



As this 1938 photo shows, the flood of that year made a trip to the Fox to see a double-feature a risky undertaking.
Pajaro Valley Historical Assn.

By MATT MOODY
JUST ABOUT EVERYONE I talked to about the early history of the Fox Theater agreed on one thing — they didn't really remember that much about it.

"But I can tell you someone who could."

Then, without fail, just as I was about to let them go, they'd remember that Saturday matinee back in 1949 when the row they were sitting in won the theater raffle and they all got free passes to the next week's show.

Or that those paintings they found when they moved into their new house turned out to be done by L.L. Gluck who painted the original murals on the ceiling and walls of the Fox.

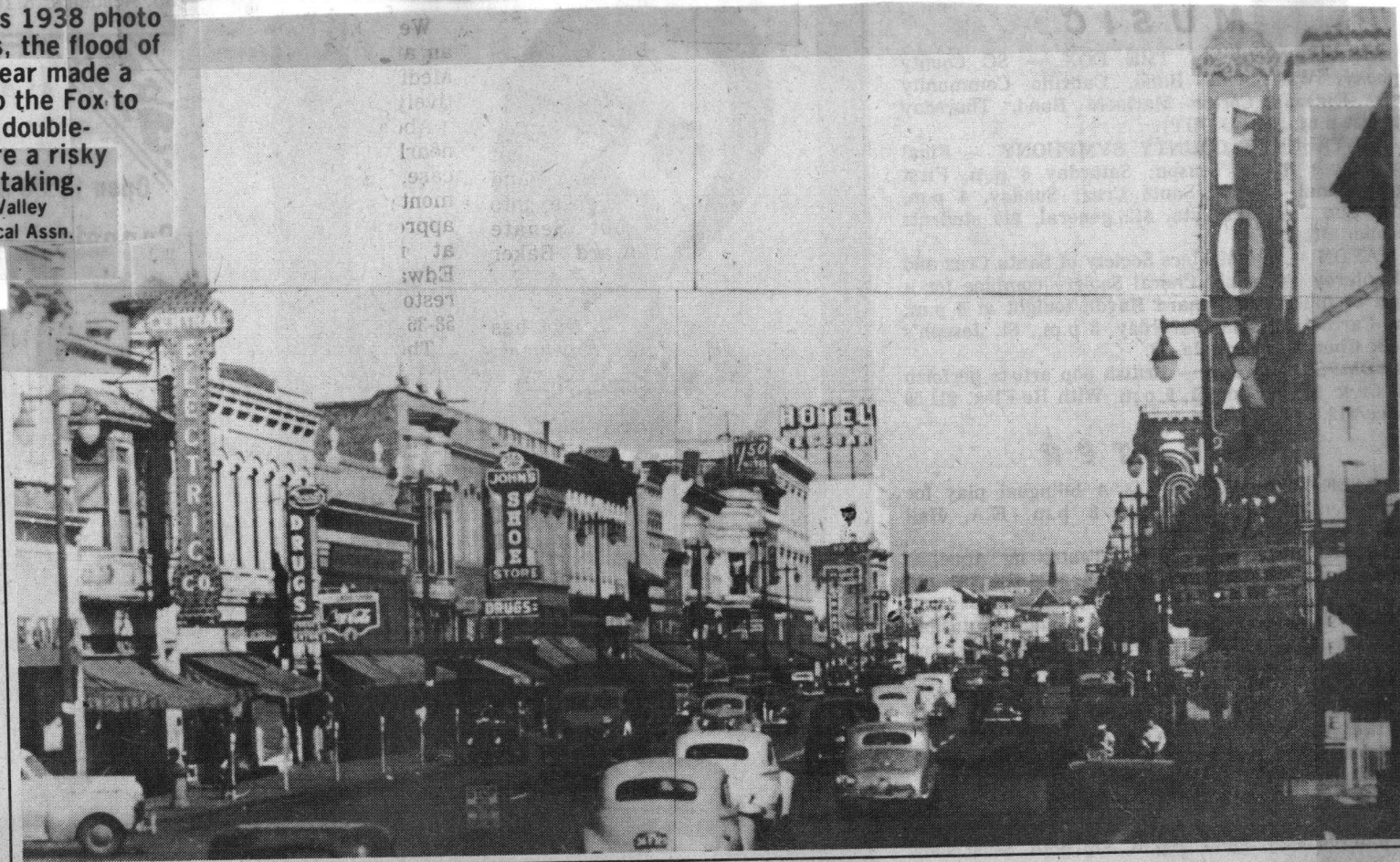
Or the night they played in a quartet for one of the fund-raising talent shows the De Molay put on in the 1920s during intermission in the days of the silents.

