

Historical Old Redford Home of Motor City

by Harold J. Bellamy
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Over sixty years ago, on January 27, 1928, to be exact, the Redford Theatre opened in northwest Detroit.

It was an active community theatre showing first run movies and was also on the vaudeville circuit. Don Miller, a midwest organist who was playing for the Capitol Theatre in downtown Detroit, came out to do the Redford's opening night. Although Don Miller later played a two week engagement at the Redford, not much is known about the organists who played in the years that followed. However, thirty-six years later, in 1964, the organ was reintroduced to the public when the Motor City Theatre Organ Society Chapter received its charter. The Redford and Motor City soon became friends because each had something to offer which was mutually beneficial. In exchange for organ concert dates, Motor City Chapter members offered their talents in restoring the theatre's dormant pipe organ. The theatre owner would, as a result, regain an organ of greater value with continued maintenance at no expense to him in addition to one-half of the concert profits.

Motor City members had access to an organ and had their interests in theatre organ satisfied while preserving the theatre organ in its original setting. There was one problem, however, that could upset this seemingly equitable arrangement. Motor City was indeed vulnerable to the whim and caprice of the theatre owner who could, at any time, sever their access to the organ by moving, selling, or for that matter any subjective reasoning he or she would choose to exercise in doing so. In this case history, this circumstance did, indeed, occur to Motor City. In 1974, the owners of the Redford Theatre informed Motor City of their desire to close the theatre. This announcement alarmed the chapter because they would not only lose their countless hours of organ restoration, but they would also be in danger of losing access to the organ. The owners did, however, offer Motor City the right of first refusal for a lease arrangement. Motor City agonized over the prospect of operating a theatre featuring films and theatre organ in an effort to save the organ. With a feeling of bravado, they chose to give

it a try. Within a few months the fiscal realities of theatre operations caught up with the dreams of the chapter. To survive, the chapter requested that the owners reduce the lease amount by one-half. The owner obliged and Motor City continued to struggle to stay afloat despite the reduction. Shortly thereafter, the theatre owners made their next bombastic announcement — they wanted to sell, but again offered Motor City the right of first refusal. After many traumatic meetings of the Board, it was decided to put the issue to a chapter vote. The outcome is historically evident since Motor City decided to purchase the Redford Theatre.

Months of trial and error ensued in the pursuit of a fiscal formula which would permit a viable theatre operation. For example, our three day carnival failed, but a donation drive for "angels" to secure a down payment produced results. Other similar ventures were undertaken with mixed results, but a positive pattern of success began to emerge. Many people who were contacted for support expressed surprise at our venture and asked a common question: "You mean you bought this theatre just so you could have the organ?" Put that simply and forthrightly, this realization often tested our fortitude. Nonetheless, the chapter finally settled on a combination of activities that have proven viable in sustaining the operation of our Redford Theatre. Briefly stated, these are described as follows:

- Bi-weekly (Friday-Saturday) classic movies with theatre organ overture and intermission played by members.
- Theatre organ concerts featuring professional artists — four or five annually at the Redford, and two at the Royal Oak Theatre where the organ is owned by Motor City.
- Theatre rentals including film presentations, stage plays, concerts, vaudeville, and events such as body-building competitions.
- Concession counter operations at all sizable events, and boutique counter sales of jewelry, tapes and records.

- Special fund-raising events such as garage sales and bazaars.

This format may not be workable in every locale, but it is serving us well. To date, it has not only provided the cost of operations, it has paid off our theatre's mortgage. Do not, however, get the impression that we have a rich flow of money. Quite the contrary, high energy costs and the difficult maintenance of our original (1928) heating and cooling systems have precluded such an enviable status. The perception nonetheless exists. Invariably outsiders translate a near full house at two dollars a person as an automatic profit in excess of \$3,000. Our response to that statement is "not so . . . it's actually less than half that amount." They are surprised, for example, to learn that we pay the same distribution fee of approximately 35% as that of private movie houses. In addition, the cost of publicity, tickets and the preparation, printing and mailing of up to 20,000 program flyers is substantial. Building operation costs average over \$150 per day. A winter fuel bill of \$6,000 for the month can really bring any thought of large profits back to reality.

So how do we do it? The key is that we do not have a labor cost. We operate all of our activities on a completely volunteer basis. At times we would perhaps admit that a paid staff sure sounds good. This is especially true of the unsung heroes who do all of the housekeeping chores. However, despite any such trepidations, we are happy with our endeavors to maintain and restore our Barton and our Redford home.

In tune with this objective, what rises on our four-poster lift is a made-in-Oshkosh 3/10 Barton console. In keeping with the Oriental motif, its black surface is adorned with ormolu relief patterns of serpentine horses and demonic dragons. The organ is housed in two chambers located at the second floor level to each side of the stage. In the left chamber, reachable only by ladder, are the Tuba, Clarinet, Diapason, Flute, and Chryso-glott/Harp. The right chamber is readily accessible via the staircase which serves

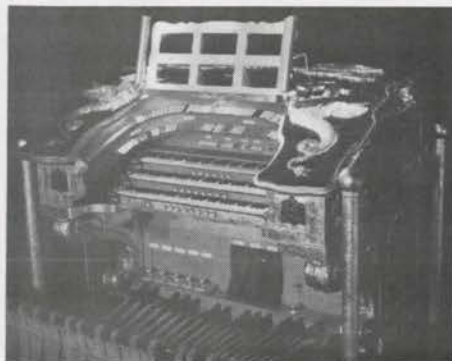
the four floors of dressing rooms and is, therefore, regularly visited by interested patrons after performances. In this chamber are the Kinura, Violin Celeste, Violin, Oboe Horn, Tibia, and the Vox Humana. The toy counters housed here include the Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Bass Drum, and Snare Drum. Currently, we are adding the bottom 12 notes of a 16-foot Tuba. Some members have expressed a desire to add a Post Horn but there are no plans at this time to do so. Space for such a rank, to put it mildly, is non-existent.

