



IT WAS A GRAND NIGHT - Event draws packed crowd, benefits Riverbender Community Center, Crisis Food Center

by Leanne Guthrie, Reporter
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ALTON - It was a unique way to celebrate New Year's Eve, but many around the Alton region had a grand time Monday evening thanks to a unique party for charity in the downtown area.

A packed crowd marked New Year's Eve as part of the rebirth of the Alton Grand Theatre on Monday. The event benefitted Riverbender Community Center and the Crisis Food Pantry in Alton.

The decor boasted a truly historic setting within the old theater. The inside of the stripped-down historic theater was decorated with lights that when paired with the exposed brick and high ceilings made for a stunning environment. Guests were treated to hors-d'oeuvre and a champagne toast at midnight. A DJ and silent movies were also some highlights of the evening. The event's purpose was simply to bring the community together to see the theater after many years and raise money for charity.

A visit to the theater was a nostalgic experience for many who attended the event. Attendees mingled and shared their own stories of favorite memories experienced at the theater before it closed in 1977. The theater was brought to life once again on New Year's Eve, even if things looked different inside.

“We’re working on fixing it up. What we end up doing with the space is up to the community, it's for everyone.” said owner John Simmons.

A suggestions box was out at the party so the hundreds of attendees could offer their own ideas of what they hoped would become of the theater.

“We’re going to sift through every single idea submitted. We want the ideas and we’re curious to see what the people come up with,” said Simmons.

While a final decision on the future of the Grand Theatre hasn’t been made, those who attended the party hope to see more events be held at the theater. They hope more opportunities arise so they can continue to watch construction progress within the building.

John and Jayne Simmons bought the theater earlier in 2018 with hopes of restoring the building. They are both from Alton and passionate about the downtown area and the Alton community. And with such a successful and unique party they hosted on New Year's Eve there is surely much more exciting things to come for them and the iconic Alton Grand Theatre in 2019.

The Grand Theatre Fact Sheet

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| Property Overview: | The property now known as the Grand Theatre, was original built in 1898 as the John Karel Carriage Manufacturing building. It transformed into the Biograph Theatre in 1909 and the Habit Theatre in 1914. |
| Grand Theatre Overview: | The Grand Theatre was opened in 1920 as a state-of-the art facility. It took 10 months to complete construction. It was the largest theatre in downtown Alton and the last theatre built in Alton during the golden age of great movie palaces. The proscenium arch was 33 feet wide, and the stage was three stories high. It is said that the building cost \$150,00 to construct. The theatre originally showed silent films and vaudeville acts. The silent-movie era ended with the presentation of the talking picture <i>State Street Sadie</i> in December 1928. |
| Address: | 130 Market Street, Alton, Illinois 62002 |
| Seating Capacity: | The original seating capacity was 1,400. To accommodate an orchestra and vaudeville performances, seating was reduced to just over 1,000. |
| Opening: | The theatre opened on December 4, 1920. The first feature film was <i>The Sin That Was His</i> , starring William Faversham. A 10-piece orchestra accompanied the movies until 1925 when an organ was installed. |
| Boom Years: | The theatre was the most popular during the 1930s and 1940s during the Great Depression and World War II. Movie goers used entertainment as a way to escape the stressful events of real life at the time. <i>Gone with the Wind</i> was one of the most popular film attractions. Crowds waiting in line for hours to see the first Beatles movie in 1964, <i>A Hard Day's Night</i> . |
| Decline: | The theatre began its decline with the advent of television, and it closed in 1977. <i>The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat</i> , which was the first animated film to receive an X rating in the United States, was the last film shown at the Grand Theatre. The theatre was repurposed as a haunted theatre in the 1990s. |
| Various Uses: | Over the years, the theatre was also used for World War II bond rallies, cooking classes, a haunted house, among others. |
| Size: | The current structure is about 11,000 square feet. |
| Builders: | In 1920, the Grand General Contractor was H.H. Unterbrink. In 1938, it was remodeled by Claude B. Rubens, Goodlow S. Moore and architect D.N. Sandine. |
| Interesting Fact: | The theatre owners accommodated Robert Wadlow, Alton's Gentle Giant, by providing him his own seat at the back of the theatre by removing two seats in front of him to make room for Wadlow's long legs. Original ticket prices for holidays, weekends, and evenings were box seats 50c, lower floor 30c, balcony 20c and children 10c. 612,000 bricks were used to construct the Grand Theatre. There was a fire in 1924 that did extensive damage to the property. |
| Various Owners: | The building was first owned by John Karel in 1898. W.T. Sampson opened the site as the Biograph Theatre in 1909. In 1920, the Grand Theatre was owned by Alton Amusement Co. In 1924, William Sauvage purchased the building. In 1930, Great States Theater took it over. In 1970, Clarence N Kulp purchased the building, and Ed McPike later purchased the property. Today, the Grand is owned by John and Jayne Simmons. |

Primary source of information is from the Hayner Genealogy and Local History Library.



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