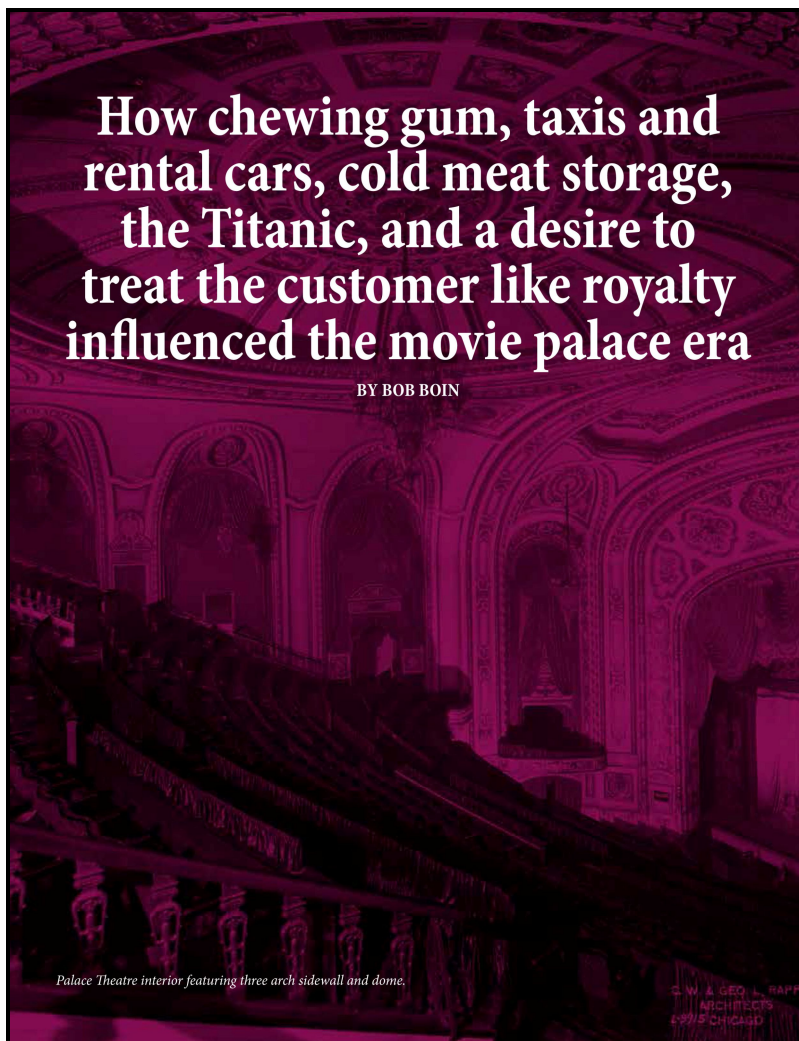


**Air Conditioning American Movie Theatres  
1917-1932**

# The Movie Palace Era In Chicago

**How chewing gum, taxis and  
rental cars, cold meat storage,  
the Titanic, and a desire to  
treat the customer like royalty  
influenced the movie palace era**

BY BOB BOIN



*Palace Theatre interior featuring three arch sidewall and dome.*

C. W. & GEO. L. RAFF  
ARCHITECTS  
699 S. CHICAGO

From the Theatre Historical Society of America  
*Marquee* magazine, 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter, 2016



*Central Park Theatre interior with original stage, oval orchestra pit and mural*

**A**s we begin our 47th Conclave (which is our 4th in Chicago), I thought it might be beneficial to our younger members and some of our older regulars for me to commit to paper some of the thoughts and stories of one of THS's founding members, Joe Duci Bella. He would often entertain anyone who would listen about an interesting part of film presentation and architectural history that shaped the high points of the movie palace era of the 1920s and 30s and it all happened right here in Chicago. Often considered the second city to New York, Chicago made a bigger im-

pact in movie palace design than the enormous early New York theatres, which were merely legitimate theatres on growth hormones. This pioneering effort was even involved in the sounds of the silent film. Wurlitzer, the most prominent of the theatre pipe organ companies, perfected the sound of its Tibia pipework at the Chicago Theatre. This distinctive sound was copied by all the other theatre organ manufacturers.

We will see six of the first seven presentation houses of the local movie chain, Balaban and Katz (referred to as B&K), designed by a

local architectural firm of the brothers Cornelius W. and George L. Rapp (referred to as R&R) and many lit by the local firm of Victor S. Pearlman (referred to as Pearlman), before these three firms became the major components of the nationwide Paramount Pictures empire. The missing theatre was number three in the B&K "built order," the Tivoli which opened 1921 a few months before the Chicago Theatre. It was unfortunately demolished in 1963, but Marquee, volume 17 number four is dedicated to this masterpiece and is included in the convention packets for your viewing pleasure.

