

Starlit Ceiling Was a Theater Hit

By Joe Redmond

Joe Redmond started working at the Uptown in 1930 and later was manager of the theater. He has been in the entertainment field here 34 years.

"The Uptown Theater opened last night to a capacity house that was as interested in the sky effect of the ceiling, as the picture," read the story in The Kansas City Times of Jan. 7, 1928.

The theater, which will become a dinner playhouse after 45 years as a movie house, was started several years earlier and when it bogged down, Universal Film Company acquired the shell of the unfinished theater and hired John Ebersson, an architect, to complete it.

A specialist in atmospheric design, Ebersson achieved a garden effect for the auditorium with an Italian Renaissance decor. But most impressive was the ceiling with its simulated night sky with twinkling stars and clouds.

By the early 1930s the Uptown, at 37th and Broadway, had become the "flagship" of the Fox Midwest chain. Its principal competition remained the 12 big theaters concentrated in the Downtown District.

In that era most moviegoers relied on streetcars and busses but a growing number were buying automobiles.

As an attraction, the Uptown offered free parking in a lot directly east, across Broadway. A uniformed footman, with luminous white gloves, a police whistle and flashlight, escorted patrons across the street.

Many Attractions

Golden-haired P. Hans Flath was musical director and featured organist at the theater, which also offered live entertainment. Later the Tracy Brown Columbia-Recording Orchestra enjoyed a lengthy engagement. An unknown young comedian filled a "single" spot for a week during that first year. His

name was Bob Hope.

The late Alberta Bird, Kansas City organist, was a featured soloist for an entire season. Billed as Dolly Fashion, she modeled a new dress fashion each week on the stage, then played a "hits of the week" medley. Occasionally, her program would be highlighted by filmed lyrics, accompanied by the "little bouncing ball" to encourage an audience "sing-along."

Many things were tried in those early years to attract patrons. One week a series of seven evening weddings was performed on the stage. The rings, flowers and other gifts

were promoted, after first securing the 14 participants. (This role of cupid was not too difficult to play in the Depression era, with so many lacking the necessary funds to finance a wedding. Through Kansas City Star want ads the couples were readily lined up.) A great number of additional tickets were sold just to friends and relatives of the wedding parties who desired to attend.

Numerous other box-office stunts were employed to weather the Depression. To lure the ladies there were dish giveaways, followed later by cosmetics. Bank Night was a proven power in attracting

crowds until cut short by the courts.

In the summer of 1931 an exclusive Uptown innovation was introduced under the copyrighted name of Fragratone. This new olfactory delight was intended to add to the picture's enjoyment, since movies had only recently become an audio experience. For example, during a scene depicting a California orange grove, the scent of oranges emanated from the ventilation system, or likewise one of rose perfume for a love scene in a rose garden.

One of the hazards of those early years was the frequency

of holdups. In the first three years there were six major holdups. The police chief assigned several policemen to work as janitors cleaning the theater. This "thief trap" didn't pay off. So, after several days, the decoys were relieved. The next day a holdup cost the theater \$2,300 in box-office receipts. In 1931 a bullet-proof, metal-mesh door was installed at the theater manager's office.

Personal Appearances

The Big Brother Bob Club, a KMBC radio program, filled the theater with 2,000 young members each Saturday morning for the personal appearance of the radio entertainers, Big Brother Bob and Little Willie, followed by a children's movie.

