

Restoration Begins

When you look back at the newspaper headlines starting in November 1996, it all seemed like an impossible dream. "Fox closes." "Friends of the Fox form to save the Fox." "Friends need \$500,000 to buy Fox." "Rival group eyes Fox." The odds seemed insurmountable. How could a small, grass roots group raise \$1 million to "Save the Fox"? Well, as the Fox marquee proclaimed a year later, a "miracle" happened.

When the Fox closed its doors on November 7, 1996, Rami Cherami, a teacher at the Visalia Adult School, saw the headlines and decided to save the Fox. A few weeks later, she called a press conference in the freezing cold outside the Fox, and Friends of the Fox was born. People called the Fox a landmark, an emblem, Visalia's heritage. No one wanted to see it closed for good.

During the next year, the group formed a non-profit organization to acquire and restore the Fox. Although many people stepped forward to offer money, supplies and in-kind services, others took a wait-and-see attitude—understandably. Every time the volunteer group took two mini steps forward, there would be a setback. Then a year after the Friends formed came the first big breakthrough. In January 1998, the headlines proclaimed "Miracle on Main Street." The owners had donated the building to Friends of the Fox.

Now the real struggle began. Donations came in...slowly, and work began. George Pope, retired from Southern California Edison, who had overseen many complex construction projects, became the project manager. Loads of trash had to be removed, water damage and roof leaks had to be repaired, and the seats all had to be removed so that the triplex walls could be torn out.

The dirtiest, most difficult job was cleaning out the clock tower. Buckets of pigeon droppings were placed in dumpsters behind the theater and hauled away. Volunteers appeared to perform these somewhat distasteful jobs. The community response would be amazing over the next three years. Hundreds of people donated funds and in-kind services.

Repairing the Clock

The Fox clock tower had long been a famous Visalia landmark. But the clock hadn't worked for years. Friends of the Fox realized that repairing the clock would be the most visible way to show that restoration was beginning and a way to solicit much-needed donations.

Frank Kiler, a retired electrical and shop teacher who had kept the clock running in its heyday, volunteered to repair the clock along with Dennis Jahn of Visalia Clock Works. They removed the clock works and took it to Dennis' garage for repair.

The tower renovation was financed by a \$12,500 donation from the Visalia Rotary Community Foundation. First the tower was power sprayed by Kenny's Painting in Tulare to remove years of grime and pigeon droppings. Then the tower was repainted and a roasted pepper-colored trim added reminiscent of the early days of the Fox.

Next came the clock faces. They were removed, stripped to the metal and painted by Visalia powder coating and Kenny's Painting with what is believed to be the original colors of roasted pepper and blue. The paint was donated by Andy's Automotive Paint & Supply and Wilshire Paints. One weekend, Corky Bardone of A-C Electric took his boom truck down to Main Street and lifted Dennis up to the tower so he could reinstall the clock faces. Next to go up was the neon which was repaired and installed by Bob Bethel from Sal's Restaurant.

Relighting of the clock tower was a big event, and Friends of the Fox decided to relight the clock tower and restart the clock during the Taste of Downtown on Tuesday, October. 6, 1998. At 7:15 p.m. hundreds of people stood on Main Street to cheer the relighting of the Fox.

Interior Meticulously Restored

Retired architect Jay Moring took on the task of overseeing the final restoration, designing handicapped restrooms under each stairwell, deciding to tear out the snack bar to allow more room at the entryway and to build a new one where the old offices were located. Two of the most important parts of the interior that had to be repaired in the auditorium were the beautiful murals and the big Genie face on the proscenium arch.

The Genie had been totally destroyed when one of the triplex walls had been rammed through the face. The plaster structure featuring a somewhat grotesque face between two elephants was cut in half with the 1976 remodeling and the face removed.

As so often happened with the Fox restoration, a volunteer stepped forward. Jamie Hitchcock had restored the famous plaster cow and milkmaid at the former Adhohr Farms in Tulare with his father. Jamie volunteered to rebuild the face. Perched on scaffolding nearly three stories high inside the often dark and deserted theater and working from a blurry picture taken the day before the face was destroyed, Jaime began rebuilding the face.

