



Early Legitimate Cinemas

3.1 Français Theatre (1913-1961)

328 DALHOUSIE STREET

Three years after designing the striking Family Theatre on Queen Street, architect Walter Herbert George gave Lowertown its own neighbourhood showplace. By this time, movies were sharing almost equal time with vaudeville on theatre bills. The Français Theatre, opened on June 23, 1913, can truly be called Ottawa's first large playhouse designed for movies, a legitimate cinema, as it were.

The Français Theatre presented a distinguished hand-carved limestone façade to Dalhousie Street, extending more than half a block to York Street, a few metres north of the Monument National. Reprising a design he had so successfully applied to the Family Theatre, George designed an elegant arched entrance for the Français, but on a smaller scale. The heavy-set limestone arch was placed beneath an intricately carved festoon featuring the comic and tragic masks that symbolize theatre, as well as large sculpted letters spelling out Théâtre Français. Smaller stone arches framed the entrance on either side and descended below the cornice to flank the poster boards. The dark mahogany doors were located underneath a glass and wrought iron canopy, also bearing the theatre's name etched into the glass.

Past the front doors, the lobby featured marble floors in various shades of green, with murals representing "home-like themes" by Parisian artists. From both corners of the lobby, wide staircases led to the balcony, and mahogany doors opened into the orchestra floor.

Inside the auditorium, the audience's footsteps were hushed by thick red velvet carpets, while the side walls were covered in rose draperies. Elegant chandeliers and indirect lights underneath the half-moon-shaped balcony floor provided the illumination. Including the orchestra floor, the balcony, and the boxes, the Français had 1,600 seats, making it Ottawa's second-largest theatre at that time, exceeded only by the Russell. Unfortunately, the balcony was supported by pillars that obstructed the view of the screen from some of the orchestra seats. The asbestos drop curtain was painted with a scene of marching soldiers saluting Madeleine de Verchères, commemorating the French-Canadian heroine's one-hundredth anniversary.¹⁸⁴



An early 1910s postcard view of the Français Theatre on Dalhousie Street at the apex of its beauty: the delicately carved limestone façade sported an iron and glass canopy above the main entrance, and large storefront windows kept the rest of the building engaged with the street.

Note the enormous tree across the street.

Emmanuel Briffa Collection,
Historic Theatres' Trust

In response to fears of fire, the building was constructed completely of concrete on a steel frame. All wiring was contained in tubes encased in the concrete walls. The projectionist was equipped with three projectors, to eliminate rewinding and reel-switching time lags. The projectors purchased for this theatre were the latest novelty, since they came with a device that eliminated the flickering of the picture most common to nickel shows.¹⁸⁵

Because vaudeville was still a popular draw, the Français had a stage and dressing rooms, as well as some wooden scenery. An eight-piece orchestra accompanied plays and movies.

The theatre took one year to build, cost \$100,000, and was owned by local businessman Patrick Labelle. Much like the builders of the Monument National, Labelle wanted to give Lowertown's francophone population its own movie theatre. "The pictures for the opening have been especially chosen to appeal to the people of this section of the city including many films produced in France and other European centres."¹⁸⁶ Although the movies were silent, the staff was not, and was advertised as being bilingual. When Sir Wilfrid Laurier died, Labelle dutifully had the Français draped in black and purple, removed all movie posters, and closed the theatre in mourning during the funeral.¹⁸⁷

Labelle made his theatre a success by surrounding himself with experienced managers, well-connected with the film booking circuits. The first manager hired to run the Français was Kenneth Findlay, who was also managing the hugely successful Family Theatre. Throughout its existence, the theatre was in the capable hands of veteran managers. Val Bureau took over from



Newspaper advertising for the theatre's grand opening, enticing people to its programme of "Vaudeville and Moving Pictures." The Français was Ottawa's first legitimate cinema, even though vaudeville was still presented on its stage for a few years.

The Ottawa Citizen, June 21, 1913

Findlay around 1918, then A. Donaghy came over from the Monument National a couple of years later.¹⁸⁸ Donaghy pushed the envelope by pioneering forbidden Sunday movies, presenting shows under the auspices of St. Bridgid's Parish.¹⁸⁹ For over a decade, the theatre was leased to prominent exhibitor Harry Brouse, who ran it as part of a three-cinema chain that included the Imperial and the Family.

In addition to drawing from Lowertown, the Français enjoyed a strong following in Hull. Theatregoers from across the river could hop on a tram that would leave them at the Dalhousie Street doors of the cinema. Labelle sponsored a large scoreboard advertising the theatre at Hull's Dupuis Park for Inter-Provincial Baseball, and promised season passes to the movie house to any league player who hit the sign with a batted ball during a game.¹⁹⁰ In 1926, after Harry Brouse died, the Français was leased by Hull theatre magnate Donat Paquin, who remodelled the interior and bought new projectors and a new screen. Paquin ran the house for decades and, as a result, managed to strengthen the presence of the Français's among Hull residents.¹⁹¹ After Paquin's death, the Français passed to another well-known Ottawa exhibitor, Bob Maynard.

The Dalhousie Street theatre was an established fixture in the neighbourhood. Finding a Lowertown French Canadian family that does not remember the Français would be like finding a long-time Ottawan who doesn't remember the Capitol. The nostalgia is not simply tied to old Lowertown and its fond neighbourhood memories, it is especially powerful because the Français catered to children. It was located within easy walking distance of thousands of homes, closer than the Rideau Theatre, which required crossing a busy shopping street. Mothers would send their children to the Français all day long on Saturdays for serials and cartoons. In



Postcards such as this one were mass-produced and sent to local theatres for advance promotions of upcoming features. All the theatre owner needed to do was to add the name of his venue and distribute the cards.

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conversations long-time residents, anecdotes about the Français theatre flow freely.

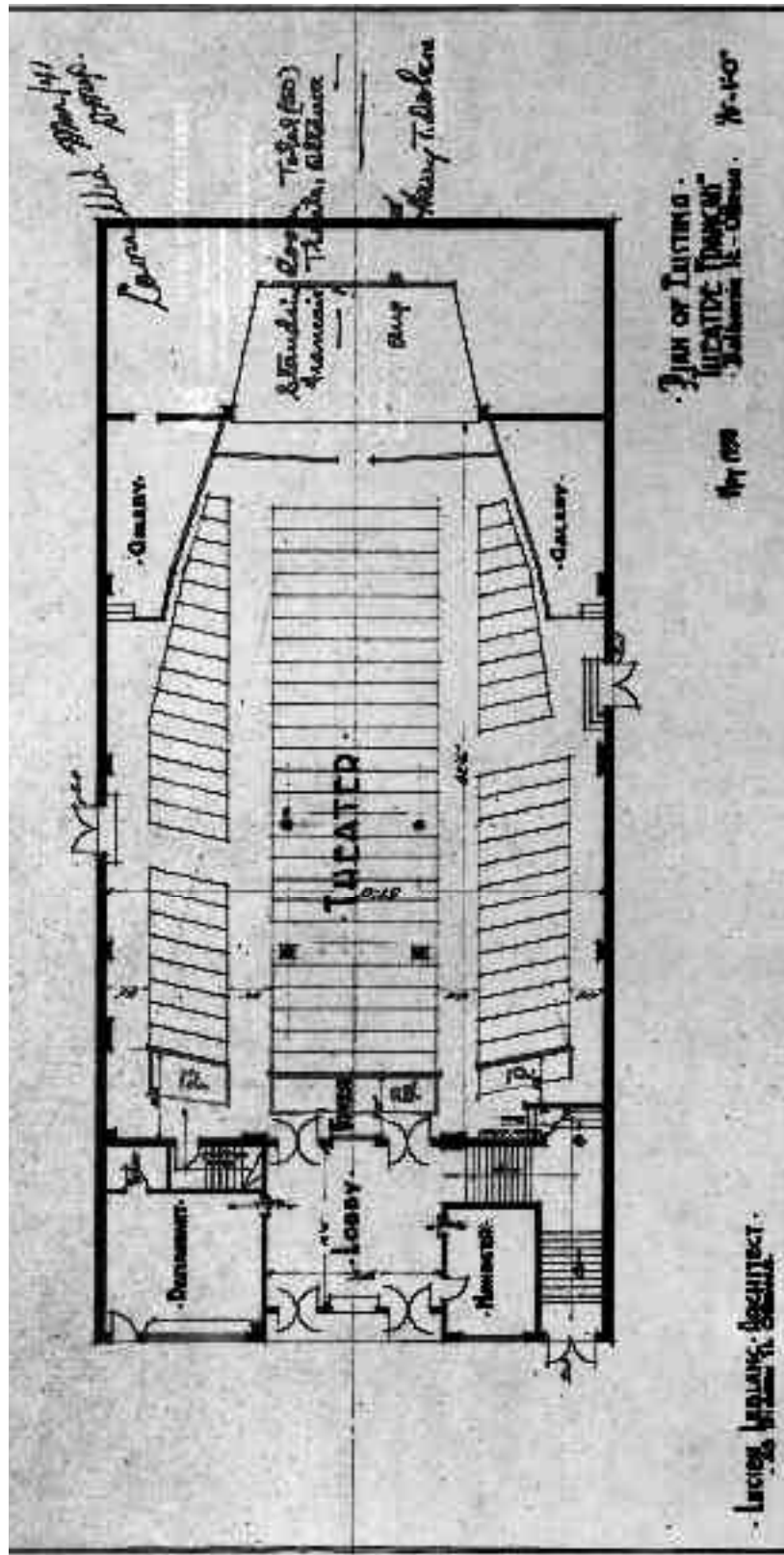
One man, who grew up in the neighbourhood just before the Second World War, was part of a gang of twenty-five boys, dubbed the Lévesques' Gang, who hung out around the No. 5 fire station at Bruyère and King Edward, later to become the Armand-Pagé Community Centre. The

Lévesques' Gang were regulars at the Français. Every Saturday at 10:00 a.m. they would all line up at the doors, having given their dime to one of their numbers who bought all the tickets. Then they would all line up in front of the one had who had the tickets and file past the ticket taker saying "*en arrière*" (behind), leaving the ticket taker to collect everyone's tickets at once. Of course, there were never as many tickets as there were gang members, but by the time the tickets were counted, everybody was inside.

The boys would regularly stay all day, hiding in the washrooms between shows to avoid being kicked out by the ushers, who had a tough task running the Saturday shows, because the theatre was often a zoo. The Lévesques' Gang boys, for instance, would suddenly roll marbles on the floor yelling "*des rats!*" (rats!). As the marbles hit other children's shoes, screams would erupt and some children were so scared they would leave the theatre crying. At 4:00 p.m., after the end of the third show, the theatre would close until the evening show, which was attended by the grown-ups.

Kids went to the Français, derisively nicknamed the "Frog," during the school week as well, but they had to go to the evening performances only, and when they did, they had to ask adults to buy their ticket, or try to pass as their offspring. During the day, there was often a teacher pacing around the entrance of the theatre during a break making sure no one was cutting class.

