

History of the Fox: The Glory of Yesteryear

The Fox Theatre tells a lot about the community of Visalia. Opened in 1930 in the early days of "talking pictures," the theater was the grand showplace in town for over 40 years. Going to the Fox was an unforgettable experience. It let you leave the streets of Visalia behind to enter the garden court of an East Indian temple resplendent with wall murals, green trees, and of course, the unforgettable twinkling stars above.

The Fox first made headlines in the Visalia Times-Delta when on January 5, 1929, a front page story announced that a grand new theater would be built for Fox West Coast Theaters, the largest chain of motion picture theaters in the country. Fox built hundreds of theaters to promote their films, six of them in California. Movies gained respectability through association with elaborate movie palaces, and the Fox is typical of the "atmospheric" style of theater—designed with elaborate motif so grand that the movie goer could escape from the realities of the Great Depression into romance and fantasy before the feature ever began.

The theater was to be built on the west edge of town, at Main and Encina Streets, and work soon began to raze the garage and small residence that occupied the site. As construction got underway, "talking pictures" debuted in town at the old Visalia Theatre, and the Fox Corporation promised that their grand new theater would be an all-talky movie house. Fox contracted with Western Electric to provide the highest quality sound and much of the projection equipment.

Up in the box office tower, the famous Fox Theatre clock was installed. The three-way clock was the largest of its kind ever constructed at the time. Its face measured over six feet in diameter and was rimmed in neon so it lighted up the sky in all directions at night. Only trouble was, it apparently never kept very good time. Management eventually spent hundreds of dollars trying to get the intricate mechanism to work properly.

A year after construction began, the theater was almost complete. The new theater had cost \$225,000 to build and had every convenience—including the best heating and cooling system. Patrons were assured that the auditorium would be constantly filled with pure, fresh air which was washed by passing through a screen of water.

First Opening: February 27, 1930

Finally, on February 27, 1930 at 6:30 p.m., the Fox Theatre opened. Huge spotlights shined their beams skyward to announce the opening. The streets were blocked for some distance by onlookers and patrons waiting their turn to attend one of the two movie showings. The opening night billing was typical of movie houses of the day-an all-talking western, plus a newsreel, a "Mickie" Mouse cartoon and a Laurel and Hardy comedy.

As patrons entered the theater, they were awestruck by the beautiful foyer with its Oriental atmosphere of subdued richness, crowded with baskets of flowers sent by many business firms of the city. The décor was elaborate in every detail. Softly carpeted stairways led up to the balcony. Beautifully woven tapestries lined the walls. Elaborate mirrors, mosaic vases, fountains, plaques and chandeliers completed the effect.

Inside the huge auditorium, all 1,300 seats were filled. The audience was surrounded by a garden court of an East Indian ruler with blue sky and stars above and towering temples at either side of the stage. From the depths of the orchestra pit came rich organ music, the pipes hidden behind the ornate carvings.

Early Days

In the early days, live acts were a part of the entertainment. Local residents remember watching singers, dancers, roller skaters, impressionists, magicians and hypnotists, as well as concerts-both amateur and professional.

The Saturday afternoon Kiddie Klub featuring young talent was a great attraction for children, and the Fox proved a long-term babysitter when you consider there was generally a newsreel, a serial, a cartoon or two, plus a double feature to keep the younger set enthralled. Uniformed usherettes with flashlight in hand helped patrons to their seats and were supposed to keep children out of the balcony. There was no concession stand in the early days. Eventually a portable candy case was installed, which gave way to today's more traditional concession stand.

The magic lasted into the 70s, but television changed the movie industry. The big movie houses were being replaced by multi-plex theaters. In 1976 the Fox was

divided into three theaters, and that division brought the end of an era. The Fox continued to show first-run movies for 20 more years, until November 1996 when the opening of a 12-plex at the Sequoia Mall brought the closing of the theater after 66 years.

Friends of the Fox

But immediately after the theater was closed, the Friends of the Fox was formed. Their goal was to acquire the building, restore it to its original glory and make it a performing arts venue. It took three years of struggle and fund raising, but finally on November 20, 1999, the Fox reopened, beautifully restored at it had looked nearly 70 years before.