



Park Theatre shown with new façade in 1940, after remodeling; main entrance flanked by the Lorraine Beauty Shop, left, and Harry Silverman's confectionary, right.

## **PARK THEATRE**

The Park Theatre (also known as the Lincoln Park Theatre) was located at 1583 Fort St, Lincoln Park, Michigan. It was built in 1925 and sat 600 customers. The building was approximately 60 feet wide by 160 feet long. It was designed by C. Howard Crane [1885-1952], a well known architect of about 250 theatres around the country including 62 in the Detroit area. Other buildings such as Orchestra Hall and The Olympia Stadium in Detroit were also designed by Crane. M. R. Levy constructed the Park Theatre. Silent movies were shown there in the early days. A piano was situated in front of stage during the silent days. Silent movies began around 1894. The first "talkie" came out in 1927.

During the 1950s and 1960s, it was owned by Whisper & Wetsman. They owned numerous other movie theaters in the Detroit Metro area as well in other parts of the country as far away as Arizona under the company of Wayne Amusements. Their office was in Birmingham, Michigan.

By 1938, as sound movies were becoming more popular, the building was remodeled. The front façade roof area was changed to add a new "Park" sign and the marquee was changed

from a rectangular shape to a larger one with angled sides. The new one was larger and could hold 3 rows of clip on lettering on each side as well as a short message on the front section. The newer marquee also had yellow light bulbs surrounding the lettering which sequenced in order to appear to be moving. It was also an eye catcher for passing motorists. Lots of white light bulbs were installed on the underside of the marquee.

Air conditioning was probably added at the same time. It was a “swamp cooler” or evaporative cooler type that utilized water evaporation to produced chilled air. The air conditioning was a big deal because it was not available for residential housing in early days. So many people came to the theatre to cool off during hot summer days and evenings. However, the law of physics causes cold air to drop down which meant that seats near the stage were often extremely cold since the floor descended toward the stage.

It’s not known if or when the screen may have been replaced by a wider cinemascope type. In the beginning, theatres were able to continue using the 35mm format although it was vertically compressed and required a modification to the projector lens to “stretch” the image onto the screen. Later, some theatres switched to a 65/70 mm film format.

The theatre received a second remodeling around 1960. It was minor, but involved removing much of the beautiful 1930s style décor. The large leafed wallpaper hanging in the lobby was exchanged for bland beige paint. The special mirrors were taken away, as was the scale, and the neat ticket stub box. A new stainless steel box replaced the old one. A pop machine was added. New carpeting was also laid.

### Layout

Retail space was available at both front corners, housing various establishments such as a barber shop, beauty salon, ice cream parlor, jewelry store, etc. They were approximately 15 by 15 feet square or maybe larger.

A door to the small basement furnace room was located on the south wall of the lobby. Opposite it on the north side was the stairwell going up to the manager’s office to the north and the Projection Room Booth to the south.

At the very back of the building were separate rooms for containing the ladder and letters for the marquee (north side) and another room (south side) for the air conditioning system. Access to both were only from the outside doors.

### Lobby

Before 1960, the lobby had a large oval mirror (approximately 3 feet wide by 4 feet tall) hanging on the walls at each side. A person could into either mirror and see an infinite display of the mirrors as the image reflected back and forth, each smaller than the last image. The ticket box was a small gutted out coffee grinder from the early days of the theater. It stood about 4 feet tall and was about 16 by 16 inches square. The top section was ceramic “sided” funnel for stubs to drop down into a container below. There was about 12 inches of glass below it. The lower section was red painted wood with a door for removal of the spent

ticket stubs. Ticket stubs were counted each night to match up with that days take in order to assure no money was embezzled. That beautiful ticket box was replaced by a larger stainless steel box during the remodeling. The old scale which sat along the south wall of the lobby was also removed. The machine not only read a person's weight, but also produced paper quotations.

### Concessionary

A concessionary was located within the lobby and was operated by Mary "Ma" Muegge for many years through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The usual candy, popcorn, and drinks were available although drinks were not allowed beyond the lobby area. Later, around 1958, a pop dispenser was added in the lobby. Popcorn that wasn't sold one day would be saved for the next day. When the theater opened each day, Ma would begin to pop fresh popcorn, but mixed it with the previous days goods. Later, when more popcorn was made, she would take a large piece of cardboard to the doors between the lobby and the seating area and begin fanning. The aroma of the fresh popcorn would waft into the seating area and soon, dozens of hungry customers would come out.