Although we factually did purchase a theatre in order to save a Barton, we also know that the sound of pipes is best achieved in the house for which they were designed. In keeping with this premise, what better objective can there be other than restoring the house in which the Barton lives? Our theatre is on both the State of Michigan and the National Register as a Historic Place.

At one time, over 200 movie theatres were located in Detroit. Today, only three movie houses remain; one in the downtown Renaissance Center, another — the Northwest, built in 1936, and our own historic Redford, built in 1928. For this reason we feel our theatre to be unique. The restoration of the organ and the theatre are not only worthwhile but well endowed; not with money — but with family values, friendships and just plain fun.

A familiar sight at the Redford is that of people who look up and turn completely around as they enter the inner lobby. Why does this unusual behaviour occur? There is an explanation. Our regular patrons delight in checking our restoration progress. We enjoy their interest, especially when we have something new to show off. However, when there is a lull in our restoration efforts it causes us some concern, but also tends to motivate us to become more active. We will also admit candidly that the coming ATOS convention can also be a catalyst for action.

We have substantially completed the restoration of the inner lobby except for the concession stand, wall lighting fixtures, and the two large side-wall insets which frame this lobby. Because we do not have photographs of the inner lobby, their original design is not well documented. We are, however, slowly developing the design concept through interviews with former employees and patrons who remember the early days of the theatre. The centerpieces for this area, our chandeliers, are now finally complete. As many of you are aware, these are not the original Redford chandeliers. We obtained them several years ago when we rescued the remaining hulks of the vandalized chandeliers which graced the lobby of the downtown Oriental theatre.



At the time of the 1982 convention, the framework, lighting and decorative glass spangles were all restored, but the fixture did not have its glass panes. After some very complex molding, we now have in place beautiful gold-toned panes. They are adorned with the figure of an elegant, graceful bird. At a distance the bird resembles a peacock, but a close-up inspection reveals otherwise. In fact, Dr. Seuss followers might try to give him credit for this artistic work of art. Incidentally, although the chandelier is not original to the Redford Theatre, the artistic design is. We were fortunate in finding a box of broken glass noted to be from the original fixture. Matching these pieces revealed the art work now reproduced on the new glass panes.

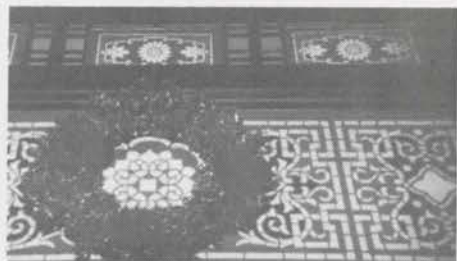
We also undertook another "glass" project — that of refabricating all of our rather drab exit signs. This project has created a great deal of interest within the chapter. Thanks to the artisanship of one of our members, we have replaced the six inner-lobby signs with duplicates of the original designs. They are strikingly beautiful. Donations to defray their cost were sold out on all fourteen signs in just a few days.

We have also been busy probing into several areas of the auditorium seeking out the design patterns which have been covered for years under many layers of paint. Unfortunately, the theatre's owners destroyed, encased, or obliterated as much of the oriental motif as possible in order to divorce themselves from any association with our World War II opponents. Members of Motor City are now experiencing the fun and the intrigue involved in uncovering the original artistic designs of the theatre. Restoration progress of often necessarily slow because these fun activities have to be sandwiched into the theatre's busy schedule of events. Whenever we have an open weekend we immediately put up scaffolding in order to capture a two-week restoration period. It's always painful to be forced to stop some interesting restoration in order to remove the scaffolds before the next event. Similarly, the organ maintenance crew also takes advantage of these short periods for their organ down-time repairs.

At left: Barton organ in Redford Theatre.
Below: Inner lobby during restoration.



Restored chandelier in Redford inner lobby.



Restored decor in inner lobby.

We hope that you will take the time to poke around the theatre during convention to see first hand these "uncovering" efforts. We believe you will find it as intriguing as we do. We hope that at some future convention we can treat you to more uncovered treasures, new theatre seats, and restored murals framing a starlit sky laced with fleecy clouds drifting overhead. To meet this objective, we have finally decided to seek outside funding in order that we may accelerate our restoration work.

So there you have it — an overview of how we began and what we've been doing here at Motor City. We hope that many of you will join us in July to see us in person. If you don't make the trip, we invite you to drop in on us anytime. If you are not an organist, we are sure someone will play for you. If you are an organist — the console is yours to enjoy provided you don't arrive during a concert, film presentation or a rental. In any case, we are sure that we can work out something to make your visit worthwhile! See you in Detroit at the Redford!