

Randy Harter/Fort Wayne Historian

Embassy Oct 1, 2025 X = Slide Change

XWelcome to our fabulous theater. I must tell you that we realize how lucky we were to have had this collaboration between our local architect, A. M. Strauss, and renowned theater architect John Eberson take place.

XA.M. Strauss designed hundreds of buildings during his career long career all over Indiana and Ohio including 13 buildings at IU in Bloomington.

XJohn Eberson, born in western Ukraine, designed over 500 theaters in his lifetime, gaining the nickname "Opera House John". I'm not sure if that was compliment or a slight by his peers, but he was certainly at the pinnacle of his field.

As you likely know, this is one of five extant Eberson theaters in Indiana, and so I'd like to give a quick shout-out to the other four starting with the beautiful 1929 atmospheric Paramount Theater in Anderson that had closed in 1985 and, after restoration, reopened in 1995. And incidentally, it also was a collaboration between Strauss and Eberson.

The wonderful 1922 Indiana Theater in Terre Haute, with its lovely lobby with its impressive ceiling, the rotunda, and use of terra cotta on the outside.

The vacant 1915 Hippodrome in Terre Haute, that while up for sale still looks great inside and out.

Lastly, we have the 1925 Palace Theater in Gary, which has been vacant for many years and if that city's plans are implemented, it will become part of their downtown redevelopment efforts, and only the theater's façade will survive with residential housing units slipped in behind.

As those in your profession know, despite best efforts, things change, and if you'd been sitting here in 1924, you'd be in Xchurch... this Plymouth Congregational Church that is, who decided in 1923 they wanted a new house of worship and so built a limestone beauty six blocks away, and then a year later sold the old church, which looks pretty good in this image, to the locally owned Fox Realty Company for \$92,000, who would level it and build this gorgeous theater and the adjoining 200-room hotel. In fact, those of you over here are in the choir.

XThe new theater, prior to its completion, was leased to successful local theater operator W. Clyde Quimby, who named the theater the Emboyd in memory of his mother, Emlie Boyde. I'm a historian, not a historic preservationist, and so will not attempt to describe the mixture of design elements that Eberson and Strauss used in bringing their creation to life. Instead, I'll share a bit of the history of this theater.

I won't bore you with how many bricks were used or sacks of cement, etc., but a few of the more interesting facts were the beam holding up the balcony is 11 feet tall and 110 feet long making it then the largest piece of steel in the city weighing in at 100 tons.

XThe blade sign out front was six stores high and weighted 5 ½ tons making it then the largest sign in Indiana. And one last factoid,

there are 283 tons of terra cotta on the building. In the end the cost of the site, building and equipment was 1.5 million dollars, that when converted to today's money would be 27 million dollars for a single screen movie theater. And talking movies were scarce at that time as the Jazz Singer, the first feature length movie at 89 minutes long had only come out the year before. So, like all theaters in Indiana, for several years our 2,500-seat theater was still mostly very much a vaudeville, play and music venue with film shorts in between.

X With great fanfare and no shortage of hyperbole, the opening program was two silent movies, Mr. Wu, with Lon Cheny and Easy Come Easy Go with Richard Dix. Also on opening day was the Bennington's Harmonica Band, the traveling Keith-Orpheum Vaudvillie Show, Frank Richardson – The Singing Joy Boy and more. .40 cents for the matinee and .60 for the evening shows.

X The Emboyd's grand opening on May 14, 1928, it was a smashing success. And by the mid-1930s Clyde Quimby was successfully operating six of Fort Wayne's theaters that, depending on their size and location, featured A, B, or C run films and entertainment. A real showman, promoter, and businessman, Quimby died in 1935 at age 54. His widow, Helen Qumiby, continued to operate this theater until it was sold to the Alliance chain in 1952, and at that point the theater's name was changed to the Embassy. Like most movie palaces from the 1920s and 1930s, the Embassy eventually fell on hard times and changed hands five times in the six years between 1968 and 1974.

I certainly remember being around 12 years old and me and my pals sitting up in the balcony flicking popcorn over the railing, and if any

you were startled by it, I want to take this opportunity to sincerely apologize. Sort of.

But while the Emboyd, and Embassy after it, had a fantastic run the population shift to the suburbs, parking problems downtown, high infrastructure and maintenance costs and the public chasing newness caused the theater after a 44-year run to close doors in 1972.

Fortunately, as it turns out, this building was saved by an organ^X. Not just any organ, but this one because even though the theater had closed, a half dozen lovers of this Grand Page organ, one of which had keys to the building, would come in on Saturday mornings and nurse the organ along and play for their own enjoyment.

The building had a leaky roof and many other issues, so the band of organ affectionatos led by ^XBob Goldstine thought maybe they should try to buy the organ and move it. After consideration they decided that taking apart the 1,100 pipes that range in size between 7" to 16' tall, not to mention the snare and bass drums, cymbals, Chinese gong, and various other noise makers that are behind these two light fixtures, ^X and then finding the appropriate location to reinstall them was a non-starter, and so instead they landed on the scary idea of trying to save the whole building, and thus in 1972, even though they didn't own the building, the Embassy Theatre Foundation was formed.

Between 1972 and 1974, the theater, while never operating during that two-year period, had five different out-of-town owners. Empty and deteriorating theater was lastly owned by SportService Company

of Buffalo, New York and was headed for the wrecking ball. In a last-minute agreement in 1974, SportService agreed to sell the XEmbassy to the foundation for \$250,000. provided they could raise the money within 60 days. While I won't go through all the SAVE THE EMBASSY fundraising efforts and machinations that ensued, and that ultimately a few months extension was given, but in June of 1975 the money had been raised and the foundation now owned a building that needed LOTS of physical work and millions of dollars of upgrades. X

Fortunately, scores of volunteers with various skill sets, or even just strong backs, Xcame forward and have spent years taking apart, cleaning, restoring, recreating, and maintaining this grand theater as it looked in 1928. XEven now, fifty years after the Embassy was saved, there is a cadre of 200 volunteers management can and do call on.X One of the more recent projects was an 10 million dollar expansion of the stage to accommodate large touring companies and production events, conversion of upstairs rooms into a large ballroom, building administrative offices, putting in a rooftop patio,X and new dressing rooms for the visiting performers.

That's the very short version of this theater's 97-year history.

But part of the theater's history is the thousands of entertainers, from big bands to magicians, acrobats, comedians, rock and roll groups, traveling Broadway plays, animal acts, dance troupes, and lecturers that stood upon this stage. So just for fun,X I looked through the massive archives housed here, and I put together a list of some of performer's names that I recognized. I can tell you there were hundreds of names, especially from the vaudeville era, that

were unfamiliar to me. So, I left them off the list and here's a few that have graced this auditorium that I was familiar with.

When I was finishing these slides up the other night my wife looked at the list and said, "I can't believe the biggest most impactful legendary rock n roll band of the 1960's never played the Embassy". As you might imagine next day back here I came and combed the archives again. And by golly, somehow, I missed that as it turns out everybody important X did play the Embassy! (slide of the Monkee's)

XWe're pretty proud of this theater, and this city and appreciate your visiting us here in Fort Wayne. Thanks for your attention and enjoy your conference.