"I'm glad I have the picture," he laughed. "I don't want people to think I made it that unattractive on purpose."

The Fox face had been called everything from a Buddha to the Indian Goddess Cali. But the Historical Research Committee finally discovered the true identity. While going through old newspaper accounts of the opening, Dallas Pattee found that the face was referred to as a Genie. Jamie began work by building a wooden frame with a wire screen over it. The face was molded of material like plaster of Paris, but of a slower drying material so he could work with it. When he finally finished it, Patric Barszcz stepped in to paint the face.

By that time, Patrick was already calling the Fox his home. He had spent the last several months up on scaffolding restoring the murals, proscenium arch and pagodas to their 1930s glory. In fact, when he cleaned the south pagoda, he weighed all the dirt he pulled off with a wet/dry vac. It came to 36 pounds of dirt! Also included was broken glass, bottle caps and buttons.

Patrick began his restoration process by repairing and repainting the proscenium arch around the stage. He had to scrape off adhesive that was sprayed on when the theater was divided into a triplex, fill nail holes and then match the original suede leather look. After Jamie Hitchcock rebuilt the genie face, Patrick made minor repairs to the elephants and other parts of the large plaster artwork and then repainted the entire structure and added gold trim around the edges. Pieces of the original paint were still there so he could match the colors.

"My goal is to restore the exact feel and color as it was in 1930," he said.

When he cleaned and repaired the pagodas (which housed the organ pipes and look like wood but are made of plaster for fire protection), Patrick found some interesting relics: an original plaster bag from 1929 and a 1927 newspaper lining one of the urns. Next he vacuum brushed and cleaned the entire ceiling which was water stained and patched where the triplex balcony walls had been extended. Then he sealed it with a special sealer tinted to the original sky blue color. Using original pictures from the 1930s, he restored the beautiful murals on the side walls of the theater. There he discovered sets of colored lights that had originally been focused on the murals. Different colors could be shined on them—for instance, cool blue in summer and warm red in winter—to give the illusion wanted for the occasion.

Just before the grand reopening, Patrick also repaired and restored the stenciling on the front of the balcony, as with painstaking detail, he helped return the Fox to its original grand decor.

Old Seats...New Feel

So many things had to be done, but getting the seats refurbished and reinstalled was a biggy. Friends of the Fox chose Smokey Stouffer, owner of Somerset Studios, the company that put seats in such places as Stanford University, the Oakland Coliseum and the beautiful Oakland Paramount Theatre.

Smokey is a character, but he knows his seats. His warehouse is full of seat parts, bolts, arms and backs, all neatly sorted, for any kind of seat you'd want. He's the one who came down to inventory the seats after volunteers pulled them out of the Fox back in 1998. Although Friends of the Fox had been warned to sort them by size (this advice came from the Enchanted Playhouse which discovered they had several sizes of seats when they remodeled Main Street Theatre), the seats were all in a big pile in a warehouse.

Smokey found the Fox had four different sizes of seats. He had no idea which size went where. Some of the seats were even a totally different style. Smokey assumed that after the Fox had been made into a triplex in 1976, seats were cannibalized from wherever necessary when a replacement was needed. For those seats that were missing, Smokey simply pulled the needed parts from his huge inventory.

The Fox seats were built in the 30s, but they were installed "used" in the 50s, he said. He estimated that date because in 1961 a new style of seat was being built, and theaters would not have installed the old seats after that. But he assured the Friends of the Fox that the refurbished seats would be better than the originals because of new techniques in painting and fabric. He powder coated the standards (the kind of paint job a car gets), put in all new foam and upholstered the seats in rich red fabric (guaranteed for 300,000 double rubs before they begin to pill).

To bring the theater up to ADA code, he built 13 seats with swing arms for handicap access (1 percent of seats must be handicap accessible). He also made seating available for wheelchairs.

A week before the grant reopening, Smokey and six of his crew drove two 48-foot trailers full of seats (all marked as to where they belong) to the Fox to start the task of reinstalling 1,280 beautifully restored seats. Two days before the big gala, the seats were fully installed, and—after all those years—the Fox finally looked as glamorous and beautiful as it had 70 years earlier.

