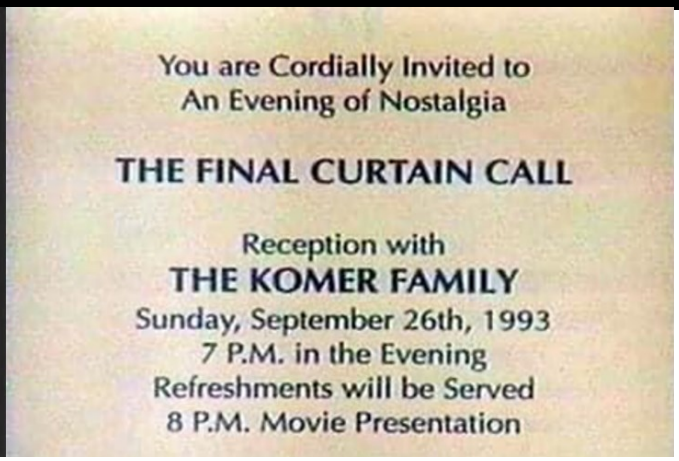
Berkley History & Museum Happenings **December 2024**



The Berkley Theatre

Part 2 of 2, The Komer Years

By Margie Kaplan (Granddaughter of Harry Komer)

The Theater Becomes a Family Business

As Part 1 of 2 reported, Harry A. Komer took over the Berkley Theatre lease in 1961 and bought the theater a year later. From then on, it was a family business independently owned and operated by the Komer family. Komer had been in the movie theater business since the 1930s, owning and operating several theaters with his older brother, Charles, beginning with the Redford Theatre in 1932. The brothers invested in several theaters and drive-ins with their finance partner Sam Goldberg, founder of Detroit's Colonial Department Store, under the umbrella of Community Theaters. They ran the chain with Goldberg's sons Irving and Adolph. The last theater Komer owned before the Berkley was the Whittier in Detroit, which he ran for more than 20 years.

After purchasing the Berkley, Komer made a few basic improvements. He removed more than 100 seats to provide his audience with more legroom, thus reducing the auditorium capacity to 851 seats, and upgraded the heating system, switching from coal to natural gas.

Komer was a hands-on proprietor who liked people. Many an evening, he greeted his audience and took their tickets at the door. He also liked kids and always offered a friendly smile, a pat on the head, or a pinch of the cheek.

The theater's popularity was apparent when driving by on a Friday or Saturday evening. Many times, a line formed that wrapped around the west side of the building and stretched to the alley. This phenomenon repeated itself in greater numbers on Saturdays when parents dropped off their children for an afternoon matinee of fun and cheap babysitting.

During Komer's tenure, there were many movie holdovers (a movie showing extended beyond its initially scheduled timeframe.), but the longest was *Butch Cassidy & The Sundance Kid*, which ran for 20 weeks, a total of 135 days until it was replaced in April 1970 with *True Grit*. This was the only time

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Upcoming Events

- ***Additional Museum Hours***
  - ***2nd Thursday of the Month, 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.***
- ***100th Anniversary of Our Lady of La Salette—Includes Never-Displayed Photos***
- ***Berkley First United Methodist Church Historic Photos in February***

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The Berkley Theatre Part 2 of 2 *continued from page 1*

the Berkley Theatre had an exclusive for a hit movie with two big-name stars. In the mid-1970s, the theater transitioned to "second run" movies at the bargain price of $1.00. (A second-run film could not be shown until the first-run theaters in an area finished showing it. Second-run theaters paid less for the film and could charge bargain prices.)

In 1981, Komer retired at 80, and his son and daughter-in-law, Richard and Judy Komer, took over the business. They were already involved in the operation, having managed the concession stand for several years. They promoted Bill Briggs, a part-time manager who had worked at the theater since the early 60s, to full-time manager. They also made their own improvements, refurbishing the seating and adding surround sound.

The theater continued to thrive in the eighties, and its freshly popped popcorn with real butter won several local awards. But by the early 1990s, the advent of cable and VHS had taken its toll on the discount movie business. The theater switched to first-run movies at slightly lower prices than other first-run movie theaters but ultimately could not compete with the multiplexes with several screens that had the ability to move an unprofitable movie to a smaller screen after its initial opening. In fact, second-run theaters fought back by forming the National Association of Discount Theaters because, as Richard Komer was quoted in a 1991 *New York Times* article, "There was the feeling that second-run is not important." In the end, multiplexes squeezed out independent single-screen theaters.