Discipline was not just the ushers' job. The Français had a matron, who, according to some memories, was a large woman with glasses who wore her hair in a bun. The matron was a formidable authority figure who did not take any nonsense from anyone. During the shows, she stood by the doors or walked around with her enormous flashlight, and when things got out of hand, she would walk up to the little demon causing the disturbance and



The interior layout of the Français: space was so tight that the washrooms had to be placed in the basement, and were accessed by narrow stairs from the auditorium. In this 1938 plan, a restaurant shared the street frontage with the ticket lobby.

Department of Public Works, G-51

A late 1930s view of the Français. After the Second World War, the theatre acquired a lacklustre reputation as a cheap, dark, and dungeon-like movie house, and it was derisively nicknamed "le Frog."

Department of Public Works
G-51





The big lie. In an innocent-looking 1961 newspaper ad, the Lowertown population is advised to look for “complete renovations and the grand reopening.” The venerable Français Theatre was instead demolished to make way for a Holiday Inn. The last movies to play at the Français were for children, not the sordid and taboo-themed movies that had helped brand the theatre so negatively.

Le Droit, May 20, 1961

whack him on the back of the head with her flashlight. In particular, she never tolerated any kissing, or even a boy putting his arm around a girl. The flashlight struck the backs of many teenage heads for such offences.

During the war and for years afterward, the Français gave free admission to anyone who presented three Top Valu can wrappings from Gold Bond products. Predictably, scores of children would raid the pantry, ripping off the precious labels, leaving parents with rows of metal cans and no idea what they contained. During the Depression and the war years, the Français also gave out china dish sets, one piece per week, and hundreds of people went faithfully to the movies until they had collected their complete dish sets. Many of those are still used every day in Lowertown homes.

Most of the people who talk about the Français nowadays also sadly recall its final years. When television arrived, it took little time for the Saturday serials ritual to die down. The theatre came to be known as an old, dark, cavernous and dingy place, with rats and a musty smell, where unsavoury movies were sometimes shown.¹⁹² Risqué films were screened from time to time, such as Brigitte Bardot movies, Quebec’s horrific drama *Aurore, l’enfant martyre*, or *Le défroqué*, which dealt with a defrocked priest, a very taboo theme. Such movies can only have aroused disapproval among French Catholic Lowertown families.

Still, when the end came, the Labelle family, who still owned the building, was well aware of the neighbourhood’s emotional attachment to the theatre. On Saturday, May 20, 1961, the newspaper ad for the Français carried the notice that the theatre would be closing for renovations the following Monday, and encouraged readers to watch for the announcement of a grand reopening.¹⁹³ The Français, however, never did reopen. The theatre building, which also contained a restaurant and a printshop, was demolished and replaced by a three-storey Holiday Inn,

The beautiful festooned façade of the Imperial Theatre stands out among the ordinary-looking buildings that surround it along Bank Street in this mid-1930s picture. Although the “Imp” is best remembered for its Saturday serials for children, the marquee is seen here advertising *Forty Naughty Girls and Men Are Not Gods* — the type of movie you would expect to see in one of the city’s seedy areas. Right beside the theatre was the Gilmour Inn, and across the street, the Alexandra Hotel, two working-class drinking spots.

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whose parking lot occupied the adjacent site of the Monument National. The hotel, built by the Labelle-Brisebois family trust, remained in the family until 1998, when it was purchased by an American company, which now operates a Marriott franchise there.¹⁹⁴

3.2 Imperial Theatre (1914-1955)

325 BANK STREET

Several hundred people crowded the Bank Street sidewalk near MacLaren hours before the grand opening of the Imperial, billed in the press as Canada’s Theatre Beautiful. A powerful searchlight on the roof of the building flashed up and down Bank Street to attract attention. It was a Monday evening, August 24, 1914, and the first shots of the First World War had barely been fired.

The mood was euphoric. Despite the fact that over five hundred would-be patrons were turned back at the door for lack of capacity, there was no disappointment. “Nothing has been withheld to make the Imperial Theatre truly metropolitan in all its appointments — both the interior and exterior presenting so unusually attractive appearance,”¹⁹⁵ cooed the *Ottawa Journal* the following day.

A large upright sign with oversized electric lettering and a neon crown at its pinnacle beckoned the city’s discriminating public to the Imperial, a glowing example of beaux-arts classical design whose façade was in Fiske tapestry brick with ornamental festoons under its cornice.¹⁹⁶ Four pilasters, each surmounted by concrete lanterns atop the cornice, framed a pair of



large leaded-glass windows on each side of the façade, which in its centre featured a three-panelled arched window that provided light to the entrance lobby. Two lion heads flanking this central window bit into thick chains that held the overhanging canopy in place. The entrance to the lobby was at the centre of the building beneath the canopy and upright sign. The heavy walnut French-style doors were the work of W.C. Edwards and Co., who also made the doors for the Château Laurier Hotel.

Once inside, patrons were submerged in a discreetly rich and elegant décor. The outer lobby was small, with very high ceilings, which, according to the *Journal*, were “a blaze of light, yet no lights are directly visible”¹⁹⁷ — a clear indication of the architect’s mastery of indirect lighting, both natural and electric. The lobby’s walls were a feast of gold-coloured bas-relief motifs, festoons, and green marble panels, and the floor was finished in soft terrazzo. A door to the right led to a second lobby, from which a marble staircase led to the balcony.

Inside the auditorium, one could genuinely get a sense of why the theatre was billed as Canada’s most gorgeous. A large cornice, adorned with golden bas-relief, ran along the ceiling, itself traversed by equally decorated beams. Large cream-coloured panels framed by festooned friezes gave the rest of the ceiling a restful, rhythmic sophistication.

The side walls were dressed with Japanese grass cloth panels highlighted by gold-painted carved frames. Creams, ivories, and soft purples made up

Even in 1947, the year of this view, the lobby looked well maintained. The decorative plaster bas-reliefs, the walnut doors, and the wood panelling around the staircase to the balcony are in good condition, despite the Imperial’s thirty-plus years.

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A plunging 1947 view of the auditorium from the top of the balcony shows the Imperial in its full stunning glory. Note the sound horns on either side of the screen.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.9) AO2864

the general colour scheme, and these hues blended splendidly with the satin walnut woodwork found throughout the auditorium.

The proscenium arch, slightly recessed from the stage's outer reach, was embellished with sculpted plaster decorations and rosettes. At its apex, a Canadian coat of arms surmounted by the Imperial Crown completed the arch. The system of curtains was unique. A royal purple curtain that fell to the edge of the stage folded laterally to each side, revealing a second, grey satin drop curtain, which in turn revealed the screen.¹⁹⁸

One of the pioneering features of the Imperial Theatre was that its box seats were not located along the lateral walls but were placed at the front of the balcony, sectioned off from the other balcony seats and surrounded with lavish purple draperies.¹⁹⁹ This gave a perfect view of the stage and screen to the higher-paying public, who was also served by uniformed attendants. By building a cantilever balcony, the architect ensured that the orchestra floor was devoid of pillars, a long-time annoyance in earlier theatres.

All of the seats were of robust Circassian walnut and were upholstered in dark leather. Box seats were larger and wider, but the overall seating arrangement was more than comfortable for every patron. Thick carpeting lined every aisle, causing the *Journal* reporter to observe that “[to] tread down the aisles of the Imperial is like walking on a bed of moss.”²⁰⁰ The the-



atre's original capacity was 1,200, including 500 on each of the ground and balcony floors and 200 in the boxes.

The theatre's most significant furnishing, however, was its pipe organ. Built in Ottawa at a cost of \$20,000, the enormous instrument was in a class by itself. It was operated by organist Alban Moss for the opening night. "Ottawans," wrote the *Journal* reporter, "have not the slightest idea what this music means when accompanying the motion pictures. To hear the organ alone is worth twice the price of admission."²⁰¹ For many years, the Imperial boasted of its unique instrument in newspaper ads that always carried the phrase "The House with the Organ" right under the theatre's name.

Although the Imperial was used to show movies for most of its theatrical life, it came equipped with a fifty by twenty-four foot hardwood stage. A tiny dressing room was tucked under the stage and could be reached via narrow winding stairs. Off the backstage, the rear walls of the building were equipped with panic doors that opened onto the back laneway.

The designer, architect Walter Herbert George of Ottawa, had ample experience in theatre architecture, having also designed the beautiful Family Theatre on Queen Street four years earlier, and the stately Français in 1913. This, however, could be described as his crowning achievement. He was also the architect of several residences on Clemow, Monkland, and Carling avenues and the Weldon Court Apartments on Laurier Avenue West. George also designed much of Linden Terrace and the Connaught Park Jockey Club.²⁰² He remained active for several decades and designed various public buildings, among them the Civic Hospital Annex in 1942.

The Imperial Theatre opened at a time when cinemas were barely appearing on the entertainment landscape. Its elegant design clearly conveys what most enterprising exhibitors sought to achieve, a sense of legitimacy for the

Most of this view of the Imperial's auditorium is still available, as Barrymore's Music Hall. The ground floor of the building was converted to miscellaneous retail uses half a century ago, but the balcony's wall panelling, gilded plasterwork, and ceiling decorations are still intact. The horseshoe-shaped cantilevered balcony provided clean sightlines for everyone in the cinema, without any obstructing columns or pillars.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.9)

Dressed as characters from L'il Abner, in the late 1940s, ushers from the Imperial Theatre would parade up and down the street to promote the show.

Maynard Valois (personal collection)



moving picture business among the upper middle classes. The Imperial's comfortable balcony chairs and its uniquely placed box seats were part of this strategy, as was remarked without subtlety in the *Canadian Moving Picture Digest* later that decade: "The Imperial in Ottawa probably gets the finest balcony crowd of any theatre in Canada. In other words, a good class of people seek the upper floor of this house. One reason for this is that there are padded opera seats right to the back row."²⁰³ When it opened, only the stately Russell and the opulent Dominion theatres, both stage-oriented houses, surpassed the Imperial in class and sophistication.

The man behind the Imperial Theatre was Harry Brouse, who also built the Family and operated the Français for a few years. An astute exhibitor and businessman, Brouse allied his theatres with United Motion Pictures Limited,²⁰⁴ thus ensuring a consistent supply of moneymaking films. Through his affiliation with United, Brouse was able to première such films as Chaplin's *A Dog's Life*, *Tarzan of the Apes*, and *My Four Years in Germany* at the Imperial for runs of up to a week. Considering the routine of two or three weekly programme changes that prevailed in those days, an entire week was considered a substantial run.

