry in Ironwood has steadily declined. In 1950, mining employed 1,072 out of 11,466 people in the city.[4] The last of the forty-three mines closed in 1962, creating chronic unemployment.

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[2]Gogebic Range Directory, 1928, p. 3.

[3]W.E. Kuursisto, Early History of Gogebic County, Michigan, Written for the Michigan State Library, 1952, p. 25.

[4]U.S. Census Bureau, 1950.

According to the Lansing State Journal of November 10, 1988, fifty-five percent of the population currently receives Social Security benefits or welfare. Today, lumbering, farming and tourism are the main industries in Ironwood.

CHAPTER 2

DEMOGRAPHICS IN IRONWOOD IN 1928

The first United States Census was taken in Gogebic County in 1890.[1] The largest increase in the county's population occurred between 1910 and 1920. Ironwood was counted in the 1910 census as a city with more than 10,000 inhabitants. Its largest increase in population also occurred between 1910 and 1920 when it peeked at 15,739 inhabitants.[2] The 1928 Gogebic County Directory noted that Ironwood gradually became the center of population. "Its prosperity and growth has at length enabled it, for the past several years to claim the honor and distinction of being the largest city in the Upper Peninsula."[3] By 1930 Ironwood's population declined to 14,399 causing the city to loose its title as the largest city in the Upper Peninsula to Marquette with a population of 14,789.[4]

Because the Depression had impacted Ironwood's population by 1930, the actual population of Ironwood in 1928 was probably closest to the 1920 census. At the time the Ironwood Theatre was built, Ironwood was at its zenith, "the shopping center of an area reaching

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[1]United States Census Bureau figures for Gogebic County: 1890, 13,166; 1900, 16,738; 1910, 23,333; 1920, 33,225; 1930, 31,577.

[2]According to the United States Census Bureau, Ironwood's population in 1910 was 12,821; 1920, 15,739 and 1930, 14,399. Today Ironwood has 7,741 inhabitants.

[3]Gogebic Range Directory, 1928, p. 2.

[4]United States Census Bureau, 1930. In 1980, according to the United States Census, Marquette had a population of 74,101.

for miles in extent, rich in natural resources and boundless in wealth and opportunity."[5] The theatre could potentially serve 15,739 people in Ironwood, 33,225 people in the county and countless others in Wisconsin.

According to the 1930 United States Census, closest in building date to the Ironwood Theatre, the bulk of Ironwood's population in 1930 was male (7,376 men to 6,923 women) and over twenty-one (7,686). The second largest age group was between five and fourteen years inclusive (3,416). The next most populous group age was the fifteen to twenty-four year olds (2,147). Ironwood had a 2.5% illiteracy rate for the population over ten years of age, the majority of those being foreign born.

In 1930, 26.8% of Ironwood's population was foreign-born and 53.2% of "native whites" were first generation Americans with either foreign-born parents or "mixed" parents (one parent was foreign born);[6] therefore 79.8% of Ironwood's population had strong ethnic ties. Only county figures were broken down into distinct ethnic groups. County figures paralleled the pattern set in Ironwood, with 28.3% foreign-born whites, 52.4% as first generation Americans and 80.7% of the county inhabitants with strong ethnic ties (See Appendix I for ethnic breakdown).

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[5]Gogebic Range Directory, 1928, p. 2.

[6]According to the Census figures, there only three negroes in the whole county and only 36 "other", meaning Asian.

CHAPTER 3

LEISURE IN IRONWOOD IN THE TWENTIES

Trade unionism and mechanization helped to free the worker at the beginning of the twentieth century, while increasing productivity. As a result, the national work week declined five hours every ten years between 1900 and 1920, creating more leisure time.[1] People in Ironwood and all over the country earning an average of ten dollars a week, with less than one dollar to spent on amusement,[2] participated in at least one of three categories of leisure activities of the 1920s: traditional leisure, self-conscious leisure and machine governed leisure.

According to the Lynds, "leisure activity was conditioned by the physical environment."[3] Traditional leisure was a regional affair, shaped by the geographical and ethnic character of the area. Ironwood's abundant natural resources made swimming, boating, camping and skiing popular seasonal activities. Skating was one of the most popular of these leisure activities; in addition to the natural

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[1]Garth Jowett, Film the Democratic Art, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976), p. 17. The work week dropped from an average of fifty-six hours in 1900 to an average of forty-six in 1920. According to the Gogebic Range Directory, 1928, p. 3, the steam shovel was introduced in mining in Ironwood in 1890. This would have also freed the miner in Ironwood.

[2]Garth Jowett and James M. Linton, Movies as Mass Communications, (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1980), p. 70.

[3]Helen Merrill Lynd and Robert S. Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company), p. 225.

skating rinks, a skating rink was erected on McLeod Ave in the twenties. With such a high percentage of Northern European immigrants, one would expect cold weather leisure activities to be popular. For those who preferred indoor activities, municipal dances premiered in Ironwood in 1925 for thirty-five cents. The Irondrome in Bessemer was seven miles away, but the 100 by 200 foot amusement center which opened on December 19, 1919, was probably worth the effort it took to get there. The Irondrome had an orchestra box and dance floor.[4]

Some of the most popular leisure activities in Ironwood in the twenties were morally suspect. Billiard halls and soft drink parlors were covers for bootleg and prostitution. According to City Manager W.M.Rich, in a March 7, 1927 City Council meeting, eleven soft drink parlors and ten billiard halls were suspected of selling bootleg. "Although word on the street had it that lewd women and liquor traffic were worse than ever," Rich declared, "Ironwood was free from lewd women."[5] Owned by immigrants like Matt Lehto, Vic Niemei, Bill Byrnes, and Joe Kubiack, these establishments catered to the high number of ethnic Europeans who were not used to having morality and personal drinking habits dictated by government. Ironwood also had a history of imbibing as recreation from its earlier mining days. The presence of Hurley, Wisconsin, the home away from home of Al Capone, linked to Ironwood by a streetcar, was also an influential geographical factor

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[4]History of Gogebic County, Michigan, (typed by Michigan State Library from historical deposits in Michigan Historical collections: Ann Arbor, 1954), p. 260.

[5]City of Ironwood, Minutes of City Council Meeting, March 7, 1927, pp. 437-438.

in the perpetuation of bootleg in Ironwood.

Freed by canned goods, ready-to-wear clothes, toasters and electric coffee pots, housewives and working women found more time for themselves. Beauty parlors, one symbol of self-conscious leisure, allowed women to indulge themselves. In the twenties, beauty parlors supplanted the barber shop as an exclusively women's leisure activity. The 1921 Ironwood City Directory reported one beauty parlor; the 1928 Gogebic Range Directory reported eight.

Another indication of self-conscious leisure was the phenomenon of clubs where citizens golfed, dined, conversed, socialized and played bridge and baseball with a select group of friends of the same social class. The Rotary Club, The Elks club, the Kiwanis Club, a country club, the Masonic Temple, the Knights of Columbus, the Women's Club, and the Athletic Club premiered in Ironwood in the twenties. The 1921 Ironwood City Directory listed no clubs; the 1928 Gogebic Range Directory listed twelve.

The true revolution in leisure came with machine governed leisure: the radio, the automobile and the movies, none of them dependent on environment or ethnicity. The automobile widened the world and changed the face of America. Radio and movies were products of mass communication; a new revolution that according to Jowett, "disseminated a single set of values and social norms."[4] By 1922, movies were the most widespread commercial entertainment in the world. Prices were fifteen cents to thirty-five cents. Seats in special

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[4]Jowett, Democratic Art, p. 14.

shows went for as much as one to two dollars.[7] Although neither movies nor radio nor the automobile were new in 1928, the 1921 Ironwood City Directory listed no radio shops in Ironwood, but the 1928 Gogebic Range Directory listed seven. Likewise, auto repair shops and garages increased from two in 1921 to ten in 1928, a five fold increase. Although the number of movie houses actually decreased from 1921 to 1928, seating capacity in Ironwood increased. It was in 1928 that the Ironwood Theatre opened.

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[7]J. D. Wendon, The Birth of the Movies, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), p. 107.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE IN IRONWOOD UNTIL 1928

Architecture Prior to 1920

One of the dominant architectural styles in Ironwood prior to the 1920s was Romanesque Revival. The Davis and Fehr Building (fig. 2), City Hall, Norrie School, the Swedish Methodist Church and J.H. McLean's home were turreted Romanesque Revival structures constructed of Lake Superior brownstone, sometimes in combination with red brick. Brownstone was heavily favored for every building in Ironwood after the 1887 fire not only for its fire proofing qualities but for its ability to camouflage ore dust.[1] Even the Carnegie Library was built of brownstone. This local building material was also ideally suited to the massive quality of Romanesque Revival architecture. Koeper noted that "prosperous and ambitious 'Western' cities, as they were then regarded, saw in Richardsonian Romanesque a congenial means of expression for their civic, cultural, and domestic virtues."[2]

Italianate was well represented in the Ironwood Business District. The Bank of Ironwood Block, the Williams Block and the First National Bank Block were two-storied, flat-roofed, Italianate. commercial buildings.

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[1]The color was heavily favored in all building and even in clothing because ore dust seeped into everything.

[2]Marcus Whiffen and Frederick Koeper, American Architecture, Volume 2: 1860-1976, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1981), p.233.

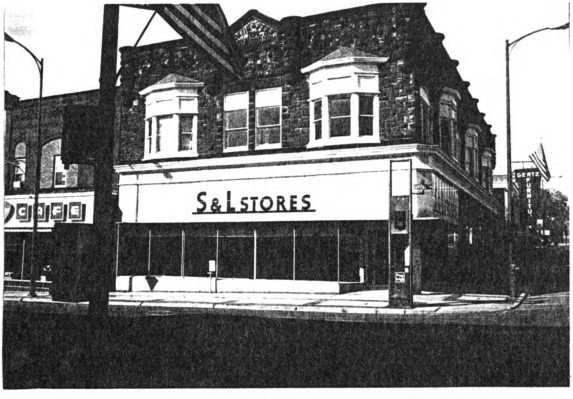

Figure 2. The Davis Fehr Building, Ironwood, 1890.

Regardless of denomination, most of Ironwood's early churches appeared to be cut from the same mold: simple, one-room structures with central towers with either pointed or arched windows. When executed in brownstone, these churches had a distinctively Romanesque quality; when executed in wood, they had a distinctively rustic and Scandinavian quality. The wealthiest citizens must have belonged to the First Methodist Church: it was not the largest church in Ironwood, but it was the only fully developed Gothic form in town.

In the twenties, Ironwood experienced a building boom. The Memorial Building (1923), a civic structure on a corner of Marquette and McLeod, was an Upper Peninsula version of McKim, Mead and White Beaux-Arts Classicism. The Memorial Building was one of the few building projects in Ironwood of the period not executed by N. Albert Nelson, the architect of the Ironwood Theatre.

N. Albert Nelson

N. Albert Nelson was born May 11, 1893 in Halmstad, Sweden, a large seaport in the southwest of Sweden where half-timbering was prevalent.[3] One suspects Nelson's predilection for Tudor derived from his homeland.

In Sweden, Nelson attended three years of high school and two years of technical school. When he left his home in 1911 for the United States, Nelson held no advanced degree.

On his arrival in the United States, Nelson immediately settled in

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[3]G.E. Kidder Smith, Sweden Builds, (New York and Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1950), p. 42.

Ironwood. For a year, Nelson attended Luther Wright High School. From May 1912 until sometime in 1915, Albert was employed by the General Contractor, Olsen and Berquist in Ironwood as a designer, estimator and draftsman doing routine work relating to mines.[4] In September, 1915, Albert enrolled in Augustana College, a four year liberal arts college and theological seminary in Rock Island, Illinois, as one of eighteen sophomores.[5] Curiously, Nelson gave a McLeod Avenue address in Ironwood on his registration card as his permanent address,[6] yet in the Rockety-I Yearbook of 1916, he listed Chicago as his home.

In 1916, Augustana offered courses in theology, business, elocution, music and art. Albert studied art among other things.[7] Although Nelson only attended Augustana for one year, he was very active. The 1916 Rockety-I listed him as belonging to the Swedish Society of Belles Lettres and the Iduna Society. He also served on the board of directors of the Rockety-I, and was credited at the end with "enhancing the beauty of the book with his work." Nelson contributed a number of full-page illustrations to the publication including the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior title pages as

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[4]Interview with Kathy Anderson, Augustana College, August 18, 1988. Nelson listed the dates as May 1912 to December 1916 on his applications to the Board of Examiners for Registration for State of Michigan. This is not possible since Augustana College recorded him as being enrolled there from September 1915 to June 1916.

[5]Rockety-I, Augustana College Yearbook, 1916.

[6]Interview with Kathy Anderson, Augustana College, August 18, 1988.

[7] Letter from Roderick Nelson, August 18, 1988. Roderick was invaluable. He shared memories and kept pertinent information on his father's work.

well as the music page (fig. 3).

Nelson was primarily a graphic designer. This was evident from a small book plate of a gate in his native Halmstad as well as from his illustrations for the Rockety-I. Although Albert had no feel for the mass or anatomy of the human body, and his style emphasized surface pattern, he displayed a masterful sense of design by the skillful manipulation of space.

Much of the information concerning N. Albert Nelson's life and career came from his son, Roderick. In 1916, Nelson left Augustana to join the army. Still, he had no degree. Sometime during his life, Albert studied by international correspondence school. By January, 1917, however, Nelson was back in Ironwood as the general manager and engineer for the General Construction Company, in charge of reinforced concrete, masonry and routine structural engineering jobs. On September 5, 1918, Albert became a citizen in Calhoun County. Nine months later, on July 22, 1919, he married Agnes Erickson and moved into a home he designed at 164 E. Harding. On Feb. 20, 1920, Nelson registered as a civil engineer (license number 655).

In June, 1921, Albert joined Derrick Hubert an architect in Menominee, in partnership as the civil engineer in charge of the Ironwood office. From June, 1921 until March 1923, Albert handled the design and construction of four large projects in Gogebic County: the First National Bank in Wakefield, the Verona School in Wakefield and Masonic Temple in Ironwood (fig. 4), a Roman Revival building abutting

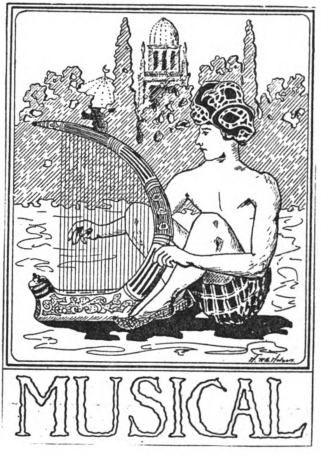

Figure 3. N. Albert Nelson, Music from 1916 Augustana Yearbook

Fig. 4. Nelson and Hubert, Masonic Temple, Ironwood, 1921-23.

the Ironwood Theatre at a cost of $160,000,[8] and the tallest building in the downtown area.

Nelson went into business for himself in March, 1923 as an architectural designer and civil engineer.[9] In Nelson's first year, he designed a grade school in Sidnaw, a Lutheran church in Wakefield, a garage in Marquette and an auto garage in Hurley. The next year was an even bigger one for Nelson. In 1924, he designed the Tudor Revival style Ironwood Country Club and received his largest commission to date from Charles Seaman, for the Seaman Building (figs. 5, 6) at a cost of $175,000.

Charles Seaman, the Seaman Building and Nelson

Charles Seaman was civically and socially active: He was a city alderman and a member of the school board and chairman of the Building Committee for the Memorial Building, an Elk, a Mason, a Shriner, a member of the Rotary Club and a founding member of the Ironwood Country Club.[10] Of these organizations, the Masonic Temple and the

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[8]Much of the information about Nelson's jobs and projects came from his application to the Board of Examiners, State of Michigan as an architect on October 12, 1933, licence number 2521.

[9]Although Nelson was not actually licensed as an architect until October 12, 1933, he is listed in the 1928 Gogebic Range Directory as an architect and as a civil engineer. On his letter head (letter of November 9, 1927 to Ironwood Amusement Corporation), he titled himself an architectural designer.

[10]Battle Creek Inquirer, October 17, 1945. Most details about Seaman's life come from his large obituary and a telephone interview with his nephew, John Seaman.

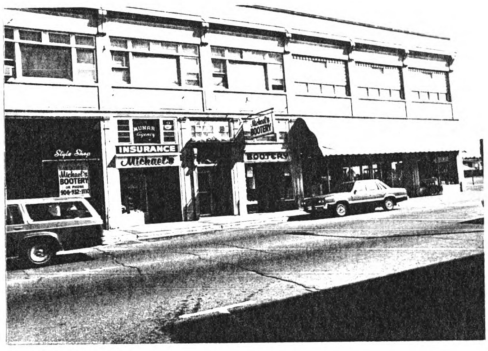

Fig. 5. Nelson, Seaman Building, 1924-1925.

Fig. 6. Nelson, Photograph of Seaman Building taken in 1927.

Country Club were designed by Nelson and built when Seaman was an active member. Like Seaman, Nelson was a Mason. One could speculate that it was through the Masonic Temple that Nelson and Seaman first met.

Charles Seaman, born on September 23, 1878, was a Lithuanian Jew, who had immigrated to America with his parents as a child. The Seaman family first settled in Menominee, Michigan. Later they moved to South Bend, Indiana where Charles' father, Joseph, opened a retail clothing store. Eventually, the Seaman family made Battle Creek their permanent base.

In 1915, Charles settled in Ironwood at the age of thirty-six. Although Ironwood was a remote outback, Charles had every reason to believe that Ironwood could be his land of milk and honey. Within three years of arriving in Ironwood, Charles Seaman had established himself in the motion picture exhibition business, in real estate, in politics and in retail.[11] First, he opened the Style Shop with his brother Maurice at 113 Suffolk Street, a small, exclusive "house of quality" specializing in the women's ready-to-wear clothes.[12] The Style Shop successfully competed with four other women's ready-to-wear shops in Ironwood and eventually with one chain department store for clientele by selling classic taste to the women of the Gogebic Range.

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[11]Seaman's involvement with the motion picture exhibition industry and the rest of his career will be explained in depth in Part III.

[12]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, June 30 and July 1, 1928, p 33. I've also spoken with numerous women who remember the Seaman run Style Shops all over the state.

The Style Shop was so successful that Charles formed Seaman Brothers and developed a small chain of Style Shops. Maurice left for Battle Creek to open his own Style Shop. Soon, nine Style Shops sprang up in Michigan and one in Wisconsin, each owned by a Seaman brother, a brother-in-law or a cousin.[13]

Seaman's personal style was indicative of the tasteful, cultivated image the Style Shop projected. Charles was always impeccably dressed in suits with piping and he was extremely well read.[14] With Seaman's position as Chairman of the Building Committee for the Memorial Building, he set the standard for taste in Ironwood. In 1924, Charles felt it was time to make a personal architectural addition to Ironwood's Business District with the Seaman Building. On April 16, 1924, he formed the Seaman Brothers Building Corporation (SBBC) with his brother Meyer, owner of the Ashland, Wisconsin and Kalamazoo Style Shop and A. L. Picker, Charles' associate in the motion picture exhibition business.[15] Charles was the president of the SBBC, Meyer was the vice-president and Picker was the secretary-treasurer.

The Seaman Building sat on an east-west axis, facing north on East Aurora Street in the heart of the Ironwood Business District. Nelson designed the Seaman Building in 1924 and finished it in 1925.

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[13]The original nine Michigan Style Shops were in Detroit, Lansing, Muskegon, Jackson, Battle Creek, Ironwood, Marquette, Saginaw and Kalamazoo. Ashland, Wisconsin was the only Wisconsin branch.

[14]Interview with John Seaman, August 18, 1988. John described his uncle as extremely interested in politics and as a "parlor leftist". John knew his uncle well after 1935 and given the events that will be described in Part III, Charles may have been become leftist as a result. John was also helpful in supplying details of the SBBC also.

[15]Michigan Corporations and Security Commission, Seaman Brothers Building Corporation, 1924-1932.

Like every commercial building in the Business District, the Seaman Building was two-stories high. Charles intended to move the Style Shop there and rent the rest of the retail and office space. The Seaman Building is of particular interest since part of its facade and interior space was later adapted by Nelson as part of the Ironwood Theatre.