### Seating Area

Two sets of double doors separated the lobby from the seating area. Inside the theatre section was a half wall approximately 7 to 8 feet tall separating the entry area from the seating area. It had curtain covered windows above at about 4 feet high. During "standing room only" days, late arriving customers stood there while viewing the show through the windows. Many more sat in aisles. That is until the city fire department banned such practice due to fire laws. Emergency double doors were located on both sides of the theatre near the front and the back of the seating area.

Two aisles ran from the back (lobby end) to the front (screen end) separating the seats into 3 sections. It's guessed that there were 30 to 35 rows. Walls were narrower at the front by the width of about 4 seats on each side. Purpose of that was to have good viewing from any seat. Since the building was rectangular, inner walls curved inward as one approached the stage area. Openings existed in those walls to allow for heat passage into the theatre from the water heating pipes. Ushers could walk into that hollow space to look out over the audience.

### Heating & Cooling

The heating for the building was provided by a coal furnace which utilized an auger to drive coal into the boiler. Heated water was pumped along both sides of the building. The furnace room was in the small basement on the south side of the lobby. Coal was loaded into a hopper via a small steel door along O'Conner Street. A large steel grating on the sidewalk provided open air access to the furnace room.

The air conditioning unit was located in a separate room behind the screen on the south side of the building.

### Operation

The theatre was usually opened on Saturdays and Sundays from 11:00 am until around 1:00 pm when the last movie ended and during weekdays from around 6:00 pm to around 1 pm when the last movie ended. It was common to have two movies showing each day. One was a good new movie while the other one was often a B movie. On weekdays, the good movie was played first and last while the other movie was shown in between them. Upon opening each day, it was important for the ushers to slowly draw open the huge curtains covering the screen as the movie began. The projectionist dimmed the room lights at the same time. There was also a secret button above the water fountain near the men's room that was used to signal the projectionist to raise or lower the audio (one push meant raise and two pushes meant lower). The projectionist also had a window he could open to look out over the audience.

Cartoons and other short films were played between movies. It also included ongoing short movies such as Batman which usually ended each time as a "cliff hanger" where customers were lured back the following week to see if Batman and Robin would survive. Additionally, short newsreels were also played though the 1950s. It's important to note that TVs did not become popular until the early 1950s. So if people wanted to see footage of various news articles including the wars, they could only see it at the theaters via the Warner-Path newsreels.

At opening time and closing time, side wall lighting was turned bright for audience ingress and egress. During shows, they were dimmed. Tiny lights shown down on the aisles from the sides of seats every few rows during movie time. The walls and ceiling were quite decorative in the 1930s style.

### Projectors

A carbon arc flame provided the bright lighting needed to project the film onto the screen. Each projector used two carbon rods, one positive and one negative about the size of a wooden pencil. They were ignited by low voltage, high amperage electricity. One of the carbon rods would burn 4 inches per reel, thus requiring frequent replacement during the show. Each movie reel held 20 minutes of 35mm film. Usually 3 reels were contained in a metal carrying box. So with two movies, cartoons, and newsreels, there could be 7 heavy containers to deliver upstairs to the projection booth. Each reel held 2,000 feet of film that ran at 24 frames per second. Two projectors were used during the shows. As one projector was about to reach its 20 minute run time, the second projector would be ready to switch on. The projectionist watched for a small symbol at the upper right section of the screen to know when to start the next projector and also synchronize the two films so that customers would not notice any breaks in the action. Sometimes the film would break or jam. Jams were as bad as breaks because the hot carbon arc would quickly burn through the film. In either case, Mr. Borschardt, the projectionist for many years, would go into panic mode and quickly splice the broken ends together. Movies typically lasted from Sunday through Tuesday and from Wednesday through Saturday. So after closing and late at night, a driver would come by, enter the theater to deliver the next set of movies and posters while picking up the previous sets to deliver to another theater or to be sent back to the movie companies. If the

movie was really great such as The Ten Commandments, it might remain at the theater for one or two weeks. Long movies often did not have a second movie accompanying it.