Like many theatre owners of the day, Brouse possessed a keen sense of marketing.²⁰⁵ He also possessed a very old-boy sense of business savvy. In 1922, he purchased the Alexandra Hotel, across the street from the Imperial, and let it be known that "any film salesman that visits Ottawa and does not stop at his hotel will stand a very small chance of booking any pictures into the Imperial." The Alexandra Hotel was torn down in 1978, having acquired a reputation as one of the most unsavoury places on Bank Street. Its tavern, the Smart Alex, was a well-known source of trouble, and was notorious for its seediness. Neighbouring businesses cheered when the place was ripped down.²⁰⁶

Aside from his favourite searchlight stunt, which he used at busy periods of the year such as during the Central Canada Exhibition, Harry Brouse developed a partnership with a nearby gasoline station that had extra land



on its lot. Since he was attracting a large well-to-do and increasingly motorized clientele, Brouse arranged to dedicate free parking spaces for his patrons at the station in exchange for on-screen advertising.²⁰⁷

Brouse's showmanship also involved booking suitably themed films to correspond with various civic events. During the city's Winter Sports Carnival, forerunner of present-day Winterlude, the Imperial showed *Carnival*. Early September and the back-to-school rush brought *Trouble*, starring Jackie Coogan, to the Imp's screen. A horse-racing picture was usually shown during the meets at the Connaught racetrack.²⁰⁸

Harry Brouse died suddenly in 1924 at the young age of 53. Shortly afterwards, Solomon and A.H. Coplan acquired the Imperial Theatre, beating out a bid from Famous Players. The Coplans were the owners of the Hull Iron and Steel Foundries and also proprietors of the Princess Theatre on Rideau Street.²⁰⁹

The new owners reduced admission prices and introduced a few novelties, such as the Music Box Pit. A seven-piece orchestra played from the pit into a curious music box, which was a cabinet containing a large phonograph horn. As industry observers remarked, "This tones up the music, it has been found, so that every strain can be enjoyed in the back of the balcony as well as on the orchestra floor."²¹⁰

The Coplans, despite their resourcefulness, did not run the Imperial for very long. The theatre was leased two years later to Hull movie magnate

The "Imp" in 1947, starting to show signs of age, the marquee falling into disrepair, and the side doors pasted over with stills from the feature, Angels with Dirty Faces.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.9)

*The end. Just a small notice
in the paper to announce
that over forty years of
movies were coming
to a close.*

The Ottawa Citizen, Oct. 15, 1955



Donat Paquin, who hired James Moxley, formerly manager of the Regent and Russell theatres, to run it. An experienced industry manager, Moxley maintained his links with major distributors and ensured a

stable regime of solid features, which kept the audiences returning.²¹¹

The Imperial eventually affiliated with Twentieth Century and became renowned for its tough-guy double bills and Saturday serials. John Warren, former host of CBC's Parliamentary network and co-author of *Capital Scandal*, remembers that "For three decades, Saturday double features at the Imp were a rite of male passage. For 10 cents, then 12 and finally 15 in my formative years, I got to meet a never-ending stream of such tough guys as the Durango Kid, the Cisco Kid with Pancho, Tarzan, William Boyd as Hopalong Cassidy (Hoppy), James Cagney as a con, Jesse James, Frank Dillinger and on and on."²¹² To accommodate all those kids, Twentieth Century expanded the candy bar in 1948. Because of the small size of the entrance lobby, this meant literally carving twelve seats out of the auditorium for the expansion!²¹³

With the post-war television boom, the Imperial's death was just a matter of time. Seating was gradually reduced from 1,200 to 1,091 in 1937, then to 999 in 1949.²¹⁴ By the mid-1950s the building was quickly slipping into disrepair. The grand old walnut doors were gone, replaced by ordinary wood-and-metal doors. The marquee, an art deco style projection with hundreds of light bulbs on its underside, was chipped, and some of its plastic panels were broken. Ugly posterboards covered up much of the façade's intricate detailing.

The end of Canada's Theatre Beautiful came quietly, on Saturday, October 15, 1955. People who were still paying attention noticed that the Imp advertised it was closing that day "until further notice," but after its last screening of *Johnny Dark*, the Imperial Theatre went dark for good.

The story does not end there, however. True to its vaudevillian origins, the building continued to have a colourful history, and it survives to this day as one of Ottawa's finest live music spots.

After it closed, the Imp was split horizontally along the balcony floor to accommodate a furniture store at street level and a warehouse above, which, ironically, was used to store television sets. According to some accounts, the balcony section, which by then had become a separate floor above a street-level shop, still had its projection booth. This refitting allowed the building's owner, Sam Rothman, to keep a small theatre and give private screenings, although, "[g]iven the cloistered second-storey atmosphere of such a cinema, and the building's subsequent history, one might well wonder what kind of movies Sam was showing upstairs."²¹⁵ The

furniture business remained for more than fifteen years.

The city's nascent rock scene prompted Bass Clef impresario Harold Levin to give the old Imperial its first life as a nightclub, which he named the Opera. Designed to be the city's largest rock 'n' roll palace, the Opera opened in 1970 and featured psychedelic murals on the side walls of the auditorium. It lasted a very short time, crumbling under legal and internal conflicts, but it managed to bring on stage Canada's counter-culture band Lighthouse.²¹⁶

A few months later, the building was again returned to its entertainment origins, although of a very different type. The city's first all-nude burlesque cabaret house opened to titillated Ottawa audiences.²¹⁷

The man behind the raunch was New Yorker Bob Werba, who had observed the success of large all-nude strip clubs in major cities, such as Toronto's Starvin' Marvin's.

Despite its stage shows, billed as "Canada's Biggest and Best Live Nude Show," the club still displayed a tinge of Ottawa conservatism, with all its entertainment halting at midnight! Still, Werba later claimed that he made back his investment in seven weeks. "They called it Pandora's Box, a club whose audacious crudity earned it instant worldwide notoriety, including a passing mention in *Playboy*."²¹⁸

The strip joint, burdened by increasing competition from similar Hull establishments with longer hours, and with lawsuits related to the unsavoury reputation of the upstairs massage parlour, lasted until September 14, 1977.

As the times demanded, Bob Werba turned Pandora's Box into a discotheque. Seeking to recapture a connection with the building's past, Werba named it Barrymore's, after the Barrymore theatrical family. A concrete dance floor was poured and a portion of the original illuminated dance floor from the movie *Saturday Night Fever* was installed on top of it. The psychedelic murals from the previous decade were painted over and much of the gold trim ornamentation was restored.

To provide food as required by the liquor laws, the disco was equipped with a kitchen that served up to 150 lunches a day, prepared by a fine cuisine



Canada's Theatre Beautiful becomes Canada's Biggest & Best Live Nude Show. The Imperial is revived as Pandora's Box strip joint in the mid-1970s.

The Ottawa Citizen, May 1, 1974

Barrymore's as we know it today, seen here with a "For Lease" sign during its mid-1990s closure. The club now occupies what was once one of Ottawa's most beautiful cinema balconies.

Alain Miguez



chef hired away from the National Arts Centre. Within less than a year, as the Village People and the Bee Gees were consigned to the unforgiving "disco sucks" purgatory, Barrymore's started booking rock bands.

Barrymore's history deserves its own treatment as one of the city's music landmarks. In its first heyday, the early to mid-1980s, some of the most fantastic stage performances in the country happened there. James Brown, U2, Tina Turner, Marillion, John Lee Hooker, Rick Wakeman, the Jeff Healey Band, Bryan Adams, and countless other rock, blues, and soul musicians of international stature graced its stage.

One look and listen was all it took to tell you that no better space existed in the region for live music. The acoustics were theatrical, the view superb, the décor at once camp and grand, the freedom of movement lending an atmosphere of carnival abandon to every major event.²¹⁹

Despite a four-year hiatus in the early 1990s when a brutal recession left it idle, Barrymore's continues to be one of Ottawa's major live music night-clubs, and it is often considered one of the best in Canada.

3.3 Cinema - Veteran - Columbia - Nola (1914-1948) 1045 WELLINGTON STREET

The Cinema Theatre began as a small neighbourhood nickelodeon serving the burgeoning blue-collar Hintonburg area. Opened in 1914, it was located directly across from the St-François Church on Wellington Street. Registry office records show that the lot was bought by Anthony Power and Samuel Cohen in April 1912, and these two gentlemen may well have been the builders and operators of the theatre.

Not much else is known about the Cinema's early days, except that it contained 300 seats, about half the capacity of the Strand, two blocks east, its main competitor,²²⁰ but somehow it managed to bury its two flanking rivals. The Stirling, a few blocks further west at 121 Stirling Street, went out of business in 1916, and the Strand folded in 1919.

With its competitors out of the way, the Cinema had the Hintonburg market all to itself. In 1920 its name was changed to the Veteran, and the following year a large Wurlitzer organ was installed.²²¹ It's quite likely that the seating capacity was expanded around that time as well.

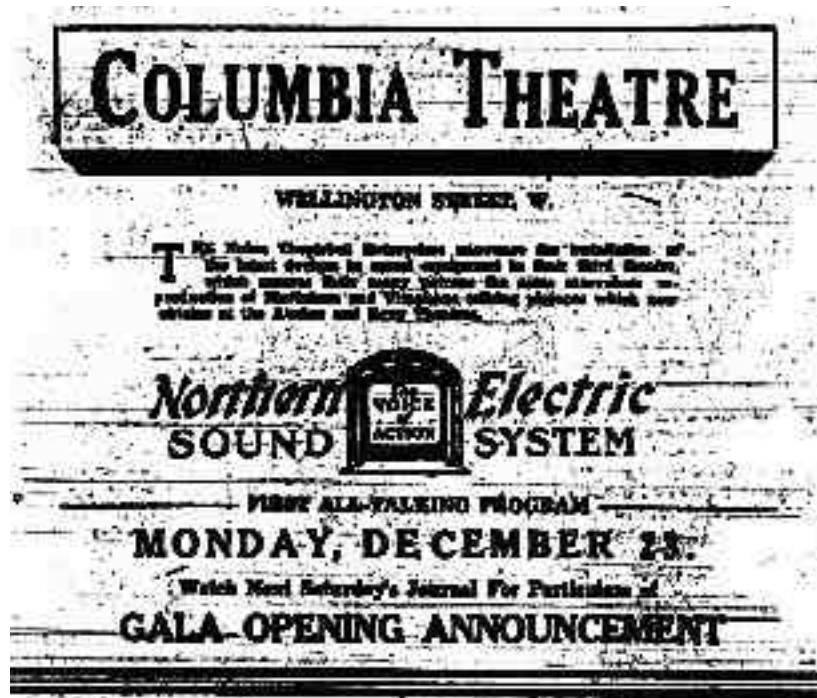
The name Veteran was replaced on the marquee by the name Columbia when ownership changed in April 1923. The new owner, James Wilson, paid \$10,000 for the building and ran the movie house for three years before he died, in March 1926.²²² At that moment, the theatre was acquired by Patrick J. Nolan, who operated the Rex Theatre on Lorne Street, was also involved in municipal politics, and served as Mayor of Ottawa in 1933-34.

Nolan was sufficiently experienced and well connected in the movie industry to keep his theatres booked with films of high quality, and this was probably one of the main reasons for the longevity of his two small houses, the Columbia and the Rex, later called the Remy. He made a profitable business with his theatres, adding the Avalon, a flagship 1,000-seat house in the Glebe, in 1929.

When talkies made silent films obsolete, hundreds of small theatres like the Columbia closed, because they were too small to be viably wired with audio equipment. This was the case, in Hull, for both the Eden and Capitol Theatres. The Columbia Theatre survived as long as it did thanks to Nolan's decision to wire it for sound, opting for this investment because he controlled

A brand new sound system for talking pictures allowed this little nickelodeon to survive more than three decades under various names, showing movies to Hintonburg.

