

A HISTORY OF MOVIES & ENTERTAINMENT IN EPHRATA

This was the Marjo Theater, which opened in Ephrata in fall of 1940. The theater was built by John and Mary Lee, hence its name, the "Marjo." Its facade hints at its previous function. The round window left of the entrance was the ticket booth. The raised center of the façade was an art deco tower that was accented by neon illumination; horizontal scars indicate the attachment of the marquee that advertised the films and protected the customers. Its construction was financed by Frank Bell, who owned the Bell Hotel across the street. John told the story that the grand opening was set, a fine film booked, and the seats purchased, but not installed. He was saved by the new Lions Club chapter, whose members completed the installation of the seats just before the opening. John then became an active member, and later president, of the Ephrata Lions. It was the finest little theater in the area, seating some 350 in comfortable seats, good acoustics, and air-conditioning in the summer. With World War II and the construction of the Ephrata Air Base, the Marjo was used for many base activities, and the trainees kept attendance high. The building included an apartment on the second floor, and an adjacent business on the first floor. The Marjo showed first run films until the opening of the Lee Theater, at the north end of town on Basin Street, in 1951. For several years Ephrata had two theaters, the Marjo showing second run films at reduced prices until its closing in 1958.

THE MARJO

Movies were an important part of town life in Ephrata. Film changes were frequent, twice a week, and often with double bills, news reels, and cartoons. Saturday matinees, with mainly westerns and cartoons, were at a reduced price for kids. Advertisement for the films was an important part of town life. Every household received a calendar of all the films occurring during the month, and a sound truck drove around town announcing the movie of the day. Movie theaters' cultural influence diminished some with the arrival of television, from Spokane stations, around 1952.

Although the Marjo had an important role in the history of entertainment in Ephrata, that history goes back at least as early as 1913, with the building of the Kam Theater.



The Marjo Theater, around 1951. Saddle Tramp, with Joel McCrea, and Harvey, with Jimmy Stewart, were both first-run films. Sparks Jewelry occupied the business space on the ground floor and to the right of the theater entrance. Later, that space was occupied for many years by the barber Johnny Anderson. After the theater closed, the building became the home of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, now located at the south end of town.

west, entrepreneurs showed films in the town, renting space, such as the second floor of the old McGrath hardware store. From 1905 to 1915, the technology for silent films advanced and theaters were built in Wenatchee and Spokane. The early theaters were not much more than a business space with a white sheet at one end for a screen. Soon more dedicated spaces were built with slanting floors and permanent seating to allow for better sight lines by the customer, and then the really opulent theaters, some owned by the film companies, were built, particularly in the 1920s. The first dedicated theater was opened in Ephrata in 1913 as the Campbell and McDonald's Opera House. That theater was purchased and re-dedicated by Joe Kaminsky in 1914, and it became known as the Kam Theater from then on. It was built adjacent to the original Courthouse (and later the Methodist Church) on 1st Avenue Northwest—now a parking lot adjacent to the present courthouse, three blocks from here. By contemporary standards it was certainly a primitive place, kept warm in the winter by a wood stove. The screen was on the north side of the building. The projection equipment was on the second floor, and it was shared with a small apartment. The theater was not merely used for viewing movies, but also for live entertainment, vaudeville and classical music, and the musicians stayed in the apartment. The theater was also available for larger community events, such as Christmas pageants and high school productions. The Kam was not always open, but it did mostly function as an entertainment center for the town until 1940. Around 1930, the Kam was upgraded to sound production. Until that time local women played the piano (sometimes taking liberties with the music) to accompany the movies. The Kam was eventually demolished in 1966.

THE KAM

The exterior of the Kam Theater in 1936. The theater was located on SW 1 st Avenue, near the Grant County Courthouse. It was a landmark of Ephrata history from its opening in 1913 until its demolition in 1966.



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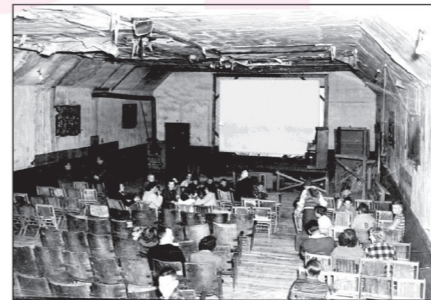
The Capital and the Jackrabbit Circuit