## THE PLAYERS

### BALABAN AND KATZ

It all started on the West Side of Chicago at the turn of the 20th century. Abraham Joseph (known as AJ or Abe) and his older brother Barney were two of the eight Balaban family siblings, seven brothers and one sister. Their father and mother ran a neighborhood corner grocery store. It was a small and somewhat successful enterprise but by no means as prosperous as some of the other local grocery/merchandise related Chicago families like the Swifts, Armours, and the Marshall Fields. Barney and AJ watched their parents struggle to make ends meet during tough economic times, often having to extend credit to their customers just to move the merchandise off the shelves and wait to be paid with a “little here and a little there.” At the same time a new industry, the moving pictures, was just beginning, with storefront theatres springing up everywhere. AJ and Barney watched as

people paid good money beforehand just to see the latest, but not always the greatest, offerings. The seeds were sown for the great B&K theatre chain.

With a substantial advance from mom and dad (a few bucks), the brothers rented a storefront and went into the moving picture business, bringing in their sister Ida (who could play a mean piano) to provide the audio portion of the experience. AJ also provided some of the stage entertainment with his singing accompanied by Ida, and the Balaban part of B&K was off to a good start in 1908 with a 103 seat camp-chair house called the Kedzie.

After a rocky start and having to add many solo vocal numbers by AJ to keep the audience happy when the film was not so good, the Balabans were finally rolling in cash, so much cash that they chose not to renew their lease on the Kedzie in 1909 but build their own venue of maybe 300 seats (AJ kept pushing for even more seats). After all was said and done, in 1908 the heavily debt-burdened Balabans opened the 725 to 750 seat (records



Central Park Theatre original exterior



**Balaban & Katz**  
want each of their patrons  
to own a share or two of stock  
in their theatres—  
TO BECOME PATRON-PARTNERS

They want their own customers—the people who attend these theatres—so have a direct, personal interest in them and to share in their profits.

All really successful corporations recognize the customer-ownership plan as the modern method of financing personnel. Patron who derive a regular income from part-ownership, not only become steadier customers themselves, but also help to create new friends for the theatres.

The Balaban & Katz corporation operates all of the following theatres: CHICAGO, TIVOLI, HIVERA, CENTRAL PARK and ROCKEFELLER, the most successful theatres in America, and owns millions of dollars worth of Chicago's choicest real estate.

Write to us for our financial statement, and the next time you attend one of our theatres, speak to the Manager, who will, if you desire, arrange to have one of the following banks buy the stock for you on the Chicago Stock Exchange: The Foreman Trust and Savings Bank, Sheridan Trust and Savings Bank, Liberty Trust and Savings Bank.

You can buy this stock on the partial payment plan, and you become a stockholder as soon as your first payment is made. Dividend checks are mailed to stockholders the first of every month.

**Board of Directors**  
WILLIAM H. MITCHELL JOHN HEUTE  
BARNEY BALABAN SAMUEL KATZ  
EDWARD M. DERTHA JOHN BORDEN  
BERNARD L. STRIN HUGO SOMMERSTEIN

**BALABAN & KATZ**

Chicago Tivoli Hivera Central Park  
Rockefeller  
Roosevelt





*Top: Tivoli Theatre exterior; Bottom: Tivoli Theatre interior with oval orchestra pit*

are not in agreement) Circle Theatre. Featuring a balcony, this was the first purpose-built Chicago cinema. It cost nearly \$25,000.00 (\$500,000.00 in today's money). Because the audiences at the Kedzie had liked the live entertainment that AJ provided, the Circle combined film and small vaudeville acts, which AJ booked. It was wildly successful, bringing in staggering sums of money at 5-cents a ticket (today's \$1.00), but AJ had even bigger plans. He had always dreamed of opening a 5,000-seat theatre, one that could hold their whole world for a single show.

Securing the film at the local film exchange (a story in itself, with Charlie Chaplin and his Essanay Studios thrown in for good measure – the Studio still exists and is located a block behind the Uptown Theatre), the brothers, in 1914, met and started a personal relationship with Ida's yet unknown but soon-to-be-husband, Sam Katz. Sam had a small circuit of theatres that he ran with his family. Over the next year AJ and Sam became fast friends, talking about the growing film industry and AJ was not shy about discussing his dream of large presentation houses (what he called the “film and flesh experience”) around the city. At lunch in 1915, Sam had mentioned to AJ that he had heard about the Marks brothers, a Chicago family (not the New York Groucho, Harpo and Chico Marx brothers' family) who were seeking a spot near the Circle for a large theatre.