The Ottawa Journal, Dec. 14, 1929

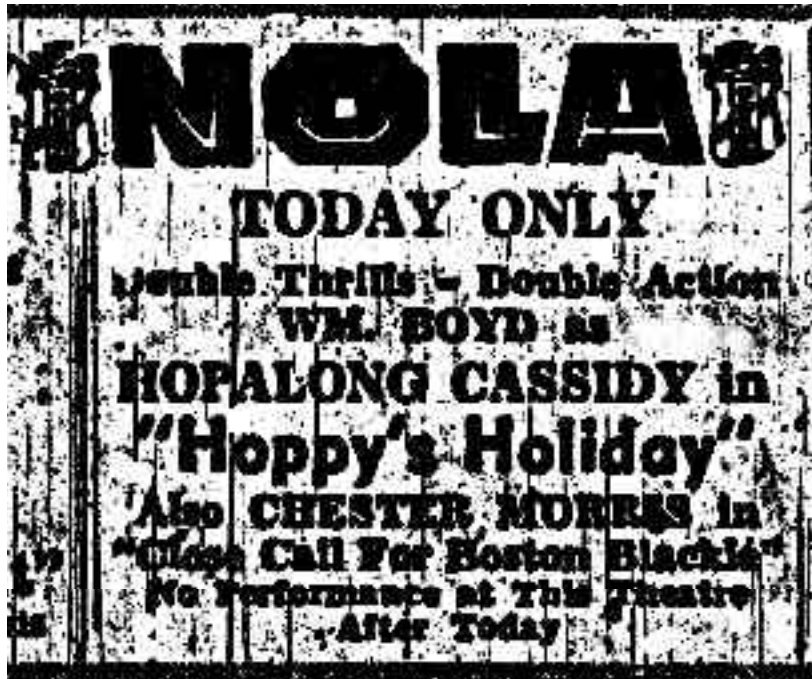


the Hintonburg market from his prime location across from the community's largest church.

After a closing briefly for rewiring and some renovations, the Columbia reopened and carried on as a "talkies" theatre. In March 1938 it was renamed one last time, and ended its showbiz life as the Nola.

No photographic record of the Nola Theatre has been found, despite considerable research by this author, though between the 1930s and the mid-1960s, the Ontario Theatres Branch required every theatre owner to file several photographs of their building, including the outside, the lobby, and the auditorium. The theatre's files also included periodic inspection sheets filled out by compliance officers from the Theatres Branch, but during my research, no record of the Nola ever appeared in the archived files of the Ontario Theatres Branch. A striking discovery was that the archives also were devoid of any record for all three theatres owned by P.J. Nolan, and, further, that his three theatres were the only ones with absolutely no trace of their existence in the Ontario Theatres Branch records! While the reader is free to complete the mystery at leisure, it remains unfortunate that we will likely never know what these cinemas looked like.

The Nola continued as a neighbourhood house for the balance of its existence. When P.J. Nolan passed away in 1941, it was taken over on a lease by Odeon Theatres, along with its two cousins, the Rexy and the Avalon. Toward the end, it came to be known as a run-down, seedy place, much like the uptown Rialto. Fights would break out there between Hintonburg and Mechanicsville guys. The downstairs washrooms were reportedly repulsive.



“No performance at this theatre after today”: an indifferent dismissal for Hintonburg’s little movie house. Its new owner, Odeon, had bigger and better things to do at its new acquisition up Wellington Street, the Elmdale Theatre.

The Ottawa Citizen, Oct. 30, 1948

After the Second World War, a new theatre-building wave brought several new movie houses to the city and intensified the competition among existing operators in established neighbourhoods. In Hintonburg, in September 1947, the Zumar brothers opened the swank 900-seat Elmdale, just five blocks up the street from the Nola. Odeon Theatres then wasted no time in securing their position in the west-end market. Within a year, they bought the Elmdale from the Zumars, and closed the old Nola on September 30, 1948. That theatre had managed to last thirty-four years, an outstanding performance for an operation started as a nickelodeon.

After Odeon left the Nola, the building became a bowling alley. During the 1960s the premises were leased out as food stores. The building finally came down in 1972 to make way for a new Caisse Populaire, which in turn was destroyed by fire in 1999. The site is now vacant.

3.4 Flower - Strand (1914-1921)

128 SPARKS STREET

The First World War had barely begun in Europe when Sparks Street witnessed the opening of one of the most original and unusual theatres in Ottawa. Under the circumstances, the inauguration was a very low-key event, with quiet newspaper ads for the opening performance on September 12, 1914. This was probably the first and last time the Flower Theatre was discreet about itself.

The Flower was built by well-known Canadian exhibitor N.L. Nathanson and subsequently owned by Mr. F.W. Carling, when Mr. Nathanson went on to build the larger Regent Theatre and, later, to

acquire control of the powerful Allen theatre chain.²²³ The Flower was an elongated structure, built entirely of cement, that stretched from its Sparks Street lobby to the backstage on Queen Street.²²⁴ The facility was purposely built for photo plays, but unlike most other first-run downtown movie theatres erected in that decade, the Flower was rather smallish, with a seating capacity of 750.²²⁵

Despite its size, two uncommon features made this theatre stand out and become the place of choice for Ottawa's younger theatregoers: good management and good marketing. Throughout its short history, in an era of stiff competition in which new movie houses were being built as quickly as people could put them up, this venue was exceptionally well managed.

Originally a journalist in Detroit and Windsor, Herb Jennings, the first manager, had a rich experience in the entertainment business. As a movie exhibitor, he pioneered some of the most innovative marketing techniques of the time. He hired a man to walk the sidewalks imitating Charlie Chaplin to advertise the *Little Tramp* films. He started the same-star series at his theatre, programming week-long festivals with six Chaplin movies in a row. Jennings also led the exhibition industry in using display windows to announce upcoming attractions. He invented the first popularity contest, which he called the Pickford Popularity Contest,²²⁶ although Toronto-born Mary Pickford, one of the biggest stars of her time, did not visit Ottawa until 1947.²²⁷ Jennings brought all his savvy to Ottawa's little Flower Theatre.

One of the most memorable stunts orchestrated by Herb Jennings came on the heels of the signing of the Armistice, marking the end of the First World War. The event was celebrated with a special feature film called *To Hell with the Kaiser*. In addition to his usual extravagant lobby display, Jennings built a horse-drawn float with a Kaiser figure inside a cage and prominent lettering announcing the movie, and paraded it all around the city. Jennings also installed a periscope in front of his theatre into which passers-by would take a peek and see the Kaiser's face with a small caption reading "To Hell with the Kaiser." Not content with this, manager Jennings organized a promotional slide show for the film, right on the street, with a pipe band to draw the crowds. As patrons came into the lobby to view the movie they were greeted by the doorman wearing a soldier's uniform, helmet and all, while other employees were dressed as sailors.²²⁸

Marketing continued to be a hallmark for the Sparks Street movie house. Archie Laurie, who replaced Jennings as manager five years after the theatre opened, became known as Canada's foremost theatre lobby dresser. He always had the most elaborate and innovative lobby displays to accompany the current features. In one instance, "Laurie sent out to the bush for a forest and a load of tan bark, and with the aid of cutouts and special scenery, he gave the theatre lobby the appearance of a bit of rugged Northland. The feature [film] was presented for three days."²²⁹

Several movie theatres used lobby displays during the 1910s. Despite the frequency of programme changes, a theatre manager could set up an intricate display at a very reasonable cost, provided he had the artistic talent



The funky little Flower Theatre on Sparks Street, shortly after it opened in 1914. Judging by the upright sign, the actual name of the movie house did not seem to matter as much as the fact that it was a place to see “photo plays.” Next door on the left was Murphy-Gamble’s department store.

National Archives of Canada
PA42358 (W.J. Topley, photographer)

available. Here is an example of the costs of one of Archie Laurie’s displays, this one for Christmas, as he outlines it in an article for the *Canadian Motion Picture Digest*:

In the construction of this front it was my idea to bring out and emphasize the spirit of Christmas and New Year in my lobby and at the same time make full use of the opportunity to wish all the patrons of my theatre the compliments of the season. Yet another point that I wanted to make was to be in touch with the seasonal nature of the time in much the same way as a departmental store would display its windows previous to the holidays.... The two shields displaying Virginia Pearson in *All for a Husband* were made so that they could be changed for each feature. There were two wooden supports behind each shield.... The shields are of cardboard. Two wreaths were braced on an ordinary six-sheet frame, which was covered with deep red

*Hallmarks of the Flower
Theatre were elaborate
sidewalk displays,
like this one in 1918.
Note the sign advertising
ten-cent matinées.*

National Archives of Canada
PA42913 (W.J. Topley, photographer)



wallpaper. The two Cupids were each made in a section three feet high by two feet wide, both can be seen holding the end of a ribbon which runs from the hands of the one to the other. Santa Claus is in a section by itself.... I laid all pieces on the street, got two long strips made of wood and ran them straight across the top. This formed a brace for the entire frame, reinforcing it against the possibility of gusts of wind buckling it up through the centre. Another three by two piece runs directly behind Santa Claus' face from top to bottom. A stout iron rail which I use weekly for all big banners and which is removable, supports the whole structure.... The whole display is hand-painted throughout with the exception of two one-sheet posters. In the lobby I built a special frame the centre of which is made of cardboard and mounted the outside of the frame with purple plush. My artist painted the background of this display in imitation tapestry finish and a pose of Virginia Pearson. I finished my display with the usual photo stands on both sides of the painting. The itemized cost of the above is as follows: Artist \$ 8.00, Sign Painter \$ 5.00, Plush \$ 2.50, Posters \$ 0.30, Cardboard \$ 3.75, Carpenter \$ 2.00, Nails and tacks \$ 0.75, Paint \$ 3.50, Lumber \$ 2.08, Wall paper \$ 0.45, Total cost \$ 28.33. For an eight day holiday display during which period the programme changed four times, this was no excessive cost.²³⁰

The second extraordinary feature that distinguished the Flower Theatre from all other moving picture houses was its retractable roof. It was claimed that this made the Flower Canada's first air-conditioned theatre. In the summer months, management would open the roof, which had an intricate moving scale mechanism, and patrons would watch the feature under the stars. Of course, there were incidents of surprise rain-



storms that would fall on unsuspecting audiences midway through a show. Archie Laurie once recalled that “one night, during a terrific storm, the roof was ordered closed. But the complicated machinery refused to budge, patrons scurried to the side seats and lobby for protection from the elements and the show was called off to permit a drying-out process after the rain had stopped.”²³¹

The playful and interesting marketing and the opening roof allowed the Flower to prosper as a first-run house charging higher prices than most other theatres. While most shows around town cost between 5¢ and 10¢, a show at the Flower ranged between 10¢ and 15¢.²³²

Having originally been leased to Regal Films, the success of this little house soon attracted the attention of the major circuits. During the summer of 1918, Paramount Theatres acquired the Flower and, on September 2 of that year, changed its name to the Strand.²³³

The change in name and ownership did little to curtail the raucous antics of manager Laurie, who was in fact counted on to continue in the same vein. Paramount, which was later to be known as Famous Players, provided Laurie with the added advantage of booking the biggest first-run hits produced by Hollywood’s Paramount studios, allowing the new Strand to do away with most of its reissues. New funding was also given to Strand management for an aggressive advertising campaign, which included a number of 24-sheet billboards around the city.²³⁴

