

Reels run low at historic theater

Audrey Jacobs, above, sells tickets to an evening show at the Capitola Theater, right. Jacobs' father, Joseph Jacobs of Burlingame, and partner Arthur Mayer of San Francisco built the 500-seat theater near the beach shortly after World War II. The theater opened on Aug. 6, 1948. Audrey Jacobs, who graduated from college the year before, took a sabbatical from her job as a high school teacher to give her parents a hand. She stayed to help manage the theater and later inherited it.



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Capitola landmark is for sale

BY JOHN WOOLFOLK
Mercury News Staff Writer

Audrey Jacobs has come about as close as anyone to creating a time machine. Just stepping up to the ticket window of her 46-year-old Capitola Theater seems to send clocks whirring in reverse.

Jacobs rings up \$4 tickets — yes, \$4 — on a manual cash register that looks like it's on loan from the Smithsonian. Through the time-smudged turquoise doors wafts the aroma of popcorn, cooked fresh in peanut oil and smothered in real melted butter. A can of Coke from the fridge costs 70 cents; a box of Junior Mints, 50 cents.

"It's the perfect place for one of those old romantic dates," said Eric Dexel, 21, of Aptos, whose parents used to date at the Capitola. "It has that old theater feeling. It's a place for locals, something familiar, when everything else is changing."

Times have changed

But change has finally caught up with the Capitola Theater. Jacobs has put it up for sale.

"I'll miss it terribly," said Jacobs, working a crossword puzzle behind the ticket window on a Friday night while the Brad Pitt film "Legends of the Fall" played inside. "But there comes a time when you have to do some things even though in your heart you don't want to."

The theater has become such a local institution — it is a Santa Cruz County historical landmark and opened before Capitola became a city — that news of the pending sale has left dismayed locals wondering why.

Not enough films

"The answer is obvious — they just opened nine theaters in Santa Cruz," Jacobs said, referring to the new Santa Cruz Cinema 9 on Pacific Avenue. "There aren't enough films to go around."

With so many screens to fill — there are now 34 in the county — the "first-run" cinemas that feature new movies will hold on to them longer before releasing them to "second-run" theaters like the Capitola, Jacobs ex-

plained. By then, the films will be out on video, she said.

Located near the beach at the foot of Monterey Avenue in Capitola's downtown village, the theater occupies the site of the old Capitola Hotel, built in 1883 and which burned down in 1929, said Carolyn Swift, director of the Capitola Historical Museum.

It was during World War II that Jacobs' father, Joseph Jacobs of Burlingame, thought of opening a movie theater in the town where the family spent summer vacations. After the war, when construction materials became more plentiful, he and partner Arthur Mayer of San Francisco built the 500-seat theater for \$70,000.

Opened in 1948

The Capitola Theater opened on Aug. 6, 1948, with "The Pirate," starring Gene Kelly and Judy Garland. Audrey Jacobs, who graduated from college the year before, took a one-year sabbatical from her job as a high school English and social studies teacher to give her parents a hand.

"I was just doing it temporarily," Jacobs recalled. "But it didn't turn out that way. It just sort of got to be a habit. I like being my own boss, and I like the variety. Each type of film brings a different clientele."

Jacobs stayed to help manage the theater and later inherited it. Little has changed over the years. The theater's signs, its projector — with motors like those used in B-17 bombers — and its steel-backed upholstered seats with wooden armrests are all original. The stuff that isn't — well, it's hard to tell.

"Every time she replaces something, she replaces it with something like the original," said Anthony Crawley, a trombone player who has worked there off and on for 10 years. "It's a museum of kitsch."

There are no video games in the theater lobby, just a couple of old couches. Jacobs also prefers family-oriented entertainment, such as her favorite film, "Gone With The Wind." And she's a stickler for the age limit on R-rated movies.

Over the years, the theater has become steeped in local lore, not all of it true. Among the most common tales, Crawley said, was that Jacobs and Barbara Brown Lewis, the assistant manager for 18 years until she died in 1991, were sisters who turned the old hotel into a cinema.

"People still come in and ask about my sister," Jacobs said.

"Sometimes there are rumors so deeply entrenched that even stating the truth can't stop them."

Still, there is plenty about the Capitola Theater that is legendary. There's the popcorn, which Capitola councilman and former Mayor Ronald Graves dubbed the county's best in a 1992 honorary declaration, one of several that adorn the theater's walls.

Then there's the "crying room" up the stairs near the projection booth, an unusual feature intended as a place where parents could take noisy children without missing the film. Over the years, it became known among local teenagers as a sort of lover's lane, Crawley said.

Price-conscious owner

Finally, there are the prices — as little as 75 cents for children 3 and under — so low that customers would urge Crawley not to mention them to Jacobs, thinking she hadn't noticed inflation. She knew, of course, what she was doing.

"We always used that as a way to get people to come," Jacobs said.

Like many local residents, Crawley laments that the theater will become another victim of "valley encroachment."

"The only reason I work in a movie theater is this theater," said Crawley, dressed in an iguana-print T-shirt and munching a handful of popcorn. "It's not like a McDonald's job. There's a certain family element that makes it cool. It's just another local place that's going to go down because of big chains."

Even Jacobs said she isn't eager to sell. "But on the other hand, there's no point in keeping it if it's going to be operating at a loss," Jacobs said.

No details available

It is the first time Jacobs has offered the theater for sale, and she stresses that it's "very tentative." She will not say who the buyer is or discuss many details, saying only that escrow began in February and ends Nov. 1. Real estate agents on both ends of the deal would not return telephone calls.

If the sale goes through, it would leave downtown Capitola without a movie theater, said Toni Castro, director of the Capitola Chamber of Commerce. The only other theater in town is the 41st Avenue Playhouse.

"I think it would truly be missed," Castro said.

Others, meanwhile, say they've been too lucky all these years.

"It's been a great theater," said museum director Swift. "It hasn't changed since I was a kid and the community loves it. But it looks like time is passing. I wish Audrey could keep it going forever, but that's unrealistic."