AJ and Barney located a spot in the neighborhood a few blocks from the Circle and put in an offer for the lot. They realized that they would need additional capital for such a large venture and called their friend Sam Katz to see if he was interested. The film industry of Balaban and Katz was now off and running. Along the way, they (the Balabans and the Katzs) had

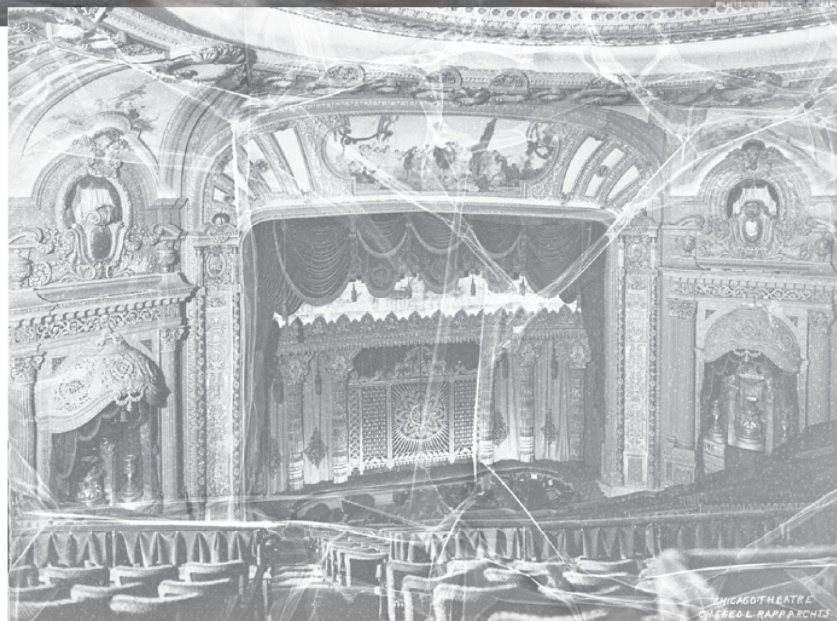
met with a few not-yet-notable people who would shape their empire with money and expertise. Among these people was John Hertz, who started a cab company in Chicago in 1914, and Bill Kroeschell, who worked at the Chicago Stock Yards meat packing plant and was responsible for the cold storage of their products.

In 1914 you could buy any type of motor vehicle for cabs that you wanted as long as it was a black Ford, the same color as all other vehicles and cabs on the street. So John Hertz decided to paint all his taxis yellow and the Yellow Cab Company came into existence. By 1925 it was the largest taxi company in the world. He sold the cab company in 1929 to spend more time with his auto rental business that he started in Chicago.

As the idea to build a bigger venue grew in the B&K minds, they knew that they would need the services of a registered architect. Enter the Chicago firm of Rapp and Rapp, which had just completed the Al. Ringling Theatre (1915) in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

## THE RAPP BROTHERS

Cornelius W. and George L. Rapp were brothers whose father, Isaac Rapp, was a southern Illinois architect of some standing. Cornelius was 18 years older than his brother George, but both had studied architecture. While Cornelius had several buildings already under his belt, George's first theatre job was as an assistant to Edmund Krause in the design of the Majestic (1906; aka Shubert, now Bank of America) Theatre in Chicago, which we will also visit. George was responsible for the nautical-themed men's smoking lounge with its porthole windows (lost during the recent renovation and enlargement of the bathroom facilities) and the ladies' lounge that still exists. Was this a precursor to the



Top: Chicago Theatre exterior; Bottom: Chicago Theatre interior



*Top: Uptown Theatre interior featuring three arch sidewall and prominent organ screen; Bottom: Uptown Theatre depicting original upright marquee and roof sign*

themed smoking lounges that R&R used in most of their large houses?

C. W. and George had collaborated on a vaudeville house in 1910, the Majestic (now the Five Flags) in Dubuque, Iowa, but their designs had not yet evolved into the “French Louis” treatment that became their trademark. That would be attributed to Cornelius’ wedding in 1911 to Mary Payne Root. For their honeymoon, Mary had decided that a trip to Europe would be beneficial to Cornelius’ work, so the newly-married Rapps toured Paris and were scheduled to return to the States on the brand new ship RMS Titanic. Although they were quite impressed with Versailles and the royal chapel there, they had not yet seen Marie Antoinette’s Petite Trianon apartments and the Paris Opera house. Their return was, luckily, postponed for a few more weeks of sightseeing.