The subsequent manager, Harry Pomeroy, continued Archie Laurie’s tradition. When the Strand featured Ottawa’s first run of Shirley Temple’s movie *Mrs. Temple’s Telegram*, Pomeroy sent fake telegrams on real telegraph

*The wild displays continued when the movie house changed its name to the Strand Theatre. This complicated décor came with the movie *Nine Tenths of the Law*, set in the Canadian North, which screened in February 1919.*

William James Topley
National Archives of Canada
PA201434

*This October 1919 display for
The Divorce Trap starring
Gladys Brockwell barely
lets people get through
to buy tickets!*

William James Topley
National Archives of Canada
PA33988



paper to hundreds of married men. Specially hired delivery boys handed the men the telegrams and asked them to sign for them. The message read, "If you don't take your wife to the Strand tonight to see *Mrs. Temple's Telegram*, she will never forgive you." The signature appeared to be Mrs. Temple's. The stunt, which had Ottawa laughing for days, ensured full houses at the Strand for the entire run.²³⁵

Manager Harry Pomeroy also smartly utilized the opening roof to keep his theatre different and his audience returning often. Before the days of air-conditioned theatre auditoriums, the torrid Ottawa summers would mean extremely slow business at the movie houses, most of which would actually close for the season for lack of sufficient patronage. Even with the open roof, the hot and humid air of summer could still be suffocating to movie audiences. Pomeroy came up with a unique remedy, which even caught the attention of U.S.-based *Moving Picture World*, the largest industry periodical of those days:

In a number of Canadian theatres the patronage started to dwindle during the third week in May when the first hot wave spread over the country.... This led one theatre manager to make a brave effort to hold the interest of the fans.... This manager was Harry Pomeroy of the Strand Theatre, Ottawa, Ontario. Mr. Pomeroy booked *Polyanna* for the



Under Paramount ownership, the Strand was continuously able to book the most popular movies and pack the house.

The Ottawa Citizen, Feb. 14, 1920

whole week of May 31, opened the roof of the theatre so that patrons would sit practically under the open sky, shoved in a special orchestral organization, decorated the theatre interior with breezy chintzes and added a special thrill in the shape of the Strand Cascades, consisting of two scenic waterfalls in close proximity to the screen.²³⁶

The theatre's success had nothing to do with its unfortunate demise, which was more a product of large-scale jockeying for position and market share among the leading circuits. In 1920, Loew's had opened its palatial 2,353-seat Loew's Theatre, later known to Ottawans as the Capitol, at the corner of Bank and Queens streets. The Allen chain controlled the 1,500-seat Regent two blocks away. Famous Players needed to keep up with the trends in the exhibition industry to retain its market share.

With competition heating up, all of the large players knew quite well that the Ottawa market would be unable to support another 2,500-seat palace in addition to the Loew's. Famous Players, however, decided to bluff,



One of the many eye-catching marketing techniques used by the Strand to promote its movies: a pony cart with a couple of posters being driven around the downtown streets.

This display from July 1919 announces that the show is to start "Tomorrow morning."

William James Topley
National Archives of Canada
PA33973

and trumpeted plans for a 2,300-seater to be named the Capitol and to have its address on Sparks Street.

"We desire to hold all of our big new pictures at a larger house," said a Famous Players representative to the press. "We have a large number of big attractions booked for Ottawa and these will be shown in the new theatre."²³⁷ The opening of the new Capitol was announced for September of 1921.

The staff of the Strand Theatre enjoyed a closing dance at St. Patrick's Hall on March 3, 1921. The theatre showed its last movie two days later.²³⁸ The building was immediately taken over by a drug store.

Famous Players' bluff did not work. Plans for the grandiose Capitol on Sparks Street were put off indefinitely as circuits continued furiously to bid and counterbid for theatres around town. Eventually, when the smoke cleared, Famous Players never followed through on its construction plans, despite having actually purchased a site and laid down foundations. Instead, it took over Loew's Theatre, which it renamed the Capitol, and the nearby Regent Theatre, after its acquisition of the Allen chain.

So died one of Ottawa's most intriguing and exciting movie houses, after a short and fast-paced existence. No trace remains today of the Flower Theatre. It was located at 128 Sparks Street, right next to the Hardy Arcade, which is still in existence.

3.5 Rex - Raxy (1914-1954)

136 LORNE STREET AND 777 SOMERSET WEST

In what today is Chinatown there was once a neighbourhood theatre, mysteriously tucked away on a side street off Somerset Street West. When the Rex Theatre opened in 1914, Centretown West was a working-class neighbourhood, with most residents employed in LeBreton Flats factories. The corner of Somerset and Booth was the centre of the neighbourhood, and the Rex was one block away from this corner, on Lorne Street just north of Somerset.

With only three hundred seats, the Rex started out with no greater ambition than to be just another neighbourhood nickelodeon, joining the nearby Orpheum and Star theatres to serve the immediate area. The building was a tight box-like structure. Patrons would enter through its front doors on Lorne Street into a minuscule lobby, and then step right into the auditorium. The décor was probably quite plain and the only accompaniment to the silent movies was a piano at the corner of the room. Admission did cost just a nickel, but the Rex was not only a nickelodeon, it also staged the occasional vaudeville performance, usually jugglers, acrobats, dancers, or singers, along with the movies.

The Rex Theatre was built and operated by Patrick J. Nolan, a local businessman who served as mayor of Ottawa in 1933. Mr. Nolan ran for office several times during the 1920s, and served a few terms as alderman. The Rex was sometimes used for political meetings during municipal campaigns.²³⁹

Probably because it was located in a blue-collar district, the theatre had no problem employing youths looking to supplement the family income with part-time jobs. In one instance, P.J. Nolan had to appear in juvenile court to face the charge of contributing to the delinquency of three boys he had paid to walk around city streets during school hours with sandwich boards advertising the theatre's attractions. Nolan was fined \$10.²⁴⁰

One of things about the Rex Theatre found frustrating by the owner was its location on a side street. While Somerset was a busy commercial thoroughfare with a heavily travelled streetcar line, it was easy for people to entirely miss the theatre if they didn't know it existed. Nolan resolved to change all this in 1925. At the corner of Somerset and Lorne stood a wooden house with a Chinese laundry on the ground floor. Nolan leased the corner of the building and installed a curved, illuminated show window measuring a massive five-and-a-half metres wide by three metres tall. Inside this display case were still photographs from the current and coming attractions. Right above the showcase was a large sign with the inscription "Rex Theatre, The Finest Photoplays on Earth." On either side were big billboards with movie posters, and above them were large arrows pointing up Lorne Street toward the theatre. Above all of this was an imposing sign painted right on the wall of the house that read "Rex Theatre, Motion Pictures, Admission 10 cents." As if this weren't enough, on the Somerset Street side of the building was an electric sign flashing the name Rex, and yet more

The mysterious Rexy Theatre started its life as a nondescript neighbourhood nickel show, the "Rex Fireproof Theatre." It opened just fourteen years after the great Ottawa Fire of 1900, about five blocks south of the working-class areas where the conflagration had caused the most destruction. The area is now Ottawa's Chinatown.

The Ottawa Journal, Oct. 1, 1915



poster cases.²⁴¹ Although such displays today would be unacceptable under the City's signage by-law, they must have been quite the sight in the 1920s.

In less than two years, however, the whole thing came down when the Chinese laundry was demolished, to be replaced by a larger brick block with stores and apartments. This gave Nolan the opportunity to solve, once and for all, the issue of visibility for his theatre. Since the new building abutted the Rex, Nolan bought one of the retail spaces facing Somerset Street for \$30,000 and turned it into a lobby for the theatre. At the same time, he embarked on a complete redesign and expansion of the auditorium.²⁴²

When it reopened in the fall of 1927, the New Rex was unrecognizable. Nolan went all out to make the theatre one of the prettiest in the city, giving it a Spanish bungalow look, with Spanish-themed decorations inside and a stucco exterior with iron grille details. This remodelling made the New Rex Ottawa's first atmospheric theatre. It is said to have inspired the owners of the Mayfair, which opened a year later and still operates, to make their theatre atmospheric as well.

Seating at the New Rex was increased to 750, including a new 250-seat balcony. The stage was enlarged for vaudeville shows, a new Wurlitzer pipe organ was installed, and a six-piece orchestra was hired to accompany the movies.²⁴³

The new entrance now had a Somerset Street address, and a brand new marquee flashed away on the main drag. Patrons entered from 777 Somerset into a lobby that looked more like a narrow corridor. Past the ticket booth, the corridor sloped upward, and on both side walls were large round mirrors to make the space feel wider. At the end of the corridor, a flight of stairs went straight up toward the balcony, and a short flight of stairs turned right into the former front lobby, facing Lorne Street, whose doors remained to serve as exits.

Two years later, Nolan fitted the theatre with sound equipment and changed its name. The theatre triumphantly reopened as the Rexy with *The Patent Leather Kid* in February 1929.²⁴⁴



A rare photo of the Rexy in its later years. The view today along Somerset Street West hasn't changed much except for the long-gone tree and the theatre's marquee.

National Archives of Canada
Crawley Films

For the next twenty-five years, the Rexy Theatre remained a well-attended neighbourhood house. It played largely second-run films most of the time, had the obligatory serials and cartoons for children on Saturdays, and Pathé newsreels brought the latest updates from the War to the folks of Centretown West.

When P.J. Nolan passed away, his widow leased the theatre to the Odeon chain, along with her husband's two other cinemas, the Nola and the Avalon.

From this point, the Rexy suffered the same fate as its western cousin, the Nola. Odeon was only interested in newer, larger theatres. Just as the Nola was promptly closed when Odeon acquired the brand-new Elmdale, the Rexy was left adrift until Odeon secured a lease on the Somerset.

People still remember the Rexy, as they do the Nola, for the advancing state of decay it suffered in its final years. Because the theatre was not air-conditioned, many joked that it was the cheapest Turkish bath in town during the summer. After the Nola, the Rexy was the next pre-First World War theatre to go after television took hold. The Rexy showed its last movie on May 15, 1954.



This broader view of the Booth-Somerset area is instantly recognizable today. In half a century, the neighbourhood has evolved into Ottawa's Chinatown, but the buildings are all the same. Who remembers the Rexy Theatre these days?

National Archives of Canada
Crawley Films

A neighbourhood house its entire life, the Rexy Theatre closed in 1954, as more and more people were buying television sets.

The Ottawa Citizen, May 8, 1945
(courtesy Karen Boissonneault and Muriel Shinden)



After the theatre ceased operations, the building was split in two, with the Somerset Street lobby converted to a retail store still visible today, and the auditorium rented out as furniture storage space to Day Storage and Forwarding Company. On November 5, 1956, a fire of unknown origin destroyed the old theatre auditorium and all the furniture stored inside it.²⁴⁵ The building was beyond repair, and was torn down. Today, a three-storey apartment building occupies the site.

3.6 Clarey - Fern - Rialto - Phoenix (1914-1991)

413 BANK STREET

At a time when the motion picture industry was becoming big business, everybody seemed to be getting involved in building theatres, including politicians. Tom Clarey, who sat on the City of Ottawa's Board of Control, did just that in 1914. His 300-seat Clarey Theatre, at the corner of Florence and Bank streets, joined a growing number of movie houses on what was quickly becoming Ottawa's theatre street.

