

THE DENVER PARAMOUNT AND ITS UNWANTED WURLITZER

by Steven A. McCormick

Being the Publix Theatre chain's regional manager for the area including Denver, Colorado, was not the best of jobs in 1928. Clearly, the mighty Publix organization was on the defensive. In the high stakes race to lure patrons into their theatres, other exhibitors were outdistancing Publix by a wide margin. Sure, there were splashy ads in both of Denver's daily newspapers, and the popular "Publix Bucks" promotion (six movies for the price of five). The problem was the theatres — a ragtag assortment of properties, most of them neighborhood houses, some dating from the "teens." This conglomeration of cinemas hardly projected the glamorous Hollywood image that Publix desired.

The competition, on the other hand, had been busy building. Take, for example, the flamboyant local exhibitor, Harry Huffman.

Three new neighborhood theatres (all with 2/6 Robert-Mortons) were opened in 1925 and 1926, and Huffman's best effort, the 1200-seat Aladdin Theatre opened in 1927. Located "uptown" (actually East Colfax Avenue), this atmospheric house (with a 3/12 Wicks, because Robert-Morton couldn't deliver in time) created a sensation in the press as Huffman rushed construction in order to open ahead of the Denver Theatre, which was then also under construction.

And the Denver, which had opened in mid-1927 to rave reviews, was drawing the cream of the movie-going crowd. Patrons stood in long lines to experience its luxuriously appointed interior designed by Rapp and Rapp. While it had opened as an independent house, Fox took over its management.

The inclusion of the Denver in Fox's

arsenal, coupled with the recent opening of its "Miracle Mile" showcase, the Mayan (with 2/8 Wurlitzer), made the Fox organization an almost invincible competitor.

To top it all off, Orpheum announced that they were planning a new major downtown theatre, in the "moderne" theme, to replace their pre-World War I Curtis Street house.

Clearly, Publix needed to do something, and do it quickly! What they needed was something big, something new, glamorous, exciting, newsworthy; a Paramount. The main office must have been in agreement, for by early 1929 planning was well along for the new structure.

In something of a real estate coup, Publix agents had located seven adjacent parcels of land on Glenarm Place between 16th and 17th Streets. Removal of two buildings would make room for the white terra-cotta, Deco-style, three-story building containing the inner lobbies and auditorium of the theatre, as well as shops and office spaces. By leasing first floor space in the adjacent Kittredge Block, then a 40-year-old office building, and constructing the entrance lobby in this leased space, Publix was able to position the main entrance of their new showcase immediately across 16th Street from the competition's flagship Denver Theatre.

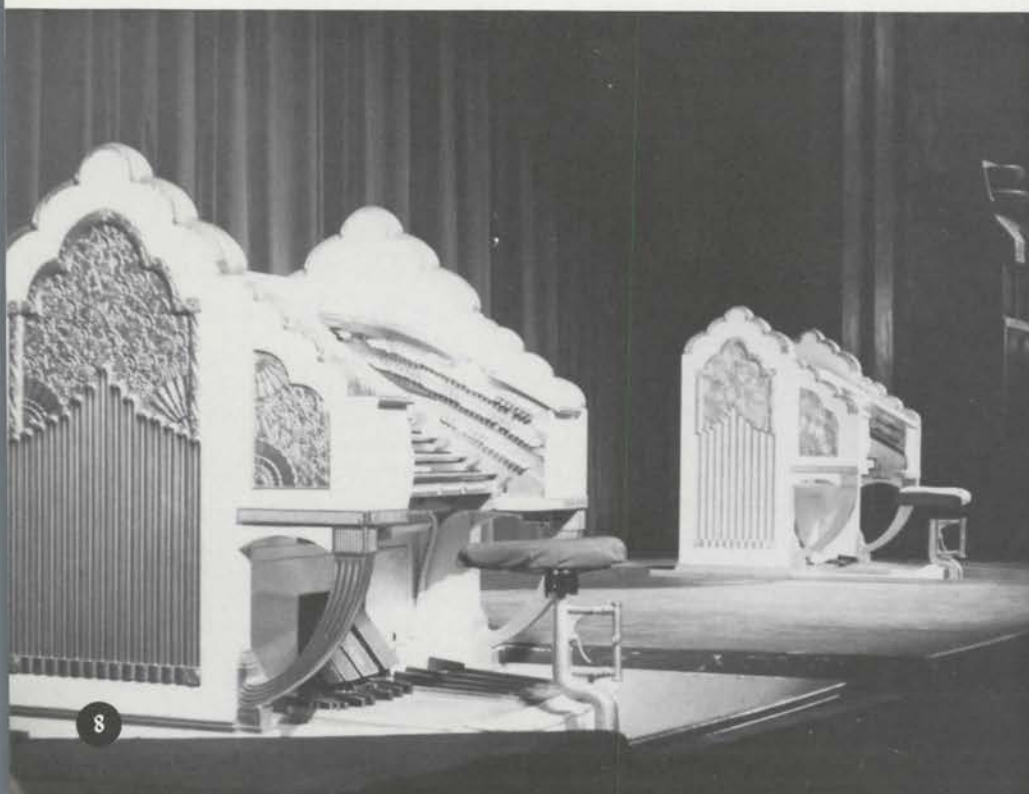
Young Denver architect Temple Buell was hired to coordinate on-site construction activities. Major architectural designs were supplied by Publix's New York office. These drawings were used as the basis of more than one Paramount Theatre. The Aurora, Illinois, Paramount is nearly identical in interior detail to its sister house in Denver.