When Cornelius returned, a new style of design was on his mind. One of the first theatres in the new style was the Orpheum in Champaign, Illinois (1914). It was an oval French theatre and was a pattern for a theatre in Baraboo, Wisconsin for circus man Al. Ringling (1915). The Ringling theatre is often described as the Orpheum on steroids. R&R also designed the exterior of an office building housing G. Albert Lansburgh’s State/Lake vaudeville theatre (1919). Both buildings were to play a big part in R&R’s design career.

### **VICTOR S. PEARLMAN**

Theatre decorations that architects generally provided were lobby chandeliers and sconce light fixtures. R&R turned to the local firm of Victor S. Pearlman who had done some very large chandeliers for the Chicago City Hall and County Building (1905-1910) and for Cardinal Mundelein’s new seminary chapel and library (1916) on

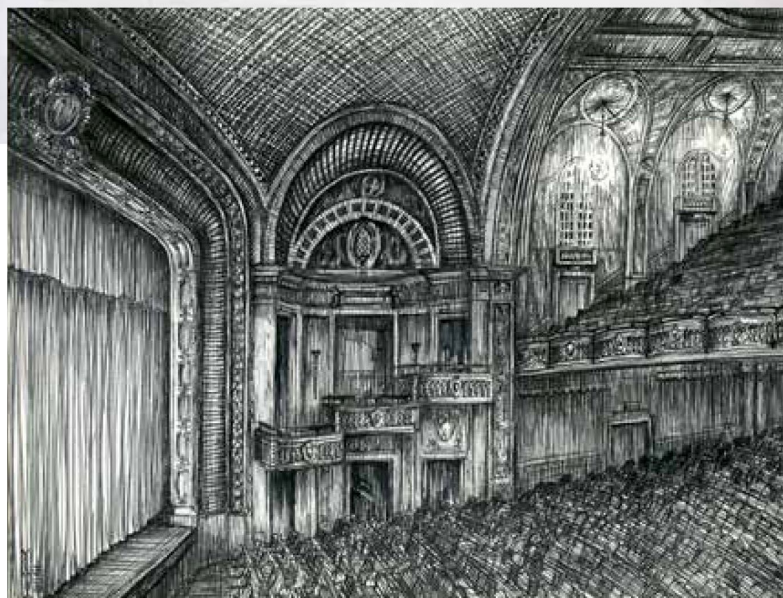
North Michigan Avenue across from the famous Chicago Water Tower. R&R used the Pearlman Company for fixtures in the Al. Ringling.

### WHAT BROUGHT ALL 3 FIRMS TOGETHER?

Work on the Central Park Theatre brought all the people mentioned together for the first of many collaborations. Sam Katz had seen the Ringling Theatre and was impressed enough to recommend the R&R firm as the architects for the proposed Central Park Theatre.

The plan for the Central Park was to construct a great presentation house that would provide film and vaudeville on a year round basis. Most film houses in Chicago closed during the summer months because of the hot and humid weather. The larger “live” houses like the Auditorium Theatre, which we will also see, could afford to have ice shipped in and placed in their fan rooms to provide patrons with cool but humid breezes during the performances. B&K persuaded their acquaintance, Bill Kroeschell, to modify his ammonia cooling system, used at the Chicago stock yards, to a safer, audience-friendly gas to cool their auditorium. The carbon dioxide system that Kroeschell perfected was used in all B&K theatres for many years, and all B&K theatres always opened fully air-conditioned from day one. You could always tell a B&K house in the summer because the front doors were wide open and the cool breezes hit you as you walked by, enticing you to buy a ticket. The mechanically cooled theatres were responsible for driving much of the competition out of business, allowing B&K to acquire the closed theatres and reopen them fully air-conditioned under the B&K name.

