

Theater Marks 50th Anniversary

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Like movies themselves, the Hanford Theatre represents a bit of make-believe.

Standing in the dimly-lit interior of the Hanford Theatre is like being whisked away to some courtyard in Barcelona on a beautiful summer evening.

That's the way the theater was planned when first built, and that's the way it has remained.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the old Fox Theatre, renamed the Hanford Theatre nearly 20 years ago when it was bought by the West Side Valley Theatres chain.

Al Jolsen as "The Singing Fool" was the featured attraction when Hanford's elegant new movie house first opened its handsome mahogany doors to the public on Christmas Day 1929.

General admission was 40 cents and popcorn sold for 10 cents a bag. If you didn't have much to do in the afternoon, matinees were only 20 cents.

As were all the Fox chain theaters at that time, Hanford's new entry was designed to be an elaborate showcase for vaudeville acts as well as motion pictures, according to current theater manager Bob Raper.

In the 1920s Fox executives were not sure whether "talking pictures" would survive, Raper explained.

As a little insurance, they designed their theaters to accommodate both live entertainment and movies.

Time would later prove that vaudeville was on its last leg. What remains of the vaudeville era today are the theater's musty dressing rooms, an empty orchestra pit and an unused stage.

Raper said the Hanford Theatre is one of the few original Fox movie houses to remain basically the same as when it first opened except for the lobby. He noted that many of the old Fox theaters either have been torn down or remodeled into multi-screen auditoriums.

The twinkling "stars" in the ceiling, the Spanish courtyard motif, the faint outline of a gentle countryside on the walls — this decor cannot be found in most modern theaters of today.

"You won't find 'em built like this anymore," Raper contends. "The cost would be staggering."

One of the more unique eccentricities of the old Fox Theatre was a machine which projected light on the ceiling in the image of clouds. The device is in the theater's project booth today, but does not operate.

Within the bowels of the theater is a catacomb network of old dressing quarters, storage areas and other rooms whose use people long since have forgotten.

Directly in front of the stage is the old step-down orchestra pit which once included the theater's organ. Its sound pipes were located behind the screen.

In contrast to today's recorded intermission music, an organ commonly was used to entertain patrons as they waited for the movie to start.

Adjoining the orchestra pit, via a short tunnel, is a musician's waiting room, now employed by Raper as a repair shop. Connected to this area is a series of 10 rundown dressing rooms originally used by vaudeville and stage entertainers.

Whenever the movie screen was not in use, the management would lower an asbestos screen painted with a Spanish villa scene complementing the Moorish decor of the auditorium. The screen hangs from the rafters today, but like several other items in the theater, is never used.

Although stage shows seldom are presented now at the Hanford Theatre, a complete network of lighting and stage equipment still is available.

Del Jones, a projectionist in the Central Valley for 49 years, says the theater played a vital entertainment role before the advent of television.

"In those days it was really a night out when you went to the movies," he explained.

For a popular picture, Jones recalls that seating would be near capacity every night. After television, however, he said theater outings became more rare as families chose to be entertained by the inexpensive electronic box in their living rooms.

With a total theater staff of about 35 employees, Jones says ushers once were stationed at every aisle ready to seat patrons as they filed into the auditorium.

On a busy night the theater would have at least 10 ushers on



Sentinel Photos by Gary Funk

feature of the week



With the seldom-seen "Spanish villa" backdrop behind him, manager Bob Raper reminisces about the Hanford Theatre's 50 years of existence (above). Originally constructed to accommodate both vaudeville and motion picture entertainment, the Hanford Theatre (called the Fox Theatre then) opened Christmas Day 1929. Projectors currently used at the theater were installed in the late 1940s, but are still as functional as any modern projector.

duty, Raper said. Including the balcony, there was seating for 1,250 persons. Today the balcony is closed with most of the seating removed.

A phone system was employed throughout the theater so ushers could be informed which seats were available during near sellouts.

"Back then, ushers were lined up and inspected every evening," Raper said. Shoes had to be polished and hair neatly trimmed and combed.

Seating for those watching the movie was more comfortable then, he added, because each seat was designed almost like a

lounge chair.

About 10 years ago, the theater underwent a remodeling project which gave the lobby a more "modern" look, Raper explained. Paneling now covers the original wood-beamed ceiling of the lobby and the plush carpeting was removed.

Before the remodeling, there were two sets of doors leading into the lobby from the street entrance. Chandeliers and a fireplace were part of the elaborate lobby decor.

These were all removed.

But much of the theater has remained intact. Even the radio in the projection booth is circa 1930 — and it still works.