Seaman wanted a sedate facade which would reflect on his personal and professional aesthetic standards. He also wanted a progressive commercial and classic look to the building. To achieve these ends, Nelson selected reinforced concrete faced with Lake Superior sandstone.[16] Nelson masked the modern method of construction with an eclectic facade, a commercial half-modern style with Italian Renaissance allusions. Italian Renaissance effectively projected Seaman's image as a member of a "cultivated society, one of patronage and understanding of the arts,"[17] while the modern style marked him as a man of progress. Walter Kidney, in describing the patron of half-modern offices buildings, suggested that they were:

> of early middle-age, many were Jewish or at least of recent immigrant stock, having no associative ties with colonial or Tudor and happy to identify themselves with the perpetual prosperous immediacy of the jagged and geometric skyline of the hustling city where their fortunes were made.[18]

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[16]In Nelson's Application to the State as Civil Engineer in 1920, he listed masonry and concrete under technical course or program and also noted he had used the method in mine construction. In his Application to the State as an Architect, Nelson noted a garage he built of reinforced in Marquette.

[17]Whiffen and Koeper, American Architecture, p. 270.

[18]Walter C. Kidney, The Architecture of Choice: Eclecticism in America 1880-1930, (New York: George Braziller, 1974), p. 60.

Nelson's design for the Seaman Building was essentially horizontal, painfully so when contrasted to the looming vertical facade of the Masonic Temple next door. He divided the second story into eight bays, each composed of a Chicago window (these must have been truly new to Ironwood) framed by shallowly carved strip pilasters, topped with a bracket and a diamond. A row of dentils between the brackets united the brackets below the cornice.

The second story was composed of a rhythmic row of eight identical bays. The first story of the Seaman Building, however, separated from the second story by a fascia, deviated from this steady rhythm. On the first floor, Nelson employed a sequence of seven bays and large panes of glass. Each bay was diversified in size probably for maximum commercial rental. Stylized Doric columns replaced strip pilasters to separate each bay. One of the most eclectic aspects of the Seaman Building was the central bay of the first story. This marked the entrance to the second offices in the Seaman Building. It was the narrowest bay, distinguished by two brackets with acanthus and scales, and a heraldic relief (fig.7) with two griffins surrounding a cartouche with the letter S carved in Gothic script. The special treatment of the entrance to the Seaman Building not only aided a client in locating the entrance to the office space, but it was also Seaman's coat of arms, marking him as a man of property and therefore a man of power and status.

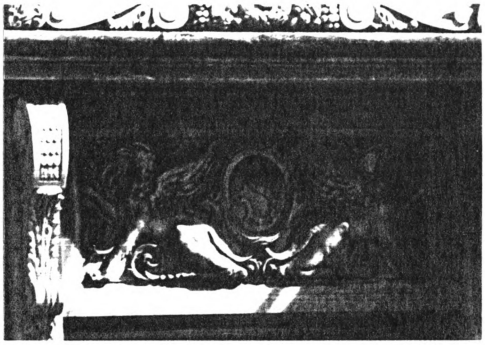

Fig. 7. Nelson, Seaman Building, detail.

Nelson from 1926 to 1949

In 1926, Nelson built three additions to grade schools in Ironwood and Bessemer. In 1927 he received the commission to build the Ironwood Theatre.[19]

The 1928 Gogebic Range Directory listed Nelson as having an office in the Rosemurgy Building and living at 164 East Harding, now with three children: Agnes, Roderick and Bertram. Bertram was named after Bertram Goodhue, Nelson's favorite architect. Goodhue was a fitting choice as Nelson's favorite: They were both apprentice trained, essentially designers, and interested in book and graphic design.

In late 1928, Nelson designed a new home for his family at 166 E. Harding next door to his old one. He branched out into Wisconsin in 1928, designing a public bath house for a private client in Kenosha and the Iron County Memorial Building in Wisconsin. Nelson also designed numerous private homes at this time, Sivula Home on Douglas Boulevard for instance, an English cottage style with an eyelid dormer. In 1929, Nelson had quite a few commissions, the largest being a grade school in Ironwood and a Masonic Temple in Hancock, but 1930 began to show the effects of the Depression. Albert had one extremely large commission for a high school rebuilding in Ispheming in association with Warren S. Holmes of Lansing. The next year was Nelson's leanest. He received only two commissions totalling $55,000. In 1932, things improved for Nelson with a commission to build a gymnasium in Wakefield, again in association with Warren S.

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[19]See Part III for an extensive discussion of every aspect of the Ironwood Theatre.

Holmes of Lansing.[20]

During the Depression, Nelson moved his office to his home and held the State Board Examinations for Architecture and Civil Engineering in the Western Upper Peninsula in his house. In 1933, he was licensed with the State of Michigan as an architect. From 1932 until his death in 1949, Nelson designed many notable buildings in the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin: The Iron County Memorial Building in Hurley, the First National Bank at Wakefield, the First Lutheran Church in Wakefield, the Veterans Memorial Building in Bessemer, the City Hall in Bessemer (uniquely Tudor), the Frick Funeral Home in Bessemer, Catholic Churches in Boulder Junction and Eagle River, and the Ispheming High School.

Nelson also served on the State Board of Examiners for Licensing from 1926-36 after which he was granted permanent registration as a civil engineer. He was also an Executive Board Member of the State Board of Examiners from 1940-1943. In 1943, Albert moved to Chicago; however, he still worked in the Ironwood area. His last commission was the St. Mary Convent in Hurley in 1949, completed shortly before his death on March 1, 1949 of a heart attack. Ironically, Nelson was temporarily interred in Ironwood in a mausoleum he had designed for a client.[21]

Nelson was a devout Lutheran and a member of the Society of Civil Engineers. As a designer and eventually as an architect, he left an indelible and unique stamp on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

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[20]Nelson's Application for Licensing as an Architect.

[21]Ironwood Daily Globe, March 3, 1949.

PART II

THE MOVIES AND THE MOVIE PALACE IN THE NATION

CHAPTER 5

MOTION PICTURE EXHIBITION

The Beginning of Motion Picture Exhibition

The United States history of motion picture exhibition began on April 13, 1896, in New York City at Koster and Bials Music Hall on Thirty-Fourth Street and Broadway when Edison's presented twelve short subjects to the public. Films were first added to vaudeville as another act. The first building devoted only to motion picture exhibition opened on November 22, 1905 in Pittsburgh. It was called a nickelodeon, named for the admission price, a nickel, and the Greek word for theatre, odeon. Within a year more than 1,000 nickelodeons sprang up nationally. By 1910 there were 10,000 nickelodeons nationwide with an audience of ten million weekly, doing a greater business than all legitimate theatres.[1]

Structurally a nickelodeon was a remodeled store or penny arcade with a small seating capacity; as a consequence, shows often ran from the early morning to the late evening to accommodate the demand. The theatre was removed from the sidewalk, with a postered lobby so the crowd waiting for the next showing could be contained while being enticed by coming attractions.[2] The ticket booth was placed either in

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[1]Foster Rhea Dulles, America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607-1940, (New York and London: D. Appleton Century Co., 1940), p. 294.

[2]Gerald Mast, The Movies in our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of the Film in America, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 50.

the center of the lobby or at the back of it. Lucee France Pierce wrote in the October, 1908 edition of World Today that the exterior was "gaudy, blue and yellow Moorish, and entrances were flaming with posters." She described the interior as puritan adding that they were sometimes decorated to looked like a submarine or a jungle to get the viewers in the mood for picture.

Little is really known about the nickelodeon. According to Lewis Jacobs, they were dark, unhygienic urban dives.[3] The Chicago Vice Commission of 1911 reported that women were being assaulted.[4] In Harper's Weekly of August 24, 1907, Barton Currie wrote of rampant pickpockets. Nickelodeons were supposedly frequented by illiterate immigrants. Some scholarship has indicated that nickelodeons may have had a higher class clientele. Russell Merritt found that Boston nickelodeons were located on the edge of suburbs in order to capture the middle class trade.[5] Robert Allen investigated the New York City nickelodeons and reported that only 43 out of 123 of them were located in the immigrant populated lower East side.[6]

The movies constant depiction of murder, robbery and sex also alarmed Americans. In 1907, Chicago imposed local censorship. By

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[3]Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of American Film: A Critical History, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 167.

[4]Garth Jowett, Film, the Democratic Art, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976), p. 83.

[5]Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theatres: 1905-1914", Tino Balio, ed., The American Film Industry, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), p. 83.

[6]Robert Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon, Cinema Journal (Volume XVIII, No. 2, Spring, 1979) p. 6.

1909, a national body of censorship was established. The National Council on Public Morals voiced concern over the powers of films in 1917. Even into the 1920s, moral questions continued to interfere with image of film as a legitimate form of entertainment. Mary Pickford's divorce and Fatty Arbuckle's trial for manslaughter were just two of the many scandals in the early twenties causing an uproar of moral indignation in the country. The Hayes Commission was finally formed in 1922 to clean up Hollywood's image.

Nickelodeon to Movie Palace

The death of the nickelodeon and birth of something larger, more legitimate and prestigious is difficult to pinpoint. In actuality, there was probably an intermediate stage between the nickelodeon and the movie palace. Allen saw 1907 as the year of conversion, pointing to the addition of small-time vaudeville to Loew's which indicated the middle class had embraced film; he also stated that by 1908, Fox had built larger capacity theatres.[7] To Jowett, pictures were out of the back room and into a respectable audience by 1909.[8] Valario wrote that larger and better theatres were tested before 1913.[9] American Way Magazine reported enlarged seating capacity of theatres and shabby

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[7]Allen, "Motion Picture Exhibition", p. 13.

[8]Jowett, Democratic Art, p. 51.

[9]Joseph Valario and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Re-Use, (New York: Academy for Educational Development, 1982), p. 17.

theatres giving way to larger ones in October, 1914.[10] According to Jacobs 21,000 remodeled or new theatres were in operation by 1916, and by 1917, nickelodeons were antiques.[11]

Several innovations in technique, technology and marketing prompted a change in exhibition facilities. The birth of the "star-system" created a more glamorous image for films on first runs.[12] Better movie plots often dealing with historical and legitimate stage themes and the accompanying development, the feature film or multi-reel film, demanded more comfortable surroundings.[13] D.W. Griffith's cinematic inventions such as cross-cutting, close-ups, long-shots, moving camera shots and flash backs helped motion pictures to be seen as "the art processes of all the ages."[14]

Better films attracted the attentions of the middle class.[15] Although audiences could be counted in 1918 when a tax was placed on all seats over ten cents, there was no formal interest in who the audiences were until the mid-thirties. The first actual data came

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[10]Robert Sklar, The Plastic Age 1917-1930, (New York: George Braziller, 1970), p. 104.

[11]Jacobs, Rise of American Film, p. 168.

[12]Prior to 1910, stars were not known by names for fear they would demand money. Carl Laemmle was one of the first to glamorize his stars to gain an audience.

[13]Queen Elizabeth, starring Sarah Bernhardt in 1912 was the first multi-reel film. Birth of a Nation in 1915 was a three hour long blockbuster that proved the public would pay a higher price to see a better film.

[14]Terry Ramsaye, A million and One Nights, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. xiii.

[15]Jowett, Democratic Art, p. 59.

from the Lynds in Middletown in 1925.[16] They concluded that business classes went to movies more often than working class families and that the average weekly attendance was once a week for boys and girls of high school age. Sociologists Walter and Lunt in 1935 were the first to be interested in classifying the audience by socio-economic group, reporting that "upper-upper class females predominated while lower-class males outnumbered lower-class females. Studio moguls assumed that adult females predominated the audience and even set the type of picture viewed."[17]

Most interest in the 1920s and even in the 1930s was centered on the effect of movies on behavior. The Payne Studies, conducted at Ohio State University in 1935, were the most famous of the series. In 1935 Dale published The Content of Motion Pictures, one of the Payne series. As a by-product of this study, he stated that one-third of the audience was highly impressionable children.[18]

Intense economic competition between studios may have been the most potent factor in the emergence of the movie palace. Studio owned theatres competed fiercely with each other for exhibition space to ensure an outlet for their films. No study of any phase of motion picture exhibition can be grasped without a basic understanding of the messy, complex and monopolistic system of production, distribution and

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[16]Helen Merrill Lynd and Robert Lynd, Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), p. 264.

[17]Margaret Ferrand Thorp, America at the Movies, (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 264. Quoting Walter and Lunt.

[18]Edgar Dale, The Content of Motion Pictures, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935). p. 300.

exhibition.

Production, Distribution and Exhibition

The making, the distributing and the showing of motion pictures had been intertwined since 1910 when General Film Company, a division of the Motion Picture Patents Company, was established to distribute films only to licensed theatres. No one was allowed to exhibit, produce or distribute film unless they were licensed by the Motion Picture Patents Company. Anyone who resisted Patents was pressured to sell or fold. Carl Laemele retaliated by moving to California, away from Patents New York base. William Fox made his own pictures and purchased theatres in order to assure their exhibition. Before Fox ended Motion Picture Patents power in 1917, Patents had acquired control over most of the large theatres in the country.

Adolph Zukor, an Eastern European Jew established in the fur business, was one the most dominant and vicious force in this economic battle. Zukor entered the penny arcade business in 1903. Marcus Loew, also an Eastern European Jewish immigrant in the penny arcade business joined Zukor in 1905. In 1907, Loew expanded into motion picture production. Zukor was his treasurer-distributor. By 1912, Loew had acquired 400 theatres and by 1914, Loew's was the largest theatre chain.[19]

In 1912, Zukor who had made a small fortune distributing Queen Elizabeth, split from Loew and formed his own company, Famous Players.

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[19]J.D. Wendon, The Birth of the Movie, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), p. 100.

In 1916 Famous Players merged with Lasky Feature Players which had been formed in 1913 by glove salesman Samuel Goldwyn and Cecil B. DeMille. Zukor's company, now Famous Players Lasky sought to create an aura of glamor on first runs, making a first run more desirable and expensive to see. When the run finished, the film was passed on to smaller theatres. Zukor forced exhibitors to show films for three to six days, then forced them to buy a package of 104 films a year, sight unseen. This practice came to be known as "block booking". Usually, there were only one or two good films in the bunch but Zukor guaranteed an outlet for all of his films whether they were good or bad.

By 1917, a resistance group, First National, had formed against Zukor's practices. First National produced its own film and eventually lured Zukor's biggest stars away from him. Between 1919 and 1920, First National acquired 3,400 theatres, the largest and best in the country.[20] In response to First National, Zukor entered the exhibition business and fought for control of theatres. Famous Players Lasky absorbed Paramount in 1919. Paramount was a distributing firm but it was through Paramount that Zukor sought to dominate the industry by the creation of a chain of prestigious first run theatres. In 1920, Zukor bought interests in Southern Enterprises and purchased New England Theatres. The next year, Paramount/Famous Players acquired 300 additional theatres. By 1920, 6,000 theatres and one-third of all pictures were shown only at Paramount theatres.[21]

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[20]Jacobs, Rise of American Film, p. 286.

[21]Wendon, Birth of Movies, p. 100.

In 1920, Motion Picture Theatre Owners formed to fight block booking, alleging that Zukor intimated theatre owners to build and operate theatres for Paramount. The Federal Trade Commission investigated these allegations and found Zukor guilty, but block booking and the hold of film companies on theatres wasn't broken until 1948.[22] In the twenties, Zukor was unstoppable. On September 15, 1925 Film Year Book reported that Paramount/Famous Players merged with Balaban and Katz a Chicago exhibition firm who controlled theatres in the mid-west, and all houses were called Publix-Paramount. Film Year Book reported that on October 10th, 1925, Publix-Paramount was negotiating for the Butterfield theatres in Michigan. By 1930, Paramount-Publix was the most profitable chain in history.[23]

In 1926, there were 20,000 theatres in the United States with an attendance of 100,000,000 monopolized by chain theatres.[24] Chain theatres, particularly Publix, used a centralized, standardized system of exhibition and even building. This has prompted Douglas Gomery to apply the chain-store theory, the most dominant mode of mass marketing in the United States in the 1920s, to theatre exhibition. He noted that after World War I, from 1918 to 1930 the regional system of motion picture exhibition was dying.

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[22]Paramount vs United States. In 1948, after ten years of anti-trust litigation, the government ordered motion picture production companies to sell most of their theatres.

[23]Gorham Kinder, ed., The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 11.

[24]Jacobs, Rise of American Film, p. 291.

CHAPTER 6

THE MOVIE PALACE

The Definition of the Movie Palace

A movie palace consisted of an auditorium and a "vast collection of rooms strung together on a plot of irregular land . . . built to express the romantic extremes of architectural design for purely economical reasons."[1] All movie palaces boasted of being the most technologically advanced buildings in their day. They were the first to use climate control and air conditioning. Movie palaces were often erected in less than a year thanks to their speedy method of construction, reinforced concrete.[2] Their modernity was masked by suspended ceilings, stucco and scagliola (like plaster but harder) that simulated everything from marble to gold in order to create an illusion of the antique. The height of movie palaces building was between 1925 and 1930.

Valario has divided these theatres into two types: the palace and the movie house. His movie palace seated between 1,000 and 5,000, was a first-run theatre with a strong decorative character, was situated in the downtown entertainment districts established by vaudeville or at major thoroughfares or intersections. The palace had an orchestra and a balcony, dressing rooms, stage and rigging. Initially, the

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[1]David Naylor, American Picture Palaces, (New York, Cincinnati, Toronto, London and Melbourne: Van Nostrand and Reinhold Co., 1981) p.32.

[2]Ibid.

palace was freestanding or near an unrelated commercial structure. Between 1925 and 1930, they were components or the core of an office building. In contrast, a movie house seated less than 1,000, had no distinctive decorative character, was a second-run theatre located in the suburbs.[3]

The majority of plans published in Architectural Record, Architectural Forum, Pencil Points, and American Theatres of Today, from 1925 to 1929, however, were for balcony-mezzanine theatres seating 3000-5,500 people. The June, 1925 Architectural Forum classified theatres with 1,400 seats as small. Even these small theatres had balconies and stage facilities.[4] Within the context of the 1920s, movie theatres can more realistically be divided into three groups based on seating capacity, and the vernacular term for films in the twenties used by architects, exhibitors and patrons, photoplay. A photoplay or second run theatre seated less than 1,000 people; deluxe photoplays seated between 1,000-2,500,[5] and super deluxe photoplays seated between 2,000-5,000 people.[6] All photoplays aspired to be

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[3]Valario and Friedman, Renaissance and Re-Use, p. 11. Valario gives two conflicting years for his golden age. On page 9, he stated "from 1915-1940, over 4,000 movie palaces were constructed". On page 15, wrote "in the first 20 years of that golden saw the construction of nearly 4,000 movie palaces." Further, on page 35 he said, "in the years from 1934 to 1960, the movie industry experienced a period of recovery from the Depression followed by rapid growth, albeit without accompanying movie theatre construction."

[4]Architectural Forum, "The Small Motion Picture Theatre",(Vol. XLII, No. 6, June, 1925), pp.411-432.

[5]Ben Hall, The Best Remaining Seats in the House, (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, 1961), p.109. Halls quotes Lamb, who called his early theatres deluxe photoplays.

[6]Ibid., p. 200.

movie palaces.

Decorative, functional and architectural precedents for the movie palace included Charles Garnier's 1861-1875 Paris Opera, Paris. The movie palace not only emulated Garnier's functional circulation pattern based on "the way people promenade,"[7] but used a series of bounded spaces to coax the patron into the next, grander space until the auditorium--the grandest of space of all--was reached. Garnier's staircase, a place of luxury where surface decor "recalled in real life certain of the resplendent tableaux of Veronese,"[8] was also incorporated into the movie palace repertoire.

Naylor saw Adler and Sullivan's Auditorium (1887-1889) in Chicago, as a pertinent ancestor to the movie palace because of its double shell construction, use of plaster, hotel, bar, office space and air conditioning.[9] Some elements of the movie palace derived from garish facades and lobbies of some nickelodeons. The intent of the movie palace and its appearance stems most immediately from vaudeville. The B.F. Keith Vaudeville Theatre which opened in 1894 in Boston and distinguished itself from Madison Square Garden and the Metropolitan Opera by its palatial grandeur. McLean summed up the differences best:

> To some extent, they assimilated into vaudeville theatres materials and motifs characteristic of public buildings and private palaces from Vienna to Lisbon. It was a reflection

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[7]Arthur M. Drexler, The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1977), p. 272. Drexler quoting Garnier.

[8] Ibid.,p. 272.

[9]Naylor, American Picture, p. 22.