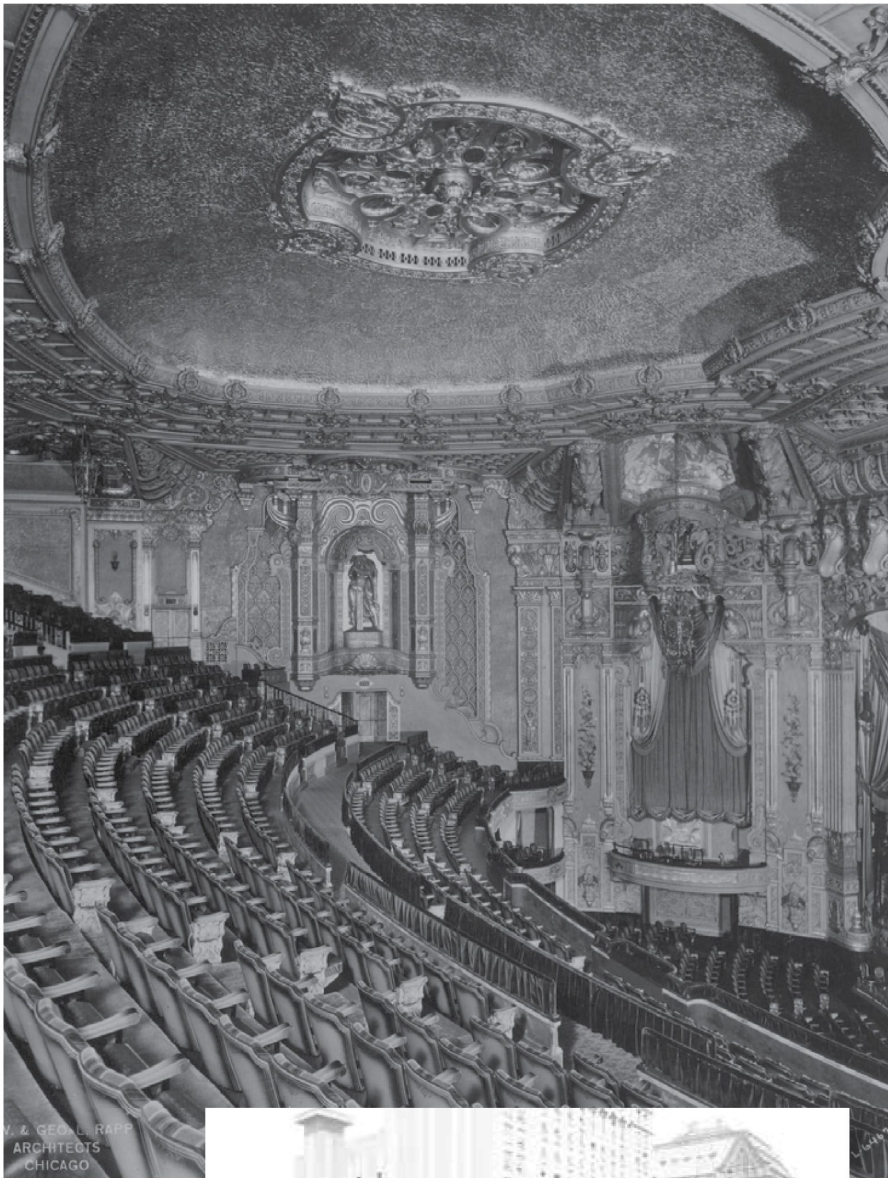
With cash provided by John Hertz and William Wrigley Jr.'s (chew-



*Top: Riviera Theatre exterior; Bottom: Drawing of Riviera Theatre interior, one of a collection by THS member Bret Eddy*

ing gum fame) collection of several other backers and banks, ground was broken for the 1,800-seat Central Park Theatre, considered the nation's first fully air-conditioned movie palace, in 1916. Rapp and Rapp used all the tricks of their trade to create a truly magnificent theatre with both a mezzanine, a fully cantilevered balcony, and the beginnings of their famous patron traffic management techniques. Since the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago in 1903, which killed over 600 people,

emptying a full theatre was a major design consideration. R&R designed a separate balcony exit staircase for the Central Park so that those exiting the balcony would not meet those leaving the main floor. The auditorium floor plan itself was fan shaped, projecting the sound of the organ, orchestra, or musical and speaking acts into the back of the auditorium and balcony without the need of yet-to-be invented amplification devices. The stage was very small because this house was to



V. & GEO. L. RAPP  
ARCHITECTS  
CHICAGO



Top: Oriental Theatre interior; Bottom: Oriental Theatre exterior

feature films, and the oval orchestra pit extended half way into the stage area.

Shortly after designing the Central Park Theatre, Rapp and Rapp moved their offices to the top two floors of the State Lake building, their design in 1918, which was overlooking the sight of their soon-to-rise Chicago Theatre (1921). As the Central Park was nearing opening, one of the bank backers approached B&K about a theatre on the North Side for which they were providing financing. The owners had gone broke after the office building and theatre foundations had been started. B&K asked their now good friends R&R to look at the theatre design and offer suggestions. R&R said the entire theatre needed to be redesigned and one year after the Central Park opened to rave reviews, the Riviera opened in 1918 with 2,800 seats. AJ was well on his way to his 5,000 seat dream and the B&K empire in association with R&R and Victor Pearlman was also well on its way. R&R became the house architects for the B&K chain and when B&K merged with Adolph Zukor in 1926 to form Paramount-Publix Theatre chain, the three Chicago firms were on their way to national importance.