John and Mary Lee moved to Ephrata after their marriage and honeymoon in mid-1936. John had moved from the Midwest to Chelan with his family, and he graduated from Chelan High School in 1924. Mary had moved around Washington following the work of her engineer father, and she graduated from Wenatchee High School in 1932. They met during the construction of Grand Coulee Dam, when her father surveyed the dam site and then the future irrigation project. John had been influenced by a pep talk from Jim O'Sullivan (the biggest promoter of the Columbia Basin Project) and had noticed how people even during the Depression could find a quarter to enjoy a film at the Roosevelt Theater, next to the luncheonette he ran with his mother, in Grand Coulee. Thus, John and Mary came to Ephrata with the idea of starting a movie theater business. They rented the Kam from Joe Kaminsky, renovated it and renamed it the Capital Theater. They lived in the small apartment of the theater for three years. Since there were not enough customers to provide a livelihood from the theater alone, they purchased some portable projection equipment and showed movies on the road, mainly at Grange Halls



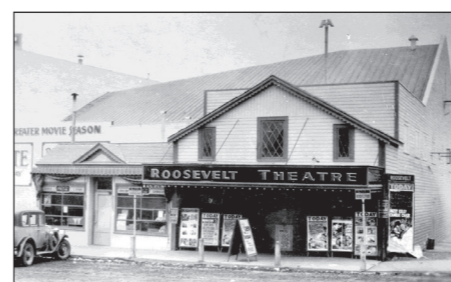
Mary and John Lee, about the time of their marriage and move to Ephrata to start the theater business, in 1936.

in small towns in the area: The Jackrabbit Circuit. This monthly circuit totaled some 500 miles on mostly terrible roads, and it included Othello, Warden, White Bluffs, Quincy, Wilson Creek and Mansfield. This went on for about four years. Later on, they established theaters in some of those towns. Ephrata grew in population and the time came to shut down the Kam/Capital, discontinue the circuit, and run the Marjo after its opening.



The auditorium of the Kam, in 1936. It was in a run-down condition and was renovated by John and Mary Lee as the Capitol Theater later that year. Note the hard wood seats on the slanting wooden floor.

As the headquarters of the Columbia Basin Project, and a growing shopping center, Ephrata grew rapidly in the forties and fifties. By 1950, its population was 4,600, and the Marjo was too small to accommodate its patrons. So, John and Mary built their largest and most successful theater: the Lee. It is on Basin Street, but four blocks north. It opened April 24th, 1951, with a first run showing of *Never a Dull Moment*, starring Fred MacMurray and Irene Dunne. John dedicated the opening to his old friend Jim O'Sullivan. The Lee was totally modern in ambience and technology. It was designed by two local architects, Bob and Elaine Bensing, with help from a Seattle theater designer, Tom Mails. Through him the Lee shares some design features with theaters on the coast built a year or so earlier, including the Magnolia in Seattle and the State in Olympia. This included the lodge seating and the soundproof cry-room for families with infants. For many years it was the finest cinema between Spokane and Seattle. It was a spacious theater, with 750 seats, and with space above for portable seats for concerts of about 1,100. It was designed with a large stage and disappearing screen for that purpose, and it hosted the community concert series for many years. In fact, John and Mary purchased a Steinway concert grand when the Lee opened, to support those concerts. That same piano now is used in concerts at Big Bend Community College. Its high marquee tower has held up well. In the lobby of the Lee Theater, one of the old projectors used in the Jackrabbit Circuit is on display. It was unusual for those times in using a high wattage bulb rather than the carbon arcs.



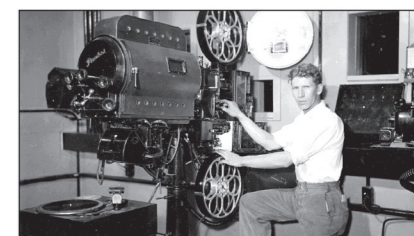
The Roosevelt Theater, Grand Coulee, 1936. John Lee and his mother operated the luncheonette adjacent to the theater, and he was impressed by its success during the Great Depression.

THE LEE

Moving into retirement, John and Mary gradually removed themselves from the theater business, eventually selling the Lee and other theaters to Jeff Fairchild, a young business person whom John saw as a younger version of himself. It is still run by the Fairchild Organization, whose principal business interests today are in the Tri-Cities and Moses Lake. The Lee continues to be a popular venue for an evening at the movies, attracting patrons from throughout the Columbia Basin. In synch with trends in the theater business, it has been converted into a triplex. In 2013, a former Ephrata High School student, Michael Bosnar completed

the 3,000 square foot mural on the north side of the theater, with the characters who filled the screen inside over its six decades of entertainment.

Early in the development of the movie business, the films and projection were standardized, and these standards continued until the introduction of digital projection, around 2005. Images were projected at 24/second to provide the illusion of smooth movement, and the films were 35 mm in size. Illumination of the screen required the brightness of the carbon arc, until its replacement by the xenon lamp in the 1960s. Carbon arc lamps required frequent adjustment and consumed a lot of electricity (those in the Lee used 73 amps each). In a small town the evening movie was probably the largest single user of electricity. The earliest films, as the early years of movies at the Kam, were run on a single projector, and still images were shown while the reel was changed. Until the mid-20s, the movies were silent, with sound provided by musicians, mainly pianists. In the 1920s techniques were developed allowing the



A projectionist in the projection room at the Lee Theater, around 1955. The barrel-shaped structure houses the carbon arc lamp, with a vertical pipe to release exhaust heat. Two projectionists worked in tandem insuring that the movie experience was not disrupted or (rarely) that a reel from another movie was not inserted!

