

## CAMPUS THEATRE

*Historical Narrative researched and written by Jennie Alkire for Texas Historical Commission  
Recorded Texas Historic Landmark Application, 2009, Denton County*

### I. CONTEXT

As related by Barry Vermillion for the ‘Pinckneyville Project’, from 1846 through 1850, Denton County initiated four different county seats. Pinckneyville, named in honor of the first governor of Texas, was the first site chosen, in 1846, this site was then replaced by the ‘First Alton’ in 1848. Probably in search of a reliable water source, the county seat was again relocated in 1850, in a site called ‘Old Alton,’ just a few miles south-south-west of the ‘First Alton.’ The final site for Denton County’s courthouse was located in Denton in November of 1856.<sup>1</sup> Named for a Methodist preacher who was killed by Indians in the area, Denton rests on 100 acres of land that “Hiram Cisco, William Woodruff, and William Loving donated”<sup>2</sup> for the city’s creation in 1857, however, the city was not incorporated until 1866.<sup>3</sup> A commission composed of Otis G. Welch, Charles C. Lacy, and Joseph A. Carroll laid out the city, planning the original courthouse on the north side of the central square.<sup>4</sup> It wasn’t until 1896 that the stone courthouse, constructed with native quarried stone from a site just a few miles north of the current city site, was built.<sup>5</sup>

The historic cinematic function of the Campus Theatre is based on the developments by the Englishman Edward James Muybridge (born Muggeridge) in 1877 to 1878, of taking multiple photographs and copying them onto discs which were spun round to produce the illusion of action, using a machine called a zoopraxiscope.<sup>6</sup> The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition provided the opportunity for Muybridge to introduce the technology to the public in “the Science of Animal Locomotion in the Zoopraxographical Hall, build specially for that

purpose in the “Midway Plaisance” arm of the exposition.”<sup>7</sup> Using his zoopraxiscope to inform the paying public meant that “the Hall [was] the very first commercial movie theater.”<sup>8</sup> However, Thomas Edison is credited with the first public showing of film. The Brooklyn Institute was the location of Edison’s debut with the Kinetoscope on May 9, 1883; which utilized the film he had produced with his Kinetograph. Though only one person at a time could view the films in his Kinetoscopes, parlors for viewing were opened in major cities.<sup>9</sup> Bringing the cinematic experience closer to how it was experienced in 1949 at the Campus Theater was the invention in France by two brothers, Auguste and Louis Lumière. Their 1895 invention, the Cinématographe, could both record film in motion and project it upon a large screen for viewing,<sup>10</sup> foreshadowing years of inventors improving on the concept of recording and displaying motion pictures for the public.

When films were first developed, the technology used internationally was based on still pictures and used celluloid film, and simply captured motion as it occurred.<sup>11</sup> As films moved toward larger audience presentations, the experience moved from simply silent presentations to included theater provided musical accompaniment to then actual scored music for the films.<sup>12</sup> The 1920’s heralded the ‘talkies’, where sound was recorded that played in synchronization with the film. As the efforts of imitating a life-like presentation evolved, coloration developed from hand-painted frames to production of images on film in color. This is the phase of technological achievement reached by 1949, when the Campus Theatre was opened to the public. Cinema, according to Shipman, has been “in the thrall of literature and the stage – which is why it was considered an art form subsidiary of both.”<sup>13</sup> Shipman writes that “no other visual art form is so dependent on the written word. The more a film is discussed the better it is known”<sup>14</sup>

Hall and Hasbrook noted that the United States involvement in World War II provided the opportunity for “movies and newsreels [to] unite the citizens at home.”<sup>15</sup> Because citizens were finding solace in ‘community,’ the downtown strengthened its role through cinema and opera venues. Hall and Hasbrook relate that at this time “sometimes theaters were built in clusters. [And that] promotional gimmicks added to the fun.”<sup>16</sup> As the post World War II era evolved, from the 1950’s through the 1970’s, the mass production of cars, and other goods, changed the way in which citizens sought amusement. With the advent of the “car culture...urban flight and [the] general deterioration of inner cities”<sup>17</sup> changed the urban landscape from central city emphasis to peripheral locations, emphasizing drive-ins and strip-malls. During this time TV grew to be the primary entertainment media, which led to “thousands of old theaters [being] taken down to make new, efficient business space; others just stood vacant.”<sup>18</sup> It was another twenty years, in the 1990’s, before the tide would turn for downtowns, as urban blight increased with the number of vacant buildings, so did the interest in revitalizing the central business district. In response to the renewed interest in the downtowns, ““Main Street Projects” encourage[d] citizen interest in downtowns as fun places to go, [providing a much needed] adrenaline shot for many historic theaters.”<sup>19</sup> During this time it was not uncommon for the old theaters to get “upgraded equipment and show first-run movies while others thrive[d] on classic films and or live entertainment.”<sup>20</sup>