A slight scaleback from the proposed 2200-2500-seat house was necessary to make the building fit the previously purchased property. Final configuration allowed for 2076 seats on main, loge and balcony levels.

By mid-July 1929, the first steel was erected and Publix ad-men eagerly advised the press that Denverites could look forward to enjoying the splendors of this new Palace of the

The twin consoles on display, master on the left.

(Steve McCormick photo)



Cinema by early spring 1930. Construction continued through the summer of 1929, and by the end of the year the building shell was well along.

Then work stopped as Publix officials tried to assess how the stock market crash was going to affect their operations. In their opinion, a theatre which required fewer employees to run was in line with the changing times, and an appropriate redesign of the half-finished Denver Paramount was in order. Clearly, vaudeville was out. Such a change demanded that architectural drawings be hastily modified to reduce the size of the stage and orchestra pit. Another expense Publix saw that it could eliminate was the organ, and the contract with Wurlitzer was cancelled.

During planning, the exhibitor's music department had selected a Publix No. 1 (4/20) instrument for inclusion in the new theatre. A 2000-seat house would not normally have warranted so large an instrument. However, Publix wisely perceived that the Denver audience was used to, and appreciated, a large and powerful organ in their premier theatres. This tradition dated from 1914 when the first four-manual Wurlitzer ever produced was installed in the Isis Theatre on Curtis Street. To play on Denver's obvious attraction to the theatre organ, the designers took an unprecedented step for a moderately large theatre. "Twin" consoles were ordered. Not one grand console, with a lesser slave to be tucked away in a corner, as had been the case in other theatres, mind you. The two waterfall consoles were designed to appear to be duplicates, each equipped with its own lift, one located to the left and the other to the right of the orchestra pit. In actuality, the consoles would not be duplicates, and the second console was to be nothing more than a slave, with the keyboards, pedalboard and combination pistons the only working elements. Nevertheless, the effect was designed to be like nothing ever witnessed in the Western U.S. Two glittering gold consoles rising simultaneously from the pit under the command of not one, but two organists.

Needless to say, when word of the contract cancellation reached North Tonawanda, the folks at Wurlitzer did not share Publix's enthusiasm for this particular cost cutting measure. Wurlitzer took a copy of the signed contract to the courthouse and after the dust of litigation had settled, Publix found themselves the owners of an unwanted organ.

Back in Denver, work on the new Paramount had resumed. With news that the organ would be installed as originally planned, another design revision of the pit area was undertaken. The resulting pit provided for the two organ lifts, and an orchestra lift so small that it barely accommodated a grand piano.

Completion and decorating of the theatre continued fairly uneventfully through spring and early summer of 1930. Every construction milestone was, at the urging of Publix's promotional staff, well recorded by the local press. Finally, the big date was announced. On Friday, August 29, 1930, the long-awaited Denver Paramount was to have its gala Grand Opening.

Opening night crowds, by invitation only lined up for admission well in advance of curtain time. Searchlights played on the night sky as a special promotional airplane droned overhead. Once inside the building, guests were able to enjoy the piano in their passage through the lavishly appointed lobby areas. A film crew, positioned in the entrance lobby, took motion pictures of the throng as they entered. This film was rushed to a local photographic lab where it was developed, then rushed back and screened as part of the evening's entertainment.