PROJECTING MOVIES



1947 Chevrolet Van, advertising a popular Western Film, Sand, Directed by Louis King, showing in Ephrata in 1950. Using sound and posters, these vehicles also transported films from town to town.

seamless shifting between two projectors, so that five or six reels might make up a single film. Sound was also embedded in the film, so that voice, sound effects and music became part of the movie experience. Until 1948, the film medium was the highly inflammable cellulose nitrate, converted to cellulose acetate after that. Projection rooms were engineered against the spread of fire. All of these factors made the projectionist a technically demanding job, and the perfect rendition of a movie combined with shorts was a satisfaction of that work. Around 1975, these single reels were combined into large platters, with no more reel changing. With the shift to multi-screen theaters, a single projectionist could run all the screens. With the recent shift to digital projection, a few moments of attention by a single person runs the movie.

Thus, theaters were significant employers in these small towns, particularly hiring talented high school students, the "geeks" of those times, as projectionists and musicians. Two early high school projectionists made names for themselves in later life. Art Danke became an orthopedic surgeon, and Andy Jones was a senior engineer and then administrator at Boeing. Thus, a theater that today can be run by a single person employed a dozen or so part-time workers in earlier decades.

Motion picture technology was quick to arrive in Ephrata, and quick to follow changes, such as sound, in subsequent decades. It was a small town but drew customers from a wide area, and the railroad connected it to Seattle, with the specialized movie supply companies and representatives of the major producers available.

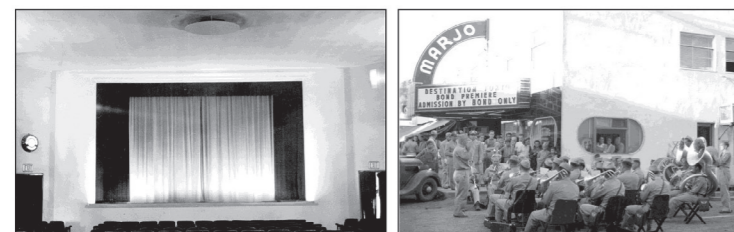


The Lee theater, a year after its opening, photographed in 1952.

This display was prepared and financially supported by the children of John and Mary Lee: David, Jack and Mary Ann.

<p>Ephrata Theatre FOWLER & CAVANAUGH, Proprietors Performance given every at 7:30 p.m. unless otherwise stated. If one show please see, tell your friends. If not, tell us. Matinee Special Sunday, Nov. 23 Beauty and The Beast An Entertainment Theater Staff Present Play from the Fairy Story by Andrew Lavis A new high class show and play HELP HYPOSPERIA PASSIONS BE BIRD THREE, Comedy Mr. Ed Wilson will sing Saturday Matinee, Admission 15c. Sunday Matinee, 10c-40c</p>	<p>At Campbell-McDonald Opera House A High Class Motion Picture Show Four Thousand Feet of Film Illustrated Songs Every Tuesday and Friday Night TWO ENTIRE PERFORMANCES EACH NIGHT Hours open at 10:15 P. M. Children 10c. Adults 20c.</p>	<p>Grand Opening For One Week Commencing Monday, Jan. 19 New Kam Theatre The Moulán-Memmen Company A High Class Company of Vaudeville Artists Admission 35 Cents Children under 10, 15 Cents Performance commencing at 8:00 Sharp each evening.</p>
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Advertisements for movies and entertainment in Ephrata, from the Grant County Journal, 1913-1914. Left, the Ephrata Theater, of uncertain origin and location, November 21, 1913; center, the Campbell-McDonald Opera House, October 24, 1913; and right, the Kam Theater, a vaudeville act, January 16, 1914. The prices seem minuscule, but given the inflation over 105 years, 20 cents would be about \$5.00 in 2018.



Left: The modern and comfortable auditorium of the Marjo Theater, around 1942. At right, an event at the Marjo, sponsored by the Ephrata Army Air Force Training Base, with a performing band. Perhaps this event supported the sale of war bonds and the showing of *Destination Tokyo*, starring Cary Grant, 1944.

Consider the movie theaters in Ephrata with the town's history and the history of the theater business. Although it was a small settlement and railroad stop before, Ephrata only became a town, and the county seat, in 1909, with a population of around 300. Ephrata grew quickly, but it was set back by a fire in 1910 that destroyed much of its business district along Alder street across from the railroad station. With good access from trains running east and