

LIBERTY THEATER EARLY HISTORY

In 1910, John Brining, Dayton businessman, purchased the Nilsson building to house a theater, which he named the Dreamland. Extensive remodeling work on the building was immediately started. He extended the back of the building to the alley. The work was completed by the end of 1910. In 1917, the name, Dreamland, was changed to the Liberty possibly because of patriotism accompanying World War I.

The courthouse cannon across the street from the Liberty was chained to a concrete foundation but in April of 1917 when some pranksters decided to set it off, it broke loose from its fetters, turned around several times and landed with the muzzle toward the courthouse. The axle was broken in the middle, but the gun was as good as new. The Dreamland Theater suffered the loss of a couple of upper sashes while many other windows in the area were blown out from the concussion.

In 1919, the Liberty was totally destroyed by fire. The restoration work was completed in July of 1921 with new seats and wide aisles where "every seat commands an excellent view of the stage". Modern ventilation was provided. A drop curtain and several sets of scenery arrived so that road shows could play in the renewed theater. On July 30, 1921, 800 people (yes that is the number reported by the Dayton Chronicle), attended the opening photo play. The picture entitled "Half a Chance" was shown. Other entertainment included Tex Fraser on the new Wurlitzer pipe organ and The Knights of Pythias orchestra. Mr. Brining made a speech detailing that money was hard to obtain and material prices were high. However, at the urging of Daytonites, he had hired Rodrick as the contractor to bring a theater to the people of his hometown; one that they would be proud of and enjoy. He revealed that the revenue would never justify the expense. The cost of the chairs alone he declared was more than a small farm. The woodwork was a warm brown and the walls neutral. The borders and ceiling were very artistically stenciled. Mr. Brining was very proud of the indoor restroom for women and children (men outside please, ???). To beautify the interior, Miss Cora Loundagin, whose talent in painting was well known, painted the box and balcony fronts and the proscenium arch representing "morning and evening." Mountains and forests loomed up and ocean and tropical scenes had a prominent place as well; the whole united in one great theme, which was to have an allegorical significance. By the end of August, 1921 Brining leased the theater to a Spokane Corporation which would be in charge of not only the Liberty theater but the American Theater of Dayton as well.

In the summer of 1930, alterations were made to the front of the Liberty Theater as a forerunner to installation of new talkie apparatus. The front of the Liberty had been completely refinished in a stucco adorned with a stipple finish of bright and attractive colors. The ticket window was moved from the side of the building to the center. New doors with tasteful drapes were installed. A partition at the end of the room concealed the stairway. Red plush furniture was added to the foyer. An arched effect and additions of curtains improved the stage, which matched the other draperies of the building. Removal of the wing balconies made possible a number of striking changes in the appearance of the auditorium, giving it a much larger and roomier appearance. It also

improved the sound effect, which was said by experts examining the theater to have been broken up by the projecting loges. The walls were bordered at the top by an artistic frieze, seemingly supported by stenciled columns. Light fixtures of modern design were installed and all wiring was concealed in the walls, which were covered with a Tiffany plastic finish. J. W. Duncan who had charge of the decorative scheme in the reconstruction of the Liberty Theater stayed in town to plan the interior design for the Green Lantern. (Previous to being called the Green Lantern, it was the American Theater; later it became Dorsey's restaurant and now houses Puget Sound Energy/Alexander's Chocolate/and Manila Bay.

In July of 1937, work was completed on the installation of the new neon marquee in front of the Liberty theater. The sign included a double letter board and the word "Liberty" in 18" letters on each side. It had a roof effect reaching out over the sidewalk, with neon tubing used for light effects. The exterior of the building was repainted at this time with a scheme of green, red and light yellow.

In 1940, Liberty manager C.T. Laidlaw purchased the Plaza Theater in Waitsburg to manage both theaters, with bookings different at each house. Mr. Laidlaw purchased the Liberty Theater building from the John Brining estate for a consideration of \$7,500. Mr. Laidlaw already owned the equipment and the furnishings. In 1941, the recessed entry was done away with and the front of the building brought in line with the sidewalk. The Dayton Chronicle reported in November of 1943 that Mr. Laidlaw became a ditch digger deluxe. He wheeled the dirt over the foyer velvet carpets because the original builder placed the building fairly on the ground with no place for servicing of water or furnace pipes. Anytime there was a good freeze, there was trouble and no room for repairmen.

In April of 1944, C. T. Laidlaw, owner and manager of the Liberty leased his interest to the Mid-West Amusement Co. of Chicago and a new manager, J. Brown Schick, took over the operation. Mr. Schick was a former owner of the Chronicle-Dispatch. Mid-West Amusement Co., which had an extensive chain of theaters throughout the country, redecorated the interior of the theater including the office off the lobby and both the men's (tiled in white and black) and ladies (tiled in green and black) restrooms. By 1945 new sound booth equipment was installed, along with a modern candy and popcorn bar in the foyer. The theater received 200 new seats and new blue carpets and drapes as well as an air-conditioning unit. A new, larger marquee was installed.

Gerald Harlan, operator of the projection machine in May of 1945, had his attention called to the sound production machine and was startled when a flash told him that the film in the Liberty projector was on fire. Seeing the flash on the screen, one strong-voiced fan yelled fire and dashed out to sound the alarm. It was reported that the crowd in the well-filled house started to follow him. Manager Hughes seemed to be everywhere. Hughes' caution and a native coolness held the crowd in check and all filed out without crowding. Only a few used the exits that had been improved only one week earlier. In ten to fifteen minutes from the time the fire department boys arrived, the fire was out. Chief Ray Brown praised the boys for their work. From his survey, he judged the beginnings had all the elements of a real fire. Freddi Robanske and Jim Burke were the handy boys who got

the trucks rolling in record time. Damage was comparatively light, and the theater was expected to resume for the next showing.

New seats were once again installed in March of 1949 in the balcony and lower floor giving the theater a seating capacity of 387 seats. (More than double the seat count after the late 1990's latest restoration of the Liberty.)

During the late 1940's and early 1950's there were several managers at the Liberty. In 1951, the long term Laidlaw lease by the Dayton Theater Company, an Illinois corporation, was sold to the Spiess family who operated the theater for over ten years. (Spiess opened a drive in (space for 250 cars) theater known as the Sunset Drive-In during his stay. In 1952 at a regular children's Friday and Saturday afternoon movies, the manager of the theater had pictures taken of all 155 youngsters on hand and their pictures were shown on the screen during the next few weeks along with the regular films.

Norman Kayser leased the Liberty in 1961 and the theater closed about 1965 only to reopen on occasion in the early 1970's to be the location of Dayton's Halloween haunted house. The building sat and decayed for almost thirty years when the local citizens rose up to restore the once splendid theater home.

Early Liberty Theater Managers. . .

1910	William Hammer
1917	Emil C Smith
1929	C. T. Laidlaw (purchased the theater)
1944	J. Brown Schick
1945	W. G. Hughes
1948	Dixon Murphy
1950	Mrs. Jack Foust
1951	Mr. and Mrs. Charles Spiess & Lowell Spiess (purchased the theater)
1961	Norman Kayser
1965	Theater Closed

Information compiled from Dayton's Main Street Newsletter 34th Publication; Nadine Dieringer, Publisher; the Dayton Chronicle 'Theater Series' in October through December of 2001. The notes for the Chronicle series were partially compiled in 1995 by Judilyn Jones.