

Memories of Popcorn and Regal Splendor

# Final Curtain Falls On Marlow Theater

BY CHARLES JOHNSON  
IR Staff Writer

For weeks the blank marquee of the Marlow Theater hung as a silent symbol of its impending fate.

Now they are ripping the building down to enlarge a street for urban renewal, and with it, they are shattering some childhood memories.

Feeling nostalgic about the Marlow may seem odd. But for years it was the only game in town for Helena kids. Many, like myself, experienced a strange love-hate relationship over the place.

The Marlow, where we watched Disney films and cartoons, sheltered us from reality when we were young. Later, weaned from this Pollyanna existence, we were nurtured slowly on the violence of westerns and gangster films in a way television could never match.

Sure we went to Bengal or Greenie games, 'Y' dances and slumber parties. But during those awkward adolescent years, the Marlow remained a constant we could depend on every weekend, week in and week out.

Teen centers, occasionally foisted on kids by do-gooders battling juvenile delinquency, came and went.

**Majestic Old Palace**

Until recently there was no other indoor theater. Older youths reminisced about the long-defunct Vigilante Theater across from Penney's, but most of us knew only the Marlow, that majestic palace at the foot of Edwards.

Drive-ins were out. None of us had a driver's license.

That left the Marlow.

I have faint memories of my first visit to the Marlow with my parents to watch "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" when I was four or five.

As we grew older, a weekly allowance took us to Saturday matinees with a horde of friends who lived near Hawthorne School. Since television was truly a luxury in the 1950s, we grew up watching these matinees instead of the TV cartoons today's kids absurd.

After waiting in long lines that snaked clear around the bus depot at the corner, we at last would reach the glass booth and

plop down money for tickets that sprang from a nifty machine.

Then we would zip past the ticket taker into the red, green and yellow lobby, pausing only to buy some candy from a girl in a sequined outfit. You had to grab a seat quickly and save 10 more for friends who might show up.

**Regal Splendor**

We were awestruck by the plush splendor of the Marlow. The high arches, gargoyles, bright carpeting, striped walls, soft seats and velvet curtains gave the Marlow a regal appearance.

For 35 cents you could watch a newsreel, cartoons, previews, Lone Ranger serials and a couple of good westerns.

Each Saturday we would devour popcorn, Slo-Pokes, Sugar Babies, Flicks and Guess Whats (a box of taffy with a surprise).

Instead of buying an overpriced Coke at the concession stand, we would use the pop machine, the only one I have ever seen that could create exotic mixed drinks. You would drop in a dime, hit the cola button for a few seconds and then press the grape, lime and root beer buttons to concoct a different flavored neclar each time.

When we turned 12 — that awful age when you have to start paying student instead of children's prices — we found it easy to fib about our ages. Our lies became less convincing to the skeptical girl in the glass booth as we grew taller and showed signs of whiskers and pimples.

After becoming a full-fledged teen-ager at 13, you gladly paid the high student prices. You wanted everyone to know you were no longer a kid.

**The Great Melting Pot**

At about the same time, we outgrew matinees and started going to the night movies.

The Marlow was the great melting pot for shy junior high school kids. It was the place where westside kids mingled with castsidiers and public school kids met those attending parochial schools.

We would descend on the Marlow in cliques. The boys sat in one area, the girls in another to watch Elvis and Fabian, Connie Francis and Annette.