In addition to newsreels, a short subject and the feature talking picture, *Going Coconuts*, the crowd was regaled by the sights and sounds of Jackie and Jean at the "twin" consoles of the mighty Wurlitzer. The management may not have wanted the organ to begin with, but they resolved to make the best of the situation. The "Jackie and Jean" attraction, despite several changes in personnel, was a popular feature of the Paramount, lasting into the '40s.

Opening night provided the public with its first view of this new architectural marvel. Done in a style influenced by the Art Deco school of design, every space was ablaze with a riot of color. The decor did not exhibit the smooth simple lines of later Art Deco. No, this was early Art Deco. Big, bold, angular, full of color and pattern; Gothic Deco.

Passing beyond the ticket kiosk and through the multiple front doors, patrons were immediately awed by the lavish use of space in the lobbies and public areas. The entrance or outer lobby featured gilded geometric plasterwork along both side walls, a barrel vault ceiling, and multi-hued terrazzo floors. At the far end, the grand staircase of terrazzo with wrought iron handrail in bronze, gold and silver tones ascended to the balcony lobby. Archways on either side of the staircase allowed passage through to the main floor inner lobby.

The inner lobbies, by today's standards, were garish, done in shades of orange, red and rust. Chairs and couches upholstered in the latest patterned and flowered fabrics seemed busy sitting on the leaf patterned carpet. Moldings and borders, with a slightly Aztec flavor, were richly stenciled in geometric designs. Beyond the auditorium doors with their bright peacock panels, the balcony and main floor lobbies were connected by yet another stairway. Stairs also led downward to the lower level lobby with adjoining men's room and ladies lounge.

High, angular of appearance, and ablaze with every imaginable color, the auditorium was unlike anything seen before in Denver. Modern, up tempo, and slightly European, just what Publix had wanted. Overhead, sun rays painted on a blue sky radiated outward from the glass and jeweled chandelier. Adorning the side walls were 25-foot-high burgundy silk paintings by the Italian artist Vincent Mondo, using themes from the *Commedia dell'arte*. Between the paintings, multi-fluted golden pillars thrust upward, each capped by a lighting standard and a silvery Deco goddess, replete with cloche hat. Metallic-hued stencil work adorned the walls and ceiling. Rich red carpets, seat cushions and draperies completed the kaleidoscope of hues.

Operation of the theatre under the Publix banner continued until 1936. At that time Fox assumed management from the defunct Publix estate. With Fox's takeover came a redecoration of the lobby areas. "Fox Blue" replaced much of the original brash design work. "Bank Night" and the periodic automobile giveaway, trademarks of the Fox promotional strategy, came to the Paramount along with the occasional appearance of a big band or traveling show company. For a brief period in the early 1950s the theatre was renamed the "Quo Vadis" in connection with the screening of Cecil B. DeMille's extravaganza of the same name.

Rich stencil work and Mondo silk paintings show in this side view of the auditorium.

(Steve McCormick photo)



In 1952, Wolfberg Theatres, a local exhibitor, purchased operational rights to the Paramount, continuing operations as a premier-run movie house. Wolfberg instituted stage shows which lasted through 1955. Hosted by local radio and TV celebrities Fred and Fey Taylor, the weekend-only shows presented a variety of acts, in some cases accompanied by the organ. Bob Castle and Joel Kremer did honors on the bench during this period.

By the mid-'70s it appeared that the Paramount's star had just about burned out. Across the street, old rival Denver Theatre had been "twinning" and was living out its last days as an X-rated cinema. Wolfberg, under the able direction of John Simms, continued to operate the Paramount as a deluxe movie house, although it was becoming difficult to obtain first run films. Additionally, profits from Wolfberg's chain of neighborhood and drive-in theatres were being used more and more to cover the Paramount's deficits.

In what seemed at the time like an unrelated incident, Vern West, a member of the Intermountain Chapter of the National Railway Historical Society, located a print of a 1925 silent feature entitled *The White Desert*. Filmed high in the Rocky Mountains west of Denver, the film, aside from its Hollywood-style contrived plot, contained an enormous amount of material which the local historian would find almost invaluable. It cried out to be screened. But, where?

Through inquiries, Vern was put in touch with John Simms, and through John Simms to Bob Castle. Indeed, all the elements for a grand night of classic silent movie entertainment were still available; an organ, an organist skilled in cueing a silent movie, and a great palace in which to show the film. During discussions, John Simms outlined the plight of the Paramount to Vern West. Would people come downtown to see a movie? Could the house ever be filled again? *White Desert* would be a test.