> of the shifts in American taste brought about by the altered pattern of immigration during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Whereas the architects of the Genteel Tradition had seen in the architecture of Italy and had translated into terms of the United States in terms of qualities of fluidity and proportion, the peasants and artisans of Southern Europe had perceived in their architecture its grosser qualities, its color, profligacy and grandeur. The palaces which the European masses had regarded from afar but which in the New World they were permitted to enter, and the cathedrals had testified alike to further dimensions in life than those of field and marketplace. To the immigrant, the spiritual promise of his religion had been manifest in the hues, lines and lights of the cathedrals, and when he came to the secular society of the United States, he could not help seeing the symbolic promise--not for life hereafter but for the present life--in the vaudeville palaces. By its proportions and decor the vaudeville palace made easier the immigrant's translation from the rites of a ceremonial religion to the ritual of secular amusement.[10]

It was really Samuel Rothafel or Roxy, a man who thought movies ought to aspire to grand opera, who became the most articulate spokesman for the movie palace concept.[11] The first United States movie palace was the Regent in Harlem, built in 1913, designed by Lamb and managed by Roxy. The facade of the Regent looked like the Doge's Palace. The interior according to Naylor, was traditionally nineteenth century. In its first year, the Regent was on the skids. Roxy, who had begun showing movies above a saloon in Pennsylvania in 1907, had made a name for himself as a successful local exhibitor and was called in to make the Regent solvent.

Roxy made several structural changes to the Regent, such as moving the projection booth to the orchestra level, putting the

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[10]Albert F. McLean Jr., American Vaudeville as Ritual, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 194-195.

[11]Samuel L. Rothafel, "What the Public Wants in a Picture Theatre", Architectural Forum, (Vol. XLII, No. 6, June, 1925), p. 362.

orchestra on stage, and "the transference of the proscenium arch from the legitimate theatre" which Valario called the "symbol of Roxy's marketing strategy."[12] Roxy insisted that the predominately German neighborhood, wanted culture and he treated the audience as if it was capable of rising to the greatest heights of aesthetic appreciation by enveloping the movies in accepted cultural forms. Classical music, performed by an orchestra and accompanying silent films was Roxy's most potent addition to the movies' quest for legitimacy. By concentrating on one of the elements the movies lacked--sound--Roxy elevated film to a pseudo-cultural experience for the masses. Once the Regent was an unprecedented success, Roxy became a consultant to other flagging theatres around the country. In 1926, he graduated to the Roxy Theatre, his namesake, where he perfected his exhibition ideas. The Roxy Theatre, backed by Fox, was a twelve million dollar extravaganza dubbed the Cathedral of Motion pictures. It was the largest theatre in the world seating close to 6,000 people. It was the definition of a movie palace, the prototype for architectural and exhibition style, spawning nouveau-riche one-upmanship and imitation in towns all over America. The Roxy Theatre was a symbol of everything American stood for: the biggest, the most, the newest, and the best. The Roxy was billed at the "most sumptuous, most stupendous theatre ever erected" and guaranteed to give an unforgettable thrill.[13] There were six box offices, a mezzanine that seated 1,054, a balcony that seated 2,626, and an elevator to take you there. It had a

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[12]Valario and Friedman, Renaissance and Re-Use, p. 25.

[13]Hall, Best Remaining Seats, p. 2.

grand foyer, numerous small foyers, a hospital, a baby-sitting service, the largest permanent symphony in existence, a permanent choral group, a permanent ballet corps and cathedral chimes. Corps of uniformed ushers trained by a marine colonel catered to patrons every whim.

A prelude of pseudo-cultural sights and sounds lead up to the movie, echoing the architectural crescendo. First there was the symphony, then ballet, then vaudeville (now an adjunct to films), then the newsreel, then the comedy short and then finally the movie. To reinforce just how American the Roxy Theatre was, Roxy opened every performance with the Star Spangled Banner.

Movie Palaces as Art and as Religion

Roxy did not think of the movies as art, but he thought they could be the highest art form when packaged properly. Unlike Garnier's Paris Opera which was "not an architecture of literary symbols or structural geometry,"[14] movie palaces were pure structural geometry and the personification of symbol. As the symbol of the movie industry to millions, the theatre and the movie industry were synonymous, and it was through the decor and architecture, that movies became respectable.[15] If the movies were "concerned with the manipulation of symbol and in the process eventually acquired prestige and

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[14]Drexler, Ecole des Beaux Arts, p. 279.

[15]Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of American Film: A Critical History, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1939), p. 168.

legitimacy,"[16] then architectural symbolism was the most visible means of attaining cultural, artistic, and moral legitimacy in the public's mind. By wrapping theatres in art, culture and morality, the movies became those things.

Movie palace architecture and decor were extreme forms of eclecticism. Woollett, who designed Grauman's Metropolitan felt that "the eclectic palace best suited the mood of mental confusion resulting from the disorientation of war."[17] Eclecticism was not only symptomatic of the twenties' awareness of style, it allowed for a multitude of subconscious associations to appear at the same time. Greek, Adam, Italian Renaissance, French Renaissance, Gothic, Romanesque, Tudor, Mayan and Italian Baroque mixed freely in the same room, even in the same chair or light fixture. Exoticism was sometimes added to prevent one theatre from looking exactly another one. The only style missing in the American picture palace in the twenties was frank modernism.[18]

In 1922, Woollett built the Egyptian inspired by the discovery of King Tut's tomb. The next year, he designed The Metropolis, a replica of an ancient Greek temple. Rapp and Rapp, architects for Balaban and Katz/Publix, modeled all of their movie theatres on European palaces.

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[16]Garth Jowett, Film, the Democratic Art, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), p. 11.

[17]Ave Phidas and Lucinda Smith, Movie Palaces, Survivors of an Era, (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, Inc., 1980) p. 16. Quoting Woollett.

[18]R. W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today (New York: Architectural Book Publishing, Co., 1930). p. 12. It is interesting that in 1930, Sexton called for "an end to copying styles". He now felt that style should only be copied when they reflected "secular and social conditions."

Thomas Lamb and John Eberson were the biggest names in movie palace architecture. The Scottish born Lamb was credited with inventing the "standard style." His Capitol was called "the most splendid type of building since the Renaissance."[17] Lamb initially worked in Italian Renaissance, French Baroque, Adam, and Greek Revival, but later added elements of Italian Baroque and Rococo, reproducing parts of palaces, churches and monuments in his theatres. The Picture Gallery in the San Francisco Fox, for example, was an exact duplicate of the chapel in Versailles.

John Eberson went to extremes to bring in cultural associations. Eberson, a graduate of the University of Vienna, invented the atmospheric style in 1923 with the Houston Atmospheric Majestic. The aim of the atmospheric was to simulate a Mediterranean patio setting, a motif used in restaurants like Murray's Roman Gardens in New York in 1908. When the lights dimmed, Eberson projected images of stars, birds and gods onto the blue ceiling. As a further embellishment Eberson placed plaster replicas of famous statues and reliefs painted gold, such as Donatello's David (fig. 8) and Cantoria, Michelangelo's Lorenzo and Guiliano de Medici and the Medici Venus, around the theatre. These replicas were mass produced at Eberson's own Michelangelo Studios.

The Roxy Theatre was not content with reproductions. Chevret's Le Reveil and Le Sommeil stood on either side of the staircase, Benjamin West's Sacrifice of the Bull hung by the men's room, Rape of Europa by Vitello d'Impolito was placed in the mezzanine and Luca

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[17]Talbot Faulkner Hamlin, The American Spirit in Architecture, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926), p. 201.

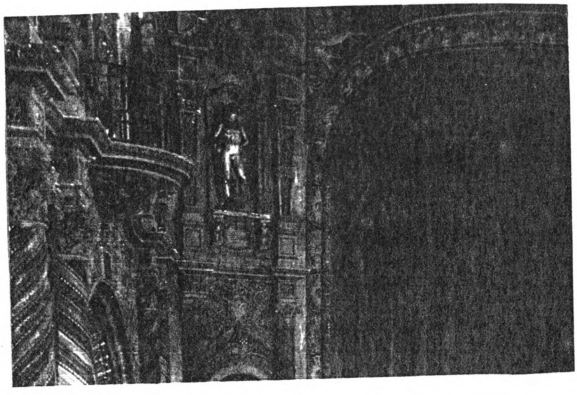

Fig. 8. John Eberson, State Theatre, Kalamazoo, 1927.

Giordano's Assumption of the Virgin hung on the Grand Staircase. The San Francisco Fox had an entire picture gallery, personally selected by Mrs. Fox.

The decorators and architects thought of the art as didactic, "cultivating good taste . . . while the masses of ornament, rich in color appealed to the masses conception of beauty".[20] Women, they wrote, were the ones "who looked at tapestries and wall decorations, while the men read the program."[21] One senses, however, some revulsion on the part of architects and decorators. Sexton said that "as the masses become more educated in what beauty really is, the theatre will not need to depend on such methods to lure the patron."[22] Hall recounted one critic who was so appalled at the pilfering of global architectural treasures that he wondered:

> If a whole generation is not now arising whose artistic appreciation will be so warped that when visiting the Taj Mahal, will be heard to remark: So this is the Taj Mahal: pshaw . . . the Oriental theatre is twice as big and has electric lights.[23]

Francis Lacloche noted "des trèsors s'accumlent dans les palais du cinéma americain que l'on visite comme des musées."[24] Lacloche went on to compare movie palaces to San Simeon, where one never knows if he is

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[20]Sexton, American Theatres of Today, p. 1.

[21]I.F. Lichter, "The Question of Lighting", Architectural Forum, (Vol. XLII, no. 6, June, 1925), p. 389.

[22]Sexton, American Theatres, p. 16.

[23]Hall, Best Remaining Seats, p. 94.

[24]Francis Lacloche, Architecture des cinema,(Paris: Editions du Moniteur, 1981), p. 68.

looking at a copy or the real thing. Many patrons, uneducated in art history or history did not know the difference between a medieval castle, a Renaissance palace and its twentieth century stucco imitation, and were drawn to the architecture and decor of the movie palace, not to the movie. To millions, the Oriental Theatre was the Taj Mahal, and the grander the building, the more revered the movies.

One of the strongest allusions in movie palace architecture was to religion. According to Shand, a Englishman writing in 1930, the movies were "a most public and private place with affinities to a church."[25] Gomery noted that in order to remind "movie goers of the more traditional structures such as churches or halls of government", Rapp and Rapp used stained glass behind the sign and marquee.[26] In the Roxy Theatre, the boxes on either side of the proscenium arch looked like pulpits, were derived from St. Peter's Baldachin and Santa Maria Novella. No picture palace of the 1920s was complete without an allusion to a church and a title such as temple or cathedral. The equating of religion and commerce was called by Allen "the most significant phenomenon of the twenties."[27] The basis for equating God and commerce in the 1920s stemmed from Bruce Barton's 1925 and 1926 best seller, The Name Nobody Knows. Jesus, according to Barton, was the founder of modern firms, thus reassuring the millions of

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[25]Morton P. Shand, Modern Picture Houses and Theatres, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1930), p. 8.

[26]Douglas Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business," Tino Balio, ed., The American Film Industry, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1973), p. 221.

[27]Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen Twenties, (New York: Evanston: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 180.

speculators in the investor crazed twenties that God approved of capitalism. A New Yorker cartoon of 1929 by Helen E. Hokinson summed up the true aim of the movie palace architecture.[28] It depicted a little girl and her mother in the Roxy Theatre foyer. The child asked her mother: "does God live here?" No greater claim to legitimacy could be made.

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[28]Naylor, American Picture Palace, p. 121.

CHAPTER 7

THE NATIONAL STANDARD OF MOVIE PALACE ARCHITECTURE

Standardization of the Movie Palace

Chain-owned movie theatres not only killed regional exhibition, but lead to uniformity in movie palace architecture. Although movie studios hired local architects, they often used regulars. Balaban and Katz/Publix employed Rapp and Rapp who, true to Publix's method of operation, standardized all aspects of their theatres. Fox used Lamb. Everyone used Eberson. Between 1928 and 1929, movie palace architecture became so inbred and formulated that Lamb was copying Eberson and "twins" were being built in different cities. C. Howard Crane's Detroit Fox (1928) and the St. Louis Fox (1929) were identical. Even movie palace advertising was standardized (figs. 9, 10, 11). The advance publicity for the Roxy Theatre (1926), the Ironwood Theatre (1928) and the Michigan Theatre in Jackson (1930), although separated by four years, was extremely similar.

The automobile and the radio were also responsible for the standardization of the movie palace. Automobile ownership was at a high in the late twenties. Americans could travel at will to major cities like Chicago, New York and Detroit, see a Rapp and Rapp or an Eberson theatre, and return home to brag about it to their neighbors. Roxy broadcast concerts from the Roxy Theatre on the radio, inspiring imitation.

The most immediate cause of the architectural standardization of the movie palace was the wide diffusion of architectural magazines.

Fig. 9. Roxy Theatre Publicity Reprinted from Hall, 1926.

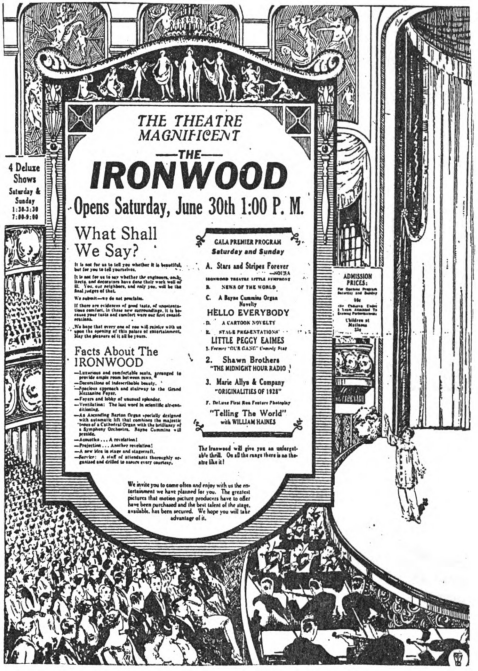

Fig. 10. Ironwood Theatre Publicity, June, 28, 1928.

Fig. 11. Michigan Theatre Publicity, Jackson, April, 29, 1930.

Pencil Points, Architectural Record, and Architectural Forum regularly published theatre plans. An architect didn't have to imitate Versailles or even know of its existence; he could imitate Lamb or Eberson imitating Versailles. In addition to the publication of isolated plans, in June, 1925 Architectural Forum devoted an entire issue to movie theatres. In 1927, Sexton published his first issue American Theatres of Today, similar and repetitive in parts to Architectural Forum. Both publications relied on the same nationally renowned experts, such as Roxy, Eberson, Lamb, and others employed by major architectural firms or movie studios to inform the architect how to correctly build a movie palace. The information in these two publications is so complete, that an architect who had never even seen a movie theatre could design one based on a national model.

Following, are combined synopses of Architectural Forum and Sexton's Modern Theatres of Today, pointing out the basic features of a successful motion picture theatre.

Types of Plans

According to Sexton, there are five basic choices in floor plan: one floor, consisting of only an orchestra floor; bleacher, a variant of one floor, but with a steep gradient at the rear; stadium, a variation on the bleacher; the single balcony and the balcony-mezzanine type. In determining which plan to use, the architect must first consider building codes, followed in order by size and shape of the lot, location and future development of the area, desired seating

capacity, cost and the character of patron. The balcony-mezzanine is the most economical plan because it allows the greatest seating capacity on a small lot. The single balcony is recommended for the same reasons. One floor, bleacher and stadium require a lot large enough to accommodate all seats on one floor.

Form must follow function in the floor plan. There should be sufficient corridor space and exit facilities so customers can wait, exit, and attend to physical needs as quickly as possible without congestion.

A clear, unobstructed view of the stage preferably over seats not between them, is mandatory.

Facade

A theatre facade should sell tickets. According to Sexton on page seven, it should be "the dominating and controlling factor in the development of its architectural and decorative design . . . and contrast to the stiff and cold character of its commercial surroundings." The facade should be alluring, tasteful and entertaining.

The entrance to the theatre should be the main attraction, and it should be unobstructed providing a glimpse into the lobby.

The sign or marquee should not obscure the facade.

Lobby

One should never have to pass through doors or by any obstruction to purchase a ticket.

A lobby must allow adequate waiting and exit facilities. Paintings, architectural detail and overabundant ornament should engage the customer's interest and takes his or her mind off of waiting. The appeal of the theatre is through the lobby and wall surfaces must stimulate interest to see the rest of the building.

The staircase should be the central feature of the foyer and should suggest an escape from the crowd to cozy surroundings. Patrons have an aversion to balconies, and promenade foyers should be wide spaces with works of art to put the patron at ease.

Atmosphere

A theatre should always be intimate. Music should never be sung in a foreign language and should interpret the characters. Lights should express the mood of the music and film. Red, blue and green express Latin countries and pastels the abstraction of the idealistic.

Interior

The interior of the theatre must be comfortable, interesting, entertaining, and thrilling. Patrons should be surrounded by luxury they cannot afford. The proscenium arch must be the center of interest, and the scale of the decor must suggest coziness.

Proscenium Arch and Screen

The proscenium opening should as wide as possible, thirty-five to forty-five feet.

The size of the screen should be relative to the size of the theatre. In a theatre with a seating capacity of less than 2,000, a width of fourteen to sixteen feet and a height of eleven feet to twelve feet is permissible. The screen should not be less than twenty-five feet from the back of the first row of seats on the orchestra floor.

Balcony and Auditorium

The slope of the auditorium floor should begin six to ten feet behind the railing or orchestra pit.

Balconies should not be more than fifty feet above the level of the stage and as far back as possible so that seats in the rear of the orchestra have an unobstructed view of the proscenium arch.

Balconies should be framed with steel trusses.

Projection Booth

The greater the distance from the screen, the more problems in picture control. When a line is drawn from the center of the projection booth to the center of the screen, the angle should not exceed twenty degrees. The rear wall of the auditorium is suggested as the location for the projection booth in a single floor type; the

front center of balcony is suggested for a single balcony or balcony-mezzanine type.

Stage

The gridiron should be twice the height of the proscenium opening plus four or five feet.

Organ

The organ chambers should be located adjacent to the proscenium arch. The chamber should be constructed of hollow tile plastered on both sides or of metal lath and plaster. The average organ chamber should be twelve feet high.

Ventilation

There should be not less than fifteen or more than thirty cubic feet of air per minute per person.

Lights

There should be sufficient light to allow for the reading of the program.

PART III

THE IRONWOOD THEATRE

CHAPTER 8

MOVIE EXHIBITION IN IRONWOOD PRIOR TO THE IRONWOOD THEATRE

Movies were first shown in Ironwood at the Pierce Opera House, one block southeast of the current Ironwood Theatre.[1] In 1908, the Pierce Opera House was remodeled as a "showcase", putting the only legitimate theatre, the Varsity Theatre, one block northwest of the current Ironwood Theatre out of business.[2] In 1912, four theatres serviced Ironwood: The Pierce Opera House; The Bijou at 103 East Aurora, west of the current Ironwood Theatre; The Empress at 120 East Aurora, across the street of the current Ironwood Theatre, and the Temple at 125 E. Aurora, the "first modern line of theatres using movies as the chief source of entertainment", east of the current Ironwood Theatre.[3] Except for the Pierce Opera House, these theatres were located in the Ironwood Business District. Judging by current lot sizes and the number of these theatres, one could speculate that they were nickelodeons.[4] The Temple was probably an improved nickelodeon.

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[1]Newspapers for this date are unavailable. The date of the first showing is not known. The Pierce Opera House burned sometime between 1912 and 1921, exact date unknown also.

[2]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

[3]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

[4]The confusing part of the newspapers statement is "modern" and "using movies as chief sources of entertainment". The nickelodeon's claim to fame was that they used movies as the chief source of entertainment. Whether these were vaudeville/movie theatres is a mystery.

By 1921, the Pierce Opera House had burnt, and the Temple and the Bijou were out of business. Ironwood had acquired three 'new' theatres: the Rex Theatre, the Rialto, and the Newport. The Rex, located at 119 W.Aurora (one or two blocks west of the Ironwood Theatre) and dubbed "Ironwood's PhotoPlay Deluxe" by the 1921 Ironwood City Directory, had a seating capacity of 600 people.[5] Originally owned by the Fulton Amusement Corporation, the Rex was acquired by the Ironwood Amusement Corporation (IAC) soon after their incorporation on November 21, 1918.[6] Charles Seaman was president of the IAC, Meyer Seaman was Vice President and A.L.Picker was the secretary treasurer:[7] the same people, holding the same positions as in the Seaman Brothers Building Corporation (SBBC).

By 1921, Thomas O'Donnell who had owned the Empress according to the 1912 Ironwood City Directory,[8] had remodeled it and renamed it the

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[5]Film Yearbook, 1926, p. 527. Film Yearbook of Motion Pictures, 1932, p. 752. reported 775 seats.

[6] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1929. The paper related the original ownership of the Rex as the Fulton Amusement Corporation. The date of incorporation was taken from Michigan Reports: Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Michigan, Vol. 283, (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, p. 223.). Michigan Corporations and Security Commission, 1924, established that IAC bought the Rex almost immediately after their incorporation.