It was by no means a movie palace, nor did it attempt to exude grandeur. The Clarey was a straightforward neighbourhood theatre. However, it went on to become one of the most storied theatres in Ottawa, going through several incarnations and identities. It remained staunchly independent until the 1980s, when it became part of the Cineplex-Odeon lineup as the Phoenix. That affiliation would ultimately spell its demise.

The name Clarey lasted only five years. In 1919, under new ownership, the place became known as the Fern. Then, thirteen years later, the theatre was purchased by prominent local businessmen A. Levinson and J. Polowin, who renamed it the Rialto. They undertook major renovations that increased seating capacity to 485, a gutsy business move, considering the Depression. The Rialto, as this theatre is remembered by most, opened in January 1932.²⁴⁶

Although the renovations had freshened up the theatre, the look remained simple. The walls were brightened up with light gold paint, and decorative cream and gold mouldings completed the effect. The façade sported a small marquee with neon letters that spelled out the name Rialto. Heavy wooden doors led inside from the sidewalk.

The Rialto catered to families living in the vicinity. At the height of the Depression a family of two adults and two children could spend an afternoon watching double bills for fifty cents. Its location on what was regarded as the seedy section of Bank Street also made the place an interesting gathering spot for all sorts of people. Throughout the dirty thirties people coming into Ottawa looking for jobs would often make the Rialto their first stop, as they could spend the entire day indoors for ten cents, watching movies and getting some sleep before hitting the employment office or searching for a roof. The owner at the time, Mr. Levinson, is said to have told a distributor, "I'm not selling movies, I'm selling a heated sheltered park bench for a dime."²⁴⁷

The sleaziness of Bank Street also attracted many school kids. Cutting class and going to the Rialto for the entire afternoon without getting caught was good for a few days' worth of bragging rights on the school yard, remembers John Warren,²⁴⁸ who goes on to say, "On very special occasions, we paid for one pal's ticket so he could sneak down the aisle, behind the curtains to the back fire exit. He would quietly open that just long enough for three or four of us to dart in and scatter through the seats free." Other school kids' pastimes at the Rialto included having an entire row of fifteen

A neighbourhood house its entire life, the Rexy Theatre closed in 1954, as more and more people were buying television sets.

The Ottawa Citizen, May 8, 1945
(courtesy Karen Boissonneault and Muriel Shinden)

The earliest known photograph of the Rialto Theatre, taken in 1944. The primitive marquee and wooden poster boards hide some interesting architectural details such as the sets of ornamental double columns on either side of the entrance. To the right is the doorway to the apartments above the cinema.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.17) AO2880



or twenty boys thrusting themselves backward at the same time on the count of one-two-three to make the row of seats tilt. This would inevitably bring out a scandalized usher with his flashlight and an eviction order.

Teachers weren't so easily fooled, however, and many a lecturer from surrounding schools used a free period for an inspection tour of the Rialto, wherein they would often discover students who were evidently not planning to attend the upcoming class. This practice endured well into the seventies.

Younger kids, however, tended to stay away from the place, which, aside from its somewhat dubious reputation, had acquired the nickname of the "Rat Hole." They much preferred the safety and the serials of the palatial Imp (the Imperial) just up the street to the "fearful darkness" of the seedy Rat Hole. As John Warren reminisces, "such racy fare as *Carnival in Costa Rica* and *French Dave* had little appeal for pre-12s. Besides the adult entertainment police (ticket sellers, ushers) kept anything truly forbidden (and therefore desirable) off limits."

During the 1940s Rich Little was a regular at the Bank Street cinema. Many remember how he would stand in front before the movie began and do imitations, to the great delight of the audience.

Levinson and Polowin owned the Rialto until the 1950s. When they died, the estate rented the theatre to Bob Maynard, who also ran the Français on Dalhousie Street. Maynard operated the Rialto until 1958, when he sold it to Casey Swedlove, who a decade earlier had opened the Linden in New Edinburgh.

Swedlove continued the tradition of screening double and triple bills. As time went on, the fare became more risqué. During the seventies, a quarter bought a whole afternoon of martial arts and sex movies, and the Rat Hole



The interior of the Rialto in 1944. Despite some efforts at dressing up the room, the exposed air ducts on either side of the ceiling would never have been seen in a good downtown house. Note the auditorium clock above the left exit.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.17) AO2881

strengthened its reputation as Ottawa's sleazy theatre. Of course, what passed for pornography at the time was nowhere near what you could see across the river in Hull, let alone what is offered nowadays on videocassettes or DVDs, but the novelty of sex on the big screen provided steady business.

There still were movies for the whole family to see. In fact the programmes would change radically midweek. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday you could see such attractions as *Keyhole Exposé*, *Sassy Sue*, *Fanny Hill in Sweden*, and *Teenage Hitchhikers*, "educational movies," as Swedlove liked to call them. Then, for the balance of the week, you would have movies that attracted Mom and Pop and the kids. Ironically, the Rialto was one of the few theatres during the 1970s that played family fare. Chain theatres at the time tended to carry a large proportion of restricted movies, such as *Alien* and *Apocalypse Now*.

The Rat Hole's split personality, as Swedlove remembers, created unique situations, which were tactfully handled by the staff: "A number of guys turn up with their wives and kids at the end of the week after coming in to see the show at the beginning of the week. Do the wives know about it? Maybe some do, maybe some don't. We don't say anything."²⁴⁹

The Rialto was also, for the longest time, the cheapest deal in town. Nowhere else in Ottawa at that time could you see three movies for a dollar, or \$1.25 in the evening. The soft porn and the low admission prices became the Rialto's bread and butter in the television era. Further, with the consolidating of large theatre circuits like Famous Players and Odeon, against which small independents could never compete, carving out a unique niche in the market was essentially for survival, even if it meant getting a less than honourable reputation.

Ugly and cheap-looking: the Rialto during the 1960s and 1970s was Ottawa's sleazehouse. Gone are the decorative columns, and any other hint of detail that made the original building look decent compared to this.

Ottawa City Archives
CA18895



Another unusual feature of the Rialto was the six apartments it contained directly above the projection room, walk-ups from Bank Street. One of the units was occupied for several years by the projectionist, with the result that he and his clothes forever smelled of popcorn. At the end of the 1970s a two-bedroom apartment at the Rialto rented for \$85 a month.

In an article in the *Ottawa Journal* in the summer of 1978, the theatre was celebrated as unique in character, and generally described as an adventure into Ottawa's hidden dark side. "The Rialto has always been Ottawa's seedy cinema.... But Ottawa without the Rialto would be like London without Raymond's Revuebar, Paris without the Moulin Rouge. Classy, it ain't. Part of us, it sure is. Even if we all deny ever having been in there."²⁵⁰

A few short months after that article appeared, the Rialto's curtains came down for the last time. Maybe family movies simply weren't pulling in the money any more; maybe the clientele of risqué movies had defected en masse to Hull, where the downtown Cartier was now providing hard-core X-rated viewing all day long within walking distance of the new federal office buildings. Either way, the Rialto died quietly over the winter of 1979.

The building was not left vacant very long. Frank Taylor, a former National Film Board director, promptly bought it from Swedlove and invested \$90,000 in renovations, which included new seats (reducing the capacity to 435) and a new candy bar. The old screen, yellowed from years of cigarette smoke, was replaced by a state-of-the-art new screen that could be widened to accommodate European prints. The upstairs apartments were condemned. On September 17, 1980, the Phoenix rose from the ashes of the old Rat Hole. It was to be a completely different kind of theatre.

Taylor sensed that Ottawa moviegoers were becoming more sophisticated. The Towne, on Beechwood Avenue, had been programming permanent festival repertory for seven years with great success. Not seeking to compete, but rather to complete and enhance the city's art film market, Taylor consulted extensively with the Towne's manager, Paul Gratton, concerning his

programming. He opted for a format of first-run pictures of high quality for the evenings. Afternoons remained devoted to double bills of all kinds, mostly old classics such as *Mad Max* and *Wild Angels*, whereas Saturday and Sunday afternoons would feature child- and family-oriented programming. A late show at 11:45 on Fridays and Saturdays was also introduced to attract cult movie buffs and classics followers. All this added up to 83 hours of screening per week, making the Phoenix by far the most active cinema in the city.²⁵¹



Here comes the Phoenix. A passerby barely seems to notice that the old “Rat Hole” has shut down and a new name has appeared on the poster board. The Phoenix Theatre was to be Centretown’s version of the Bytowne Cinema for about a decade.

Le Droit

Much acclaim accompanied the opening of the Phoenix, regarded as a welcome addition to the city’s cultural scene, which at long last would offer Ottawa some variety and quality. Frank Taylor played the part to the utmost. Aside from the renovations, the candy counter served specialty coffee and tea in china cups and saucers, with carrot cake, fresh pastries, and banana bread. All this was provided in addition to regular movie menu mainstays: popcorn (the best in the city, as it was advertised), candy, and soft drinks. Large signs on Bank Street invited passersby to come in for popcorn even if they were not going to watch a movie.

The Phoenix opened with Bertolucci’s *Luna*. Movies that followed included *Nosferatu*, *Best Boy*, and *Soldier of Orange*, but Taylor soon realized that the film distribution world was an extremely difficult sea to navigate. In a short time he joined forces with Germain Cadieux of the Towne Cinema, who officially took over as owner.

Cadieux had vast experience with independent repertory theatres. Aside from the Towne, he was also involved at different times with the Outremont and Papineau theatres in Montreal and with a short-lived attempt at reviving the Laurentien in Gatineau. The Towne succeeded by playing second-run art films and foreign productions, but programming first-run repertory was becoming increasingly difficult for the independents, as film distribution became dominated by the two majors, Cineplex and Famous Players.

As Cineplex grew in the Ottawa area, it became hungry for downtown screens. Through its merger with Odeon, the chain came to operate the



Centretown's hip place to see and be seen. The Phoenix Theatre, looking young and refreshed despite its venerable age, soldiered on as an art house for eleven years, first as an independent, then under the ownership of Cineplex Odeon.

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nearby Somerset, but that theatre also had only one screen. This was far from sufficient for the fledgling company, whose profits were built on multi-screen complexes such as the just-opened Vanier and the Kanata. Since the circuit had no immediate plans to build from the ground up in the downtown area, it took over the Phoenix on April 2, 1982. The decision to throw in the towel was a painful one for Cadieux, but he had little choice. Cineplex signed a five-year lease.²⁵²

Programming at the Phoenix didn't change. Cineplex was aware of the Ottawa market's need for high quality and foreign films, which were not Famous Players' forte. The chain had also experimented with an art theatre in Toronto, the downtown Carlton cinema, with great success. Throughout the decade Cineplex offered a variety of high quality fare at the Phoenix, such as Louis Malle's *Au revoir les enfants*, Denys Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, and all of Spike Lee's major films.