Much to the surprise of everyone involved, on the evening of February 23, 1978, nearly 2000 people lined up around the corner of 16th Street and Glenarm to gain admission for the one-night-only showing. Theatre management and staff, accustomed to accommodating no more than 200 to 300 people per night, eyed the crowd nervously. As the doors opened, people began filtering in, their eyes upturned to view the fanciful plasterwork and bright colors. Some who had been there years ago marveled at the condition of the place. Most who had never before been in a movie palace were awestruck that such an architectural curiosity could exist in the midst of glass and steel high-rises.

The evening's entertainment included a full vaudeville stage show directed by, and starring, local entertainer Kit Andree. Those "in the know" sat patiently through chorus lines and torch songs eagerly awaiting the "real" entertainment that was to follow. After intermission, as people returned to their seats, the house lights dimmed and, as a spotlight played on a seemingly empty hole in the pit, the most wonderful sounds imaginable poured out of the walls, filling the auditorium. Excitement built as the massive console, now glimmering in the spotlight, appeared from the depths of the pit. All too soon the overture was finished. Amid wild applause the console began a descent, stopping halfway down as the first frames of the film played on the parting grand drape.

So well received was *White Desert* that it became a springboard for an organized effort to assure the Paramount's continued existence. A support group, Friends of the Paramount, was formed with Vern West as president. Another '20s theatre night, this time featuring *Phantom of The Opera*, was scheduled for late October. It looked as though there was some hope for the old theatre yet.

As October 1978 rolled around, ticket sales

for "Phantom" were brisk. Indeed, walk-in traffic for the regularly screened movies was up, due in part to publicity surrounding *White Desert*. Then disaster struck. After closing on a Friday evening, two would-be thieves entered the theatre. Frustrated because they could not locate any valuables, they set a fire on stage. Before firemen could douse the blaze, the grand drape, organ chamber scrims, stage properties and the stage floor had been consumed. Smoke stains covered the auditorium walls and ceiling and much of the inner lobby as well. It was announced that all operations would be suspended indefinitely. Public speculation was that the Paramount had reached the end of the line.

As the extent of the damage to the building was assessed, it appeared that there were some bright spots in the otherwise dismal situation. First, the organ was still in relatively good condition, owing to the efforts of a Denver firefighter who had attended the *White Desert* show. He was able to apprise the officer in charge of fighting the fire that the valuable consoles lay just under the blazing stage floor. With such knowledge, firemen were able to locate the consoles and wrap them in fireproof blankets, averting major damage.

The second ray of sunshine came from Wolfberg's insurers, Continental Union, who made funds available for a full and historically sensitive rehabilitation of the damaged property. Rudy Savage, the last of Denver's old-time commercial decorators, was called in. Within weeks, the auditorium was full of scaffolding as workmen repaired fallen plaster in preparation for new paint. Restoration technicians carefully cleaned the Mondo paintings, by now considered the largest single collection of his works extant. Floors, walls and ceilings were repainted and stenciled, seats cleaned and repaired, and carpeting and draperies replaced. The result was a bright, sparkling auditorium appearing, save for details, much as it had when it opened in 1930. Lobbies, however, while clean and presentable, looked like they had since the mid-'50s when they were "updated" with wood-grain paneling and modern lighting fixtures. *Phantom of The Opera* finally was shown February 3, 1979, as the theatre's "phoenix" performance.

Soon after the fire, John Simms began thinking about selling his Wolfberg chain. Several potential buyers expressed interest in the company but, without exception, they specified that the Paramount had to be excluded from the transaction. A deal was reached early in 1980 and Wolfberg's neighborhood and drive-in theatres became part of the Commonwealth chain, leaving the Paramount to fend for itself. John Simms' courageous wife, Sandy, became overseer of this remnant of the Wolfberg organization. Together with Friends of the Paramount, she would operate and look after the theatre for more than two years. During these lean times, a new owner was sought. Someone who would not only assume the lease and operate the house, but someone who had the where-

View of Denver Paramount auditorium from the Xylophone chamber.

(Ed Zollman photo)



withal necessary to preserve and restore a 50-year-old dowager.

It was during the Friends of the Paramount tenure that members of the Rocky Mountain Chapter approached Bob Castle about assisting in the maintenance of the theatre's Wurlitzer. For nearly 20 years Bob had single-handedly tuned and repaired the instrument (as well as served as house organist). But time and an occasional roof leak had taken their toll.