We were rude, heckling ushers, making

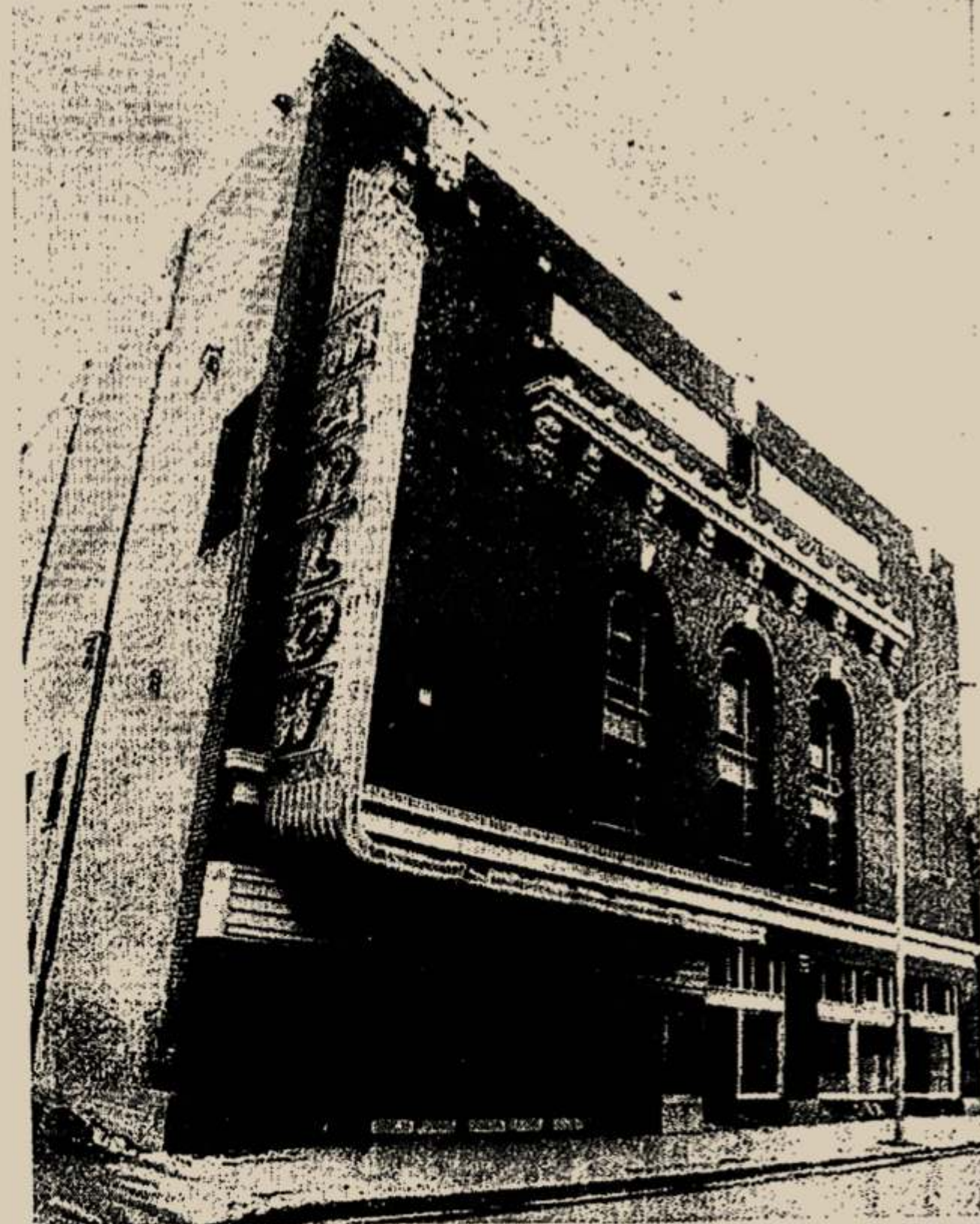
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A LAST REGAL LOOK — Charles S. Johnson takes a last look at the interior of the Marlow Theater, not so awestruck now as when the high arches and gargoyles loomed over his five-year-old

head. But his memories, typical of many young men and women of Helena, will not be destroyed with the razing of the 54-year-old monarch of Helena theaters. (Staff Photo by Dave Shors)

Built to last, Helena's 'Majestic Old Palace' will fall hard under the wrecker's hammer. But then, like many of the stars and shows she housed, the Marlow will fade from all but the memories of those who grew up with her.



ROAD SHOW — Ironically, the Marlow, built primarily for road shows in 1918, is being razed so Broadway can be extended to Park Ave. And now the lines of theater goers will be replaced by lines of cars. (Staff Photo by Charles Johnson)

AT THE FEET OF FAMOUS PEOPLE — For more than half a century noted people moved across the stage of the Marlow, first those in theater and then in movies and special appearances. But now it's the footlights that draw a last look, upstaging the past. (Staff Photo by Dave Shors)

## A Victim of the Times

It cost \$200,000 to build the Marlow Theater, which opened playing "The Show of Wonders" April 3, 1918.

Some \$85,000 was spent on remodeling in 1949.

It will take about \$32,000 to

tear the solid building down.

The theater was built primarily for road shows, and longtime Helena residents remember seeing many first-rate touring productions.

Helena contractor Al John-

son, who as an apprentice carpenter helped build the Marlow, recalls taking his wife to see "Ten for Two," a national production on tour.

Vaudeville shows made regular stops at the Marlow, he

says, and contrary to some claims, the building is solid.

"It will take them six weeks to tear it down," he said of the demolition, which began May 9.

Johnson, who then worked for A. B. DeKay Construction Co., said four-foot concrete and steel piers on three sides of the building go 54 feet deep. There are eight piers on each side and four across the back.

He recalls that the ornamental sculptures of vegetables that formed the high arches in the theater were cast right on the job.

Kennedy Spoke There  
Two recent highlights in Marlow history occurred in the early 1960s.

In the summer of 1960, Presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy sought the support of the Montana State Democratic Convention, which met at the Marlow.

About a year later, in June, 1961, the world premiere of "The Naked Edge," Gary Cooper's last film, was held at the Helena theater. Cooper, a cartoonist for The Independent Record before embarking for Hollywood, had died of cancer in May, 1961.

Don Kerns, acting urban renewal director, said he hoped downtown Helena would not be without a theater long.

"We are seeking a replacement," he said, adding that several of the firms expressing an interest talked about having a theater with two mini-theaters, similar to the Circus Twin Theater in the Helena Valley.

Bob Innon, director of special projects for urban renewal, said the Marlow was being razed so Broadway can be extended to Park Avenue.

