

BACK IN TIME

Lansdale Theatre's rise and fall



For a half-century, it was the region's movie palace

By **DICK SHEARER**

Hindsight is 20-20. Monday morning quarterbacks throw no incomplete passes. Second-guessing counts for nothing.

Choose the cliché and it probably can be applied to the Lansdale Theatre which disappeared from the local scene 33 years ago. At the time of its demise, it seemed few people cared what happened to the town's most elegant movie house. Today, with all the talk about a failed performing arts center, residents with long memories wish we had another chance to save the old entertainment palace.

The Lansdale Theatre, located at W. Main St. and Towamencin Ave., was the second to bear that name. The first, erected in 1922 on Courtland Street near Railroad Avenue, was the brainchild of Edward F. Burrow and a group of investors.

The original Lansdale was the first theater in town that was built to show

motion pictures. It was boom time for silent films. The Courtland Street building was impressive enough but it came with two flaws that Burrow recognized early on: It lacked a presence on Main Street and it was exclusively a theater – there was no provision for storefronts or offices to bring in revenue when the projector wasn't rolling.

Burrow observed that the business district was spreading westward so he and his investors quickened the pace by constructing a new theater, which came to be one of the most elaborate in the Philadelphia suburbs.

It opened on March 5, 1928, to rave reviews. There wasn't much to dislike. The Spanish architectural style was all the rage in that era. The theater boasted 999 seats (one more would push it into a higher tax bracket), as well as a marble and Mercer Tile-enhanced lobby with a wall fountain. There were

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THE NEW
LANSDALE THEATRE
Main Street at Towamencin Avenue

Opens Monday, March 5

With Norma Talmadge in
"THE DOVE"

Two Shows: 6.45 and 8.45. Admission 50c to all

Starting Wednesday with Clara Bow in "GET YOUR MAN"
ADMISSIONS: 35c FOR ADULTS, 25c FOR CHILDREN
No Children in Arms Admitted Except Saturday Matinee

In the end, time wasn't on theatre's side

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beautifully inlaid doors with intricate glass that opened to the main auditorium. The walls were adorned with sconces and heavily-detailed reliefs. A massive pipe organ was one of the dominant elements but the centerpiece was the huge chandelier that hung from the middle of the arched roof.

Opening night was a Hollywood-style by-invitation-only gala. In the best tradition of the Roarin' 20s, the crowd was dressed to the nines for a showing of Norma Talmadge starring in *The Dove*.

The only negative was the fact that the Lansdale's sound equipment was back-ordered, making it necessary to feature silent films at a time when talkies were becoming the rage. Need we mention that *The Dove* was a bomb and Talmadge's career faded when she actually had to talk on screen.

That notwithstanding, the Lansdale Theatre quickly became the town's entertainment showplace. It eclipsed the older Music Hall, which was smaller and built in the 1880s for stage productions before being converted to a movie house.

The popularity of the building was not limited to the theater itself. Bitner's Pharmacy occupied one of the adjacent retail spots and was home to a soda fountain. What better place to hang out before and after the show?

The Lansdale thrived through the Depression years, World War II and the 1950s population boom. During that time, two names were synonymous with its success: Burrow and projectionist John Comfort, who was on board for four decades.



The beginning of the end came in 1964 when Burrow, then 82, died unexpectedly. His passing coincided with the arrival of the first multiplex theaters which were being built along highways – not downtown – with ample parking surrounding them.



CINEMASCOPE debuted in 1953 with the release of "The Robe", 10 years in the making, two years in production, with a cast of thousands.

Slowly the Lansdale Theatre's crowds declined. Without Burrow, first-run films were more difficult to obtain and necessary building maintenance was deferred by a succession of owners.

Even live concerts with up-and-coming talent like Barry Manilow and Hall and Oates couldn't right the ship.

First Federal Savings and Loan Association, located in the same block, owned the property in the mid-1970s and wanted to expand into the space occupied by the theater. By all accounts, the bankers had mixed feelings and a soft spot for the theater. They gave the community one last chance to support it by turning out in large numbers for a classic film series. On most nights, only a few dozen folks showed up, most to take a final look around before the walls were brought down. It sealed the theater's fate.

In 1979, a demolition crew reduced the movie house to memories. Ironically only two years later, the people of Glenside reached the conclusion that their theater, the Keswick, could be retrofitted for big-name live acts. But in Lansdale it was too late.

The Lansdale was Barrow's passion

By DICK SHEARER

It's fairly easy to pinpoint the beginning of the end for the Lansdale Theatre.