Under the able direction of chapter member Don Wick, water-damaged offset chests were repaired. Repairs to the switch stack and wiring were made, and the console pneumatics releathered. The piano stack was rebuilt by player piano technician (and ragtime artist extraordinary) Dick Kroeckel. Slowly, the instrument began to emerge as a reliable, concert-worthy organ.

In 1980, Rocky Mountain Chapter began its well-received concert series. To date, artists appearing on the bench have included Hector Olivera, Patti Simon, Bob Castle, Father Jim Miller, Bob Cavarra and Walter Strony. Produced at the rate of one concert per year, the events have grown in popularity to the point where the last two concerts have been attended by sellout crowds.

A new permanent theatre owner meeting all the necessary qualifications was found in 1982, when Historic Denver, Inc. agreed to assume management duties. One of the largest private organizations of its type in the United States, Historic Denver had originally been formed to save "Unsinkable" Molly Brown's House of Lions from the wrecker's ball. From those somewhat humbler beginnings, Historic Denver had grown into a powerful force in the community with an interest in just about any old and noteworthy property. They had everything the Paramount needed. A management sensitive to the needs and requirements of old buildings, historians, researchers and technicians capable of directing an authentic restoration effort, and most importantly, people skilled in obtaining the funding so necessary to any restoration effort.

Historic Denver quickly reorganized their operations to accommodate their first "working" property. Historic Paramount, Inc. was spun off as a separate, but subsidiary organization charged with the tasks of theatre management, operation and restoration. After surveying the building, Historic Paramount proposed a three step restoration plan.

Step one, which has been completed, involved rehabilitation of the shop and office spaces within the Paramount building. By rehabilitating these spaces, they could be leased at a higher monthly rate than before, thus increasing the building's revenue base.

Step two, which is continuing, involves cosmetic restoration, especially in the lobby and lounge areas. This effort was somewhat thwarted in its early stages when the management of the Kittredge Building raised the lease rate for the entrance lobby space to an unacceptable level. Unable to meet the leaseholder's demands, the lease was allowed to expire and the entrance lobby was walled off

from the rest of the theatre, moving the main entrance to the Glenarm Place side. The elaborate grand staircase was disassembled and moved to the back of the inner lobby, where it was meticulously reassembled. While unfortunate from an historic standpoint, loss of the original entrance in no way hampers theatre operation.

Once structural revisions were completed, the auditorium, lobbies and lounges were repainted and recarpeted. New lobby lighting in the form of chandeliers originally from Chicago's Southtown Theatre have been hung. Additional work on lobby furnishings and understage dressing areas remains to be completed.

Step number three, the most ambitious of all, has not yet begun, and may not start for several years. The planned work involves enlarging the stage area so that full-scale Broadway-style productions can be presented. Basically, the plan is to undo what was hastily done in the 1930 redesign of the building by moving the rear stage wall back to the property line. Such a change, while requiring a great many structural revisions, would not result in any visual changes to either the auditorium or the exterior of the building.

In 1984, the building's leaseholder, Joseph B. Gould, transferred by deed of gift the structure and all interior properties and fixtures to Historic Denver. This gracious move, together with Historic Denver's long-range financial planning assures the continued existence of the theatre.

Since the inception of Historic Paramount, organ maintenance has been performed by Ed Zollman of Colorado Pipe Organ Service, with occasional assistance from Rocky Mountain Chapter members. A Trivo Post Horn, purchased by the chapter with funds from private donations and concert proceeds and donated to the theatre, has been installed. Regulators have been releathered and the switch stack has been rewired to accommodate the Post Horn and provide expanded Solo Tibia unification. A Flute Celeste has replaced the original Dulciana. Currently standing at its original 20 ranks, plans are underway for eventual expansion to 25 ranks.

Most importantly, however, from the standpoint of audience enjoyment, Ed has done a great deal of the tonal finishing which the instrument never received when it was originally installed. By virtue of sheer size, the organ has always been powerful. With tonal finishing completed, the Wurlitzer has taken on a "presence" in the house which is unlike any other Publix No. 1.

Those attending the Rocky Mountain Chapter's Regional Convention, October 10 through 13, 1986, will have an opportunity to see the restoration work which has been done, and to hear this most remarkable organ. Two visits to Denver's only remaining downtown movie palace are on the agenda. A Friday evening "kickoff" concert will feature Jim Riggs, and the grand finale concert will feature Lyn Larsen and Ron Rhode at the "twin" consoles. □

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Fr. Jim Miller
at the Redford Theater 3/10 Barton

Stan Kann
at the D.T.O.C. 4/34 Wurlitzer

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