

Newberry theater regains elegance

By JOHN PEPIN

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NEWBERRY — When the economic fortunes of Newberry were cast on hard times in recent years, Fred Dunkeld was forced to close the theater he'd owned since 1973.

The shutdown of the Newberry Regional Mental Health Center in 1992 spelled ruin for many local businesses. More than 300 jobs were lost. The community, economically reliant on that one large state employer, sought ways to diversify its economy and overcome its troubles. Dunkeld's Tahqua-Land Theater was one of the casualties of the fallout. But the former professional photographer kept alive his dream of reopening the historic movie house. He spent four years regrouping and planning, while the theater was closed and the community rebuilt its economy, largely with the help of another state employer: the Newberry Correctional Facility. The prison was built on the grounds of the former state hospital.

As he did when he first bought the theater, Dunkeld hoped to remodel the structure before he reopened. "It's kind of an evolution," he said. "To research exactly what you want to do, it takes a couple of years." Dunkeld hoped to restore the theater to much of its original luster. "The building was built Greek-Italian Renaissance, 1930," he said. "The original murals have been lost to time, painted over." Dunkeld tried to secure grants or tax breaks to help restore the building, but was unsuccessful. He received loan assistance from Northern Initiatives. He then looked at the design and decor of many theaters, hoping to find just the right idea for reworking the Tahqua-Land.



Murals showing scenes from Greek mythology adorn the walls of the newly-refurbished Tahqua-Land Theater in Newberry. The theater has blended old and new features. The murals are copies of 18th Century artwork. The theater seats are the new rocking chair type. (Journal photo by John Pepin)

“I settled on a Greek mythology theme,” he said. “The whole process of going to the movies is kind of a fantasy. I thought it (mythology) would fit in pretty good.”

Having decided on the theme for the renovations, Dunkeld began looking for craftsmen. “Once you decide what you want to do, then you have to find the artisans that are able to come in to do this and are affordable,” he said.

Dunkeld found his Greek-Italian craftsmen via the Internet in Toronto. The men came to Newberry in September 2000 to see the theater and find out what Dunkeld had in mind. The two artists would ultimately produce nine full-color reproductions of murals dating back to the 18th Century. The artwork covers 700 square feet. Some of the reproductions include the “Triumph of Amphitrite,” “Cupid and Psyche,” and “Death of Orpheus.”

Meanwhile, work had begun on replacing the theater’s roof and fixing the water-damaged ceiling. Rosettes were placed over ceiling fixtures. Walls in the concession area, and in some other places, were redone with marble. Ten thousand sheets of gold leaf were attached to mural frames and cornices to complete a gilded look.

The sound system and projector of the movie house were also updated, dramatically. New rocking chairs were purchased in Mexico and installed in the theater.

The newly remodeled theater was opened in late December 2001. So far, reviews have been good.

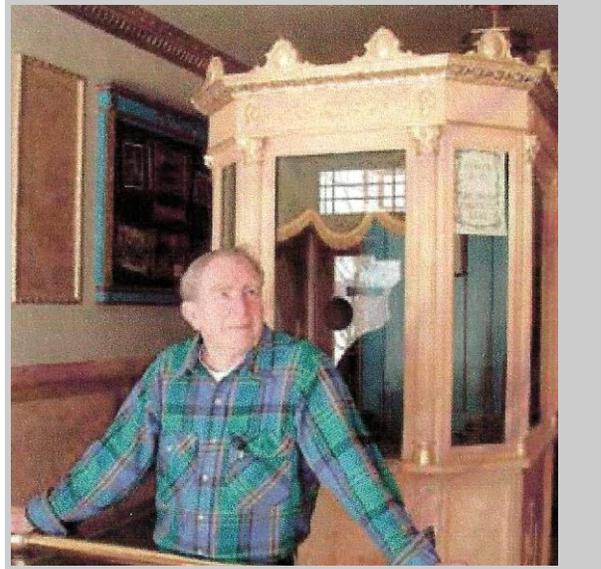
“The people who have come in have really enjoyed it,” Dunkeld said. “There are still quite a few out there who haven’t seen it. I don’t think they’re aware of the extent of the renovations that have taken place.”

Later this year, Dunkeld plans to finish his remodel of the theater by erecting a marquee and completing some exterior bronzing work.

The Tahqua-Land Theater was originally opened as the State Theatre in August 1930. It was built for \$60,000, half of which was paid for by selling bonds to village residents.

The movie house, which seated 400 patrons, was designed by a Marquette architect and built by a Milwaukee, Wis., company. Dunkeld bought the theater after it had deteriorated to a dilapidated condition by the early 1970s.

The nearest theater to Newberry is 70 miles to the east in Sault Ste. Marie and 70 miles southwest of the village in Manistique. The Tahqua-Land Theater is open daily, showing big-name films in current release. Schedules vary. For more information, call 293-3900.



Fred Dunkeld, owner of the Tahqua-Land Theater in Newberry stands in front of the ticket booth at the entrance of the historic theater. The movie house was built in 1929 and opened in 1930. Dunkeld spent the past two years repairing and remodeling the theater. (Journal photo by John Pepin)