### Some Managers

Some of the theater managers were Mr. Richmond, Mr. Kaplan, Mr. Zeus, Mr. Howard, Mr. Ondejko (from Canada). Mr. Richmond was quite old in the 1950s and reportedly played the organ located near the stage during the early silent film days.

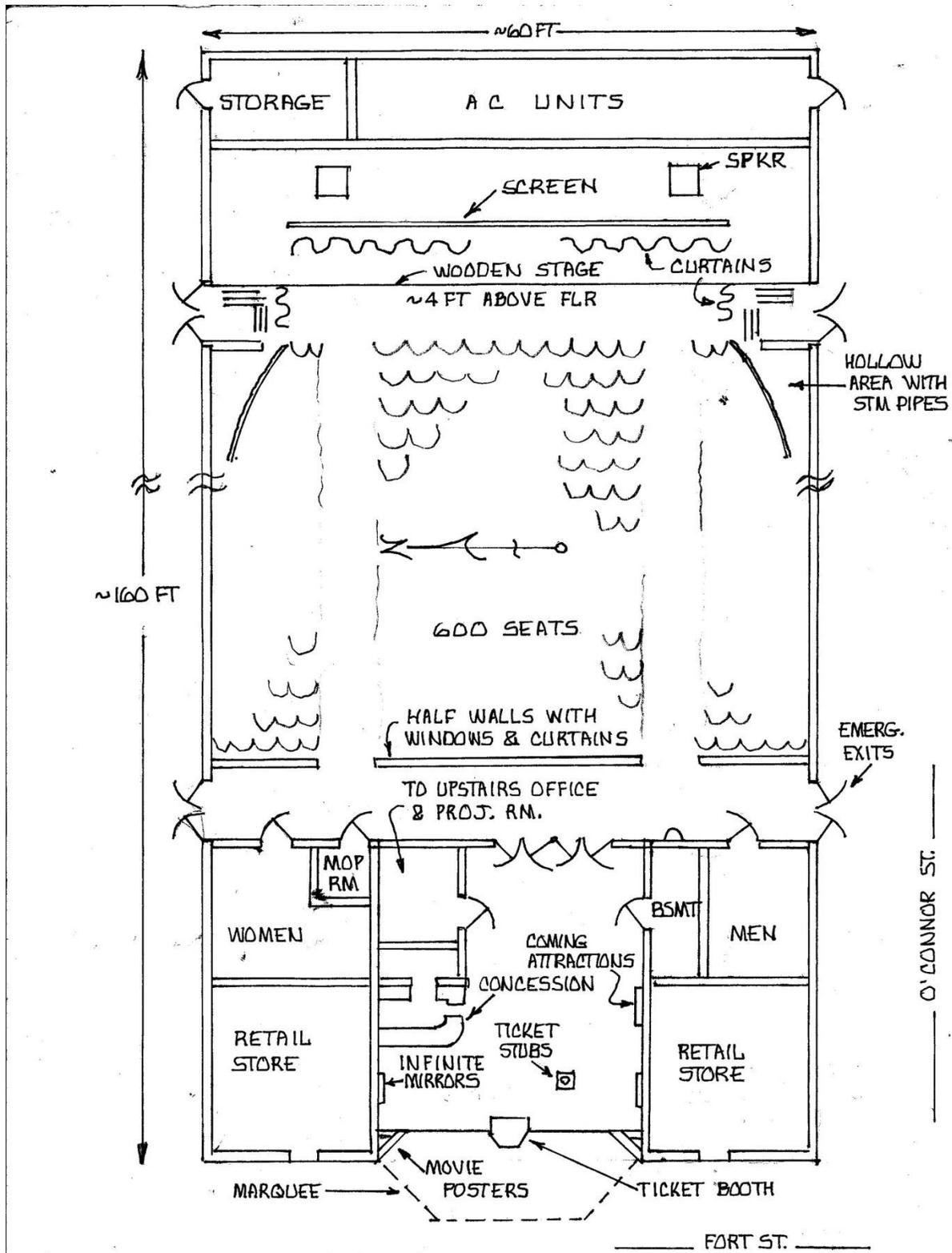
### The Downfall

By mid 1970, the theatre could no longer make a profit and closed down. Free parking between north and south bound Fort St. (M85) had been banned by the state by 1960, so little parking was available. Also, television and home air conditioners were partly to blame for reduced attendance. In 1980, it was re-opened as an Adult Entertainment Show. It closed its doors in 2008, partly due to public pressure to have a more family friendly environment for that area. The Wayne Metropolitan Community Action Agency purchased it as part of an action settlement between the city and the Hustler Club to be transferred to a non-profit organization.