All of a sudden, a different type of crowd was venturing into that section of Bank Street. Dinner-and-a-movie combinations for both the Somerset and Phoenix were offered at the trendy Bank Café, which featured a romantic tree-shaded terrace between two tall, leaf-covered walls. So it was also at the James Street Feed Company, although without the charming patio. This was also the golden age of Barrymore's, which pro-



The Phoenix did not fit into the multi-screen plans of its owner, Cineplex-Odeon. But just to make sure it would not fit into anyone else's plans, the wreckers were called in. Seventy-seven years of movies were crushed to the ground in 1991.

*The Ottawa Citizen
91-5995*

vided alternative rock and blues music by upstart and world-famous bands alike. Several nightclubs and eateries gravitated around the area. After theatre hours, of course, should one wish to stay out just a bit longer, Tomorrow's restaurant, next door to the Phoenix, cooked on around the clock.

For the Phoenix, the end came when Cineplex decided to open a multiscreen complex in the downtown core. The World Exchange Plaza Cinemas, which premièred on July 5, 1991, drove the final nail into the old Rialto's coffin. No mystery was made of the fact that the new multiplex was replacing the stately single-screen theatre. It was made abundantly clear that the Phoenix had become a surplus operation, as Jay Stone reported in the *Citizen*.

The building had been purchased a few years before by a group called Phoenix Investments. Though they maintained that every attempt would be made to lease the space to anyone who wished to operate a cinema, by the early 1990s it was too late to attract a major chain. In fact, the other major circuit, Famous Players, was already well into the process of ridding itself of its stand-alone houses, having just abandoned the Nelson three years earlier. As for independents, the recession made it almost suicidal to enter the business of running a theatre. Whoever took it over would also have to foot a hefty renovation bill.

Nothing is left of the old Rialto Theatre but a derelict vacant site surrounded by blank walls. The theatre, which had stood as the visual end of Florence Street looking east, is gone but not forgotten. Many Ottawans treasure fond memories of the little cinema.

Alain Miguélez



The day of the last picture show at the Phoenix, there was a rope blocking off the first 15 or so rows, and a handmade sign saying no seating beyond that point. And above those rows, the plaster was flaking off the ceiling.²⁵³

The last feature to play at the Phoenix, Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*, reopened at the Elmdale Theatre on June 22, the night after the old Bank Street theatre's winged marquee was switched off for the last time.

Many old theatres all over North America have found new lives after their screens went dark. Some remained in the entertainment business, becoming stage theatres, like the successful and highly renowned Pantages in Toronto, or nightclubs, such as Barrymore's in Ottawa or the Metropolis in Montreal. Others were converted to retail or food outlets, such as the Avalon, the Towne, and the Elgin. Still others became churches (the Elmdale), bowling alleys (the Victoria in Hintonburg), bingo halls (the Montcalm and the Strand), and community centres (the Westboro). Despite its pivotal location, no such luck was to befall the old Rialto.

As the search dragged on for new tenants, the owners became incensed when homeless began people breaking into the boarded-up theatre to seek warmth and a place to sleep. Anticipating that the problem would amplify during the winter months, they came to the conclusion that they were better off giving up on the building and trying to sell the land instead. City Hall issued the demolition permit without blinking. Shortly afterward, the wreckers' hammers obliterated the landmark.

It has not proven any easier for the owners to sell the land. To this day, between the Staples superstore and the restaurant best remembered as the old 24-hour Tomorrow's, a gravelled lot still yawns.

3.7 Eden (1914-1929)

94-96, RUE PRINCIPALE

Capitol (1926-1929)

175, RUE PRINCIPALE

The little Eden Theatre was one of the most wildly popular movie houses in Hull for all of fifteen years, before being eaten by advancing technology. It was the first movie house built by local exhibitor Donat Paquin, who until then had been successfully running a small nickelodeon down the same street called the National Biograph.

Opened in late 1914, the Eden Theatre occupied the ground floor of a three-storey building with apartments in the upper floors. Little information has survived about the Eden, but it can be assumed that it only had a few hundred seats. When it opened, the Eden competed directly with the large Odeon Theatre, located just a few metres east along rue Principale. Its longevity was due solely to Paquin's shrewdness and his connections in the film distribution industry.

To lure people into the Eden, Paquin screened a combination of big-name Hollywood productions and movies that had been banned by the censors in Ontario.²⁵⁴ Banned or otherwise, Paquin advertised his movies extensively in the English newspapers, not just because of the larger market size across the river, but also because the city's only French-language daily, *Le Droit*, staunchly refused to advertise any movie entertainment until the early 1930s.

Donat Paquin gained control of the rival Odeon Theatre, by then called the Laurier, in 1922, and the Eden functioned as a complement to the larger cinema, showing second runs and extended runs, and catching the overflow crowds for very popular films. The Paquin theatre empire spread into Ottawa during the 1920s with his acquisition of the Français on Dalhousie Street.

The movie craze grew to such an extent during the mid-1920s that Paquin decided to completely remodel his old nickelodeon, the Eldorado, and reopened it in late 1926 under the name Capitol, a name that was not yet in use for the large Ottawa palace located at Bank and Queen streets. At the same time, the Eden Theatre was enlarged. Owning the city's only three cinemas, Paquin reigned supreme over the Hull movie business.

When talking pictures arrived in 1928, Paquin wired his largest theatres, the Laurier and the Français, for sound, but his two small houses, the Eden and the Capitol, were probably not worth the investment. He continued showing silent movies at both for about a year, but the decisive popularity of talking pictures forced him to close the Capitol in the fall of 1929. By the end of 1929, the start of the Great Depression and the virtual disappearance of silent movies felled the Eden Theatre.²⁵⁵

The final entertainment performance at the Eden, on December 16, 1929, was a pair of boxing bouts featuring local fighters: O. Villeneuve of Hull versus R. Laberge of Ottawa, and "Kid" Poulin of Hull versus "Kid" Lefebvre of Ottawa.²⁵⁶

It must have been a popular movie! Crowds gather in front of the Théâtre Eden in downtown Hull for some vues animées in this undated photograph.

Archives nationales du Québec
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The Capitol was converted to retail and apartments, and the Eden housed a bowling alley for several years. Neither building has survived.

3.8 Princess - Rideau (1915-1982)

160 RIDEAU STREET

144

While the First World War was raging in Europe, Isidor Sugarman opened his new Princess Theatre on Rideau Street with a one-week war-effort fundraiser. During its first week, half the proceeds from movie admissions were turned over to a special fund managed by the St. John Ambulance Service to buy cigarettes for Canadian soldiers in the military hospitals of France. "Accordingly," proclaimed the *Ottawa Journal*, "the people who patronize the theatre will not only see a splendid photo-play programme of a high order, but they will be helping to make the boys at the front happy."²⁵⁷



A stuntman sends chills up the spines of people gathered around the Eden Theatre. Donat Paquin, the theatre's owner, resorted to all kinds of marketing to drum up excitement for his movie house.

Archives nationales du Québec

P74-120.3 N-1057

3-37 Archives nationales du Québec

P74-120.1 N-1056



The Princess opened on April 3, 1915. It was designed by architect D.J. Crighton of Montreal and had a relatively modest capacity of 450.²⁵⁸ The theatre featured a stage and an orchestra to accommodate vaudeville and plays, in addition to projection equipment. It was remarkably well located at the corner of Rideau and Dalhousie streets, on what was at the time Ottawa's premier department store street, served by several tramway lines and close to the densely populated Byward Market and Lowertown areas. The theatre was within a stone's throw of many popular shopping emporia, the nearest being Larocque's department store right across the street. Ogilvy's and Freimans were a few steps farther.

The cinema industry was still very much in search of respectability and was viewed by many in society as a cheap, low-class type of amusement. In the 1910s, most downtown commercial main streets across North America did buoyant business by attracting women to shop during the day. Quite often, women would bring their children along after school, and, as a result, these commercial streets became magnets for theatre exhibitors, who specifically targeted the mother-and-child audience. Despite its vaudeville stage, the Princess did most of its business with moving pictures.

On a shopping break or after school, the theatre owner set up special “tea hour” screenings; if women and children came, the owner had a stamp of respectability that could (and did) lead to more money and a more favourable image in the community. Thus women and children saw half-price afternoon specials.²⁵⁹

Rideau Street was no exception. Although the Princess ran afternoon shows that certainly proved popular with mom and the kids, it also featured a billiard parlour on the second floor, frequented only by men. This unique blend proved to be one of the strongest assets of the theatre, attracting young men, who had probably attended shows there with their mothers a few years before, for movies and the thrill of such a marginal, adult-like thing as a game of pool.

Mr. Sugarman had no experience in running movie houses. Within a few months he hired Ken Findlay, an experienced theatre manager who ensured a quality film bookings and made the house profitable. As a result of Findlay’s capable management and its outstanding location, the Princess became a lure for investors. In early 1924, the Coplan brothers purchased the building. The same Coplans also bought the Imperial Theatre a few months later, when its owner Harry Brouse passed away. Brouse had been one of the original directors of Associated First National, and ran his own chain of cinemas in Ottawa and Toronto.²⁶⁰

At the time of their purchase, the Coplans had to beat out formidable rivals such as Famous Players for control of the Princess. Although small in size, the theatre served a key street and an area of the city in which none of the major national chains had any presence. The building was sold for \$45,000, but its value more than doubled over the following few years, when the battle for Rideau Street reached its apex.²⁶¹

The Coplans ran a tight ship at the Princess and continued to offer mat-inées with relaxed admission policies. Until formal movie ratings were applied in the late 1930s, children under the age of fourteen were not allowed to go to theatres by themselves. Profit-chasing exhibitors bent the rules once in a while, and when they were caught, they were given a gentle slap on the wrist:

Solomon Coplan, proprietor of the Princess Theatre, was fined \$5 and costs by Judge J.F. McKinley in the Ottawa Juvenile Court for permitting



a boy to attend the theatre during school hours. The boy was also in court but was allowed to go home.²⁶²

The coming of talkies firmly established the movies as the foremost type of entertainment, effectively wiping vaudeville from the scene. This meant fiercer competition for the urban entertainment dollar, but as the Great Depression arrived almost simultaneously, running a movie theatre required deeper pockets and, increasingly, affiliation with larger booking or theatre chains.

In 1931, one large chain, Famous Players, operated the city's largest cinema, the Capitol, and also the Regent one block away. All other theatres were independently owned but had affiliations with booking chains. Don Stapleton, who operated the Centre, was affiliated with Warner Brothers' First National distributing network. Donat Paquin ran two large theatres, the Français on Dalhousie Street and the Laurier in downtown Hull. Another large house, the Imperial, was being booked through Twentieth Century, and P.J. Nolan owned his own three-theatre mini-chain, the Avalon, the Columbia, and the Remy.

Rideau Street was the only major commercial street that still lacked a large movie house. Other theatre exhibitors must have been expecting the

A 1942 view of the Rideau Theatre, with its jazzy marquee and upper-floor pool hall. Note the elaborate wooden poster cases at both ends of the building.

Archives of Ontario
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The Rideau's auditorium, around 1930. Note the railing at the front separating the seating from the stage.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.18)

obsolete Princess to go quietly, much as other silent houses had, such as the Eden and the Capitol in Hull. After all, with only 450 seats, few exhibitors would have bothered to invest large sums of money in the middle of a recessionary economy without a capacity to recover the cost of renovations quickly.