Or Bank Night during the Depression, when they won a bag of groceries.

"But so-and-so could help you. Give him a call. He'd remember a lot."

And so emerged a kind of oral history, one of bits and pieces — some fact, some part fact, many of the details blurred by time.

It seems that the older the person, the fonder the memories, which may say more about people than about the Fox.



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The 1940s were bustling times for the Fox Theater, right, and for all of Watsonville. Most of the vertical

signs shown here came down after a city sign ordinance was passed in 1967.

The Fox Theater

What we remember

It's always been there, it seems, changing right along with us

Most remember the Fox as a busy place. It was an immediate hit when it first opened in 1923. In the early 20s, it attracted large crowds to silent movies, vaudeville and local talent shows. The first talkie in 1928, "Melody of Love" with Walter Pidgeon, bewildered audiences and meant that organist Ed Kelly wouldn't be needed anymore.

Lorene Gurnee remembers the elegant satin and gold and red uniforms worn by the ushers and usherettes who guided patrons to their seats. "It was a fun place to be."

The Fox competed nicely with the old State Theater (which used to be called the Appleton) on West Beach Street (which used to be called Third Street). The Fox showed the better movies, most remember. The State had the B movies and westerns.

Its heyday was probably the 1940s when it capitalized on interest in a world war, and the happy times that followed when it ended. Current Watsonville Planning Director Bob Ellenwood remembers that for servicemen from the Coast Artillery unit at Camp McQuaide (now Monterey Bay Academy) and the blimp unit at the old air base on Salinas Road and Highway 1, and even from Fort Ord, the Fox offered what little R and R there was.

AFTER THE WAR it continued to prosper. Few times were as fine as a night at the Fox followed by a trip to the Royal Grill or the Miramar afterward.

The 1950s saw the introduction of television and an end to the movies' captive audiences.

Though the Fox was called the California Theater until 1931 and was run by several different companies over the years, it was owned by a small corporation of local people from the time it was built in 1923 until 1972 when it was sold to Hank Garcia and James Andrade, its current owners.

The seven-member El Pajaro Theater Corporation was formed in 1921 and it purchased the plot of land on which the Fox now stands from the John T. Porter Co. for \$12,000, though the method of payment was 120 shares of stock in the corporation.

THE ORIGINAL CORPORATION was made up of seven members — Ed Pfingst (the president and only original member of the corporation still alive to see it dissolved in 1972), F.W. Biebrach, H.B. Freiermuth, Stephen Scurich, J. S. Dondero,

Arthur Atteridge and F. P. Marinovich. With each member putting up \$100 for one share of stock, the corporation was formed.

Through the years the original shares of stock were divided up among family members. Local attorney Bill Marinovich, the grandson of F. P. Marinovich, became a board member in 1962 and was in charge of dissolving the corporation in 1972. The corporation's first book of minutes, which he still has in his law library, provided most of the details about the corporation included here.

El Pajaro Theater Corporation hired G. Albert Lansburgh, who designed the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles and the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco, as architect, and Perry Andrews, who built much of Main Street, as builder, and, in 1923, the Italian Renaissance style theater was built.

In 1931, a series of improvements were made, including a new marquee. The name was changed to the Fox Theater since the corporation had entered into a lease agreement with Fox West Coast Theaters which ran the theater until 1953. The U.S. Justice Department broke up 20th Century Fox, a giant filmmaking conglomerate, in 1953. Fox then produced and distributed its own movies, and showed them in its own theaters, giving the firm a stranglehold on the film market.

After the breakup of Fox, National General Corporation took over the lease until Garcia and Andrade purchased both it and the building.

In 1941 the theater underwent another \$20,000 worth of improvements, including new seats, carpeting, lobby and box office and new 10-inch-high letters for the marquee.

No one knows for certain when the tall vertical Fox sign was erected, but it came down in 1967 when the city passed an ordinance limiting to 20 inches the distance a sign could extend from a building.