[7] According to the Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928, Picker had arrived in Ironwood in 1908 as orchestra leader for the Temple, then owned by W.F.Kelly according to the 1921 City Directory. According to the Ironwood Daily Globe of June 28, 1928, it was owned by the Fulton Amusement Corporation. Maybe Kelly and the Fulton Amusement Corporation were one in the same.

[8]The ownership of these theatres is a complex interconnecting web of conflicting interests and information coming from different sources. Film Yearbook of 1926 on p. 611, reported that Picker owned the Newport Theatre, the Hurley Theatre in Hurley, the Rialto, and the Rex. They also listed the Rex and the Rialto as owned by the IAC. The Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928 reported that Picker and Frank J. Petuska owned the Rialto. City Directories, City Council Minutes

Rialto. According to the Film Yearbook of 1926, the Rialto seated 200 people. O'Donnell also added the Newport Theatre, east of the city proper on 728 Ayer, to his list of theatre holdings. On September 16, 1926, Thomas O'Donnell, the IAC and Charles Seaman signed a contract in which Seaman and the IAC purchased the lot on which the Newport Theatre stood.[9] The contract also stipulated that Seaman had the first option of buying the Newport Theatre within ten days after receiving notice of O'Donnell's willingness to sell for $12,000. This document was much more than a land contract. It furnished valuable information about motion picture exhibition in Ironwood. According to the contract, Seaman would control the Newport's playbill and all of the Newport Theatre's advertising. O'Donnell was barred by the terms of this contract, even from advertising prices in the newspapers.

A few weeks before this contract was signed, O'Donnell applied to the city for a permit to repair the Rialto.[10] According to the Ironwood Daily Globe of March 12, 1927, the Rialto had been damaged by

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indicate differently. Both of these sources are more reliable and indicated that Thomas O'Donnell owned the Rialto and the Newport. In all probability, Picker probably managed or had a hand in the management or a financial interest in these places. Contracts, City Council Minutes, and City Directories will be used in instances of conflicts. Other sources such as the newspaper and Film Yearbook will only be used if they are the only source of information.

[9]Charles Seaman's name and the IAC are used interchangeably in this contract. It was signed by Seaman twice, one as Charles Seaman, again as president of the IAC. Picker signed as the secretary-treasurer of the IAC. This contract also included the purchase of another building other than the Newport Theatre on the land. The contract specifically stated that Seaman could not tear down the building before January 1, 1927.

[10] City of Ironwood, Minutes of City Council Meeting, September 20, 1926, pp. 359-360. O'Donnell's application supports that he owned the Rialto since the owner would have applied for the permit.

fire twice. The last fire in 1925 forced the establishment to close. On August 24, 1926, O'Donnell submitted an estimate from N. Albert Nelson, detailing the cost of repairs to the Rialto, the value of the building, and plans for its renovation to the city.[11] W.M. Rich, the City Manager, stated on September 11, 1926 that he would not issue a permit to rebuild the Rialto, but that he would inspect the building with Nelson on September 14, 1926 and request that Nelson issue a structural report. On September 20, 1926, Rich recommended that O'Donnell be denied the permit to repair the building for "use as a motion picture theatre."

This application for repair to the Rialto is pertinent for several reasons. First, the site of the Rialto had been used as a movie theatre since at least 1912; as such it is the only structural report of a movie theatre in Ironwood prior to the building of the Ironwood Theatre in 1927; therefore, it allows us to chart the development of the motion picture palace in Ironwood from 1912 until 1927 and determine what was considered the norm in motion picture theatres in Ironwood. Secondly, the report was prepared by N. Albert Nelson.

What Nelson described was a structural wreck.[12] The foundation was in bad condition; the side walls were "very dangerous" and the roof trusses were weak. An excessive snowfall or wind could cause the roof to collapse because scrap lumber had been used for bracing. The

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[11]According to the City Council Minutes of September 20, 1926, Nelson's plans were attached. These were either not kept or not included in the transcript. They would have been valuable since this was Nelson's first contact with a movie theatre.

[12]In an interview with Mrs. Earl Minken on June 28, 1988, she stated that the Rialto was "a very nice theatre, with stage shows, vaudeville and a Charleston Competition."

balcony was "very unsafe" and there was only a single thickness of flooring on the auditorium floor. Toilets had no windows and were not ventilated. Basement floor drains were not sealed properly and there were no fresh air intakes in the auditorium.

Shortly after O'Donnell's permit to rebuilt the Rialto was denied by the city, Charles Seaman purchased the building and resold it to Alex Rosemurgy, a Bessemer builder and later contractor of the Ironwood Theatre, in March, 1927.[13] Rosemurgy razed the Rialto and erected the Rosemurgy building on its site. Within one month of Seaman's resale of the Rialto, Seaman and the IAC obtained plans from Nelson for the Ironwood Theatre. Seaman may have simply been trying to make a profit by buying land and turning it over quickly. More likely, he intended to use the Rialto as the site of the Ironwood Theatre. He may have planned to tear it down or try his own luck at pushing a permit to repair through the city council.[14] Later Seaman probably decided the Rialto wasn't suited to his needs and quickly dumped it. This may have also been his intent with the land that the Newport Theatre was built on.

Whatever Seaman's intent was with either theatre, the effect on motion picture exhibition in Ironwood was pronounced. Seaman essentially block booked the Newport Theatre. With the denial of O'Donnell's permit to remodel the Rialto and Seaman's purchase of

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[13]Ironwood Daily Globe, March 12, 1927 reported Seaman had bought the Rialto "during the last six months", and sold it to Rosemurgy in March.

[14]Although Seaman was politically and civically prominent, there is no evidence in City Council Minutes that he tried to obtain a permit to have the building remodeled.

theatre shortly thereafter, Seaman and the IAC effectively monopolized film exhibition in the city and secured the future of the Ironwood Theatre as the only deluxe, first run movie palace in the Gogebic Range. Seaman was behaving like an Adolph Zukor. He not only fit Kidney's profile of a builder of half-modern office buildings, Seaman fit the profile of a movie mogul, "an Eastern Europe Jew engaged in the retail clothing business."[15]

Thomas O'Donnell, Seaman's only competitor in Ironwood, was driven to the suburb of Jessieville on the eastern outskirts of Ironwood in 1928 where he opened the Jessieville Theatre. The Rex in Bessemer (pop. 5,482), seating capacity 200; the Strand Theatre in Wakefield (pop. 4,157) seating capacity 300 and the Movie in Wakefield, seating 250; and The Rivoli in Hurley's (pop. 5,274) seating capacity 200 were all forced to become second-run outlets.[16] Some like, the Rivoli in Hurley and the Movie in Wakefield were forced out of business by 1929.[17] In 1928, Seaman and the IAC controlled two theatres with a total seating capacity of 1,800 or 11.4% of the total population of Ironwood and 5.4% of the total county population. Further, with the building of the Ironwood Theatre, Seaman and the IAC stamped out any regional pattern of motion exhibition that remained in the area, substantiating Gomery's observation that from 1918 to 1930

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[15]J.D. Wendon, The Birth of the Movies,(New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), p. 24. Every writer on film remark on this. The rise of the motion picture industry is seen as the application of retail clothing methods to motion picture exhibition. This is common knowledge, only footnoted to avoid the connotation of an ethnic slur.

[16]Film Yearbook, 1926, pp. 527-596.

[17]Film Daily Yearbook, 1932, pp. 755-820.

regional patterns in motion picture distribution and architecture became extinct, even without the help of a major studio, even in a small, range community like Ironwood.

CHAPTER 9

THE HISTORY OF THE IRONWOOD THEATRE

Building from May, 1927 to August, 1927

Nelson's contract to design the Ironwood Theatre was the first one awarded by the IAC.[1] There was never any doubt in Seaman's mind that Nelson would design the theatre despite better qualified and available architects in Duluth, Minneapolis and Chicago. Seaman, having dealt with Nelson previously, probably felt he was reliable, capable, talented and trustworthy. The IAC procured plans for the Ironwood Theatre from Nelson by April 22, 1927.[2] By this date, the IAC had settled on a plot of land owned by SBBC behind the Seaman Building with a Lowell Street address for the auditorium. This site had been used as a parking lot and gas station according a site photographs (fig. 12) taken by Nelson.[3] Part of Seaman's Style Shop in the Seaman Building was to be adapted for a lobby and entrance.

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[1]N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1927. Nelson received $7,000 for architectural and engineering fees.

[2]Nelson's plans are dated April 22, 1927 and contain five sheets. These are not the final plans. Those were lost in a flood in the forties and there are some changes from these to the final product. The April 22, 1927 plans could also be an intermediate set.

[3]Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats in the House, (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, 1961), p. 76. According to Ben Hall, "all New York theatres were built on the ruins of a business engaged in transportation." It is ironic, that Ironwood, hardly the mecca of theatre or motion picture palaces followed this pattern.

Fig. 12. Site Photograph taken by Nelson c. 1926.

According to the Ironwood Daily Globe on May 17, 1927, excavation for the auditorium was completed by W.S Peters of Wakefield for $3,057.50.[4] According to the Minutes of the Ironwood City Council on June 21, 1927 the City Council ordered the IAC to replace the sidewalk on Lowell Street, "the site at the proposed new theatre" before July 1, 1927. Construction on the Ironwood Theatre halted on May 17, 1927 and did not resume, according to the June 28, 1928 issue of the Ironwood Daily Globe, until August 15, 1927. The IAC had suddenly realized that its three members could not afford the building. In fact, the IAC still owed the excavator $3,000 in June, 1927.[5] IAC Minutes for June 27, 1927, revealed that the IAC called a special board meeting to discuss the erection of a new theatre of "a modern design and construction" with its three members. At this time, the IAC agreed to make plans with "third parties" to increase their capital stock from $40,000 to $120,000. The IAC also made plans at this meeting to buy the recently excavated auditorium from SBBC for $150,000 and:

> lease an easterly storeroom of the Seaman Building which opened on the south side of Aurora Street as the most desirable property for a foyer, lobby and entrance or other such purposes as the IAC deemed fit for $250.00 per month for ninety nine years . . . to begin in advance on the opening of the theatre.

This easterly storeroom would provide fifteen feet of street

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[4]Ironwood Daily Globe, May 17, 1927, and N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1927. For a complete list of prices and contracts awarded see Appendix I.

[5]Ironwood Amusement Corporation and Seaman Brothers Building Corporation, Draft of Lease Agreement, June, 1927.

frontage for an entrance.

According to Nelson's plans, the IAC had always intended to use these properties. When SBBC and the IAC were one in the same, there had been no need for contracts. The inclusion of "third parties" into the IAC now necessitated a property sale and a lease agreement. Given the interruption in building and the tardy lease and sale agreement between SBBC and the IAC, reorganization appears not to have been the IAC's original intent. The date of Nelson's plans and a site photograph taken by Nelson (see page 21, fig. 6) further substantiated this. Although the date of the site photograph is not known, it featured the easterly storeroom of the Seaman Building boarded up with a sign "the New Ironwood Theatre Open in Fall of 1927" plastered across the front. Although motion picture theatres often took less than a year to build, it would have been impossible to build the Ironwood Theatre between August, 1927, when construction resumed, and December, 1927; however, it would have been possible to construct the theatre between May, 1927 and December, 1927.

Whose idea it was originally to build the Ironwood Theatre is more difficult to determine. Meyer Seaman, by his own admission later, was a silent member of the IAC.[4] Little is really known of A.L. Picker. His associations with Seaman as a theatre manager and as an active original member of the IAC were documentable. Picker may have seen himself as another Roxy and the Ironwood Theatre may have been his own cathedral of motion pictures. Although Picker may have suggested the idea to Charles Seaman, in the final analysis it was Charles Seaman

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[4]Michigan Reports: Cases Decided in the Michigan Supreme Court. Vol. 283., p. 231.

who bought it. Seaman's activities with Thomas O'Donnell show his interest in advancing his motion picture exhibition business. Further, by locating the entrance of the Ironwood Theatre next to his Style Shop, Seaman appeared to be claiming it as his. But it was Nelson again who offered corroborative evidence that Seaman was the dominant figure in the building of the Ironwood Theatre. In 1933, on Nelson's application to the State Department of Licensing and Regulation as an architect, he listed Charles Seaman twice: first as a reference and second as owner of the Ironwood Theatre.[7]

On July 8, 1927, the IAC issued new stock. Each certificate was to sell for $100.00 per share. The Rex Theatre was to become part of the new IAC. F.J. Jeppesen, a cashier of the Merchant's Miners National Bank bought 625 shares of common stock for $62,000 which he could sell or transfer to anyone he desired, in effect becoming the IAC's stock broker.[8]

According to the Ironwood Daily Globe on June 28, 1928, there were now seven members of the IAC Board of Directors instead of three, and fifteen stock holders, including such prominent citizens as George Curry and Pat Kelly. In the re-organized IAC, Charles Seaman was still

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[7]Nelson had typed Ironwood Amusement Corporation in as owner of the Ironwood Theatre, then crossed the IAC's name and inserted Seaman's name in the space as owner of the building. Nelson did not want the reorganized IAC contacted as a reference to his work on Ironwood Theatre--only Charles Seaman. This only serves to reinforce the fact that Seaman was the key man in the planning and building of the Ironwood Theatre and that Nelson was aware in 1933 that if the state contacted the IAC, Seaman may not have been part of the organization, and the new members IAC could not have given him a reference since he didn't work with them.

[8]Ironwood Amusement Corporation, Minutes of Meeting, July 8, 1927.

the president; but F.J. Jeppesen, had replaced Picker as secretary-treasurer and Pat O'Donnell, (no relation to Thomas O'Donnell) had replaced Meyer as vice president.[9]

Building from September 1927 to June 1928

Once stock was reorganized and capital was secured, the new IAC proceeded quickly with the building of the Ironwood Theatre. On August 13, 1927 eight firms submitted bids on the contract for the general construction. It was awarded to Alex Rosemurgy. On August 15, Rosemurgy began digging the basement.[10] By September 30, almost 400 yards of concrete foundation and foot had been laid. By October 2, steel frames work had been put in place.[11] By November 9, 1927 all concrete foundation and basement fills were completed except those around the steel column bases.[12]

A.L. Picker, who was to be the manager of the Ironwood Theatre solicited bids. A lighting estimate from Minneapolis Lighting was addressed to Picker but it was accepted by Charles Seaman.[13] Picker also made announcements to the press about contracts awarded and the

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[9]Michigan Corporations and Securities Commission, Michigan Annual Reports, 1928.

[10]Ironwood Daily Globe, June, 28, 1928.

[11]Alex Rosemurgy, Building Estimates, September 30, 1927 and October 31, 1927.

[12]N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1927.

[13]Minneapolis Lighting Fixture Company, Bid, March 9, 1927.

theatre's building progress.[14]

Nelson may have had the most input into the actual building of the Ironwood Theatre. He not only estimated the cost of the building, oversaw every detail of the construction and approved sub-contractors, but he also fielded bids for everything from wiring to plumbing and heating, then he forwarded them the IAC with his recommendations.[15] Nelson's priority seemed to have been low-bids over speed of delivery and local suppliers. On November 11th, 1927, he stated in a letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation that the "Gogebic Steam Boiler Works of Duluth . . . has submitted a bid on this tank, which is very low and worthy of consideration." In addition to these duties, Nelson drew the plans for the fixtures, seats, decoration, organ and stage settings. He also traveled to Detroit and Chicago to select the proper decorator.[16] Shortly before Nelson even officially decided on the decorator, he made a drawing of the interior which was displayed at Merchants and Miners National Bank, where Jeppesen, secretary-treasurer of the IAC, worked.[17] These drawings were lost, and no description was recorded. Their mention in the Ironwood Daily Globe and presence in the bank indicated great pride in the Ironwood Theatre on the part of the community and on the part of Nelson.

The Ironwood Daily Globe carried a detailed account of the Ironwood Theatre's progress throughout construction in 1928. Workers

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[14] Ironwood Daily Globe, April, 17, 1928.

[15] N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1928.

[16] Ibid and Ironwood Daily Globe, January 7, 1928.

[17] Ironwood Daily Globe, January, 7, 1928.

labored throughout the winter. Thanks to excellent weather conditions during late December and early January, the newspaper reported on January 7, 1928, that work was progressing quickly on the Ironwood Theatre. The brick work was almost completed by that date. Decorators began working in the interior by mid-January. In late March plastering began inside the theatre. The ascending Barton organ which arrived in mid-April, was displayed in the window of Johnson's Music Store until its installation in the theatre on June 16th.

Newspapers accounts of the theatre's building progress accelerated in June, creating anticipation in the community. The sign was erected on June 16th and the canopy and brass doors were being installed also. By June 23, 1928 the furnishings were in place and the theatre was being "rushed to completion" by June 30, 1928 and scaffolding was being removed.

A full page ad ran in the June 28, 1928 edition of the Ironwood Daily Globe, announcing the opening program and the times of the shows. The paper also devoted a full two pages to articles about the theatre, impressing the Range dwellers with drawings of regal chandeliers and detailing the technology which would be so advanced the air would be "washed as carefully as laundry".

On the morning before the opening, carpets were being laid and a clean up crew readied the theatre for public inspection the next day. Despite "some persons who were of the opinion that the new theatre would not be ready for the opening tomorrow," the Ironwood Daily Globe reported on June 29, 1928, "the management assured everyone, there

would be no delay." The theatre, costing $202,013.30,[18] opened on June 30, 1928 at one o'clock in the afternoon, with a seating capacity of 1,150 to 1,200 people.[19]

Opening Day

The Ironwood Theatre was billed as "the finest show house in the Northwest",[20] and "equal or better to anything in Chicago".[21] Peggy Eames, the ten-year-old child star of 'Our Gang' for a brief period, was the "star attraction". A. L. Picker told the Ironwood Daily Globe on June 30, 1928 that Peggy "was so in demand booking was difficult".

A crowd waited for the Ironwood to open for the first show.[22] Admission was fifty cents for the opening program. Children under five were barred from the evening performances but were charged twenty-five cents for the matinees. A thirty-five page Gala Premier Program was available crammed with more facts about the washed air and ascending Barton organ.

The inaugural program was modeled after Roxy's. It began with the Stars and Stripes, performed by the Ironwood Theatre Little Symphony, followed by a newsreel, an organ solo on the ascending

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[18]N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1928.

[19]Ironwood Daily Globe,June 28, 1928. The paper gives both estimates.

[20]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

[21]Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928.

[22]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928. The premiers shows were at 1:30, 3:30, 7:15 and 9:15 Saturday and Sunday.

Barton, a cartoon, three vaudeville acts of a "class never seen before in this community",[23] and ended with a deluxe, first-run, movie, Telling the World starring William Haines, a popular star of light comedy pictures. The Ironwood Daily Globe of June 28, 1928 wrote that the program was guaranteed to "give an unforgettable thrill". These were the exact words Roxy used in his advance publicity for the Roxy Theatre.[24]

It was a "dignified" opening. The ushers, "drilled to assure courtesy" were dressed in their military style uniforms. The theatre was described as "spacious," with a "grand Mezzanine Foyer," and "foyers and lobby of unusual splendor." The decorations were of "indescribable beauty", and "in details and architectural technique the hand lavishness was evident."[25] On July, 2, 1928, the Ironwood Daily Globe reviewed the opening program as "excellent." They reported large crowds at the all the shows and that "everyone admired the beauty and completeness of decor."

The First Years

On August 7, 1928, the coming attractions for the Rex and the Ironwood Theatres were published in the Ironwood Daily Globe. The residents of Ironwood would be treated to some the best movies from

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[23] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 29, 1928.

[24] Ben Hall, The Best Remaining Seats in the House: the Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace, (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, 1961), p.2.

[25] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

Fox, MGM, Paramount and Universal such as Street Angel, The Wind, and The Patriot. Sunrise was due at the Ironwood Theatre. Directed by F.W. Murnau, starring Janet Gaynor and George O'Brien, Sunrise was considered by critics to be the finest silent films ever made. The Rex and Ironwood Theatre playbills were, however, strictly mainstream: Eisenstein, "beyond the average viewer",[26] and von Sternberg, both of whom released films in 1928, were noticeably absent from either theatre's roster.[27]

With the opening of the Ironwood Theatre, the Rex Theatre became a second-run theatre. It recycled the 1927 blockbuster, Kings of Kings. B-Grade serials such as Rin Tin Tin and Hoot Gibson were also standard fare. Prices at the Rex before the opening of the Ironwood Theatre had been ten, fifteen, and twenty-five cents. After the opening of the Ironwood Theatre, the twenty-five cent seats were eliminated, and admission prices were ten and thirty cents.

