

Palace History excerpt □
Jack Peach, *Days Gone By*

The Picture Palace with Its Silver Screen

The last of Calgary's imposing movie houses has reached the end of the line. The Palace Theatre, for seventy-one years an ornamental resident on the south side of Eighth Avenue—the Stephen Avenue Mall—is dead.

In 1919 the Allen Palace opened its ornate doors to offer Calgarians first-run silent movie fare in an almost regal ambience. Only one other movie house threatened to eclipse the Palace when, in 1921, the Capitol opened on the north side of the same block. However, by that time the Palace was solidly established as a premium quality film and vaudeville showplace.

Planners are struggling to find a solution to the now somewhat tacky evening appearance of our one-time "main street." Perhaps, understandably, they overlook that fact that it was Eighth Avenue's large family of movie houses with brilliant marquee lighting and flashing signs that brightened the thoroughfare as only the garish movie house showmanship could accomplish.

The Palace Theatre was in the forefront. Running lights chased each other around the marquee advertising, under which people lined up at the brilliantly lit box office to see the first-run films from the best loge seats in the house—with smoking privileges—for 50¢.

Between acts and show times the mighty pipe organ, played by

Ted Forsey, thunderingly entertained Palace patrons in the 1,784 plush-upholstered seats. Radio-Keith-Orpheum and Pantages circuits, rivals in peddling top-rated live acts, battled for bookings. Beneficiaries of their striving were the Palace Theatre customers.

The uninhibited manager of the Palace was Winnipeg-born Pete Egan, a genius of gimmickry to capture full houses for every new entertainment bill. The cheerful, bustling, innovative manager was everybody's friend but Pete's great ally, according to his son Carl, was a book called *The Motion Picture Encyclopedia of Exploitation*. Carl told me his father issued him a challenge: if he could come up with a customer-baiting stunt that wasn't in that book, Pete would pay his lad \$10, a princely sum at the time. Carl never collected.

The Calgary Symphony Orchestra conducted by Grigori Garbovitsky performed regularly at the Palace with such luminaries as Jascha Galperin, whose violin performances were as fiery as his red hair. A young violinist named Jean de Rimanoczy achieved western Canadian fame there long before receiving international acclaim with the Seattle Symphony.

Beginning one Sunday in November 1925, Crescent Heights High School principal William Aberhart made his first nervous appearance before an uncompromising microphone and a full-house audience to begin spreading, by radio, the Social Credit gospel that finally landed him in the legislature.

The Palace was chosen for the world premiere showing of *His Destiny*, a Calgary Stampede and Brooks, Alberta, area horse opera

Opposite: *The Palace Theatre (originally the Allen Palace) on Eighth Avenue was the height of opulence for a first-run movie house. Its stage was used by many artists, including Victor Borge. The Palace became the Sunday meeting place for William Aberhart, high school teacher and gospel preacher who turned politician and premier. Courtesy Glenbow-Alberta Institute/NA-1178-2*



starring Neal Hart and Alberta's own movie star, Barbara Kent. But it was up to Pete Egan to come up with one of the truly madcap stunts to publicize his movie house and its screen and stage offerings. He had a Calgary bodyshop weld, back-to-back, the front halves of two Ford coupes. Until discouraged by the unsmiling police, he shuttled along Eighth Avenue in this weird billboard that could bewilderingly change direction, touting the great shows at "Calgary's Friendly Theatre."

In late 1938 the Palace and the Capitol issued Moviewscope, a small eight-page free flier. It advertised main floor seat admission, at either theatre, for 27¢ until 5:30, and smoking in loge seats, amusement tax included. Evening prices rose to the dizzy heights of 38¢ and 50¢.

In addition to the regular fare, the Palace offered personal appearances of local artists such as piano accordionist Stan James with vocalist Jack Lee. Both also were a part of "Shadowland," a regular promotion show sponsored by the Palace on radio. Pete's son Gail Egan, who was a sports radio commentator, was host of the theatre's series.

Several Moviewscope ads were deliberately missing some letters in their script. If you sent the nearest correct answer spotting the omissions you would be eligible for a gift from Temple Duff, a drug company sharing the same block of Eighth Avenue.

The Palace offered free checking of coats and parcels while patrons watched the show. In the check room at all times was "a qualified matron with complete First Aid Kit" and as a "Service For Doctors: the ushers are equipped with cards to record the names and seat numbers of professional men and others who might be expecting telephone calls while in the theatre." Pete explained privately that, in large part, this was his insurance against a favourite ploy used by doctors to spread free publicity

among those in an audience by being paged by name during performances.

With the theatre's passing is an era of filmdom that, in this same year of the requiem of the passenger train, marks the end of another piece of leisurely elegance sentenced to genocidal oblivion by today's version of civilization. Rest in Peace, Palace Theatre—has anyone got a hanky?