On Jan. 7, 1964, Edward F. Burrow, was found dead in his Hilltown Township home at age 82. He had been in failing health for several years.

E.F. Burrow was the face of the Lansdale Theatre from the early 1920s when he assembled a partnership to finance the first movie house by that name on Courtland Street before erecting the beloved landmark on Main Street in 1928. Eventually, he bought out his partners and became sole owner.

While Burrow poured his heart and soul into the theater, it was certainly not his first career calling. Born in Erie, he was crippled by polio as a child and went to Canada to be trained as a watchmaker.

From watchmaking he entered the world of invention. He designed a device that was used on delivery wagons in New York City to record the distance they traveled, much as a car's speedometer does today. The business became very successful and it expanded to Philadelphia where Burrow relocated.

While in Philadelphia, he invented the first spring-motivated grease cup for use on wagon and machinery wheels. Burrow formed a business based on his invention that evolved into Hunter Pressed Steel Co. (later Hunter Spring). The firm's first plant was on Pierce Street in Lansdale.

When the theater bug bit, Burrow sold his interest in the company and the Lansdale Theatre became a reality.

Burrow never married. Ironically, he also served as treasurer of First Federal Savings and Loan Association from the time of its formation



until his death. Fifteen years later, it was First Federal that owned and demolished the Lansdale Theatre.

Another mainstay at the theater was projectionist John Comfort, who worked there from opening night in 1928 until 1967 when the Lansdale's best days were behind it.

Comfort, who died in 1999, lived to age 97 and was the last living person to have worked for the Betzwood Film Studio near Valley Forge, one of the first movie studios in the country.

Comfort was responsible for preserving many of Betzwood's artifacts and donating several rare, original Betzwood films to the Library of Congress.

EDWARD F. BARROW in the lobby of the Lansdale Theatre. He owned and operated the movie house until his death in 1964.



Theater gone, chandelier lives on

Lansdale's centerpiece hangs in Oregon cabaret

By DICK SHEARER

Most important buildings have a crowning jewel. The Lansdale Theatre's was its huge chandelier that hung atop the 999-seat auditorium.

Audiences marveled at its commanding presence that cried out, "Look at me". Children refused to sit under it for fear it would crash down upon them.

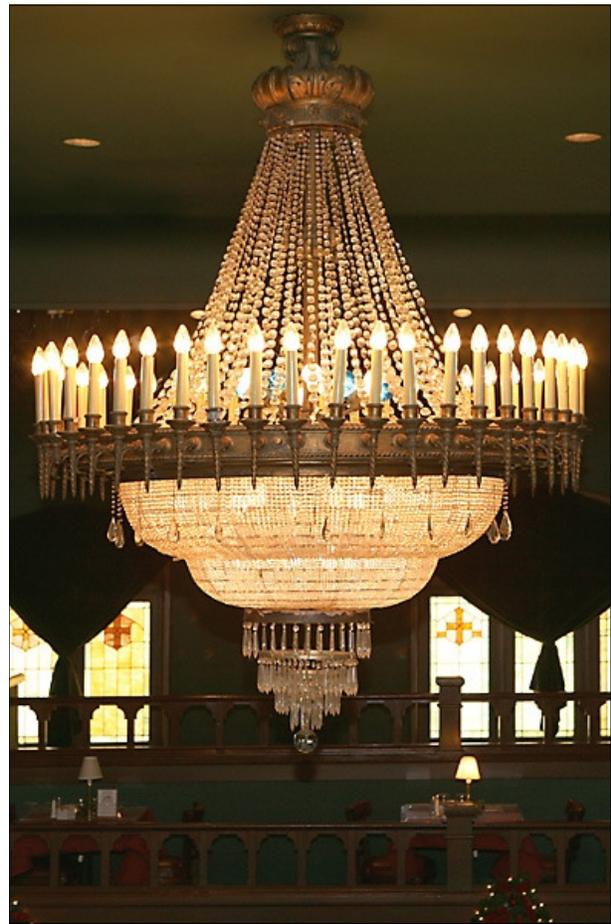
The chandelier was an object of community pride from the day the movie house opened its doors in 1928 until it closed in the late 1970s. Then it was gone, just like the theater.

For years its whereabouts were unknown. Word spread that it was salvaged before the wrecker's ball brought down the walls of the Lansdale. But what happened to it?

Back in the 1990s, a story surfaced that it had been seen somewhere on the West Coast, but where? A woman called *The Reporter* office about that time to say she and her husband spotted it in a dinner theater in Oregon but the conversation was



CRAIG HUDSON (in red shirt) is seen with a friend disassembling the main chandelier at the Lansdale Theatre shortly before the movie house was demolished in 1979. At top right, the chandelier in Ashland, Ore.



interrupted. She never called back.

