



MID-WEST: AL RINGLING THEATRE, BARABOO, WISCONSIN.

Elyse: We left Akron and flew 600 miles north across three states to the scene of our next investigation, in Baraboo, Wisconsin. Our story starts in 1915. At that time, Baraboo had a population of less than a thousand. It was classic small-town America. Yet in amongst all the local stores and businesses that made up main street, a magnificent movie palace was created. The palace was built by circus impresario and local resident, Al Ringling, as a thank-you to the town that had always supported him. Today, the Al Ringling still dominates the growing town of Baraboo, and the theater's current manager has an extraordinary claim to make on its behalf. He thinks that Baraboo's movie theater was America's first movie palace. I'm Elyse Luray, and Gwendolyn Wright and I have come to Baraboo to investigate this movie mystery.

Gwen: Larry McCoy has managed the Al Ringling Theater for the last eight years.

Larry McCoy: Every day I'm very thankful to be here, and have the opportunity to work at this theater. A theater like this will never be built again in anybody's lifetime.

Gwen: Wow!

Elyse: wow, it's unbelievable!

Gwen: So Larry, what can you tell us about this extraordinary place?

Larry: Well, I know that it was built by Al Ringling, who was the eldest of the Ringling brothers. The Ringling brothers, of course, started their circus here and they loved Baraboo. And he really wanted to give something special back to the community and this was what he gave and it's quite amazing. And I often think, this must be the first movie palace, and I wonder if it is.

Gwen: It's splendid, but the first? Why do you think that?

Larry: Well, I think we have to go back to 1915. There was no other place like it that I can think of that showed movies that was in such a facility. Just seems to me that it's built to be a palace. Think about it. Everyone in the world goes to the movies and Americans especially love going to the movies. It would be amazing if it All started here.

Gwen: Well, it's certainly a magnificent place, but if this is the first movie palace here in the middle of the Midwest, it's rewriting the history of cinema. One thing's for sure, 1915, the year the Al Ringling was built, was an exciting time in the history of the movies. The first movie to tell a story was "The Great Train Robbery," which came out in 1903. By 1915, the silent movie era was in full swing and actresses like Mary Pickford were becoming stars. Up to this point, movies had been seen as cheap entertainment, single reels that attracted mainly immigrant and working-class audiences. They weren't watching movies in palaces, but in very basic buildings that had holes knocked in the walls to make space for a projector. To make real money, the movie moguls had to attract middle-class families. So the movie palace was born: plush, elegant auditoriums for mass audiences. They made movies respectable and turned the movie business into an industry.

Elyse: I Always thought the first movie palace was built in Hollywood or New York. I never imagined it could have been Baraboo, Wisconsin. I want to find out more about Al Ringling the man. Before he built his movie theater, he was a legendary circus impresario. I've come to the circus world museum in Baraboo to meet Jerry Epps, who's an expert on the Ringling Brothers.

Jerry Eps: Al's just a really interesting fellow. In many ways, he revolutionized the circus, because he made it something for the entire family. The circus had a bad reputation. People expected to have their pockets picked, and he just wouldn't allow that. And so here we've got something brand-new and people flocked in to see what All of this was about. People came to see the menagerie. They'd never seen a tiger before or a lion or a hippopotamus.

Elyse: So it makes sense that when he went into the movie business, he did it in style.

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Jerry: Al was a great showman, but no question about it, he was a businessman, too. I think he had an idea that the future in entertainment, at least in large part, was going to be in movies. So one of the first things he did was to create what's called a black tent, and that was the place where people could come and see silent films, at the circus.

Elyse: So rather than compete with the movies, Al embraced them. He was showing films way back in his circus days, as early as 1897, but did he really go on to build the very first movie palace?

Gwen: To even be considered a movie palace, the Al Ringling Theater must have been built with the intention of showing movies. I've also come to the Circus World Museum. They hold files on all the Ringling brothers' enterprises, so they should have details on the theater's construction. Most theater managers at the time had to punch holes in the walls to accommodate projectors. I want to see if the Ringlings' floor plans reveal something more premeditated. This is the mezzanine level, and we can see here the elegance of this architectural design. It is an ellipse for the auditorium, a beautiful area for going to the box seats and for wandering around and being seen. Fantastic! This proves it! The kinodrome booth. That's what we now call a projection booth. It's made fireproof because so often the early films caught fire. There are holes for projecting from different angles, because you would have to shift from one projector to the next showing different reels. So the theater from the start was meant to be a place for projecting movies. And here's something else: the architects of the Al Ringling were a firm called C.W.Rapp and George Rapp. If Rapp and Rapp designed the first ever movie palace, there must be something in their records, which means I need to go to Chicago where the Rapp brothers were based.

Elyse: My research has revealed a number of different theaters fighting for the title of first movie palace. The argument centers around exactly how you define a movie palace. It's a debate that's been raging for years among the experts. For this investigation, I'm going to use Richard Sklenar's definition. He's the executive director of the Theater Historical Society in Chicago.

Richard Sklenar: Well, there always the question of defining what a movie palace is. They were very special things. Theater Historical Societies had to work out a definition of what constitutes a true movie palace. You need an auditorium that has some high-relief plaster or other wonderful decoration to differentiate it from other spaces. You also needed an operating stage.

Elyse: It's there.

Richard: And you also needed multiple thousands of seats, and the Al Ringling has less than 1000 seats. By our definition, it is not a movie palace.

[Elyse groans]

Elyse: By Richard's definition, the Al Ringling can't be the first because it isn't a movie palace at all. So what is the first?

