

Forgotten TEMPLES

The golden age of Milwaukee's Movie Theatres

Story by Larry Widen

Photographs from the collection of Larry Widen

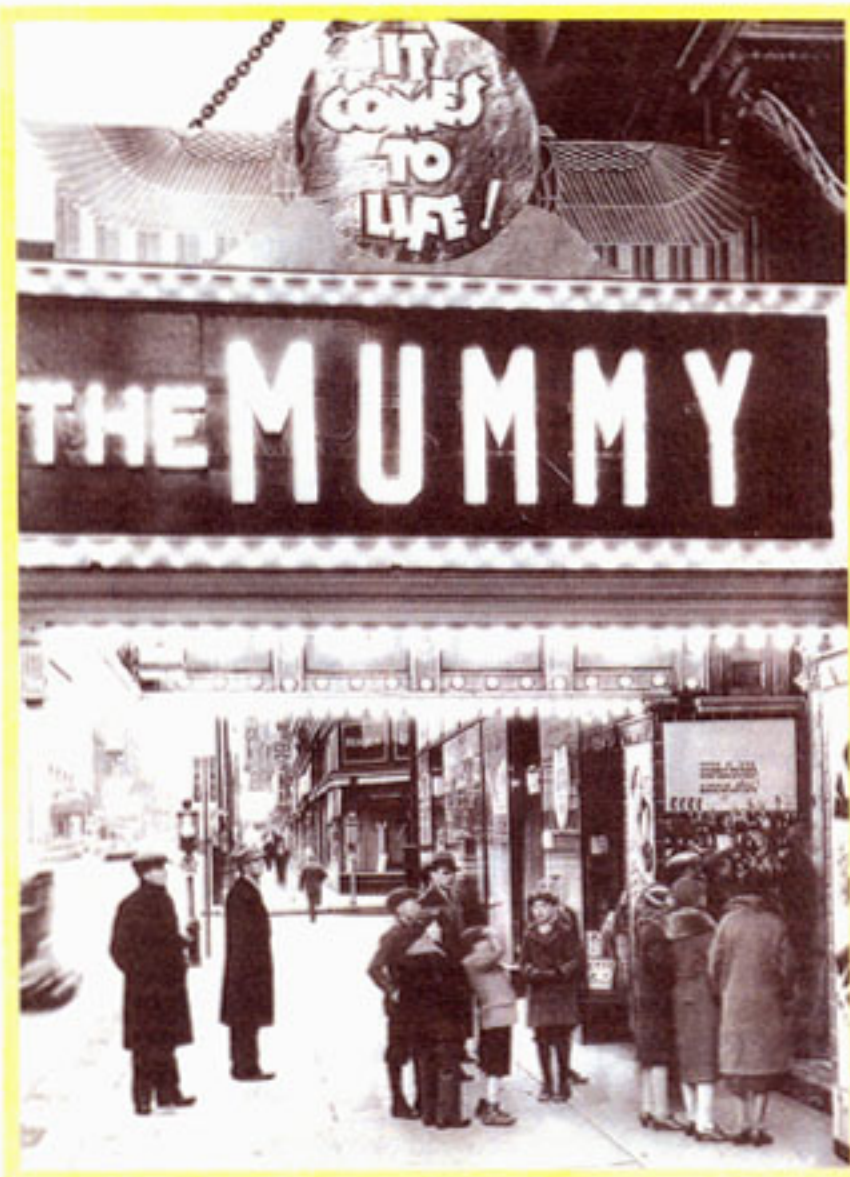
Through the Great Depression, and in the years following World War II, America was in love with the movies. People attended motion pictures once or twice a week for the sheer entertainment value as well as the convenience of being able to walk to a theater just blocks from their homes.

In 1931, while the country was reeling from the effects of a financial depression, more than a dozen movie theaters existed within a six-block stretch of downtown Milwaukee. The Wisconsin, Palace, Strand, Merrill, Alhambra, Garden, Warner and Riverside lined Wisconsin Avenue from Sixth Street to the river. The Miller, White House, Magnet, Empress and Princess lined both sides of North Third Street between Wells and Wisconsin. Going to see a film downtown at one of the movie "palaces" was the acme of the movie going experience. Admission was fifty cents in the evenings, 35 cents during the day. That ticket was a passport into a fantasy world of plush draperies, magnificent chandeliers, velvet seats, and exotic architectural motifs, all delivered with impeccable customer service. Often the film was less compelling than the atmosphere in which it was shown.

The first evidence of movies in Milwaukee dates back to June 26, 1896 when Thomas Edison's Vitascope pictures were shown at the Academy of Music, which was located on Milwaukee Street just south of Wisconsin Avenue. Grainy, flickering scenes of New York City traffic, a boxing match and the famous kiss with actors John Rice and Mae Irwin thrilled an audience who paid up to 30 cents for admission, depending on the seat. Within two years, the Schlitz brewing company's Alhambra theater was showing films documenting the Spanish-American War, an effective predecessor of the popular theater newsreels from the 1930s and 1940s.