The Berkley Theatre Closes, Becomes A Drug Store

After 52 years, the Berkley Theatre closed its doors. The last regular movie to show at The Berkley Theatre was *Jurassic Park* in September of 1993. But that was not the last movie to play at the theater. On September 26, 1993, the Komer family hosted a private gala for friends, employees and city officials, which showcased the 1942 musical *Yankee Doodle Dandy* starring James Cagney. It was a nostalgic celebration enabling attendees to bid a fond farewell to the over fifty-year-old hometown theater. The Komers sold the theater to Perry Drugs, a retail drug chain that Rite Aid eventually acquired. However, they had one stipulation: the marquee and the exterior facade of the theater had to remain unchanged. That stipulation has endured for 33 years. During that time, the City of Berkley has leased the marquee for $1.00 per year and used it to promote city events. Rite Aid closed all its Michigan locations this year, including the location in Berkley. The property is currently for sale for a price of $ 2,950,000. Hopefully, future property owners will preserve the iconic Berkley Theatre marquee for future generations.

Movie Projection at the Berkley Theatre

By Don Callihan

Projector Arc-Light Chamber is to the Right of the 3 Orange Knobs—Page 3

The photo above is a composite to establish how the projection room at the Berkley Theatre appeared during its operating life. The right side of the image is the actual projection room wall as it appears today—the upper level of the building was not modified when it was converted to a drug store. The left side is a projector on display in the museum of the Farmington Civic Theater (www.thefct.com). It is similar to the two projectors used at the Berkley, one projected through porthole #1 and the other through porthole #2.

The projectors used a carbon arc light source. Two ¼ inch diameter carbon rods were placed in the projector's light chamber. With the rods touching each other, direct

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Explosives in the Projection Room

By Don Callihan

When the Berkley Theatre opened its doors in 1941, movie film consisted of a gelatinous material with suspended photo-reactive silver salts coated on a transparent nitrocellulose film about 1 millimeter thick. Once run through a movie camera and developed, the filmed scene could be projected onto the silver screen. Unknown to most audiences at the time was the combustible, explosive nature of the nitrocellulose-based film.

Another name for nitrocellulose is guncotton, which replaced gunpowder in firearms. Its danger is enhanced by the fact that when nitrocellulose burns, it produces its own oxygen and makes conventional firefighting methods ineffective. Nitrocellulose will even burn underwater..

One of the first major fires fueled by nitrocellulose used to project motion pictures

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Explosives in the Projection Room

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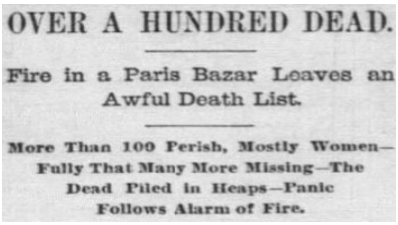
occurred in Paris in 1897. On the afternoon of May 4, a rudimentary motion picture projector known as a cinematograph was being used to project a moving image when the projectionist's equipment caught fire. The fire quickly spread to the film and the fire was soon out of control, killing 126 people. More fires followed in the ensuing years, and measures to reduce the risk and severity of a nitrocellulose fire were implemented



OVER A HUNDRED DEAD.

Fire in a Paris Bazar Leaves an Awful Death List.

More Than 100 Perish, Mostly Women—Fully That Many More Missing—The Dead Piled in Heaps—Panic Follows Alarm of Fire.

The best way to reduce the risk was to create a unique room (the projection room) to house the projectors and isolate the room from the rest of the theater. The projection room walls, floor, and ceiling utilized non-combustible materials. The door was made of materials that took several hours to burn through. The portholes through which the projectors projected their images across the auditorium to the screen were equipped with optical-quality glass to isolate the projection room from the auditorium. In the event of a fire, the fusible links melt, and the doors close. Projectors also aided in reducing the chances of fire by enclosing film in metallic compartments to prevent it from being exposed to ignition sources. The Berkley Theatre projection room adhered to these standards.

It's worth noting that nitrocellulose film, a significant fire hazard, was phased out in the 1950s. This decisive action effectively eliminated the threat of a movie film fire, ensuring a safer environment for all.

