

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: York Theatre



York Theatre, circa 1939

**What is your favorite movie? *Casablanca*? *Singing in the Rain*? *ET*? *Rambo*?**

Whatever it is, chances are good that it has been shown at the York Theatre that has operated continuously in the same location, 150 N. York, since it opened in 1924. Designed by architect Elmer Behrns, the theater had a single auditorium with a seating capacity of approximately 1,100. The building had a Spanish style decor that included terrazzo tile on the lobby floor, stenciling on the lobby ceiling, and brass, copper and wrought iron light fixtures.

For the first several years of operation the York Theatre only showed silent movies. However, in 1929 Vitaphone and Movietone equipment was installed in the York, bringing talking and sound motion pictures to Elmhurst. There was a full house at the York Theatre the night that the new equipment was used to present the all-sound picture, *The Canary Murder Case*. The York Theatre distributed handbills to let customers know what movies would be playing each week. The schedule was helpful since the movies changed several times a week. The advertisements also announced live shows, like Little Joe Warner, the NBC radio star that performed at the York Theatre in 1925.

From the time the first sound equipment was installed, the York has been progressive and up-to-date. In 1938 the exterior of the building was modernized with the installation of an art-deco marquee that featured three-foot bands of stainless steel bordered by double bands of neon for a more dramatic look. A 1949 ad for the theater boasts of the latest model push-back seats. Sound and projection systems have kept pace with new developments in technology. However, by the mid-1970s the building had fallen into disrepair, and leaks had resulted in extensive damage that led to the removal of the ornate ceiling and replaced with a dropped panel ceiling.

Willis Johnson, president of Tivoli Enterprises, purchased the property in 1984 and made a commitment to restore the building. In 1991 the theater building underwent a major restoration and remodeling project with the division of one auditorium into three; the excavation of the orchestra pit that had been filled in; the installation of a Barton pipe organ; the repositioning of a movie screen to expose a proscenium arch, the restoration of elements original to the building; and a face-lift to the marquee. The York Theatre continues to provide entertainment today, with about 200,000 people viewing movies there in 2000.

*Sources for this article include the Elmhurst History Museum archives, the Theatre Historical Society of America archives, and Willis Johnson, Tivoli Enterprises President.*

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