It was the advent of sound that prompted Solomon Coplan to seek financing to rewire and renovate the Princess. He teamed up with Gordon Fillman and Tom Moorehead, who operated their own theatre chain in Western Ontario, and announced plans to enlarge and completely renovate the Princess.²⁶³ When the news became public, the gloves were off on Rideau Street!

The city's three largest independent exhibitors, Don Stapleton, Donat Paquin, and P.J. Nolan, formed a syndicate, which they named Triangle Amusements Company. The name "Triangle" represented the three exhibitors. It also referred to the old Triangle Films, which Ben Stapleton regularly screened at his Centre Theatre as one of the original franchise holders of Associated First National Exhibitors. The Triangle Films trademark insignia adorned the Centre's upright sign for years.²⁶⁴ The syndicate



The art deco look of the Rideau's lobby in 1930: oval poster cases, typical carpeting, and chromed and rounded drink dispenser.

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bought land and vowed to build a large movie palace on Rideau Street to compete with the new Princess. They purchased the Hasteley Block and announced plans for a palatial new showplace to cost over \$300,000 and to be called the Paradise Theatre.

Moorehead and Fillman responded in kind to this challenge. They virtually took over the direction of the Princess renovation project from the



Renovations in the late 1940s brought a new multi-bulbed marquee, stainless steel doors, a box office window right on the street, and new poster cases. The upright sign and the pool hall, however, remained.

Archives of Ontario
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hands of Solomon Coplan and arranged to lease and run the theatre upon completion. At a cost of \$225,000, the old Princess was transformed into the entrance lobby of a thousand-seat auditorium reaching all the way to Besserer Street. Meanwhile, Triangle Amusements proceeded to commission Montreal architect E.J. Creighton to prepare detailed drawings for the Paradise Theatre. Triangle also bought an extra piece of land, for \$100,000, to make the cinema even bigger.²⁶⁵

In the end, Triangle's bluff was called by Moorehead and Fillman, who presided over the opening of the rechristened and vastly transformed Rideau Theatre on November 23, 1931. Not one shovel of soil had yet been turned on the Paradise Theatre site, nor would one ever be. With just under one thousand seats, but equipped with the latest sound equipment, the Rideau more than responded to the need for a large picture house on Rideau Street. The full house attending on opening night saw the première engagement of *The Star Witness*, starring Canadian actor Walter Huston.

The theatre featured an entrance foyer that led, by way of an elegant staircase with wrought iron balustrades and hardwood handrails, to a spa-



The theatre foyer and lobby after the renovations in 1948: gracious arches with sofas and paintings of famous actresses, a larger candy bar, and more lighting give the Rideau Theatre a fresh new look.

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cious and lushly carpeted inner lobby with a small recessed boudoir for ladies, and a dressing room for gentlemen. Throughout this lobby, patrons could sit on cherry red leather chairs inset behind colonnades under the light of wrought iron candelabra. Small vending machines and telephone booths added a touch of modernity to the cinema. From the outside, the Rideau beckoned pedestrians with a large, multi-bulbed marquee and an upright sign.



The Rideau's renovated auditorium in 1948, probably one of Ottawa's nicest. Its understated elegance does not overload the senses but still gives plenty for the eye to savour. Note the speakers on either side of the screen, and the small stage from which Foto-Nite contests were run.

Archives of Ontario
RG 56-11 (4.18) AO2886

The auditorium walls and proscenium arch were richly decorated in pure art deco style with bas-relief, tan-toned hand-painted plaster motifs, subtly lit by shaded wall lights. The two faux balconies flanking the screen had painted bas-relief carvings and gridded panels designed to look like doors to enhance the illusion. The ceiling was pastel blue with cloud effects, and large drop chandeliers completed the theatre's atmospheric effect.

The seats, both orchestra and balcony, were green leather with velour backs in tones matching the art deco red and green carpets. The auditorium's main entrances and its side exits were draped with heavy velour curtains in two tones of green. An intricate wrought iron grille enclosed the orchestra pit.²⁶⁶ The new Rideau Theatre also retained its upstairs pool hall.

Architect Cecil Burgess was in charge of the renovation and enlargement of this new movie palace, which became an instant hit. Moorehead and Fillman had won their battle. To ensure film bookings of high quality, they affiliated the Rideau with Twentieth Century. Nearby residents now enjoyed the convenience of two large-scale picture houses within two blocks of each other, the competing house being the Français. Because the neighbourhood was predominantly francophone, both theatres offered



one French-language performance per week, with the Rideau being the most consistent in maintaining this policy right into the 1950s. One of the Rideau's managers during the 1940s, Isser Singerman, issued a public statement that he was taking French classes to send a strong signal that he intended his theatre to be the first choice of Ottawa's francophones.²⁶⁷

With its affiliation to Twentieth Century, the Rideau blossomed into a flagship house for the chain. It regularly booked well-selling Hollywood blockbusters, and was first in line for French-language features, even during the war years, when the Wartime Prices and Trade Board issued specific orders for the importation of limited quantities of features from France.²⁶⁸

Twentieth Century frequently invested in renovations and upgrades. In 1942, the box office was moved out to the street line to create more room in the foyer. In 1946, Toronto architects Kaplan and Sprachmann were engaged to rearrange the entire seating, expanding capacity to 1,081.²⁶⁹ In another spree of renovations, in 1953, the exterior was completely remodelled, the upright sign was removed, the name "Rideau" was mounted atop the marquee, the façade of the building was framed with multi-bulbed, illuminated edge decorations, and the box office was relegated to the left of the entrance doors. During the course of this

The ladies' powder room in 1948: mirrors and makeup counters under a discreet arch, fireplace, ashtray, rattan couch, and solid mahogany door.

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RG56-11 (4.18) AO2885

A new look in 1953: the box office went off to the left side, the upright sign was removed, and the name "Rideau" was mounted atop the marquee. The outline of the building was highlighted with funky neon twirls. The pool hall remained.

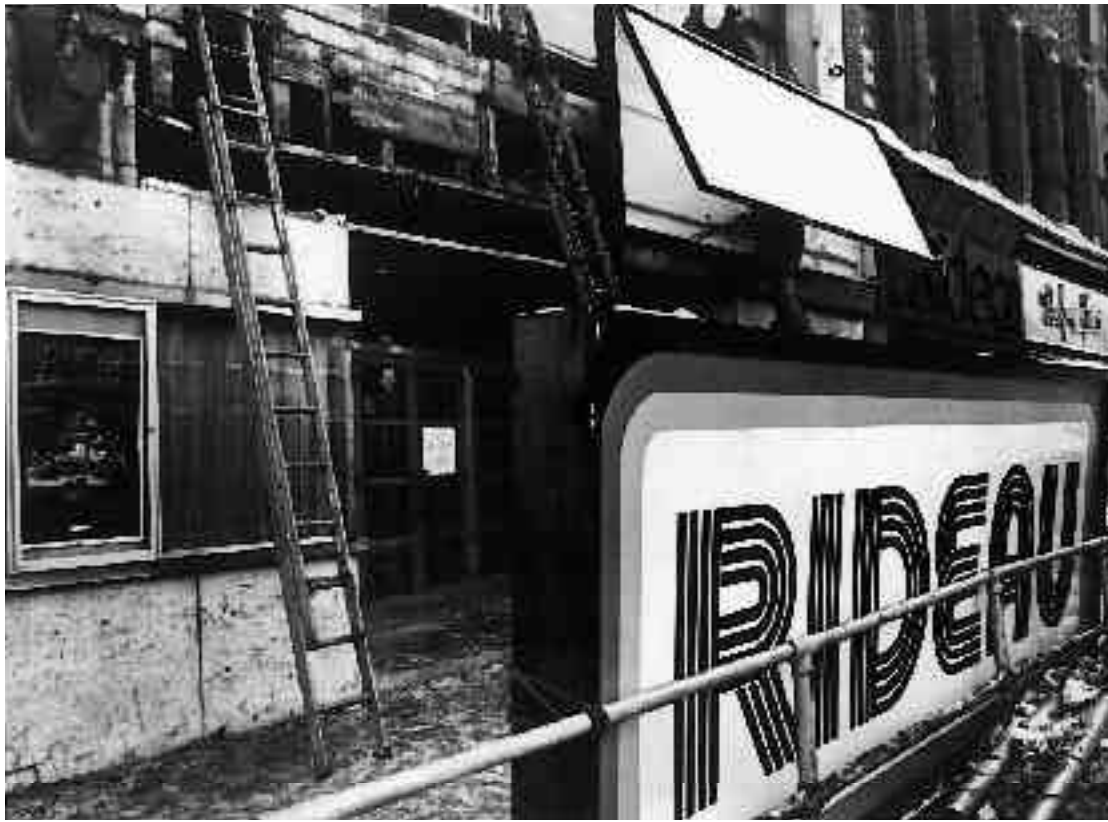
Marvin Flatt
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makeover, the façade lost its brick front and its cornice, but kept the large pool hall windows above the marquee.

When television ownership increased during the 1950s, the Rideau Theatre's attendance declined and, throughout that decade, the seating capacity was reduced to 952, then to 817 when the candy bar was enlarged. Nevertheless, the movie house remained extremely popular, playing an increasing share of children's films like *The Love Bug* and *The Aristocats* throughout the 1970s, and catering to young adults by showing music films of groups like Led Zeppelin. Yet another new marquee was installed late in that decade, this one flat against the façade to comply with the City's "no-overhang" by-laws. Keeping up with the times, in the 1980s the pool hall was transformed into a video arcade, where this author recalls his first meeting with Pac-Man.

The Rideau escaped the tidal wave of land speculation that cost Ottawa its most famous and cherished downtown movie palaces, in part because of



its popularity and relatively good attendance. Rideau Street had been, for years, the focus of numerous planning studies in which the federal government, the City of Ottawa, and the Regional Municipality were all involved. The federal government was looking for ways to redevelop the old Union Station rail yards, after having relocated the train terminal to Alta Vista. The City was trying to address the concerns of merchants demanding some sort of revitalization plan as they were faced with increased competition from suburban malls. The Region wanted to create a transit-only mall in the western portion of Rideau Street. Talks on the future of Rideau Street lasted years and featured several iterations of grandiose rejuvenation schemes. This had the effect of freezing any development on the street for over a decade.

When the plans for the Rideau Centre were at long last finalized, the theatre's fate was sealed. It stood in the way of the Dalhousie street extension. Famous Players, who by now had taken control of Twentieth Century, was nonetheless quite aware of the value of its Rideau Street location and planned a three-screen complex for the new mall.

The Rideau showed its last movie on January 20, 1982, and gave way to the bulldozers soon after. Nothing remains of the building today, although its memory was kept alive by a popular nightclub and cigar lounge that operated for a short while on the adjacent lot in 1996. It was called The Theatre.

That 70s look ... The Rideau gets yet another facelift, its last before being torn down during the Rideau Centre mega-project. By this time the City had clamped down on signs that protruded, blinked, flashed, or did anything remotely fun and eye-catching. Hence the boring, flat plastic face sign.

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ALAIN MIGUELEZ

The box office along the Rideau Street sidewalk in 1948, and poster cases with still photos of the current attraction: uncomplicated yet efficient architecture calculated to lure people into a fantasy world for the space of two hours.

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