Movie Projection

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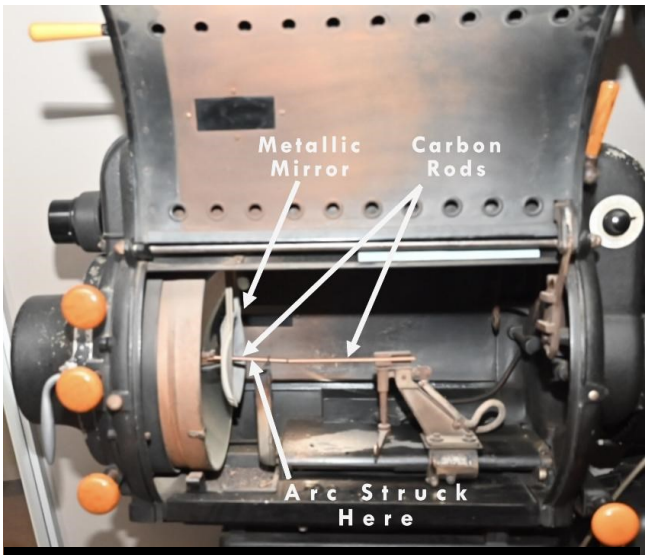
current electricity was applied to one rod while the other was grounded. Immediately after applying electricity, the rods were moved a few millimeters apart, striking an electric arc and producing a very bright light. As light was produced, the rods burned up, and a mechanism continually moved them together to maintain them a fixed distance apart. An exhaust fan removed smoke from the burning rods and expelled it outdoors. A concave metallic mirror concentrated the light before it passed through the advancing film. The resulting image passed through a focusing lens to project it onto the theater's screen.

Theaters had two projectors because a film reel only lasted about 20 minutes. Each projector was fitted with a douser, a shutter that, when electrically activated, opened to allow light to pass through the film and be projected onto the screen. At the beginning of the evening, the projectionist had reel #1 loaded on projector #1 and reel #2 on projector #2. An arc was struck on projector #1 and a switch was flipped to start the projector's motor and cause film to advance through the projector. After the film leader passed and the opening frame bearing the studio's trademark (MGM, 20th Century Fox, Columbia, etc.) reached the projection port, the douser was activated, and the opening frame appeared on the screen.



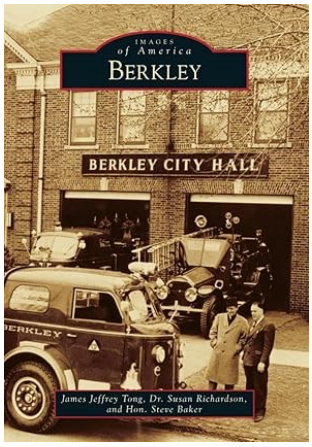
Projector Arc Light Chamber

Projection continued for about 20 minutes until reel-end, when the projectionist switched to the second projector. If the projectionist was skilled, this occurred without the audience's knowledge. To accomplish the switchover, the projectionist had to ensure the douser was closed on projector #2 and then strike an arc to activate the light source. The projectionist then waited for a cue mark (see illustration) to appear in the projected image. This occurred eight seconds before the end of the picture section of the reel and lasted for four frames. Upon seeing the cue mark, the motor on projector #2 was activated. The projectionist looked for a second cue mark

to appear seven seconds after the first. At that time, the douser on projector #2 was opened, and simultaneously, the douser on projector #1 was closed.

With the film now being shown by projector #2, the take-up reel on projector #1 was removed for rewinding, the carbon rods were replaced, and reel # 3 was loaded onto the projector. As reel #2 ended, the switchover process was repeated, and projector #1 was now projecting reel #3. This process continued through feature films, cartoons, newsreels, and previews of coming attractions until the last feature was shown, and the theater shut down for the day..

The Museum Gift Shop



The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection- One of those gifts is the book *Images of America—Berkley,* a 128 page book featuring many historic photographs. Get your copy for $20.

Other items include note pads, post cards, refrigerator magnets, coffee mugs, and a limited supply of Berkley tee-shirts.

Original artwork prints from Berkley artists

L to R, The Berkley Theater Marquee by Steven Patterson, Downtown Berkley—January 13, 2024 by Dale Carlson, The Vinsetta Garage by Steven Patterson.

Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
3338 Coolidge Highway
Berkley, MI 48072
248-658-3335
museum@berkleymich.net

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at www.berkleyhistory.org

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

Instagram: @berkleyhistoricalmuseum

X: @BerkleyMuseum

The Museum Corner Editor: Don Callihan

Get the Newsletter

If you wish to receive *The Museum Corner* each time it is published, please put your name and email address in the body of an email and enter the phrase *"The Museum Corner"* in the subject line. Send the email to: museum@berkleymich.net

Donate Items of Historical Interest

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

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The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.