The Riviera pushed the Central Park design as far as possible but because the auditorium was now at a right angle to the lobby, some new design criteria were debuted. Here, CW was able to insert more of his French style picked up on his honeymoon in Paris. The R&R's mezzanine overlook onto the main floor through large round and oval windows in the side of the under balcony dome was first introduced. It followed in almost all of their theatres. Also premiered was the famous three arch sidewall treatment used in most of their larger theatres.

The Riviera is worth a close look because we can see the genius



of R&R in their overall designs. Each side of the auditorium has the three side arches, which extend straight up the wall even as the ceiling begins to curve into the dome. The oval flat ceiling area, with which the arches ended, six small triangular areas, as well as the two larger triangular areas on either side of the middle arch, were formed in the curved ceiling area. R&R had Louis F. Grell, whom they used for the Central Park murals, fill these spaces with murals depicting the twelve months of the year and the four seasons. Grell would go on to design most of the murals for all R&R theatres.

The Riviera stage was larger than the Central Park's because the original theatre's foundation was to be a vaudeville house, but R&R's oval orchestra pit was still extended into the stage area. Opening night in 1918 was an outstanding success and B&K began to think even bigger thoughts. With two theatres in their chain seating 4,600 people, they decided to add another two slightly larger theatres and asked R&R to draw up plans. One would be near the Central Park, holding 3,600, to be called the Tivoli (opening in February 1921) and one downtown with 3,800 seats, which was to be called the Capitol (opening on October 26th of the same year). Because Thomas Lamb's New York Capitol theatre was on the drawing boards at the same time, B&K changed their theatre's name to Chicago. It had the same number of letters so the upright would not have to be altered. These two theatres ushered R&R into the large movie palace era with their huge lobbies, balconies, and distinctive organ screens. They both introduced the "French Theme" that George had seen on his Paris honeymoon and would later become the R&R trademark. The Tivoli's lobby was inspired by



*Palace Theatre exterior*

the royal chapel of Louis XV in Versailles, only larger with the altar and organ replaced by a grand staircase. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris found its way into the façade of the Chicago Theatre, only smaller.

It was for the opening of the Chicago Theatre that B&K brought a talented organist, Jesse Crawford, from the west coast to play on the largest theatre organ installed in a pic-

ture house to date, and it was at this theatre that Wurlitzer perfected the organ sound that would accompany silent films across the nation.

The Chicago Theatre was noted mostly for its wide and shallow auditorium. With extremely small screens for movies (due to immature lens and lamphouse development), R&R wanted to move the audience closer to the screen and the Chicago



*Chicago's Central Park Theatre lobby*

was designed with eight main floor aisles, and the fully cantilevered balcony was the largest ever built at that time. This led the Chicago city building department to demand that the balcony be load tested with more than twice the design weight in sand bags before an occupancy permit was issued. Needless to say large cantilevered balconies became common across the country.

W.W. Ahlschlager's Senate Theatre in Chicago opened the same

year as the Tivoli and Chicago, and when he was asked to compare his designs to that of the Rapps', he is reported to have said that he "laid an egg." He went on to design the Roxy Theatre in New York City after trying out the lobby design in Chicago at the Belmont Theatre (1926-façade still exists).

A small investment of only \$3,000,000 (\$60,000,000 in today's dollars) by B&K for the two new venues was a very wise decision, as all

four theatres were completely paid for by 1923, and the money kept rolling in.

By end of 1923, AJ could now see his 5,000 seat presentation house as a possibility and R&R was asked to start work on the Uptown Theatre, to be situated right across the street from the Riviera Theatre. There would be no budget limit for this theatre and R&R would use all of their innovative and successful ideas from the large Chicago and Tivoli Theatres, except for the French design and the oval orchestra pit extending into the stage area. The live acts that B&K had first presented in their Circle Theatre had become such a great part of their presentation format that the stage area was getting too small for the more elaborate acts and a major redesign was in order. B&K had R&R add a whole new stage house, orchestra pit, proscenium arch, and Grell mural (later painted over) to the Central Park and pushed the orchestra pits back fully into the auditorium at the Riviera, Tivoli, and Chicago theatres. The eight-aisle-wide auditorium and the large, fully cantilevered balcony of the Chicago made their way into the Uptown's blueprints along with the three arch side wall treatment and dome. But just to be different from the Chicago's 70-foot proscenium opening, the Uptown's proscenium was made 70 feet one inch. The Uptown also had more than three times the lobby space as the Chicago and two times the Tivoli; it cost a bit more than the Chicago and Tivoli combined. It was advertised as 5,000 seats (AJ was happy), but really it had only 4381.