Prices for The Ironwood's first run films, deluxe atmosphere and vaudeville acts, were of course, higher than the Rex's. Admission prices for matinees at the Ironwood Theatre ranged from five to twenty cents; prices for evening performances ranged from twenty to forty cents. On special occasions, fifty cents was charged.[28] The Rex and the Ironwood ran performances at the same time: daily matinees at 2:30, evening performances at 7:00 and 9:00; weekends matinees at 1:30

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[26]J.D. Wendon, The Birth of the Movies, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1975), p. 35.

[27]Eisenstein released Ten Days that Shook the World, von Sternberg released Docks of New York and Dragnet in 1928.

[28]National prices averaged fifteen cents to thirty-five cents to one dollar for special occasions. See Chapter 3.

and 3:30, evening performances at 7:00 and 9:00. With no drama critic regularly reviewing films in the Ironwood Daily Globe to guide the patrons to the best movie, patrons were forced to choose between the atmosphere of Ironwood Theatre and the price of the Rex, unless they had access to the Marquette Mining Journal, the Escanaba Daily Press and the Duluth Evening Herald--all of whom had regular critics.

The Rex was the trial ground for sound. On April 9, 1929, the Ironwood Daily Globe advertised: "See and hear Zeigfield's beauties and Roxy's Orchestra". On May 9, 1929, the Ironwood Daily Globe announced the premier of the Ironwood Theatre's Western Electric sound equipment. This special event featured another William Haines movie. May 1929 was considerably after Warner's sound synchronization The Jazz Singer of October 1927 and their first all talkie, Lights of New York of 1928.

Although larger theatres like the Roxy Theatre added sound synchronization immediately, smaller theaters waited before installing sound equipment. Even studios such as Paramount were unwilling to convert to sound, fearful that it might be just an expensive fad. Then there was the problem of what sound system to use: the same system ought to be used by all studios so exhibitors did not have to invest in three different systems. RCA had developed a film on sound system by January, 1927 as had General Electric. It was not until April 28, 1928 that all the studios signed with Western Electric.[27] Once studios settled on a system, perfection in amplification had to be

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[27]Douglas Gomery, "The Warner-Vitaphone Peril", Gordon Kinder, ed,. The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures, (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), p. 130.

found before studios or exhibitors would consider the venture.

Financial Problems

On April 29, 1929 at 8:00 p.m. the IAC increased their capital stock by 30,000 shares to be sold at $100 per share.[30] This was probably necessary to cover the cost of installing sound in two theatres.

By January 1, 1931, the Ironwood Theatre was experiencing serious financial difficulties, just like most theatres in the country. In 1931, eighteen months after the Crash, the Depression finally affected movie attendance nationally. Attendance dropped from a high of 90,000,000 people in 1930 to 75,000,000 in 1931.[31] Although Fox folded in 1930 and had to close the San Francisco Fox two years after it opened, RKO, Paramount and Universal staved off receivership until 1933.[32] Lack of attendance was only a minute part of the reason the movie industry went under: the purchase of theatres at an inflated price in the twenties and the massive investment in sound were given

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[30]Minutes of the Ironwood Amusement Corporation, April 29, 1929.

[31]Garth Jowett, Film the Democratic Art, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1976), p. 260. His figures for 1927 are 57,000,000; 1928, gives none, but "rising"; 1929, 80,000,000; 1930, 90,000,000; 1931, 75,000,000.; 1932 and 1933, 60,000,000 and 1934, 70,000,000. On p. 200, Jowett noted that 17,836 movie theatres stood in the U.S. in 1928. On p. 193 he noted that by 1930 there was an overabundance of movie theatres and it would have taken five years of population growth to fill all seats. On p. 260, he said that 5,000 movie theatres closed, but he didn't give a year.

[32]Ave Pildas and Lucinda Smith, Movie Palaces, Survivors of an Era, (New York: Clarkston N. Potter, Inc., 1980), p. 211.

as the primary causes.[33]

In addition to these causes, the Ironwood Theatre may have experienced an even greater decline in attendance. The population of the city dropped by 1,340 from 1920 to 1930. Even though literacy in Ironwood was low, 2.5%, Ironwood's high immigrant population may have preferred silents where language was not a barrier.[34]

Charles Seaman was also experiencing financial difficulties in 1931. He sold his Style Shop and the Seaman Building to the vice president of the IAC, Pat O'Donnell and his partner Joe Seamens (no relation to Charles).[35] P.J. O'Donnell (born March 6, 1882 in Duluth) was Charles Seaman's opposite: a family man, a Knight of Columbus and a devout Catholic. O'Donnell had arrived in Ironwood in 1924 after spending three years in New York City as the eastern sales manager for Patrick Duluth Co., a clothing firm based in Duluth. O'Donnell was no stranger to the Upper Peninsula. From 1900 to 1921, he had been based in Marquette. He left the Patrick Duluth Company to open O'Donnell-Seamens Company, a "Modern Department Store" with Joe Seamens. The O'Donnell-Seamens Company, on the west corner of the Seaman Building, was in direct competition to Charles Seaman's Style Shop.

On July 13, 1932, Charles Seaman threatened to foreclose on the lobby and entrance of the Ironwood Theatre because they had failed to

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[33]Gomery, Warner-Vitaphone, p. 166. 1928 and 1929 had been years of massive expansion, when theatres were purchased and rented, and sound installed costing the industry millions of dollars.

[34]Wendon, Birth of Movies, p. 24.

[35]Ironwood Daily Globe, July 17, 1971.

pay rent since January, 1931.[36] In 1932, the Ironwood Theatre and the Rex faced bankruptcy.[37] Oliver Suprenant replaced Picker as manager in that year.[38] On September 12, 1932, the IAC meet again to increase their stock in an effort to remedy this situation. The IAC voted to issue Class B stock at one dollar per share on October 17, 1932. Pat O'Donnell and Jepperson made the necessary arrangements with the Michigan Secretary of State to execute the plan. All stockholders were asked to turn in their stock certificates on November 26, 1932 so that new ones could be issued. Neither Meyer nor Charles, both owners of outstanding shares, turned in their certificates.

In 1933, the Ironwood Theatre lost $19,000. All outstanding stock, such as that owned by Charles Seaman, was sold at public auction for $2.50 a share. In October of that year, Pat O'Donnell as vice president of the IAC consulted with Majestic Theatres of Milwaukee to lease the Rex and Ironwood to them for ten years.[39] The next year, O'Donnell signed with Thomas Martin of Iron Mountain to set the theatres on a financially solvent course.

Charles Seaman was not re-elected president of IAC but was replaced by Pat O'Donnell in 1933. Seaman remained on the list of directors, but by 1934 his name disappeared from the Corporation's

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[36]Seaman Brothers Building Corporation, Notice of Delinquent Payment and Foreclosure, July 13, 1932.

[37]Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Michigan, Vol. 283, pp.220-243. All this specific information regarding the IAC's problems comes from these pages unless noted.

[38]Ironwood Theatre Preservation Committee, Ironwood Theatre, Past, Present and Future, (June, 1988), p.

[39]P.J. O'Donnell, Letter to L.K. Brin, October 24, 1932.

Annual Reports.

Both Charles and Meyer Seaman had been told on January 30, 1935 by their attorney Mr. Charles Humphrey Sr., that unintentional fraud had been committed in the issuance of Class B stock. Despite hearing this, Charles Seaman left Ironwood in 1935, and settled in Battle Creek with his mother and brother Maurice where he became vice-president-treasurer of Seaman's Style Shop. The Wisconsin and Upper Peninsula Style Shops were sold or dissolved along with the Detroit and Muskegon branches.[40]

Meyer Seaman waited until December, 1936 to act on Humphrey's information. He sued the IAC in the Gogebic County Circuit Court to compel them to allow him to participate in the company. The judge ruled that Meyer sued too late after being informed of fraud.[41] On October, 19 1937, Charles Seaman filed suit against the IAC in the Michigan Supreme Court, alleging that the IAC (Pat O'Donnell, Alex Rosemurgy and Thomas Martin) had committed fraud for the benefit of the other stockholders as "part of a scheme to reduce his proportionate holding of shares and therefore, make them less valuable."[42] He further alleged that the "precarious financial condition of the company was without foundation" and that the issuance

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[40]Battle Creek Inquirer, October 17, 1945.

[41]Ironwood Daily Globe, December 24, 1936.

[42]Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Michigan, Vol. 282, (Chicago: Callaghan and Company, 1938), pp. 259-264. All of the information that follows comes from the Supreme Court case unless noted. Given Charles' behavior once he left Ironwood, and his obvious embitterment at being shut out of a company he had founded, it is possible, although it is never stated, that he felt he was the victim of Post-Depression anti-semitism.

of Class B stock was meant to undermine his position at a time when he was unable to pay for his appropriate shares". On December 14, 1937, the court ruled that Charles sought to redress a personal wrong and that the case was res judicata (already judged).

On February 24, 1938, Meyer appealed his Gogebic Circuit Court suit in the Michigan Supreme Court, claiming that he had given his proxy to his brother Charles in the IAC and was unaware that the IAC was going bankrupt.[43] The judgement was the same as in Charles' case, res judicata.

Charles Seaman died on October 17, 1945 at 67. His obituary noted that once he left Ironwood, he resigned his membership in all clubs and ceased his civic involvement.[44] His obituary was not carried in the Ironwood newspapers. Pat O'Donnell died on July 17, 1971. His obituary stated that he "helped to organize the IAC in 1928 and was its president until his retirement in 1952. The company built one of the outstanding theatre's in the Upper Peninsula".[45]

Later Years

By 1934, the movie industry and the Ironwood Theatre were rebounding from the Depression. The 1940s were the next golden age of the movie palace. Nationally, 1946 was the highest year ever for

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[43] Michigan Reports: Cases Decided in Supreme Court of Michigan, Vol. 283,(1939), p. 381.

[44] Battle Creek Inquirer, October 17, 1945.

[45] Ironwood Daily Globe, July 17, 1971.

attendance.[46]

By the 1950s, the first movie palaces and the movie industry began to decline, again, this time due to growth of suburbs, television, and the divestment of movie theatres by motion picture studios.[47] In 1952, Pat O'Donnell sold the Ironwood Theatre to Thomas Theatres of Iron Mountain.

Although Bud Abbott and Lou Costello had visited the Ironwood Theatre in 1942 to promote war bonds, the Ironwood Theatre had its biggest day June 28, 1963 with the world premier of Adventures of a Young Man. Paul Newman attended the festivities.

The Gogebic Council for the Arts used the theatre for their performances in October 1969.[48] In October 1982, the theatre closed at the same time the twin theatres on Cloverland Drive, on the outskirts of town, opened.[49] The Downtown Development Authorities (DDA) were given the theatre by Thomas Renn after his inability to sell it.[50]

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[46]Joseph Valario and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Re-Use, (New York: Academy for Educational Development, 1982), p. 35.

[47]David Naylor, American Picture Palaces, (New York, Cincinnati, Toronto, London and Melbourne: Van Nostrand and Reinhold Co., 1981), p. 177.

[48]Ironwood Theatre Preservation Committee, Ironwood Theatre, Past, Present, and Future, June, 1988.

[49]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 27, 1988.

[50] When speaking with the president of Butterfield Theatres on July 14, 1988, I was told that these theatres are unsalable. Their value is aesthetic. They are too large to heat and cool cheaply and cannot be filled. Ernest Callenback, in "Temples of the Seventh Art", Sight and Sound, (Vol, 35, no. 1, Winter 1965/66), p. 14, noted that a realistic exhibitor wants 600 to 1,000 seats.

In 1986 the State appropriated $50,000 to the DDA and the Ironwood Theatre was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on January 11, 1985. The theatre is currently undergoing restoration estimated at $516,000 and will be used as a regional arts center.[51]

[51] Past, Present and Future. A more detailed description of the renovation follows in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 10

THE IRONWOOD THEATRE

Remodeling

Around World War II, the foyer of the Ironwood Theatre was remodeled and a concession stand was added.[1] In 1963 or 1964, the theatre was completely redecorated.[2] The ceiling, including the mural in the proscenium arch, was painted dark blue, and the walls were painted white.[3] The auditorium and balcony, however, were not stripped of their ornamental plaster and are in excellent condition. The concourse, and lobby have been the most radically altered areas of the theatre and today, they are void of their original ambience. The facade was the least altered area.

Alterations should be expected in any motion picture theatre built prior to 1930 with competent ownership. One of the primary reasons for this was the introduction of sound. In November, 1929, Clifford Swann in Architectural Forum, advocated the elimination of balconies, curved surfaces, protruding plaster because they interfered with speaker sound. He recommended implementing plane or slightly flared walls, flat ceilings and absorbent material. Trade publications such

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[1]Jim Kennedy, Interview, June 28, 1988. Jim told me the concession and changes made to the lobby at this time. Ledgers for June 6, 1939 also indicate new carpet was installed.

[2]Ironwood Preservation Committee, Ironwood Theatre, Past, Present and Future, (June, 1988).

[3]Conrad Schmitt Studios, Decorator's Report, n.d. According to the decorators, this mural has been obliterated and must be reconstructed from existing photographs.

as Film Yearbook Daily in 1932 recommended remodeling out-of-date buildings.

In order to compare the Ironwood Theatre with the national standard, the look of the theatre in 1928 must be established. Accounts of what it looked like originally will be taken from the newspaper, Nelson's five sheets of tentative plans for the structure and its decor, eyewitness accounts, site study and photographs of the original structure when available.

Nelson's Approach

According to Sexton's Modern Theatres, Vol. I, Nelson first had to consider state building and fire codes. Michigan codes had been in existence for movie theatres since 1913 and were relatively unchanged in 1927 and 1928.[4] No local codes governed the erection of the auditorium in Ironwood. Briefly, the codes governing the building were:

1. The projection booth must be seven feet in height and built of brick or concrete with a four foot core of reinforced concrete.

2. There must be two exits on the main floor, easily accessible by aisles.

3. No aisle should exceed four feet in width. Eighteen inches in width for every 100 seats: two feet six inches was recommended.

4. There must be one exit in the balcony for every two hundred seats.

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[4]Public Acts of the Legislature of the State of Michigan, Regular Session of 1913, (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenback Crawford Co., 1913), pp. 481-486.

5. Exit doors must open outward and be kept well lighted.

6. Seven seats is the maximum in a row opening on one main aisle, fourteen seats is the maximum in a row opening on two main aisles.

The site was the next matter for Nelson to consider. He was given a plot of land 120 feet long by 53 feet wide on an east-west axis and an 15 feet of street frontage, 87 feet deep of a pre-existing building situated on the opposing north-south axis (fig. 13) (the easterly storeroom of the Style Shop). This land was in the downtown Ironwood Business District.

The client, the IAC, wanted the Ironwood Theatre to be the "modern conception of what a theatre should be",[5] "to be in good taste", "unostentatious" and comfortable".[6] The client obviously wanted stage facilities for vaudeville acts, a larger seating capacity than had been seen in Ironwood--in essence a movie palace. In order for Nelson to achieve an integrated, functional and coherent plan that was also "modern" and "tasteful", he would have had to consult with architectural magazines. He frequently read Pencil Points and Architectural Record, both of which regularly published plans and interiors of theatres.[7] It is highly conceivable that Nelson had access to the Architectural Forum in 1925, perhaps when working on the

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[5]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

[6]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, Saturday and Sunday, June 30 and July 1, 1928. p. 1

[7]Roderick Nelson, Letter to Author, August 18, 1988.

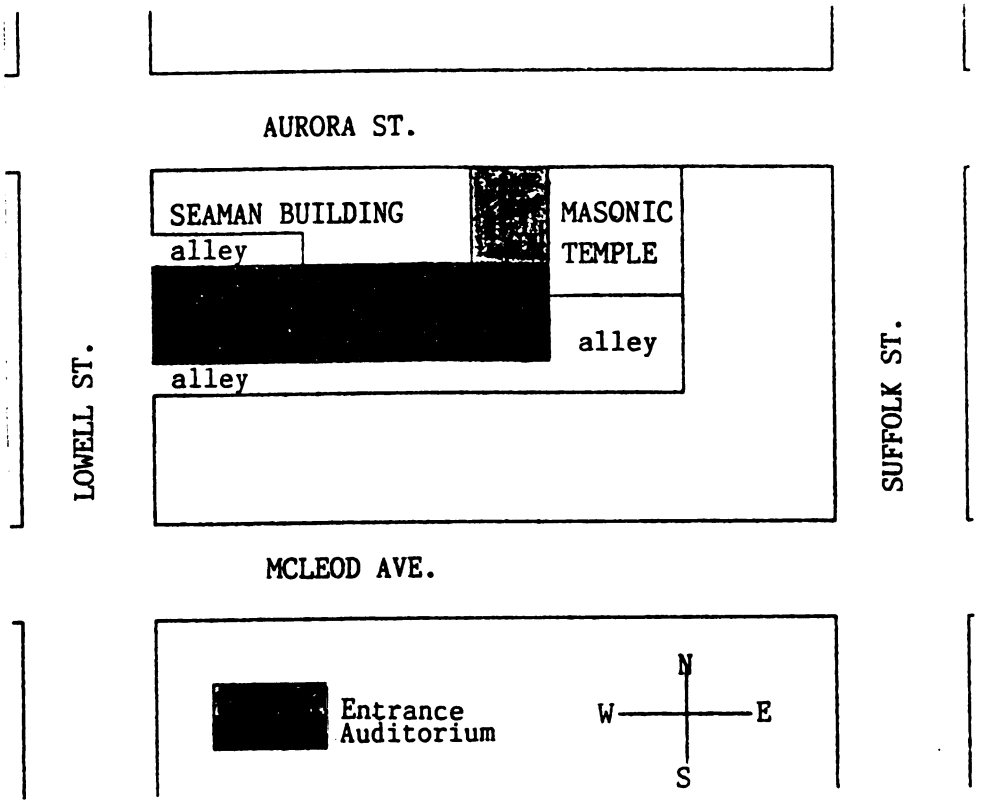

Fig. 13. Site Diagram.

Rialto and probably Sexton's American Theatres of Today in 1927 when he was working on the Ironwood Theatre.[8] Nelson also relied on site study: He traveled to Detroit and Chicago while the Ironwood Theatre was being built to look at other theatres in these cities.[9]

Building Materials

Nelson chose the most modern construction material possible, concrete reinforced with steel. Wrenshall common brick was used as face material on the west, south, and east elevations of the theatre. The facade or north elevation had already been faced with Lake Superior sandstone in 1924. Heavy duty H-tile provided fire proofing. Nelson devised a sharply defined L-shaped (fig. 14) plan of a single balcony type in order to accommodate the lot and the patron's desired seating capacity.

Facade

The facade of the Ironwood Theatre faced north on Aurora Street, the main downtown street. It comprised the far eastern or B bay sequence of the half-modern Seaman Building built by Nelson in 1924-25 and abutted Nelson's earlier Masonic Temple. Four elements distinguished the Ironwood from the Seaman Building: stained glass, a

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[8]Depending on the month that Sexton's book was issued in 1927, Nelson could have consulted with the book either before or surely during the plans for the theatre.

[9]N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1927, and Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928.

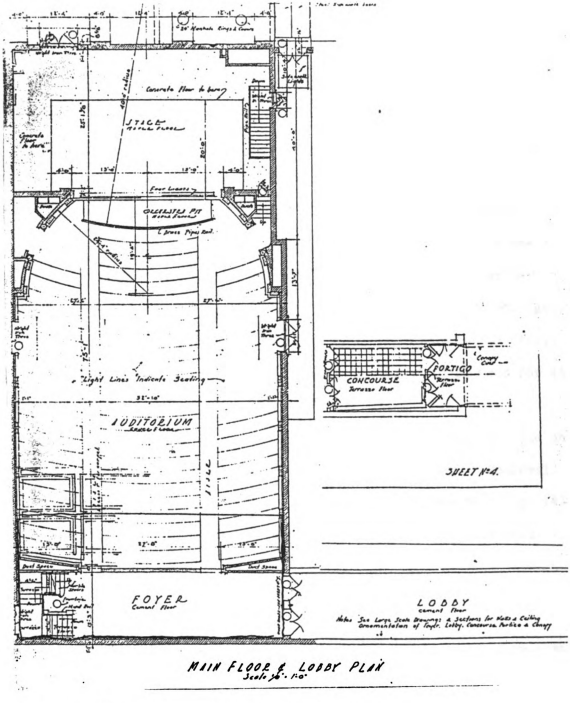

Fig. 14. Plan of First Floor of Ironwood Theatre.

Gothic-looking marquee, a neon sign and a portico (really a recessed entrance) as Nelson called it. (figs. 15, 16). If one must put a stylistic label on the Ironwood Theatre's facade, it would be eclectic: half-modern-Renaissance-Gothic. The facade was conservative, sedate, pious, and commercial, looking much more like a bus station or a train terminal than a theatre.

