

96th Birthday Recalls Invoice in 1915

Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

There's an important birthday this week, a 96th, but it is not expected to be celebrated or even observed except in this column. The house will be dark, (no activities, but open), and no crowd will gather to sing Happy Birthday on Thursday, November 17.

The day of birth 96 years ago was very different however. Artists from New York and friends and family from around the county came for the event. More than 800 persons gathered to celebrate. Everyone dressed in their best clothes, and an orchestra played.

It was of course the grand and elegant opening of the Al. Ringling Theatre in 1915. We've written of this before, but new information has appeared regarding the actual detailed cost of this theatre, known as the first of the ornate and palatial Rapp and Rapp motion picture theatres which arose in support of the new silent movie industry.

Actual original invoices are yet to be found, but very early in the history, perhaps before opening night, a detailed statement was apparently made of the (outlandish in its day) cost of the edifice and contents. It was generally agreed in town that the total cost was around \$100,000, and that was a good

guess. However, much can be learned from the detailed listing.

The General Contractor

Actually there are three parts to the expense tally listings, the first being for the general contractor to build the edifice and attached rooms, etc. The raw figure, paid to Wiley Bros. Of Chicago was \$67,015.15. This was not only for brick and mortar, but a host of miscellaneous items, ranging from painting the floor (\$95.82) to repairs for encroachment on the roof and walls of the ancient frame building directly east.

Originally the steps to the ladies lounge were to be cement, but someone must have told Al. "Everything else is first class. Why not put marble on these steps" and this required an adjustment in the contract (\$110), as did the "windlass for the chandelier (\$22.18) and extra work for telephone, city gas, and electric power connections. Constructing a room for the organ loft cost \$48.85 extra.

The Architect

The architect's fee was listed as \$4767.67, which may seem large in relation to the other items, but this was a building unlike many of its predecessor theatres, requiring special attention. The fee was based on a commission of 5%. An interesting addition to the fee of the architect was the itemized listing of an expense of \$489 for "traveling expenses". He must have made a lot of trips, because train travel was quite cheap in those days, and the Warren Hotel probably cost only a couple of dollars a night.



Above: The Proscenium Fire Screen, one of 19 large paintings.

Below: The marble steps to the Ladies Lounge, projection booth, and offices





Gov. Blaine praised Al. Ringling during Inter-
mission. The only Sauk
man to be Governor.

Below: Construction,
possibly late August,
1915



The Furnishings

So far we have considered only the construction of a building in the shape of a theater. To become a theatre much remained to be done. Draperies alone were \$3010 and decorating \$2848. Add carpet at \$1726 and light fixtures and lamps at \$2933, followed by stage scenery at \$2629.79, and you are talking real money.

Don't forget 900 or more "Opera Chairs" at \$5524, and the place looks more like a theatre. The 102 French style jewel box chairs (we still have most of them) come in at \$795, and a host of other items add up to over \$1000 more. Pretty impressive figures, but now we have an operable theatre, with standard staging suitable for many Broadway shows (and many did come).

Let's see, did we forget anything? Well, just a little item called the Hope-Johnson Wurlitzer Theatre organ! That elegant instrument adds \$7455 to the accoutrements of the house. The organ came into good use on opening night, when much of the orchestra from New York failed to show up, purportedly due to a snow storm. They would come by train, not usually fazed by a November snow, so where were they?

However, people were thrilled with the organ, a little racier than the usual church organ, with popular tunes of the day. They were also thrilled with the brilliant lighting. It is said they entered the theatre in relatively dim lighting, but gave a ten minute standing ovation when all of the lights were switched on. It was essentially

similar to the house lighting today, which a modern audience finds pretty dim.

Governor Blaine

Sauk County has sent only one man to the Governorship of Wisconsin, and that year it was Governor Blaine, from the Sauk Prairie area. He was present that night, in the President's box to the right of the Proscenium as you face it—not a good seat for the show, but great for a politician who wants to be seen. He was heard, too, in an oration during intermission in which he praised Al. Ringling for his contribution to the humanities with his theatre.

It was perhaps the last speech Al. Ringling heard. It is said that he couldn't see the Governor, his sight nearly gone, and it was his only visit to his beloved gift to city-county arts. In seven weeks he was dead. It is his "child", his visionary addition to the entertainment and enlightenment of his chosen home town.

So why did the birthday go unnoted? Fact is the Ringling needed a breather after eight smash stage performances of "Miracle on 34th Street-the Musical". That Friday night it hosted the conclusion of the Wine Walk with a movie, and Saturday Santa Claus saw children on stage after the Light Parade.

The Grand Dame needed a break: "Birthdays?? Been there, Done that."