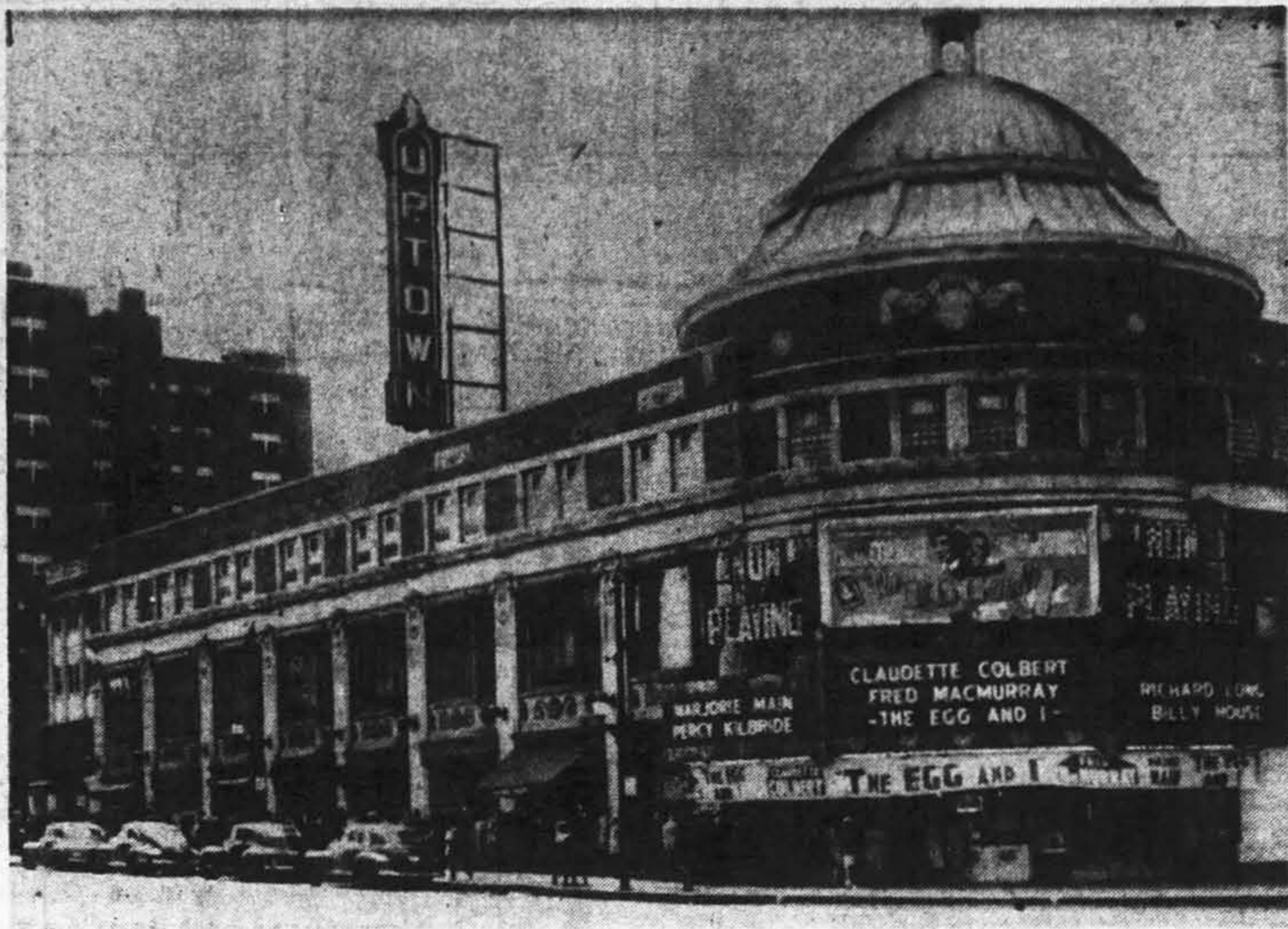
The Uptown came into its own in the mid-30s. This was the result of picture successes by two new contract stars at the Fox Studio.

Will Rogers, famed humorist, scored with a succession of family-attended comedies such as "Doctor Bull," "David Harum" and "State Fair." About this same time came the movies' greatest child star, Shirley Temple.

Among personal appearances of movie stars was one by Tom Mix and his horse, Tony. Joe E. Brown appeared there one evening in the early 1930s to give a lift to the opening night of his new film, "Fireman, Save My Child." Gene Autry and Roy Rogers appeared at various times.

In the war years of the 1940s the Uptown shared the same business boom enjoyed by most other theaters. The movie pastime was a means of temporarily forgetting the war. Then, too, gas rationing had curtailed "joy-riding."

Overhead the stars will be twinkling when the Uptown reopens its doors Wednesday night beginning a new era of entertainment.



Ticket Line

During World War II and the years immediately after the war first-run movies at the Uptown Theater regularly attracted packed houses. Here a line of patrons

waiting to buy tickets for the comedy, "The Egg and I," starring Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray, stretches along Broadway.