Grand Opening: November 20, 1999

The renovation project would require \$1.2 million in funding and in-kind services before the Fox could open. As generous as the community was, there was never enough money to finish the overwhelming restoration.

Money was tight. The board had many tough—often volatile—issues to decide. Many were unwilling to set an opening date until enough money was raised for the total restoration.

But the big decision had to be made. Community members were beginning to wonder where their money was going. Finally, founder and president Rami Cherami,

pushed the board to set an opening date.

Working backwards, the group realized the earliest the rebuilt seats could be reinstalled was November 13. Alecia Wilcox's grand reopening committee went to work. They wanted a star entertainer for the grand reopening. But there was no major act available anywhere for that date. But when the date was changed to November 20, Marvin Hamlisch was available. The countdown began.

Three tough years of organizing, fund raising and restoration came to fruition for Friends of the Fox with an event that more than rivaled the original opening in 1930. The Fox was dazzling, the party goes in awe, the food and entertainment spectacular when the Fox reopened its doors with a gala evening starring Marvin Hamlisch on November 20, 1999.

Alecia and her hard-working committee arranged for a 10,000 sq. ft. tent (the largest ever erected in this area) to stretch the entire block of Encina from Main Street to Center for the opening. Decorated with palm trees and lights to simulate the Coconut Grove, the tent served as the dining room for 480 people attending the gala pre-show dinner. Dressed in formal wear and tuxes, the gala participants arrived in limos where they were greeted with search lights, red carpet and screaming "paparazzi" (high school drama students dressed in 30s wear reminiscent of the Fox's first opening in 1930).

"I think people were just blown away," said Alecia. "When people stepped out of the limos and heard their names announced and then walked into the newly restored lobby—they couldn't have asked for more."

By the time Marvin Hamlisch began his show at 8:30, the house was packed, and Channel 30 weatherman Angelo Stalis had officially relighted the twinkling ceiling stars to everyone's delight. Hamlisch, best known for writing music for "A Chorus Line" and "The Way We Were," proved also to be quite a comedian, making numerous comments about the "ditch" in the middle of Highway 198 (referring to the three-year construction on the freeway through town).

When the evening finally ended, no one wanted to leave. They were making history: the rebirth of the Fox!

Much More Still Needs to Be Done

Once the Fox was reopened in November 1999, there was still much to be done. The building had no air conditioning, no light or sound systems—all items that were vital if the Fox was to become a performing arts center. An extended thrust stage was needed for the Tulare County Symphony to fit on stage. There was no rigging to fly theater drops. A snack bar needed to be built in the lobby. Altogether another

\$500,000 in equipment was needed.

In December, the Fox went dark for a month of more repairs. Rich Manley from Ram Air Conditioning had been at the first few concerts trying to get a handle on how the antiquated heating system worked. Ram and American Air spent the month of January installing a new computerized heating and air conditioning system. Now the temperature can be controlled with the touch of a computer keyboard—although it will still take several days to warm up the big theater on cold days.

The Tulare County Symphony, which now makes the Fox its home, has raised funds to buy chairs, music stands, acoustical shells and a light truss for the Fox—all equipment they must have to perform in the theater.

Grants from the Visalia Rotary Foundation and the Downtown Visalians have made it possible for a beautiful new snack bar to be installed. Not only does the snack bar add to the appeal of the lobby, but concession sales are an essential part of making a theater operate in the black. The snack bar was built by long-time volunteers Ron Stinebaugh and George Weddle, who designed the counters to match the roasted pepper and mahogany interior.

Friends of the Fox are still raising money to purchase theatrical sound and light systems. A number of shows have had to be turned away because this equipment is not available. Friends of the Fox have learned from other restored venues (Bakersfield Fox, Hanford Fox, Tower Theater in Fresno) that running a theater is no easy task and certainly not a money-making venture. They continue to work to book shows in the theater and to raise money for further restoration so that the Fox will remain a viable Downtown Visalia landmark.