The second story of the Seaman Building was not mentioned in the lease agreement between SBBC and the IAC; as such one must assume it was out of bounds for Nelson to adapt for theater use.[10] Further, there are no extant elevations for the facade. Nelson's own photograph of the completed Ironwood Theatre (fig. 17) was of the bottom story. Function dictated that part of that first story had to be used for an entrance.[11]

Four stained glass windows with shields and crosses of blue and yellow sat directly behind the bronze marquee or canopy.[12] Medieval cresting topped the cornice of the canopy. A Greek meander (fig. 18) ran along the cornice, and the theatre's name was printed in bold

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[10]Ironwood Amusement Corporation and Seaman Brothers Building Corporation, Draft of Lease Contract, June, 1927. SBBC stipulated that the basements of the Style Shop and the Ironwood Theatre are joined so that Charles Seaman can use the Ironwood Theatre's basement for storage.

[11]Ibid. The lease agreement stated that the leased space was to be used as a lobby, foyer, entrance for the theatre.

[12]Nelson used Beaux Arts Classical labels consistently on his plans, such as canopy, portico, promenade, instead of marquee, entrance and foyer in the balcony foyer. It's possible that he just learned these words; however, by labeling them as he did, Nelson elevated the function of these parts of the building to the level of Granier's Paris Opera.

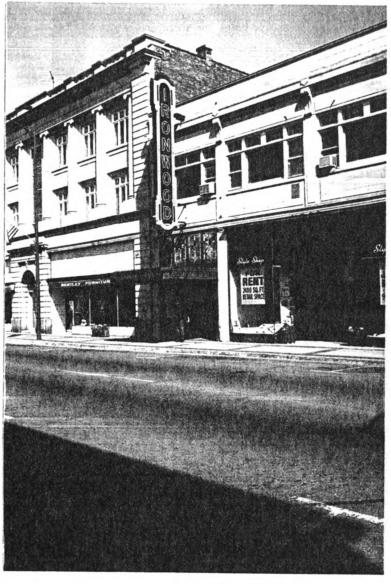

Fig. 15. North Facade of Ironwood Theatre.

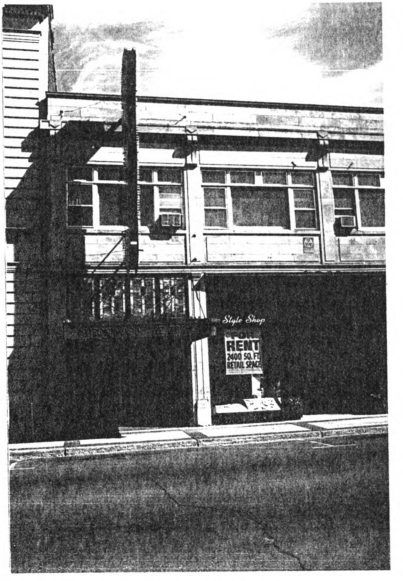

Fig. 16. North Facade of Ironwood Theatre.

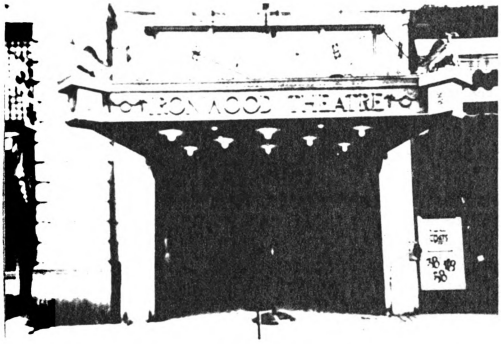

Fig. 17. Photograph of Completed Ironwood Theatre, North Facade.

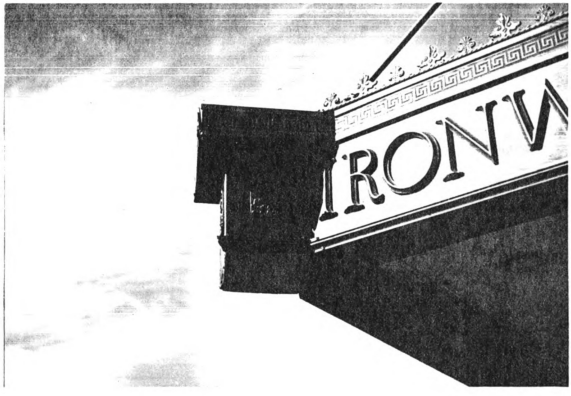

Fig. 18. Detail of Marquee

letters on three sides, set off by swags on the front. Two pedestals, with cones beneath them were decorated with shields. A griffin sat atop each pedestal guarding the entrance. The motif of shields and griffins, repeated in the ornamental plaster inside the theatre as well as in the block reinforced the high moral tone of the stained glass.

Originally, the canopy was "supported" by curvilinear modillions with a bronze flower in the center reminiscent of Art Deco and the underside of the canopy was coffered in bronze. These modillions were joined to bronze moldings running along the sandstone facing.

The Ironwood Theatre's twenty-four feet neon sign (fig. 16) was indeed larger than the entire second story. Each letter was twenty inches high and was bordered by 416 electric lights connected to a flasher.[13]

Entrance Complex

The portico began a series of three bounded spaces, entrance-concourse-lobby, each successively larger, each separated from each other by doors. The facade, entrance, concourse and lobby must be viewed as one unit in situ as part of the Seaman Building: as such they were virtually ignored by Nelson in the extant plans.

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[13] Ironwood Daily Globe, March 17, 1928. Neon went into general use in 1930; however, there was an Agencie Claude Neon in Los Angeles in 1923 and by 1924, there were neon signs in major towns. Francis Lacloche, Architecture des cinemas, (Paris: Editions du Moniteur, 1981), p. 208.

Nelson's did not plan doors directly behind the marquee. On June 19, 1928, the Ironwood Daily Globe reported "brass doors for the main entrance" were being installed and an ambiguous drawing from the Gala Premier Program indicated four doors directly under the marquee.[14] The June 28, 1928 account in the Ironwood Daily Globe reported the doors "to the concourse were solid bronze." Whether these doors were directly behind the marquee or at the end of the recessed entrance, a September, 16, 1982 photograph of the defaced doors in the Ironwood Daily Globe, showed them to be solid brass with no windows.[15]

The entrance (fig. 19) was a small recessed, domed space with ornamental plaster and bronze display cases. The patron was immediately confronted with a set of doors leading into the concourse (fig. 20), a larger area with terrazzo flooring.[16] The ticket booth may have originally been centrally located at the end of the concourse.[17]

As the first step in removal from reality, Nelson envisioned marble baseboards and simulated plaster stone walls. It was the job of the next space, the lobby, separated from the concourse by four doors,

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[14]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, p.13.

[15]Whether they were brass or bronze is a mystery. They came from Thorpe Mettalic Doors Company in Minneapolis. If they matched the canopy, they were bronze. Today there are doors at the end of the shallow entrance.

[16]Alex Rosemurgy, Building Estimates, September 30 and October 31, 1927. Rosemurgy estimated $700 worth of terrazzo work, not completed by either date. Since Nelson's plans indicated terrazzo, it is likely that was the original flooring.

[17]It is difficult to tell from the plans where the ticket booth was originally. The most logical place would have been near the end of the concourse.

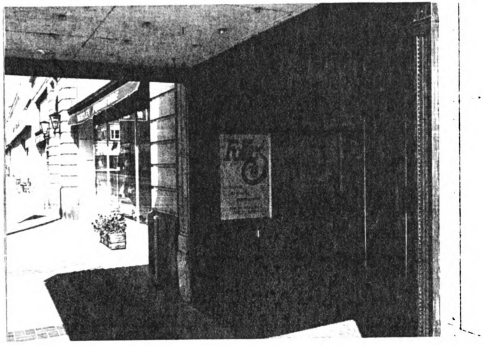

Fig. 19. Entrance.

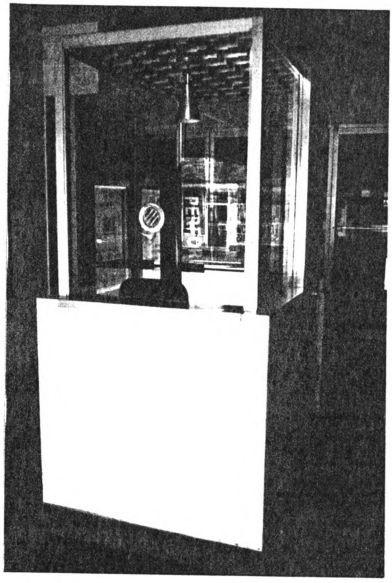

Fig. 20. Concourse.

probably with windows, to divide the exiting and entering traffic into lanes and to tempt the patron to the next level of luxury. Nelson planned to continue the simulate stone wall surface, but with a double rinceaux at the top. The Ironwood Daily Globe of June 28, 1928, wrote of "deep ivory colors of the cornice above the frieze of shields and conventional design. Delicate shades of green and pink blended with the ivory tint of the figure in the frieze. A vivid red and green characterized the shields." The ceiling today and probably at the time (fig. 21), was barrel vaulted with transverse ribs originally painted brown to simulate wood. At the either end of the lobby were lunettes or "arched parapets" filled two "scenic" murals done in Chicago by Continental Studios.[18] Elegant brass fixtures, "crystal chandeliers" according to the Ironwood Daily Globe, hung from the center of the ribs and guilloche molding ran along the base of the vault. The intended effect would have been similar to that of the lobby in the Ramsdell Theatre in Manistee, where Frederick's Ramsdell's fresco occupied the foyer lunettes (fig. 22). Instead of terrazzo, the floor in the lobby was carpeted.

The lobby noticeably continued the incline begun in the concourse, and widened towards yet four more doors and created a sense of anticipation and excitement as the patron glimpsed the foyer.

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[18]Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928. On June 28, 1928, the Globe described this space as "arched with cinnamon brown finished wood. In the arched parapets are scenic paintings."

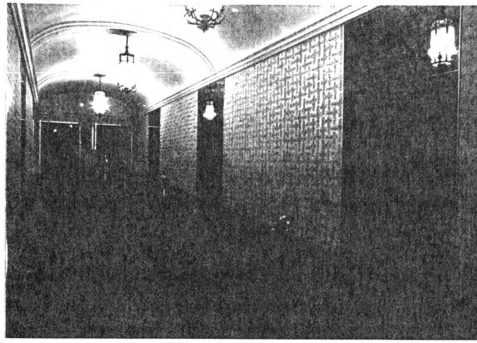

Fig. 21. Lobby Today.

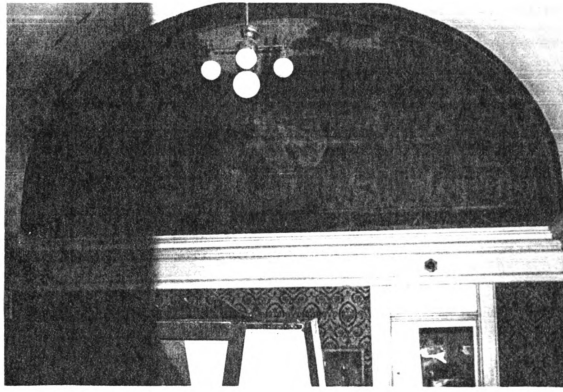

Fig. 22. Entrance of Ramsdell Theatre, Manistee, Michigan, c.1900.

Foyer and Promenade

The foyer, auditorium, promenade and balcony should also be viewed as a second unit as built in 1927-1928, with the foyer serving as the transition space between the old unit and the new one.

On entering the foyer (fig. 23) the patron entered into the Spanish phase. According to the local Globe on June 28, 1928, a flat, ivory ceiling with brown plaster wood beams originally decorated freehand with textone finish between the beams and textone walls replaced the classic transverse ribs. This Spanish phase of the decor was conceived in part by the decorators, Continental Studios of Chicago who announced the "Spanish" atmosphere on January 11, 1928 in the Ironwood Daily Globe. Nelson's plans did show a Spanish influence for these areas. He had called for simulated wood beams and simulated plaster stone wall for wall decor.[19] Nelson had visualized two square entrances from the foyer into the auditorium with rope molding and a square door head with inverted curved corners drawn over the framework of the doorway. It is evident from a photograph taken before remodeling, (fig. 24) that these doorways were originally arched. Another element that Nelson had not initially conceived of, was a niche on the west wall with a large mirror in it.[20]

Once in the foyer, the patron had to chose between directly entering the auditorium or venturing to the balcony promenade. A

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[19]There was no mention of this being carried through, in the Ironwood Daily Globe, on June 28, 1928, only "deep ivory textone surfaces."

[20]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

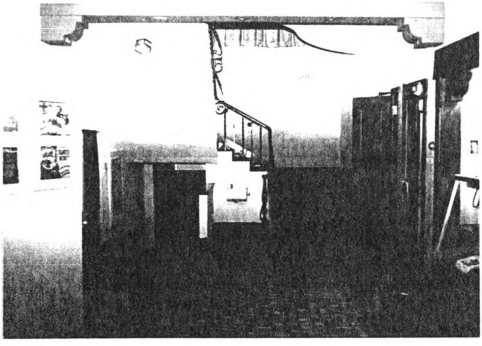

Fig. 23. Foyer.

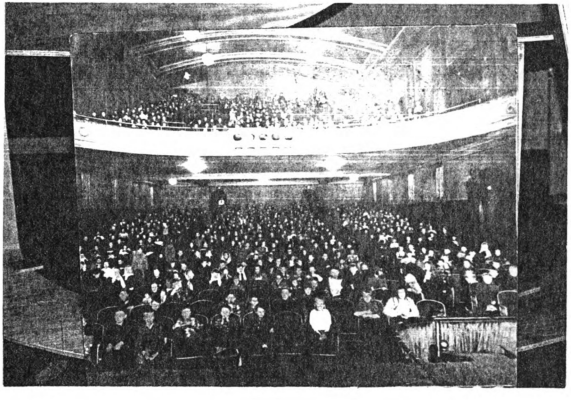

Fig. 24. Auditorium Facing Foyer.

fountain to the left of the staircase,[21] and the staircase, with its twisting wrought iron railing and marble steps probably suggested a Spanish garden awaited the patron upstairs. Initially, the patron's curiosity was piqued, and he or she wound up the two short flights, past a large curtained window with another heraldic emblem to the promenade (fig. 25), and entered a space directly over the foyer.[22]

Plaster beams, hand scrolled as in the foyer decorated the ceiling of the promenade and continued the Spanish motif into the promenade. The wall surfaces were simulated stone, probably with textone surfaces. Above the two entrances to the balcony, Nelson planned a round arch scrolled over a square door frame with a heraldic motif in the center, a slightly different motif than Nelson had envisioned for the entrances to the auditorium in the foyer. Over the door to the patron's left, Nelson imagined a pointed arch and voussoirs drawn atop the circle. Separating the entrances to the balcony, was an alcove framed by two consoles (fig. 26). Drawn above the alcove was a large rectangular frame with griffins in the center.

According to the Ironwood Daily Globe of June 28, 1928, there was a sofa, chairs and "oil paintings, copies of the masterpieces of the world" in the alcove. One was a three-quarter length portrait of a Spanish dancer in the vein of John Singer Sargent and William Merrit Chase's Carmencita's. The other two pictures were copies of Dutch

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[21]This is on Nelson's plans, but it is not mentioned in any accounts. Today, though, there is a water fountain here, indicating that water was piped to this spot.

[22]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928. This is one area that the newspaper printed photographs of, so one can be fairly certain what it looked like.

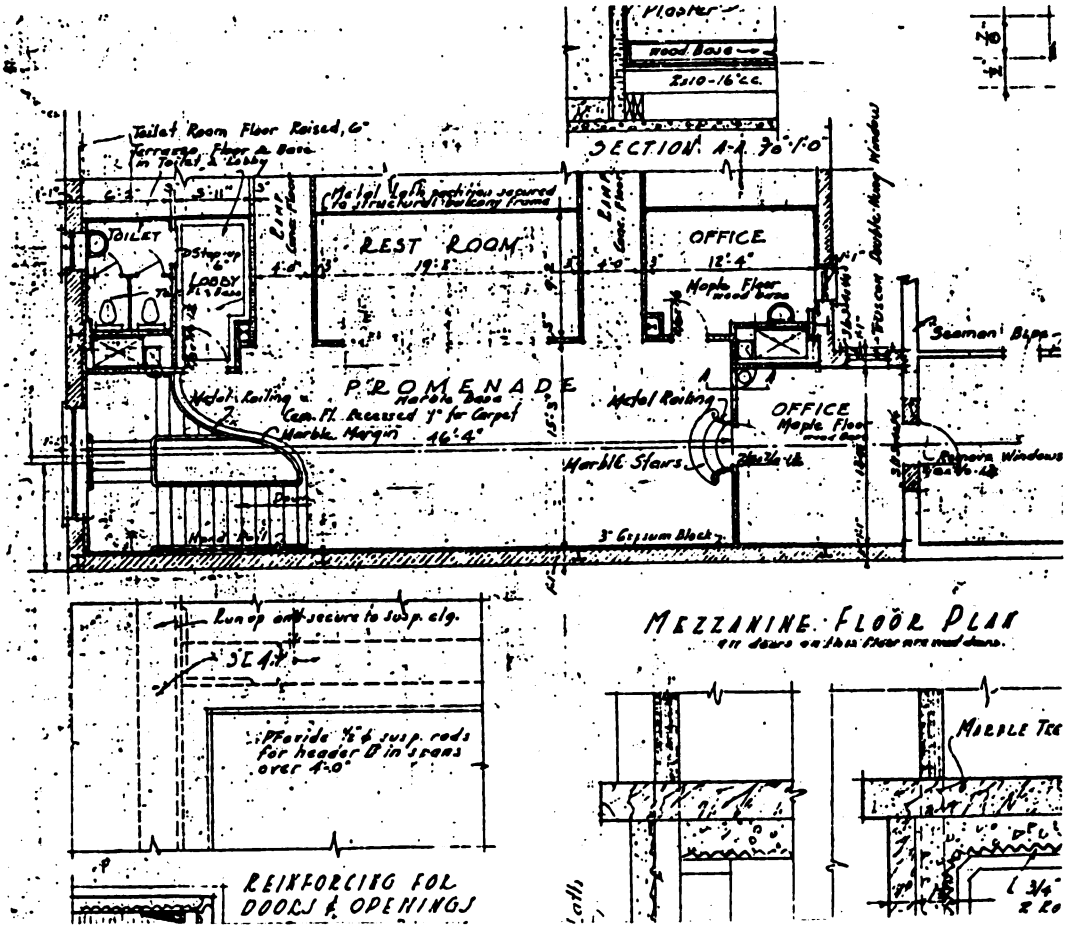

Fig. 25. Plan of Promenade.

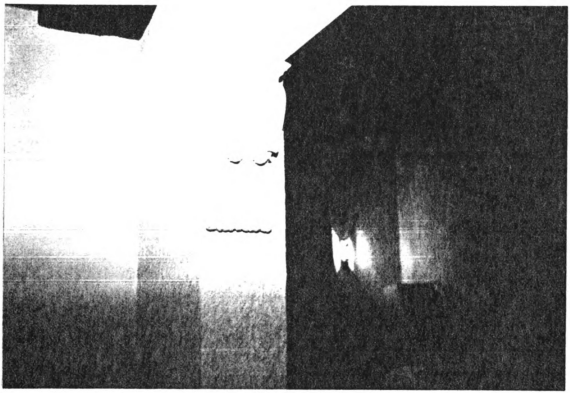

Fig. 26. Promenade and Fireplace.

seventeenth century genre: one was a tenebrist painting of a child smoking a pipe similar to Isaack van Ostade, the other was a battle scene similar to a Willem van de Velde the Younger painting

The promenade was full of cups of space: an alcove, a niche, a ladies boudoir "with all the necessary appointments" according to the Globe of June 28, 1928, and two offices from which the management could control the climate of every inch of the theatre.

One addition possibly suggested by Continental Studios or seen by Nelson in other theatres was "an electrical log fireplace" to the right of the manager's office, "typically Renaissance in design."[23] This was a common forumla in theatre decor eliciting coziness in this area. In this spot, Nelson had initially planned for another, grander manager's office with marble steps.

Auditorium

Nelson lavished most of his energy on the design of the auditorium (figs. 27, 28, 29). He seemed to revel in drawing every decorative detail; he even numbered each detail with a mold number. None of Nelson's ideas for the auditorium were changed from the April 22, 1927 plans until the theatre's completion.