With money cascading into the coffers, the rest could be described as mere history except that we will also see the next two R&R creations, the Oriental (1926) for B&K and R&R's return to the French theme in the 1927 Palace, which was designed

for the Orpheum circuit as a vaudeville house. Six of these theatres (not the Oriental) had fabulous Victor Pearlman bronze chandeliers and sconce and ceiling light fixtures. As you see these fixtures in the Palace Theatre, you will notice the gold shine. This was a deliberate act on the part of the Pearlman factory because the various bronze parts were to be welded together and the silver solder seams showed too well against the bronze pieces. To rectify this problem, all the fixtures were gold plated, which also prevented them from tarnishing or turning green as bronze can do. The Chicago Theatre lost all of its lobby Pearlman fixtures in a 1950s remodeling done by R&R, retaining only the Pearlman auditorium chandeliers added in the 1933 update that included new seats and Grell murals.

By the time the Oriental was on the drawing boards, B&K had merged with Famous Players -Lasky to become Paramount/Publix Theatre Corporation. Of course they took along their house architects R&R (who brought along Victor Pearlman) and the national building scheme was put in motion. One of the first theatres on the list was an office building and flagship theatre for Paramount/Publix. The Times Square Paramount and the Paramount building of 1926 were quite well regarded, and, while the Pearlman Company was scheduled to produce the decorative lighting fixtures (as clearly shown in the color sketches that R&R produced) Victor was on vacation with his family in Europe. When he refused to return to oversee the fixture production, Paramount went elsewhere and the theatre opened with fixtures more crystal than bronze. The theatre survived until 1966 when it was turned into offices with the removal of the marquee and large front window. The destruc-