Then a few years ago, thanks to the Internet, part of the mystery was solved. Simply by Googling "Lansdale Theater chandelier", up popped a photo of it hanging in the Oregon Cabaret Theater in Ashland, Ore. There it was, right over the stage of a converted Baptist church.

Since then a number of stories circulated about how the chandelier managed to travel 3,000 miles. One tale suggested it was bought at a flea market in Nebraska.

So in trying to discover the truth, we contacted the cabaret in Ashland where the general manager put us in touch with Craig Hudson, the theater's founder.

As it turns out, Hudson and a few of his friends were the ones who acquired salvage rights and removed the chandelier and other fixtures from the Lansdale. At the time he was a graduate student at Penn State, majoring in theater and a member of the American Theatre Organ Society which held meetings in Philadel-

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Pieces of Lansdale survive in Ashland

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phia. The society learned of the Lansdale's impending demise and alerted Hudson.

"I told them one day I wanted to have my own theater and if they ever knew of a main chandelier (that was available), I would like to acquire one.

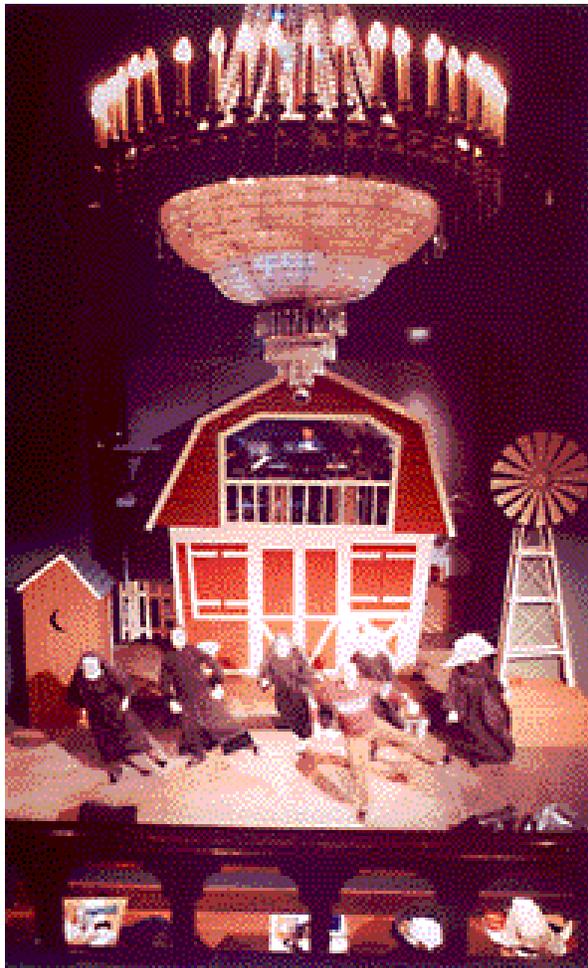
"I was able to acquire the salvage rights to the things that remained in the building. The seats and sconces surrounding the auditorium had already been removed

"In addition to the chandelier we removed the four star-shaped lights that surrounded it. They were a smaller version and one now hangs in the cabaret office. The iron spiral staircase that went up to the projection booth is now in a bed and breakfast in Ashland.

"The short Corinthian columns from the orchestra rail have been used in shows and exhibits and are



THE OREGON CABARET THEATRE is housed in a former Baptist church in Ashland, Ore. Lower left, the chandelier presides over a performance in the dinner theater.



still in storage, and I also have some of the beautiful doors with their many multi-colored recessed panels. I always think I will design a house around them.

"We removed the fountain from the lobby, a cherub on a dolphin that spits water into a shell. This is now in my garden. We also managed to find a small sample of the beautiful organ grill, a bas relief art deco urn with flowers that I have used as a centerpiece in several shows."

Hudson said it was sad to see the Lansdale follow the fate of so many grand theaters of the era. Over and over as he and his friends went about their salvage work, local residents approached him with the same comment: "What a shame".

Hudson's dream of owning his own theater became a reality in short order. He acquired the former First Baptist Church in 1982 and reopened it as a theater four years later. He still owns the building and splits time between Ashland and Mexico City. At present he is involved in restoring the Holly Theatre in Medford, Ore., which closed 30 years ago.