WHEN THE CORPORATION was dissolved after the sale of the theater to Garcia and Andrade, it had 26 stockholders and five directors, with 388 1/4 outstanding shares. Some shareholders owned as little as five-eighths of a share.

According to Marinovich, the corporation became too unwieldy with so many shareholders to answer to and, with interest in motion pictures declining, felt that the time was right to sell. "And it was a good price (\$100,000) at the time," Marinovich said of Garcia and Andrade's bid.

"We'd had it so long and it had depreciated down that we would have had to put too much money into it," he added. "It just wasn't a good financial investment for shareholders any longer. We hated to let it go, but we just had too many obligations with it and too many of the owners lived out of town."

Assorted recollection reveals that at least six different managers ran the theater before Garcia took over management.

C.L. (Brick) Laws was the first. He later would own the Oakland Oaks professional baseball team. J.D. Graham followed Laws and then the order is not clear. There was Lloyd Howell, and Marilyn Brooks. Then Jack Gunsy and Vernon Brown. Howell and Brown, the latter in his rumpled tuxedo, were fixtures.

And the memories.

Long-time Watsonville High School teacher Elizabeth Enders remembers dropping off her two sons and two daughters at the day care center near the Fox where they scavenged for 7-Up bottle caps. Three got you into a Saturday matinee.

Register-Pajaronian Editor Frank Orr remembers the asbestos screen that would roll up for the feature films, on which advertisements for optometrists, undertakers and tailors were tacked.

Retired dentist Dr. Harry Ashcraft remembers the great high school singers who performed in De Molay talent shows in the 20's. People like Elmer Neilsen, Arthur Mork and Ed Christiansen. And Oscar Buob who helped put many on many of those shows.

Howard Sheerin remembers that on the night he moved to Watsonville, he was taken to a show at the Fox Theater. It was 53 years to the day of next Thursday night's big musical show.

There are many other important dates and names in the Fox story but there isn't the time to run them all down, nor the space to report them.

But, there is the more recent history that has all but been ignored. The nature of movies has changed as have the habits of movie goers. Spanish-language films now predominate at the Fox and the emergence of the multi-screen complexes have turned large, single-screen theaters like the Fox into dinosaurs.

The days of the Fox may indeed be numbered, regardless of how next week's "experiment" turns out. But for those fortunate enough to have been a part of its history, time spent there was well worth the price — whether it was 27 cents when it opened in 1923, 35 cents in 1948, or \$10 for next week's show.

The changes

At 61, no plans to retire

- 1921 — El Pajaro Theater Corp. formed. Porter property purchased and construction begun on motion picture and vaudeville house.
- 1923 — California Theater opens.
- 1928 — First talkie shown ("Melody of Love" with Walter Pidgeon).
- 1931 — Renovations done. Name changed to Fox Theater.
- 1936 — Del Mar Theater built in Santa Cruz.
- 1938 — Flood ravages downtown area, closing theater temporarily.
- 1940s — Most prosperous years.
- 1941 — More renovations. New seats, carpet and ticket booth.
- 1947 — Full-scale television service in United States begins.
- 1953 — Dept. of Justice tells 20th Century Fox Corp. to sell off its Fox Theater leases. National General Corp. takes over Fox Theater lease.
- 1954 — Television coverage reaches 90 percent of U.S.
- 1957 — Original Wurlitzer organ sold to Robert Ogg of Santa Clara.
- 1967 — Sign ordinance forces theater to take down sign.
- 1972 — El Pajaro Theater Corp. sells theater to Hank Garcia and James Andrade. El Pajaro Theater Corp. dissolved.
- 1973 — Fox converts to Spanish-language films.
- 1977 — More renovations.
- 1978 — Del Mar Theater converted to four-screen complex.
- 1981 — Cultural facilities search done in Watsonville.
- 1983 (spring) — As a result of facilities search and follow-up work by Pajaro Arts Council, Fox owners and Cultural Council of Santa Cruz decide Fox is feasible site for performing arts.
- 1983 (fall) — Fox Theater applies for and receives Cultural Council grant. Parties enter into contractual agreement to produce 10 shows at Fox Theater, including inaugural show May 17.
- May 17, 1984 — Santa Cruz Symphony, Watsonville Band, Cabrillo Community Chorus and Eleazar Cortes Mariachi Band perform.