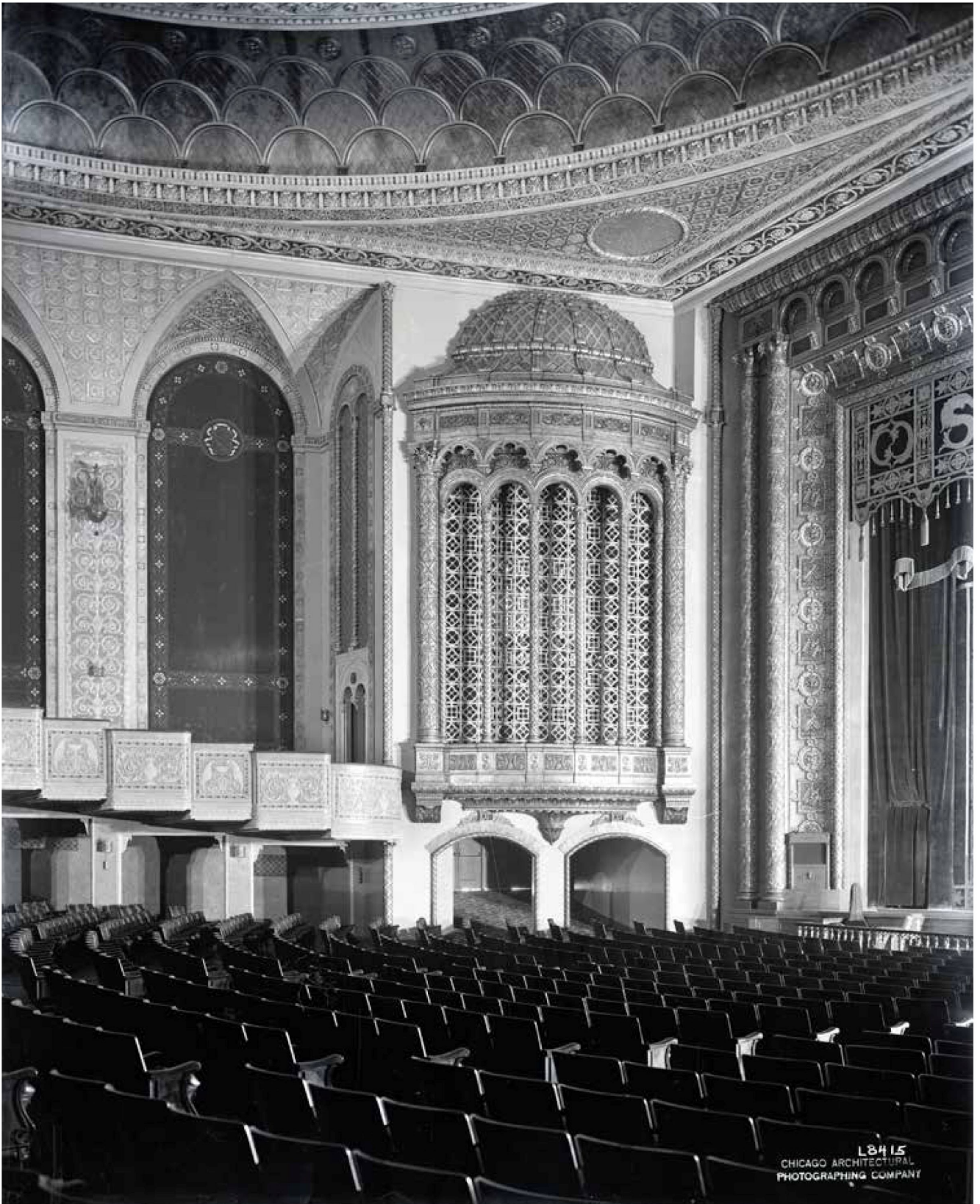
*Chicago's Central Park Theatre stage*

tion of the theatre portion can be seen, out the hotel window, in a section of the film *Midnight Cowboy*. (In 2000, the World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., which leases a large section of the Paramount building, returned the window, Paramount sign, and marquee to the building.)

The Rapp and Rapp legacy that started here in Chicago and was continued by George Rapp (Cornelius had died in 1926) can be seen all over the United States. There are probably more R&R theatres still standing than those of any of the other great theatre architects. Some, but not all, of the most famous theatres are: The Rialto Square in Joliet, Illinois; the Orpheum in Memphis, Tennessee; Shea's Buffalo in Buffalo, New York; Loew's Penn in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the Palace Theatre Playhouse Square in

Cleveland, Ohio; the Brooklyn Paramount and Loew's Kings in New York City; Loew's Jersey Theatre in Jersey City, New Jersey; the Paramount in Aurora, Illinois; Loew's Ocean State Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island; the St. Louis Theatre (now Symphony Hall) in St. Louis, Missouri; the Seattle and Portland Paramount Theatres in Washington; four theatres for Warner Brothers: Warner in Youngstown, Ohio, Erie, Pennsylvania, West Chester, Pennsylvania, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and the most famous parking lot, (not really their design) the former Michigan Theatre in Detroit.

Some other theatre architects began their careers with R&R; the most famous was S. Charles Lee, which could explain why many sections of his Los Angeles Theatre look quite similar to earlier R&R designs.



L8415  
CHICAGO ARCHITECTURAL  
PHOTOGRAPHING COMPANY

*Inside Chicago's Congress Theatre*

# **CHICAGO MOVIE THEATRES OF BALABAN & KATZ**

*Reference: The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban & Katz, David Balaban, Arcadia, 2006, page 40*

*\*Date taken over by Balaban & Katz. Dates for air conditioning and number of seats vary according to source.*

**1917 Central Park (1780 seats) Air conditioned by Wittenmeier**

**1918 Riviera (1943 seats)\* Air conditioned by Wittenmeier**

**1921 Tivoli (3520 seats) Air conditioned by Wittenmeier**

**1921 Chicago (3861 seats) Air conditioned by Wittenmeier#**

**1922 Roosevelt (1535 seats)\* Air conditioned by Wittenmeier#**

**1925 Uptown (4320 seats) Air conditioned by Wittenmeier#**

**1925 Senate (3097 seats)**

**1925 Harding (2962 seats)**

**1926 Oriental (3217 seats) Air conditioned by Wittenmeier#**

**1926 Norshore (3017 seats)**

**1926 McVickers (2264 seats)\*#**

**1928 Regal (2866 seats)**

**1928 Maryland (1540 seats)**

**1928 Tower (3015 seats)\***

**1928 Paradise (3612 seats)**

**1928 Varsity (1812 seats)\***

*Note: Wittenmeier died in 1928*

**1929 United Artists (1696 seats)\***

**1929 Granada (3447 seats)\***

**1929 Marbro (3931 seats)\***

**1929 Covent (1972 seats)\***

**1929 Congress (2890 seats)\***

**1929 Berwyn (1673 seats)\***

**1929 Crystal (1860 seats)\***

**1929 State (1895 seats)\*#**

**1929 LaGrange (1436 seats)\***

**1930 Pantheon (2035 seats)\***

**1930 Belmont (3257 seats)\***

**1930 Century (3056 seats)\***

**1930 Alamo (1557 seats)\***

**1930 Belpark (2004 seats)\***

**1930 Biltmore (1677 seats)\***

**1930 Gateway (2092 seats)**

**1930 Manor (1827 seats)\***

**1931 Nortown (2105 seats)**

**1931 Southtown (3206 seats)**

**1934 Alba (968 seats)\***

*# These theatres are also listed in a 1927 advertisement as Refrigeration Installations by Brunswick-Kroeschell Company.*