The Downtown Development Authority and the Economic Development Corp donated \$50,000 to convert the building into lofts and retail space. Reconstruction began in 2009. The old building was completely revamped except for the front section and outer side walls. The outer brick side walls were reinforced to accommodate windows and doors. The grand opening was held on January 15, 2015. It is called Lincoln Park Lofts. It holds 12 apartments and two retail spaces at 1200 sq. ft. each. A parking structure is located to the east. A second building was planned to be built across O'Connor St. and east of the Security Bank building to hold 24 more apartment units. That property was donated by AutoZone.

### Area Businesses

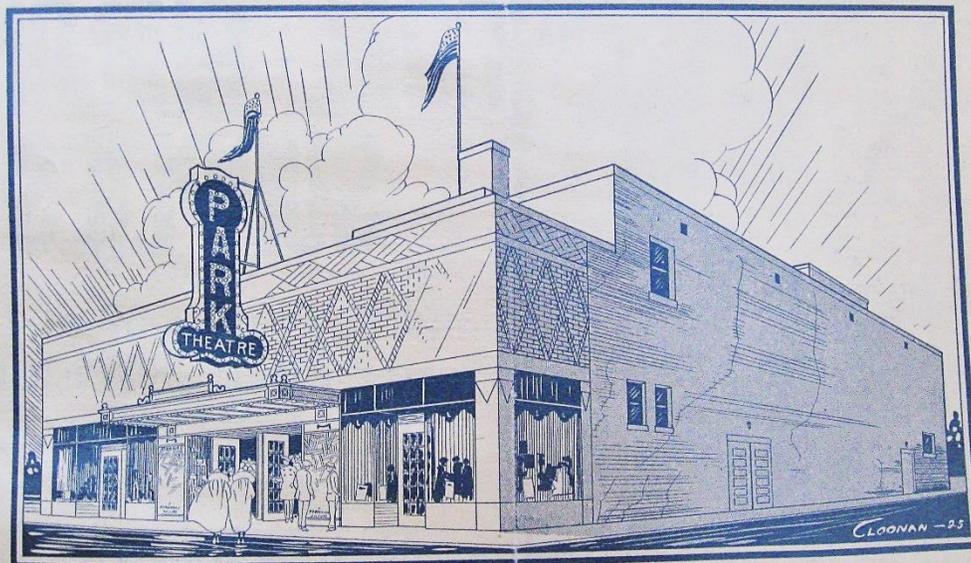
The area was once prime property for businesses. Across Fort St. was the A&P food market, Nahobitan's fruit and vegetable market, Norton Pharmacy, Rexall Pharmacy, and Wexler's men's clothing store. The original Security Bank building is still located south of the theatre, as was the Mellus Newspaper Co. (now known as The News-Herald but no longer at that location), and Bell's Men's Clothing Store, an Army surplus store, and Western Auto store. North Brothers Ford Dealership (possibly a food store before that time) sat north of the theater with an empty lot between them. Much later, a dollar store replaced the dealership and, later yet, AutoZone moved into that spot.





Park Theatre Appearance from 1925 to 1938

# Opening of Park Theatre Takes Place On Sat., August 15, 1925



**Is One Of The Finest  
Play-Houses In This Section**

will welcome any suggestions from the people as to how the policy of the theatre can be improved. A place to come and rest from the day's labor, to dream a bit within in the quiet, beautiful surroundings, to watch clean moral-building dramas, all of this is

**FAMOUS ARCHITECT  
DESIGNED NEW "PARK"**

Proof that the new "Park" theatre was designed in the very best manner was shown today when it was learned that C. H. Crane of Detroit designer

**Harrison Ford**

**FICKLE FASHION**

No law against gambling will ever be very effective until some plan is devised to take the gamble out of business, when a man invests his money in a stock of goods and a saddle