By 1899, motion pictures were being shown in local amusement parks such as Shoot-The-Chutes, a water slide park located on the Milwaukee River, and Coney Island, a huge amusement park in Shorewood. The formal exhibition of films in Milwaukee wasn't established until Max Goldstein, a real estate investor, opened the city's first permanent motion picture theater in 1902. Goldstein's storefront theater at 2nd Street and Wisconsin Avenue was a no-frills, airless room equipped with wooden bench seats and a white sheet for a screen. Admission was five cents for 30 minutes of silent films, piano music and illustrated slides. Goldstein soon wearied of the constant attention his theater required (the projector and film frequently burst into flames) and opted to sell out by 1905.

Local showmen who ran prosperous nickel theaters upgraded into larger, more opulent auditoriums before World War I. By the mid-1920s, these theaters were replaced by the movie palaces, breathtaking architectural wonders



Many of the larger theaters had their own carpenters and advertising designers on staff. Several times a month the staff created elaborate displays to advertise a film to the public. Designer Milton Schultz created the Alhambra theater's advertising for the 1931 film, "The Mummy." Schultz's concepts included massive exterior signage and a sarcophagus with a realistic-looking mummy inside. The Alhambra, 334 W. Wisconsin, was torn down in 1960.

Photo by Albert Kubli, from author's collection

that emulated Egyptian tombs, Roman courtyards and Moorish temples.

The stunning debut of the city's Wisconsin theater in March, 1924, ushered in the golden age of movies in Milwaukee. With French baroque decor, a sweeping marble staircase and museum-quality works of art, the Wisconsin was a palace in every sense of the word. A spectacular, 75-foot vertical sign hung from the theater's exterior. The owners bragged that the huge, blinking sign could be seen for miles in the evening.

Once the Wisconsin theater's opulence defined the standard, competing theater owners set about building showplaces to lure audiences away. In 1928, the RKO theater chain constructed the fabulous Riverside overlooking the Milwaukee river; two years later the Warner brothers answered with their Milwaukee flagship, the 3,000-seat art deco Warner theater.

With so many theaters operating in a six-block area, competition was fierce to attract audiences to the downtown venues. In today's specialized theater industry, upcoming feature attractions are often pitched to potential audiences with a pre-manufactured cardboard standee created especially for a particular film. But in the 1930s and 1940s, promotions were incredibly complex and creative undertakings that required many theaters to maintain a

carpentry/sign shop on the premises and an artist or craftsman on the payroll.

Milton Schultz was a designer at the Alhambra theater in 1931. One of his many projects was transforming the theater's public space into an Egyptian tomb for the premiere of "The Mummy." Since he wasn't permitted to affix anything to the all-marble foyer, Schultz faced the challenge of making the display aesthetically pleasing as well as structurally sound. He even wrapped a mannequin in bandages and set it on fire to make it appear 3,000 years old. As intricate and well-crafted as these promotional displays were, most had a life of about a week or two before they were torn down and replaced by a setup for a new film.

As the movies gained in popularity, the opulence once reserved for the downtown theaters found its way to various outlying intersections. By 1931, large, elegantly appointed theaters opened at Farwell and North (the Oriental), 27th and Wells (the Tower), and 3rd and Locust (the Garfield).

In keeping with the downtown style, these neighborhood counterparts boasted every amenity and convenience, from child care to a house orchestra or massive pipe organ. Most importantly, they had the ushers.

Aside from energy and ambition, appearance and manners were probably the single most important aspect of an usher or doorman's personality, simply because he had more contact with the patron than any other employee at the theater. Patrons who entered a theater were immediately greeted by a doorman who brushed snow from a coat or checked a gentleman's hat. Then a smartly uniformed usher guided the patron to their seat. Harold Shaffer, who was 17 when he started at the Tower nearly 70 years ago, recalled the military drills he learned in order to be a part of that theater's usher corps. "We used to go up on the roof and practice, practice, practice," he said. "We practiced marching and standing at attention, just like the army." A position on the main floor was a highly sought-after prize awarded only to young men who flourished under pressure. Those less graceful were relegated to working the balcony. Graded each week as to deportment, politeness and neatness, ushers that fell below 70 percent two weeks in succession were replaced. Shaffer and his colleagues often ushered more than 2,000 people to their seats on a busy Saturday evening shift. "They'd be lined up all around the block waiting to get in," he said. Shaffer worked every evening plus the daytime shift on weekends for a salary of \$6 a week.

In 1948, the motion picture business was affected nationally by a government anti-trust law which forbade movie studios from owning movie theaters. As the studios complied with the law, their once-grand temples of amusement fell into disrepair. The carpenters, designers, ushers, doormen, hat check girls and other employees gradually faded away. The simultaneous introduction of television in the home and a post-World War II population exodus to newly created suburbs forced Milwaukee's neighborhood theaters like the Uptown, Garfield, Tower and many others to close their doors for good. Of all the theaters that once operated downtown, only the Riverside remains, having been refurbished as a performing arts theater. The former Warner, renamed the Centre and then the Grand Cinemas, closed in 1995. Only the Oriental remains an operating motion picture theater, giving its patrons a final, unique glimpse into the past and a chance to relive some of the splendor that was part of going to the movies all those years ago. 📷



Popular film star Roy Rogers came to Milwaukee in 1943 to promote one of his movies. The "King of the Cowboys" reared his horse Trigger in front of the Wisconsin theater at 530 W. Wisconsin Ave. during an appearance on the street. It was common practice for studios to send their stars on tour across the country in support of a new film.

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