The proscenium arch (fig. 27) was the object of attention. The sides of the arch hid the organ pipes and air ducts. An order of pier-arch-pier on each side of the proscenium arch was necessary in any theatre of the movie palace era to mask the mechanics of the

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[23] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

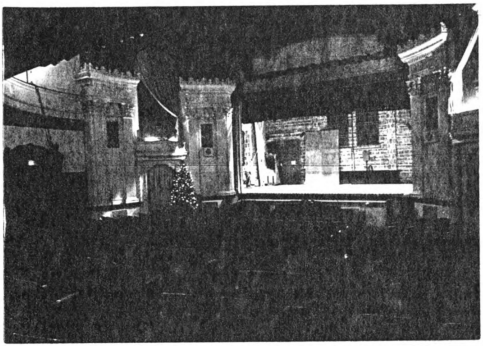

Fig. 27. Auditorium.

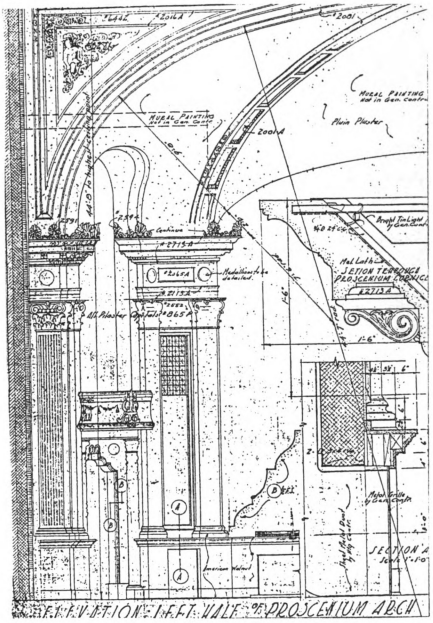

Fig. 28. Section through Proscenium Arch.

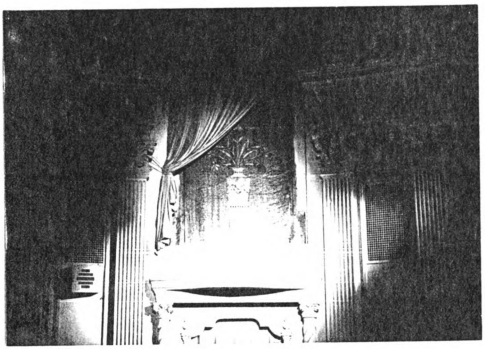

Fig. 29. Proscenium Arch.

building. This configuration resulted in the sides of any proscenium arch resembling a triumphal arch.

Nelson chose an order of splaying, paired fluted pilasters and arch on each side wall of the proscenium arch. Each paired pilaster had a Corinthian cap. Grill work and a cartouche separated each pilaster. These paired pilasters were then joined by a double band of egg and dart molding, rosettes framing a decorative plaque, dentils, egg and dart molding and a cornice crested with anthemion. This cresting, though different from the cresting on the canopy, was probably thought by Nelson to be a unifying element between the interior and the exterior of the building. This unit then rested on a base and was painted with "rich colors and gold".[24]

The box (fig. 30) or arch in each triumphal arch where the organ pipes and airs ducts were housed, was constructed of plaster, lath and hollow tile, and concealed by a false theatre box with floral facing, below a floral screen under Art Deco inspired swag draperies designed by Charles Seaman's employee Wesley Wilman. Below the false box was a false doorway framed by two Churrigueresque columns bringing a touch of Spain into the auditorium. The door frames were similar to those that Nelson had designed for the entrances into the auditorium from the foyer.

For the arch or ceiling of the proscenium arch, Nelson used a suspended ceiling and a unique decorative scheme. "Ribs" sprung from the exterior corner of each triumphal arch configuration and met at a "key stone" in the ceiling before the balcony. These ribs segmented

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[24] Ironwood Daily Globe, March 24, 1928.

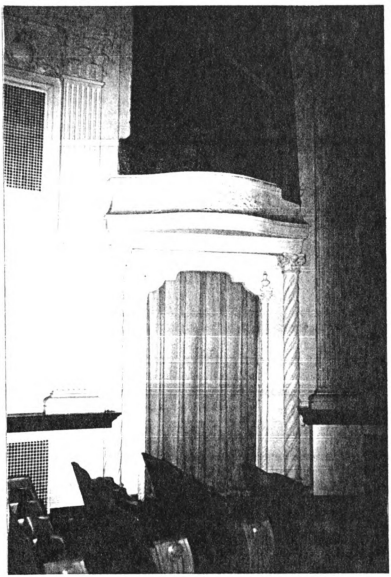

Fig. 30. Box.

the top of the proscenium arch into three bays that pointed as they converged on the keystone. If the vaulting in the ceiling had been extended three-dimensionally, it would have formed a conflated sexpartite vault and dome. A mural executed in the Continental Studios and transferred to the Ironwood Theatre, was placed in this 'vaulting'.[25] In the central and largest bay, "Apollo the sun god extended his greeting".[26] A photograph of the mural before it was destroyed (fig. 31), showed a nude male figure on a winged horse emerging from a burst of clouds. This was not Apollo unless great liberties were taken with mythology. The only winged horse in Greek mythology was Pegasus, ridden by Bellerphon when he conquered the chimera. Apollo did not ride a winged horse. The mural appeared to be done in an impressionistic style in pastel tones with a vaguely classical theme. In contrast to the wood tones, the airy mural probably created a sensation of heavenly space opening up above the stage. The slope of the auditorium floor which reached it lowest point under the proscenium arch, intensified the illusion of ascension. It may have been Nelson's intent to create an atmospheric feeling in part of the theatre without committing to an entire scheme. The desired effect was again, like Frederick Ramsdell's ceiling fresco in the dome of the Ramsdell Theatre in Manistee (fig. 32).

The fire curtain was executed in pastel tones, with a frieze of children's faces and a triangular insignia.

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[25] Ironwood Daily Globe, January, 11, 1928. This mural may have been executed by Alexander Hasenberg. No information is available on him.

[26] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

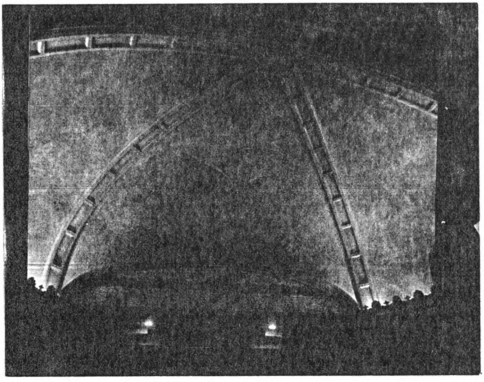

Fig. 31. Photograph after Mural.

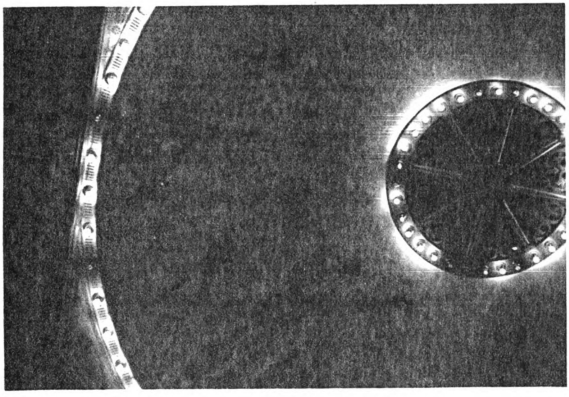

Fig. 32. Fresco in Dome, Manistee, c. 1900.

Behind the fire curtain was a wide stage with maple flooring.

The side walls under the balcony soffit were decorated with paired pilasters resting on walnut trim, dividing the wall into bays. Continental Studios planned to place twelve oval paintings on canvas, six panels per side.[87] These paired plaster pilasters had an acanthus and a vase motif and rested under a cornice of egg and dart molding and rosettes. This area was obviously decorated to enhance the proscenium arch, not to take away from it.

Balcony

The focal point of the balcony was also the proscenium arch where it must have seemed to be literally within the patron's grasp (fig. 33).

The wall treatment in the balcony varied from the auditorium. Paired fluted pilasters joined by rosettes and acanthus "supported" a cornice of vegetal ornament and swags (fig. 34). Between the paired pilasters, were verticals bands of putti (fig. 35), grotteschi (fig. 36), and horizontal bands of griffins and shields in a rinceaux motif. Vegetal motifs were repeated in the face molding between the balcony and proscenium arch and in the balcony facias.

The ceiling was similar to the lobby, with plaster transverse arches painted a cinnamon color to look like wood.

The operating booth was placed at the rear wall of the balcony.

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[87] Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928. It sounded as if these tondos were in the orchestra, but they may have been in the balcony.

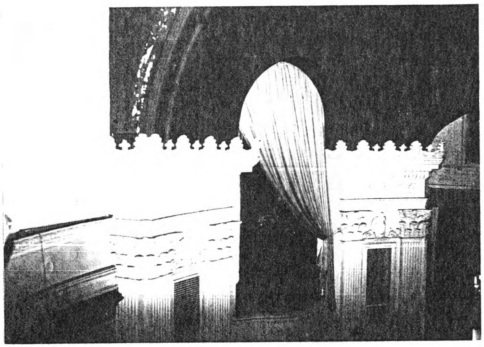

Fig. 33. Proscenium from Balcony.

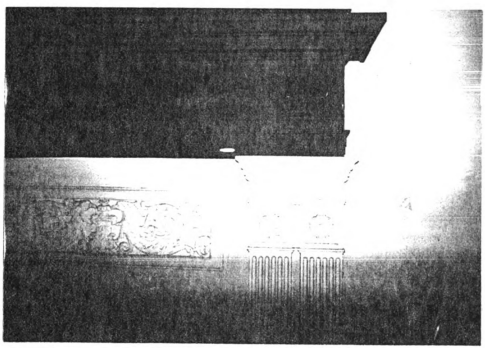

Fig. 34. Balcony Molding.

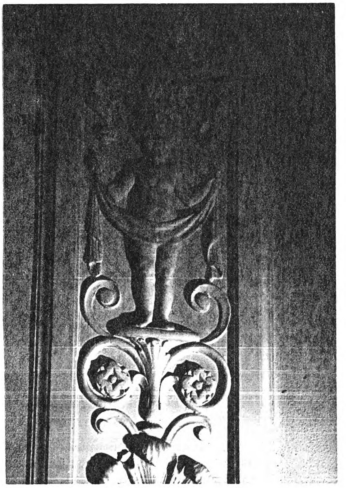

Fig. 35. Balcony Molding.

Fig. 36. Balcony Molding.

Basement

The men's smoking room was located between the foyer and the basement. Like the ladies' boudoir, it had all the necessary accoutrements. The basement space was shared with the Seaman Building, and included storage space, dressing rooms, bathrooms and a stairway leading to backstage.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION:THE IRONWOOD THEATRE AS SYMBOL

Nelson employed the standard construction methods in theatre building in the Ironwood Theatre: reinforced concrete and a cantilevered balcony (fig. 37). From the plans, it was impossible to determine if Nelson complied with all of the technical guidelines suggested in Architectural Forum and Modern Theatres of Today since the available plans for the Ironwood Theatre plans were not the final ones, and may not have been a complete set. Below is a partial listing of the measurements available for comparison.[1]

	Suggested	Ironwood Theatre
Auditorium Slope	6-10 feet from orchestra	10 feet from orchestra
Balcony	50 feet at most above stage	38 feet above stage
Gridiron	Twice height of proscenium opening plus 4 or 5 feet	45 feet high, proscenium opening, 20 feet high
Proscenium Opening	35 to 40 feet wide	30 feet high
Screen	Less than 2,000, seating, 14 to 16 feet wide by x 11 to 12 feet high	16 feet wide by 12 feet high
Organ Chamber	12 feet high	12 feet high

[1]See Appendix II for exact dimensions.

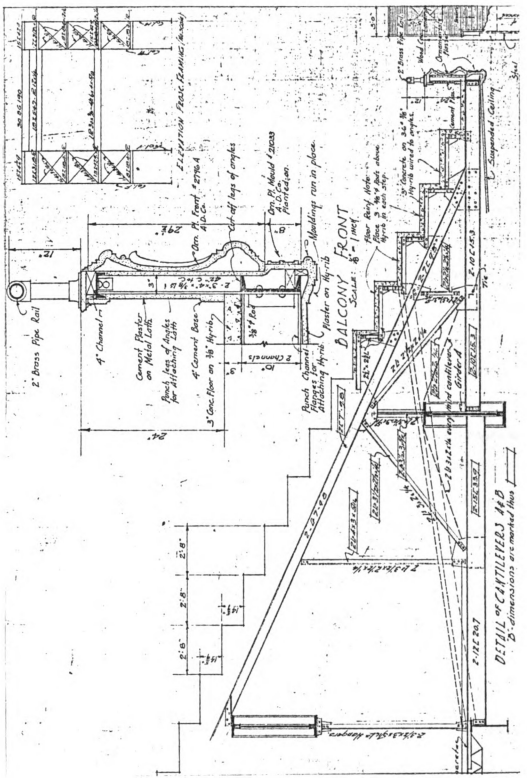

Fig. 37. Cantilever of Balcony.

There are two minor areas where Nelson did fail on the technical level: the sight lines for the balcony and the ventilation. Structural engineers currently want to re-tier the balcony for better sight lines.[2] At the time of its opening, the Ironwood Theatre had 240,000 cubic feet of air per minute per person, instead of 160,000 cubic feet of air per minute per person as recommended.[3]

The single balcony, L-plan was the only plan Nelson could use given the site. The auditorium lot was too small for all the seats to fit on one level. A balcony-mezzanine plan had two drawbacks: it would exceed the desired seating capacity and would also exceed the height of the facade in situ. The L-plan was a common, effective method of fitting a large capacity theatre on a shallow lot by essentially turning the auditorium sideways. Rapp and Rapp had used this design in the Paramount in New York. Whereas the Paramount Theatre plan was integrated, the Ironwood Theatre plan was disjointed because the space leased from SBBC was too long, too narrow and too fixed to allow for a cohesive and functional floor plan. On crowded nights, the entrance facilities were probably unable to accommodate 1,150 patrons exiting and entering without congestion. In order to combat the psychological drain of having to walk an endless distance to reach the auditorium, Nelson compressed the number of lobbies existing on two floors in a super deluxe theatre such as the Roxy

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[2]Graff, Anhat and Schuldener and Associates, Structural Report on the Ironwood Theatre, June, 12, 1987. I can find no radius drawn from the projection booth to the center screen. It is impossible to tell today, if one saw over seats or between them since seats have been replaced.

[3]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, June 30 and July 1, 1928, p. 20.

Theatre, on to one floor, separated each lobby by a series of doors and intensified the decor with each successive stage. Nelson's solution for this space was the only solution possible. Despite the obstacle of having to pass through one set of doors to purchase a ticket, then pass through two more sets of doors before reaching the auditorium, Nelson's solution essentially worked.

The Ironwood Theatre longitudinal cross section did not compare well with Valario's typical theatre longitudinal cross section, for much the same reason: the entrance facilities were too sprawling to be contained in one diagram. The Ironwood did fit Valario's definition of a movie palace: it had a balcony, an orchestra, a seating capacity of between 1,000 and 5,000 and was situated in an entertainment district. Although the Ironwood Theatre was a component of the Seaman Building, it was not its core.

The SBBC space created another, more serious problem for Nelson: the facade. Because the second story was not a part of the rental agreement between the IAC and SBBC, the theatre could not assert itself against the Masonic Temple which was the controlling building on Aurora Street without a major renovation. A simple comparison between the Michigan Theatre in Jackson designed by Maurice Finkel in 1930 and the Ironwood Theatre, demonstrates how miserably the Ironwood Theatre failed in its all important mission to dominate the block (figs. 15, 38). Although a neon sign, the only vertical on the (fig. 39) street, could be an invaluable aid in defining a movie theatre (fig. 40), neither a bronze marquee nor a neon sign could convert the Seaman Building's half-modern facade into a theatre facade. Another oddity in this entrance complex were the solid metal doors at the

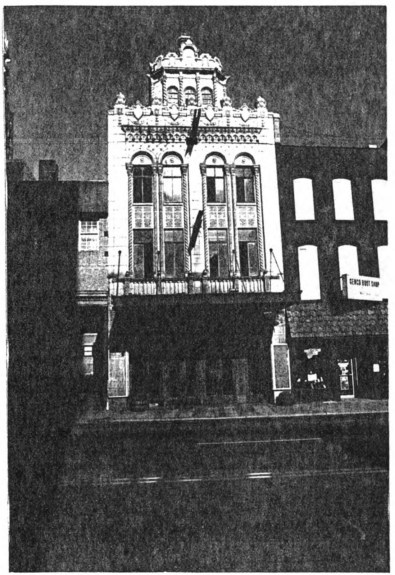

Fig. 38. Michigan Theatre, Jackson.

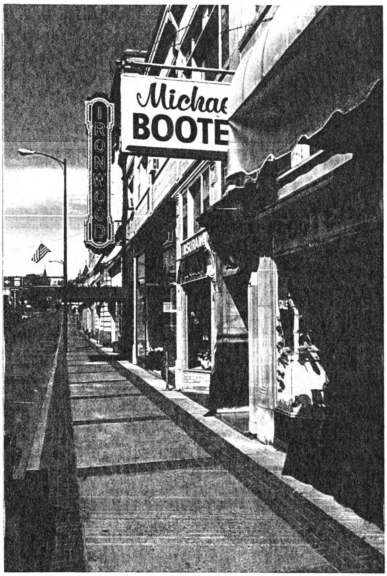

Fig. 39. Ironwood Theatre.

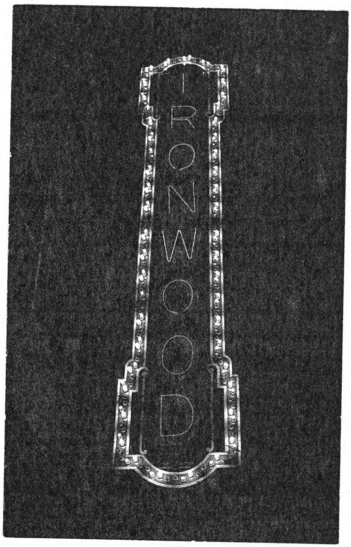

Fig. 40. Sign.

entrance to the Ironwood Theatre, if they were indeed solid. These would have closed the theatre off from the street and the patron, and given the Ironwood Theatre a fortress-like exterior. Doors with windows would have (fig. 41) added excitement to the facade and been more inviting.

Charles Seaman effectively controlled the appearance and plan of the Ironwood Theatre through the lease agreement. In particular, the theatre's facade reflected directly on Seaman's Style Shop and Seaman's reputation for good taste. Seaman may have wanted to keep the second story of the Ironwood Theatre intact for two other reasons: to ensure that he was associated with its building and to maintain the rental price of his office above the theatre. It is also possible that the sedateness of the facade could have been what was meant by "unostentatious" or that the IAC's budget may have been too tight to remodel the second story. There is, however, no explanation for the absence of terra cotta from the facade.

Terra cotta had been standard on theatre facades since the late nineteenth century.[4] It was cheap, effective (fig. 42) and specifically suggested for use in theatre facades.[5] Terra cotta was available in Ironwood and it was used on the interior of the Ironwood Theatre as fire proofing. Instead of choosing it to add color and distinctiveness to the first story, Nelson chose stained glass windows

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[4]Joseph Valario and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Re-Use, (New York: Academy for Educational Development, 1982), p. 21.

[5]E. C. Bullock, "Theatre Entrances and Lobbies", Architectural Forum, (Vol. XLII, no. 6. June, 1925), p. 369.

Fig. 41. Michigan Theatre, Jackson.

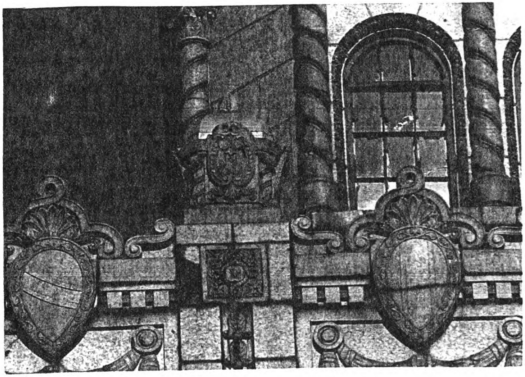

Fig. 42. Michigan Theatre, Jackson.

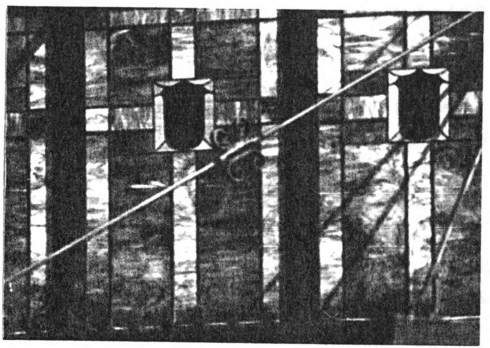

Fig. 43. Ironwood Theatre, detail.