He said that during his salvage work in Lansdale his friend Richard Schmidt of Lansdale brought along his sound system and played a recording of the last concert in the theater. Schmidt supplied an organ for the encore film series that brought down the final curtain. Two other area residents, Bob and Barbara Molesworth of New Britain, also assisted Hudson.

As a final tribute, they managed to light the marquee one last time. When its lights faded so did the Lansdale Theatre, now reduced to memories.

Gone 70 years, 'Ursula' plays on

By DICK SHEARER

While later generations were left with lifelong impressions of the Lansdale Theatre chandelier, earlier movie-goers were equally enthralled with the massive pipe organ which was installed in time for opening night, March 5, 1928.

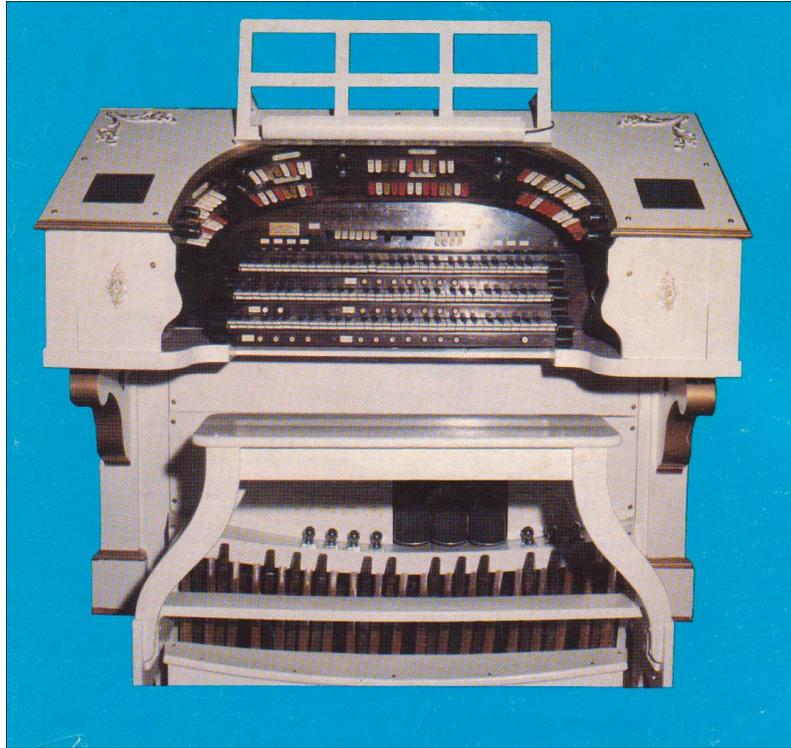
Nicknamed "Ursula" this lady is no shrinking violet. Built by the U.S. Pipe Organ Co. in Crum Lynne, Delaware County, she was – and still is – capable of belting out some ear-splitting music. And she's a survivor: Now residing at Sunneybrook Ballroom in Pottstown, she is the last remaining U.S. Pipe Organ in existence.

Ursula had plenty of work on opening night. The Lansdale was built with the intent to show talking motion pictures but because the sound equipment was on back order, a silent film, "The Dove", starring Norma Talmadge was substituted. The organ provided the suspense.

Over the next 15 years Ursula was used for concerts, live productions, recitals and some school commencements, but once talkies took over its importance to the movie house diminished.

In 1942 the organ was purchased by the Baptist Church of Phoenixville where, according to the American Theatre Organ Society, it was in service for 30 years, minus its tuned percussions and toy counter (for movie sound effects), which fortunately had been put in storage.

When the congregation decided



URSULA graced the cover of the American Theatre Organ Society's magazine during the 1980s.

to purchase a new organ in 1972, Ursula was bought by Roger and Dorothy Bloom of Downingtown, who installed it in their home. And that's where it stayed until the Blooms decided to retire to Florida a few years later.

Robert Hartenstine, owner of the Sunneybrook Ballroom at the time, heard that it was for sale and moved it to his Pottstown dance hall. It was first played there on Oct. 3, 1981.

Since that time, the ballroom has gone through several reincarnations and owners but Ursula continues to play on. In fact, the

percussions and toy counter have now been reinstalled, providing all the original bells and whistles.

In the final days of the Lansdale Theatre, the late Richard Schmidt of Delaware Avenue loaned his own self-built pipe organ for use during the last classic films series. Although it didn't match Ursula's punch, it provided memories of days gone by.

(Information for this story was provided by society member Dennis Boyles and publications of the American Theatre Organ Society.)

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Oregon Cabaret Theatre: www.oregoncabaret.com
- American Theatre Organ Society: www.atos.org