

The theater that had 9 lives

*The Hollywood Theater, an old Au Sable Forks movie palace,
may be reborn as a visitor's center*

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The Hollywood Theater, a building that has gone through more renovations than most folk can count, may be reborn yet again, this time as a regional visitor's center.

"Picture this," owner John Pattno invites you:

"You're driving down from Canada. You get off the Northway at Keeseville and motor west toward Lake Placid. The first and only stop light you hit as you head into the Adirondack Park is in Au Sable Forks," Pattno pointed out.

"So what will visitors see there? That's your gateway to all those attractions and all that money that's been spent on Lake Placid-area facilities," Pattno said.

At present, that corner is home to some severely dilapidated buildings, one on the verge of complete collapse.

Pattno, however, envisions a time in the not-too-distant future when visitors to that corner will see green lawns, a covered bridge overlooking the confluence of the Au Sable River's east and west branches, a series of solid, restored 1930s-era commercial facades — and a local museum housed in the historic theater facility.

"I don't know what to do to make this place work," Pattno admitted, "but cleaning it up is where it starts."

Pattno and his brother Mike have owned the Hollywood Theater building since July 9, 1993, in the name of their family furniture business, H. Pattno & Son. Third generation Au Sablians, the Pattno brothers have used the building as a carpet warehouse.

The theater has seen better days — and hopes to again.

"Personally, I love it," said Steven Engelhart of the Hollywood Theater building. Engelhart is executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, a nonprofit historic preservation organization headquartered in Keeseville.

"I love buildings that are odd and quirky," Engelhart elaborated, "and the Hollywood Theater certainly fills that bill. If you look around, you won't find 10 buildings in the area that were designed in the Art Deco or Streamline Moderne style.

"It's very beautiful, and very rare."

According to John Pattno, the Hollywood Theater was built in 1938, a year after the property was acquired by the Bridge Theater Inc. from Charles Marshall, who purchased it along with Frank Marshall in 1915 from the J. & J. Rogers Company. The lot was one that had been laid out in the 1892 survey of Au Sable Forks.

"Fred Pelkey and Lawrence Bean built it on a lot that had been leveled in the fire of 1925 that destroyed most of Au Sable Forks," Pattno said, "and they ran it from 1938 way up until 1970 or so. Somewhere around then it closed down.

"Then in 1978, Dick Ward came into the building. He was there to buy the old popcorn machine sitting in the lobby, something for his kids, but he just walked right past the machine and into the theater — and he was so enchanted with the place that he bought it!"

Pattno said Ward extensively refurbished the theater, operating it for several years himself and leasing it out to others for a while before closing it again, shipping off the rows of chairs to one of the movie theaters in Lake Placid, building a platform to level the downward-

sloping theatrical floor and leasing the building out to a Lake Placid sled manufacturer who used it as a factory for “just a couple of years.”

The building was sitting vacant and unused when the Pattnos bought it in mid-1993.

Friends of the North Country has become the focal point for activity surrounding the future rehabilitation of the Hollywood Theater.

“The first step in what we’re doing there,” said Scott Campbell, a staffer at Friends of the North Country, “is paying to put together a conditions report. We got a grant from Rural New York to study the building’s current condition and talk with community leaders about possible future uses, and that will lay the groundwork for whatever happens next.”

Architect Carl Sterns was hired to evaluate the building’s condition.

“For the second step, we’ve gotten a \$25,000 grant from the Adirondack Community Enhancement Program, initiated by state Sen. Ron Stafford, to restore the Art Deco exterior tiles on the building’s facade,” Campbell said.

“We’ll take them all down, lay them out inside, number and inventory them, have the damaged ones repaired, and then put them all back up. We have a company, Boston Terra Cotta, that says they can make duplicate tiles for us.

“We hope the grant will cover the tile restoration,” Campbell said. “All the figures we put down in the grant — they were just estimates.”

“We’ve already made some progress on the Hollywood Theater project,” said Ann Holland, executive director of Friends of the North Country, “but we have to go out and raise money for everything we do there, every step of the way.

“We hope to have the research done soon to get the building onto the National Historic Register,” Holland said. “Meanwhile, we’re working to repair and stabilize the building,” keeping it from any further damage in what historic architects call “a state of arrested decay.”

Ultimately, Friends of the North Country, community leaders and the building’s owners hope the Hollywood Theater will be refurbished for use as a combination regional history museum and visitor’s interpretive center — but that, Holland and Campbell both emphasized, is still a ways off.

“It’s one thing to get grants to fix the building,” Holland said. “It’s another thing to operate it.”

Postscript No. 1: Hollywood Theater changes hands

In February 2002 James Leigh Properties, a local construction company, bought the old Au Sable Forks high school building (built in 1901) from John Pattno for refurbishment as a commercial building. At the same time the company bought the old Hollywood Theater on Main Street from Pattno and his brother Mike.

When James Leigh bought the Hollywood, the company returned a \$25,000 grant from the Adirondack Community Enhancement Program for refurbishing the Art Deco tiles on the building’s facade. James Leigh estimated that the total cost for the project would have been nearly \$100,000, an expense to which it was not ready to commit.

Shirley Atkins, co-owner of James Leigh Properties, says that she and her husband have no specific plans for the Hollywood Theater building right now, though she says she daydreams of turning it back into a live, working movie theater again one day.

Postscript No. 2: Renovations begin on theater facade

In July 2003, James Leigh Properties began rebuilding the decaying façade of the Hollywood Theater. The old Art Deco tiles were removed and stored inside the building; only

four highlight tiles were left in the façade, which was rebricked with yellow glazed brick. Shirley Atkins said that the rusting marquee would be reconstructed with new sheet metal, and the roof would be examined to determine whether repairs were needed to make the building weathertight before winter.