(fig. 43). These windows do not function as windows. Like the stained glass behind the marquee on the Balaban and Katz facades, the stained glass behind the marquee on the Ironwood Theatre functioned as symbol: associating movies and movie theatres with morally approved institutions, in this case, a church, to gain legitimacy.

Although Nelson may have been emulating the Balaban and Katz facades just as he would emulate their interior decor,[6] and religious allusions were standard in the movie palace, Ironwood was very concerned with the community's moral health and the effect of mass media on behavior at the time the Ironwood Theatre was being considered. In the March 7, 1927 meeting of the City Council, as noted, bootleg and lewd women were an issue. Two of the six pool and billiard rooms suspected of peddling bootleg were located on the business strip of Aurora Street: one at 104 East Aurora across the street from the Ironwood Theatre. Hurley, noted for its bars and brothels, was Ironwood's sister city. In this same City Council meeting, two morals ordinances were passed: one preventing the sale of "obscene, immoral and indecent books, pamphlets, papers and news":[7] the other one prohibiting "indecent or immoral exhibition, act, advertisement or publication" aimed in part at art magazines suspected of "corrupting the morals of youth".[8] Jowett noted that "fear was associated with the introduction of mass media . . . and that movies

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[6]Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928. Nelson was familiar with Balaban and Katz from his Augustana Days and he visited Chicago in January to view movie palaces.

[7]City of Ironwood, Minutes of City Council Meeting, March 7, 1927, p. 436.

[8]City of Ironwood, City Council Minutes, March 7, 1927, p. 438.

had to conform to local values".[9] This was what was reflected in the architecture and decor of the Ironwood Theatre facade. A further reflection of this fear was the constant reminder that the IAC was a "homegrown" organization. The names of prominent, upright citizens who owned stock in the company were publicized as symbols to the public that the Ironwood Theatre was above reproach.[10]

Once Nelson was able to take control of the building, the Ironwood Theatre lived up to its advance publicity as "a lengthened shadow of the ideal" and "the modern concept of what a theatre should be."[11] The newly designed areas of foyer, auditorium, promenade and balcony were spacious, comfortable areas allowing for an uninterrupted flow of traffic. The stage was twenty-five feet deep, large enough to "handle anything."[12] The Ironwood Theatre had perfect acoustics (not mentioned in either Architectural Forum or Modern Theatres of Today), a lighting system that "could permit delicate blending", "a projection booth that was the last word in perfect projection", "air washed by a vast and complicated machinery", up-to-date temperature control, and an ascending Barton organ that could double as cathedral chimes and as a symphony.[13]

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[9]Garth Jowett, Film the Democratic Art, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1976), pp. 13-14.

[10]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, June 30 and July 1, 1928. p. 14.

[11]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928.

[12]R. W. Sexton, American Theatres of Today, Vol. I, (New York: Architectural Book Publishing, Co., 1927), p. 25.

[13]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, June 30 and July 1, 1928, pp. 18-20.

More important than measurement, according to the Architectural Forum and Modern Theatre of Today was atmosphere. Nelson saw that the decor was in scale with the size of the structure thus creating a sense of intimacy, especially in the promenade which still feels more like a cozy living room in a private building than a public waiting area. Works of art functioned as they did in all motion picture palaces: to create visual interest in wall surfaces in waiting areas while cloaking the films in pseudo-cultural symbols. Scenic murals in the lunettes in the lobby initiated the patron into the first level of culture, making the Ironwood Theatre look like more a legitimate theatre such as the Ramsdell Theatre in Manistee. The promenade was the art gallery where "reproductions of great works of art" hung. This was undoubtedly the didactic area where citizens of Ironwood, with no access to a museum, could become educated as to what great works of art looked like. Another allusion to legitimate theatre was the undefinable mythological image in the proscenium arch, alluding to the Greek origins of legitimate theatre. If three murals and three "famous" reproductions were not enough, twelve tondos were added to the auditorium--to overload of the senses and creating a visual cocoon of prestige and legitimacy around film.

Like the Roxy Theatre, The Ironwood also had a religious label, it was a temple,[14] and like the Roxy Theatre, the Ironwood Theatre looked more like a temple, even on the interior as well as on the exterior. Although the proscenium arch was the piece de resistance of the Ironwood Theatre, it probably elicited more awe from the patrons

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[14]Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, p. 12.

than thrill. It did not allude to amusement, but once again--to religion. While the configuration of any proscenium arch has an undeniable association with a church, with the piers and arches reminiscent of Bramante and the stage serving as the altar, and a mural in the proscenium arch replicating a fresco above the altar, no one until Nelson switched from form following function in the plan to form following form in the proscenium arch. It was as if Nelson saw the piers and the piers demanded a dome, even a non-structural dome. The hybrid shape of the space, a conflated segmented semi-dome and a sexpartite vault, seemed to straddle the Northern Gothic and the Italian Renaissance--quite apropos given the ethnic composition of the city. Nelson could have only gotten this idea from his knowledge of Gothic, and in particular, Renaissance and Baroque church architecture. One has to wonder if McLean's observation on the role of the architecture of the vaudeville palace to "ease the immigrants translating from the rites of a ceremonial religion to the ritual of secular amusement,"[15] were just as applicable to the Ironwood Theatre. Although the religious symbolism in the Ironwood Theatre could have been a double entendre in a city with a high immigrant population, moral symbolism was never so blatant in vaudeville palaces as it was in the movie palace, and never so blaring as it was in the Ironwood Theatre.

Nelson succeeded in simulating palatial luxury throughout the building by utilizing velvet, gilt and marble. In decor, Nelson was not imitative of any one building, but synthesized his ideas and

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[15]Albert F. McLean, Jr., American Vaudeville as Ritual, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), p. 195.

various tendencies in great buidings and other theatres in both the interior and exterior with a special emphasis on Balaban and Katz precedents. Nelson complemented the "international institution and influence" of the movies and appealed to mass taste ("every lover of beauty"),[16] by "denying small town" decor.[17]

Nelson never considered a local decorator or one from Duluth or one from Minneapolis as he had considered other local or regional contractors in other areas of the theatre. At one point, he contemplated using a Detroit decorator M. Goldberg Co., one of several Detroit decorators he visited while in that city looking at theatres.[18] Instead, Nelson chose a Chicago house who claimed to have decorated sixty percent of the Balaban and Katz theatres. Further the color scheme of the Ironwood Theatre was to follow that of the New Sheridan in Chicago decorated by Continental Studios and would be "equal or better to anything in Chicago".[19] By associating the theatre with a Publix/Paramount decorator, Nelson avoided associating the theatre with Ironwood; in the clearest possible way, Nelson associated the Ironwood Theatre with the national standard, of a big-city, the cosmopolitan and cultured image of Chicago.

The decor of the Ironwood Theatre, like every motion picture palace was eclectic allowing for allusions to several revered cultural

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[16]Ibid.

[17]McLean, American Vaudeville, p. 194.

[18]N. Albert Nelson, Letter to Ironwood Amusement Corporation, November 9, 1928. It is possible Continental Studios submitted the lowest bid; however proposals and specifications were mentioned by Nelson, making these seem as important as a low bid.

[19]Ironwood Daily Globe, January 11, 1928.

and art historical periods. The righteousness of Gothic was strongly represented throughout the building, in the canopy and the stained glass, in the heraldic molding and griffins and in the shape of the proscenium arch. The antiquity of Greek culture was represented by the mythological subject mural in the proscenium arch; modernity or the present was represented in a very minor way by Wesley Wilman, "designer of draperies and scenic effects" in the floral Art Deco screens in the proscenium boxes.[80] Spanish was the only style mentioned by the original decorators. Even the organ, according to the April 23, 1928 issue of the Ironwood Daily Globe, was decorated "in keeping with the interior of the Ironwood Theatre, in Spanish gold encrusted with deep red shields," as if to make Spanish theme the official theme of the Ironwood Theatre (fig. 44).

Spanish or Moorish was a standard decorative formula in movie palace decor, adding exoticism and removing the theatre from reality, a mini Mediterranean vacation for the patrons in the frigid northern climate. No decor was further from reality in Ironwood than Spanish. They were only eight ethnic Spaniards in the city and Spanish or Moorish was probably the underused decor. The Michigan Theatre, built by Butterfield/Publix in Jackson 1930, also employed this Spanish scheme (fig. 45). Its textone walls, scrolling and plaster beams are still intact today. Crane and Lamb incorporated elements of Spanish into their buildings. From the plans, with the simulated stone walls, parts of the Ironwood theatre must have look liked a Gothic Spanish castle. Despite the shields and griffins moldings alluding to the

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[80] Ironwood Daily Globe, March 17, 1928.

Fig. 44. Ascending Barton Organ, Ironwood Theatre.

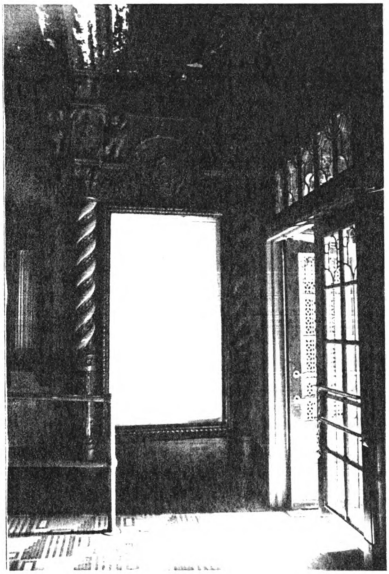

Fig. 45. Michigan Theatre, Jackson.

Gothic, these areas must have functioned as relief from the austerity of the facade and seriousness of the proscenium arch while denying any local origins in the decor.

Everywhere, the theatre was, and still is being touted as "fashioned after the Italian Renaissance in both decoration and architecture."[21] Italian Renaissance was directly referred to in the proscenium arch and in some of the plaster ornamentation,[22] but stripped of the plaster and the suspended ceiling, the theatre was architecturally and structurally modern: composed of interlocking cubes and rectangles, their placement dictated by function, powered by machine-age technology and serving machine-age people. The label Italian Renaissance achieved the same end as it had in the Seaman Building: it served as a potent symbol of God, art, taste, cultivation, culture, enlightenment, and legitimacy.

No theatre before the Ironwood Theatre in Ironwood, certainly not the Rialto, could claim to be a reflection of an ideal. Despite its isolation and homegrown ownership, the Ironwood Theatre aspired to the national standard of decor, architecture, exhibition, and technology, and succeeded in identifying itself with the nation, not with the town. When the decor and architecture evaded the national standard, the Ironwood Theatre proved to be a lengthened shadow greatest of an ideal,[23] by exaggerating the "manipulatation of symbol to acquire

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[21] Ironwood Daily Globe, June 28, 1928, Gala Premier Program, p. 17, and current post cards.

[22] Conrad Schmitt Studios, Inc., Decorator's Report. They label the molding in the auditorium from Pietro Lombardo. They also see French Renaissance, Fountainbleau in particular.

[23] Ironwood Theatre, Gala Premier Program, top of every page.

status, prestige and legitimacy".[24]

Vaudeville and the vaudeville palace was to McLean "a significant social instruction . . . the mythic re-enactment through ritual of underlying aspirations of the American people . . . and a search for commonality of vision."[25] The movie palace was an intensification of vaudeville's ritual and function. In 1928, Ironwood was a bustling prosperous, growing center, the largest city in the Upper Peninsula. What better, more American way for Ironwood to announce its status and assert its dominance in the region than by building the biggest, the best, the only motion picture theatre of its kind for hundreds of miles,[26] proving that it could look as well as act like the Chicago of the Upper Midwest.

The name alone, Ironwood, as opposed to Bijou or Strand reflected great civic pride in the building. Every phase of the building process was eagerly reported in the newspaper. The theatre was reported as being the largest building project in that city since the

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[24]Jowett, Democratic Art, p. 12.

[25]McLean, American Vaudeville, p. 211.

[26]The original seating capacity of the Ironwood Theatre is a mystery. Nelson did not plot seats on the provisional plan. As noted, the Ironwood Daily Globe of June 28, 1928 gives two figures, 1,150 and 1,200 for seating. Film Daily Yearbook in 1932, gives 1,050 as the seating; however, the Ironwood Theatre did lower its seating capacity. It's nearest competitor in size would be the Delft in Marquette, reported at 1,100 by Film Daily Yearbook in 1932. If indeed the Ironwood Daily Globe is correct for 1928, and the Delft did seat 1,100 people in 1928, then the Ironwood Theatre was the largest structure no only in the Upper Peninsula. The Delft is listed in the Marquette City Directories as early in 1916 in the Marquette Opera House Building indicating that the Delft stood on the site of the Opera House. At any rate, the Ironwood Theatre was largest, and only building built specifically on the national model in the Upper Peninsula.

"new Luther Wright High School".[27] In the long Gala Premier Program issued on June 30 and July 1, 1928, the community lauded the Ironwood Theatre. Davis and Fehr, owners of the general store, wrote that the theatre was "a credit not only to the city of Ironwood but to this entire section of the country." The IAC called it the "the spirit of vision and of progress, financed by Ironwood capitol and enterprise to bring about the realization of a bigger and better Ironwood." "The building," the IAC thought, "would reflect a high degree of credit upon the city." Hedhund and Haapoja Co, a men's clothier's congratulated the men who had the "confidence in the city to build and finance the theatre". The Gogebic National Bank stated that "Ironwood can now boast of all: beautiful churches--beautiful business, homes, beautiful clubs and beautiful centers of amusement." The Ironwood Daily Globe on June 28, 1928 reported that the Ironwood Theatre was "the epitome of Upper Peninsula accomplishments".

If the Ironwood Theatre symbolized Ironwood's coming of age and its realization of the American dream, it also symbolized what the individual could achieve. Sexton wrote that movie palaces were democratic, "social safety valves where the public can partake of the same luxuries as the rich . . . where rich and poor attend the theatre, revel in luxury and costly beauty by surroundings which they cannot afford in their home life."[28] The Ironwood Theatre was Ironwood's local palazzo, every citizen's private castle, his personal

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[27]Ironwood Daily Globe, June 30, 1928. According to Jacobs, Rise of Film, p. 292, "the theatre was often the most outstanding building in town."

[28]Sexton, American Theatres, pp., 14, 24.

potential realized. In an era where "people displayed an inordinate desire to get rich quickly with a minimum of physical effort,"[29] the Ironwood Theatre perpetuated hope of achieving the American Dream and, in a time of an altered sense of community,[30] the building united a city in this common desire. In the words of the IAC on the first page of the Gala Premier Program, "your spirit was fused with hundreds of men and women in the audience; you become a little less of the self-centered, unrelated individual and more a part of the heart and soul of the human race."

To Charles Seaman, an unmarried Jewish immigrant seeking fortune, power, status and legitimacy in a gentile city, the Ironwood Theatre was a personal symbol that he had attained these things and that he belonged. To N. Albert Nelson, a talented Swedish immigrant, the Ironwood Theatre was also a personal symbol that his hard work and self-determination had resulted in his achieving the American Dream.

Today, the Ironwood Theater enjoys unprecedented community support in the economically depressed area. Gas station attendants and physicians work side by side to salvage the only vestige of Ironwood's glory days. The Ironwood Theatre's survival, to those with little confidence in the present, is an abiding symbol of the past and the future. John Kenneth Galbraith wrote of the twenties that "men and women had proceeded to build a world of speculation, of make-believe. This was a world inhabited not by people persuaded to believe, but by

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[29]John Kenneth Galbraith, The Great Crash, 1929, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961) p.8.

[30]Jowett, Democratic Art, p. 23.

people who wanted an excuse to believe."[31] Movie palaces were and are symbols of humankind's eternal excuse to believe in art, religion, government, hope, the American Dream and oneself.

[31]Galbraith, Great Crash, p. 8.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

ETHNIC BREAKDOWN FOR GOGEBIC COUNTY

Ethnic breakdown of foreign-born in Gogebic County in 1930 according to the United States Census Bureau.

COUNTRY	NO. OF PEOPLE
Finland	3,129
Italy	996
Sweden	939
Poland	803
England	720
Czechoslovakia	510
Yugoslavia	419
Austria	289
Germany	179
Norway	174
Other Canadian	178
French Canadian	140
Hungary	55
Lithuania	52
Irish Free State	43
Belgium	37
Palestinian and Syrian	33
Other	28
Denmark	23
France	23
Greece	23
Bulgaria	22
Scotland	18
Switzerland	12
Netherlands	8
Wales	8
Northern Irish	5
Spain	5
Rumania	1
Turkey	1

Ethnic breakdown of people with foreign-born or mixed parentage in Gogebic County.

COUNTRY	NO. OF PEOPLE
Finland	5,069
Sweden	1,709
Poland	1,569
Italy	1,560
England	1,339
Czechoslovakia	956
Germany	715
Austria	694
Yugoslavia	681
French Canadian	443
Other Canadian	428
Norway	383
Irish Free State	294
Hungary	127
Denmark	67
Scotland	61
Palestinian and Syrian	55
Belgium	52
Russia	52
Other	48
French	47
Lithuania	45
Northern Ireland	42
Netherlands	35
Switzerland	29
Greece	23
Bulgaria	17
Wales	11
Rumania	8
Spain	3

APPENDIX II

COST OF BUILDING AND CONTRACTS AWARDED

The material derives either from a bill, a signed estimate, a contract, a letter to the Ironwood Amusement Corporatin and an contract dated November 9, 1927 from N. Albert Nelson, or from the Ironwood Daily Globe.

CONTRACT	AWARDED TO	AMOUNT	DATE
Architectural/ Engineering	N. Albert Nelson, Ironwood	$ 7,000	before 4-22-27
Excavating IDG	W.S. Peters, Wakefield	3,057	before 5-17-27
General (IDG) Contracting	A.S. Rosemurgy, Bessemer	67,000	9-13-27
Structrual (Nelson)	Worden-Allen Co. Milwaukee	24,000	before 11-9-27
Plumbing,Hting, Ventilating	A.B. Donaldson, Minneapolis	23,276	10-28-27
Electrical	A. C. Vanderheide, Menominee	9,338	10-25-27
Fuel Tank	Gogebic Boiler Works Duluth	613	before 11-9-27
Seating	A.H. Andrews, loc. n/a	9,468	before 11-9-27
Operating Booth	n/a	3,500	before 11-9-27
Lighting	Minneapolis Lighting, Minn.	1,659	3-29-28
Ornamental Bronze & Iron	Globe Ironworks, Milwaukee	n/a	before 11-9-27

CONTRACT	AWARDED TO	AMOUNT	DATE
Decorating	Continental Studios Chicago	$8,750 (est.)	1-11-28
Woodwork	Scott Taylor, Asland, WI	n/a	before 11-9-27
Doors	Thorpe Metallic Minn.	n/a	before 11-9-27
Roofing & Sheet Metal	D.D. Callen, Duluth	n/a	before 11-9-27
Scenery and Stage Rigging	Twin City Scenic Minneapolis	8,500 (est.)	3-17-28
Organ	n/a	10,000	n/a
Sign	Federal Sign Co. Duluth	1,800 (est.)	3-17-28
Draperies & Scenic	Designed Wesley Wilman, Style Shop, Ironwood, Manuf. Minneaplis	n/a	3-17-28
Projecting Equip.	Rialto Theatrical Supply-Minneapolis	n/a	3-17-28
Ornamental Plaster	A.S. Rosemurgy, Bessemer	11,800 (est.)	3-24-28

APPENDIX III

DIMENSIONS OF IRONWOOD THEATRE

The total dimensions of the Ironwood Theatre, based on Nelson's tentative plans are:

	W	L	H
Facade	n/a	n/a	n/a
West Elevation	n/a	53'	56'- 6"
South Elevation	n/a	120'	53'- 1/4"
East Elevation	n/a	n/a	n/a
Portico	13'	8'- 6"	n/a
Concourse	13'- 3"	19'- 6"	n/a
Lobby	13'- 3"	60'- 2"	n/a
Foyer	13'- 3"	52'- 10"	n/a
Auditorium	52'	75'- 1"	n/a
Auditorium slope from Orchestra	n/a	10'	n/a
Organ Chamber	n/a	n/a	12'
Screen	16'	n/a	12'
Orchestra Pit	6'	25'- 6"	n/a
Stage	38'	20'	n/a
Gridiron	n/a	n/a	45'
Balcony Promenade	15'- 3"	44'	n/a
Balcony	52'	52'	n/a
Balcony from Proscenium arch	n/a	38'	n/a

	W	L	H
Balcony above auditorium	n/a	n/a	32'
Operating Booth	27'- 10"	8'	10'
Fire Escapes	5'- 11"	n/a	n/a
Aisles Width	4'	n/a	n/a

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