Richard: This is the Capital Theater, the first movie palace in the United States.

Elyse: Oh, it's beautiful!

Richard: Built in 1919 in New York city. 5000 seats, which means you could put six Al Ringling theaters in this building.

Elyse: Oh, poor Larry.

Richard: Demolished, however, in 1968.

Elyse: So if it was demolished, what is -- what's left?

Richard: Well, the earliest existing movie palace is the Chicago Theater right here in town.

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Elyse: Oh, right here.

Richard: By Rapp and Rapp, by the way, same as the Al Ringling for Balaban and Katz, the theatrical chain. B&K was the first really national chain of theaters, and they were incredibly innovative in other ways, too.

Elyse: You know, it's amazing that they're nationally that big, yet I've never heard of them before.

Richard: Well, that's probably because you're hearing the name Balaban and Katz rather than what happened after they merged with famous players, Lasky, and became... Paramount Pictures.

Elyse: Wow, that's huge!

Richard: It's big!

Elyse: Today, Paramount Pictures is one of the big six Hollywood studios. You're bound to have heard of films like "Psycho," "The godfather" trilogy, and "Titanic" but they were also successful in the early days with stars like Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson, and Rudolph Valentino under contract. It was all started by a group of theater owners. In 1925, famous players, Lasky's film company, merged with Balaban and Katz, who were based in Chicago, to create the biggest chain of movie theaters in the country. In 1927, this group became Paramount Pictures.

Gwen: Well, there's a story, which is probably apocryphal, that the Balaban brothers, Abe and Barney, went up to Baraboo to look at the Al Ringling theater. And after viewing what a wonderful place that was, they hired Rapp and Rapp to be their court architects, to create their chain in Chicago of movie palaces and all of the subsequent movie palaces that were built all across the United States. The larger movie palaces were the Al Ringling on steroids. [laughter]

Elyse: If the Al Ringling was the inspiration for Balaban and Katz theaters, that would make the Ringling a key player at the beginning of the movie industry. I'm heading back to Baraboo to look for proof that Balaban and Katz did go to see the Ringling.

Gwen: I'm staying on in Chicago. Here at the American Movie Palace Museum, they've got all Rapp and Rapp's original plans. These should show me where the Ringling fits into the story of how the brothers revolutionized movie house design. I'm meeting Tim Samuelson, one of Chicago's leading architectural historians.

Tim Samuelson: Rapp and Rapp very early were kind of figuring out the evolution of the movie theaters. For example, this shows really, really early ones they did, 1914, and it's the year just before the Ringling. And that's the Orpheum in Champaign, Illinois. That's very plain. And then take a look at what happened with the Ringling. It's something very, very different. So something happened between 1914 and 1915, that's for sure. I mean, this is really where they go over the top. This is the kind of thing that people start thinking about when they think of a movie Palace. The bigger the theaters, the more money they made and really gave birth to the modern film industry. Rapp and Rapp's philosophy reached its height with the construction of the Chicago theater in 1919, four years after the Ringling was built.

Gwen: You can see touches of what the Rapp brothers had used in the Ringling and really expanded on here. The murals that line the edge of the ceiling look back to Baraboo. The Ringling's side boxes take on a grander scale. But here we have 4000 seats to the Ringling's 800. This is the Al Ringling theater in epic proportions. This is all good circumstantial evidence, which suggests that the Ringling sparked a dramatic change in theater design, but it doesn't prove it.

Elyse: I need to prove that Balaban and Katz really did come to see the Ringling, so I've come back to Baraboo to the Sauk County Historical society. They have an archive of local papers that I hope will provide the evidence that I need. Oh, look. Charlie Chaplain, 1919, next Friday and Saturday at the Al Ringling Theater. That's amazing. "It's a Dog Life". That's very cool. The local press is certainly full of the Ringling and look here, in 1924. It's exactly what I've been looking for. "Not many months after Al Ringling theater was built, the architects sent Sam Katz of now the famous Balaban and Katz and several others to Baraboo to see this wonderful Playhouse. This visit resulted in Balaban and

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Katz engaging these architects “for their many following theater enterprises, the last of which was the Chicago theater”. That’s it. That ties the Al Ringling Theater to Paramount Pictures. It’s right here.

Elyse: So it started as a gift to the people of Baraboo, became the direct inspiration for a chain of groundbreaking palaces that transformed the movies from a novelty into a mass entertainment industry. The Al Ringling is not the first movie palace, but its importance is greater than that. We have some bad news and great news for Larry.

Elyse: Larry, you asked us to find out if the Al Ringling Theater was the first American movie palace. The answer is...no.

Larry: Oh, really? Well, I have to say that I’m a bit disappointed that we can’t consider this the first movie Palace.

Elyse: I’m sorry. But we did discover that this theater was a key site in the history of the American film industry. The Al Ringling Theater was the inspiration for the people that would become Paramount Pictures.

Larry: Wow, that’s really great. That’s fascinating.

Elyse: I thought that was huge. I mean, I was just so excited when we made that connection. Well, I don’t feel so bad anymore. [laughing] Thank God. Well, you shouldn’t, you shouldn’t. This is a very exciting piece of history.

Larry: It’s still a palace to us, so -- it’s a palace to us, too.

Gwen: Almost 90 years after he built it, Al Ringling’s Baraboo movie house remains a treasured part of the community he loved so well. It’s also one of the only early movie theaters anywhere in the country still showing films. Of course, the movies have changed a bit. Let’s take a look at one of the first big hits shown here. “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” from 1915.

Larry: Thank you for bringing that. You’ve really brought a whole new life to the theater to me.

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