## I. OVERVIEW

Walter B. McClurkan purchased a parcel of the land from J.B. and Alice Cox on October 11, 1912, and a parcel from J. C. Coit on February 16, 1914. Lee Pool and J.B. Cox had purchased the land from S.S. Patterson and wife on February 2, 1912<sup>21</sup>. Prior to a lease in 1948,

the “corner of Hickory and Cedar Streets was occupied by the Denton Record-Chronicle.”<sup>22</sup> On April 16, 1948, retrospective until October 1, 1947, a fifty year lease agreement was entered into record at the Denton County records by Walter B. McClurkan for Mrs. May McClurkan Boyd and husband Dixie Boyd, Frances May Deavenport, Mrs. Jessie Lorraine Deavenport Simms and husband John Simms, Jr., and Mrs. Louise Deavenport Harris and husband Whit George Harris with Karl Hoblitzelle, president of Texas Consolidated Theatres, Incorporated of Delaware<sup>23</sup>. The land then sold to Frank G Newman and Robert Hulstrand on November 28, 1977<sup>24</sup>, who transferred the lease to ABC Interstate Theatres, Inc, of Delaware on Oct. 11, 1978<sup>25</sup>. The lease of the building transferred again, when Chicago based Plitt Theaters bought out Delaware based ABC Interstate Theatres by September 6, 1985<sup>26</sup>, when Plitt Theaters had sub-leased the building to a live show promoter, Heart of Texas Concerts.<sup>27</sup> Newman and Hulstrand sold the land to Aubrey L Pate, Sr. on January 4, 1979<sup>28</sup>. Aubrey Pate subsequently died July 17, 1987, and the property probated in April of 1988<sup>29</sup>, valued at \$134,500.00<sup>30</sup>. November 16, 1990, the Denton Community Theatre assisted with negotiations with Aubrey and Lucille Pate’s heirs, Gilbert A Pate and Marilyn Pate Bradford, to enable the Greater Denton Arts Council to purchase the building, providing opportunity for the renovation for multiple community arts activities<sup>31</sup> in 1994-95; the ongoing part the building plays in the community today.

While there are many “early American architecture” building styles that have their roots in other cultures that have been built in Texas, “there is no, nor has there ever been, a “Texas” architecture or Texas “style” per se.”<sup>32</sup> Given that, according to architect and historian Richard Payne, “the brief period between 1880 and 1930 was the golden age of architecture in Texas. ... since about 1950 there has been a general decline, ...in much of rural Texas,”<sup>33</sup> the 1949 construction of the Art Moderne industrial building, the Campus Theatre, provides an excellent

example of the end of an era in Texas architectural history. This building style reflects the fascination of the Western World with the use of the faster modes transportation than were prevalent before the 1930's. Cragoe notes that over time, rooflines undergo stylistic changes, and that "the development of tall buildings...led first to the use of heavily ornamented cornices and later to flat roofs...and [flat roofs] were a key element of the Modern style."<sup>34</sup> In fact, she notes, "modern architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized above all by the use of boxy shapes, including flat roofs, which stress function above all other considerations."<sup>35</sup>

Evidence supports that Moderne buildings have characteristics that are found in the design of the Campus Theater. The Campus Theatre, located in the downtown area, at 214 West Hickory in Denton, Texas was constructed in 1949, operating as a cinematic theater until its closing on March 21, 1985<sup>36</sup>. Standing in the business district, on the corner of Cedar and West Hickory, the yellow-brick faced Moderne building boasted the still-existing exterior features of an extensive metal and neon Art Deco marquee. The marquee has an integrated awning over the truncated corner three-bay entry comprised of glass and aluminum, hovering over tiled sidewalls with aluminum and glass show-bill enclosures and the glass and rose marble clad ticket booth. Built in 1949, on a solid concrete foundation, the three level commercial brick building is 78' wide at the front and 100' deep<sup>37</sup> Campus Theatre, with its sixty foot wide and one-hundred-ten foot long auditorium<sup>38</sup> has remained structurally intact. Randy Mallory noted that the Campus Theatre was built "to cater to the college crowd, it numbered among a handful of state-of-the-art movie houses in the Southwest."<sup>39</sup>

Architects for the Campus Theatre were the Dallas firm of Pettigrew-Worley & Co..<sup>40</sup> The firm, headed by H.F. Pettigrew and John A. Worley were considered experts in theatre construction. In addition to the Campus Theatre in Denton, Texas, the firm worked with

Interstate Theater on several projects. In Houston, Texas, they designed projects for over ten years. Starting with the construction of the River Oaks Theatre in 1939 and continuing through 1946, at least, they were responsible for the design of the Santa Rosa, Broadway, Fulton and the Garden Oaks<sup>41</sup> in Houston. Other firms involved with the building of the original theater included the engineering firm of Chappell, Stokes & Brenneke Co.; the general contractors P&M Construction Co.; and Austin Brothers, the constructors of the foundation and piers for the building.

The entrance doors, with their aluminum surrounds, and the custom lighted handrails in the interior of the building, were crafted by the Dallas, Texas firm of Potter Art Iron Studios. Currently in its 85<sup>th</sup> year,<sup>42</sup> the family owned firm, Potter Art Iron Studios designed and crafted the cast aluminum handrails for the Campus Theatre. The embedded light tube design in the handrails on the stairwells on both levels had also been utilized in 1939, in the River Oaks Theater in Houston, Texas.<sup>43</sup>

Notable scenic artist, then Dallas, Texas based, Eugene Gilboe designed the Art Deco exuberant interiors and oversaw the implementation of his designs for murals (the original murals are currently covered with a 'fresh layer of paint' that duplicates his design) in the interior of the theater. Gilboe's original work currently exist in several reading rooms adjacent to the library on the second floor of the Main Building at the University of Texas at Austin.<sup>44</sup> He is the representative artist of the 'Moderne movement' of scenic painters in the collection housed at the University of Minnesota.<sup>45</sup> His work at the Campus Theatre carried the exuberance of the Art Deco entrance throughout the interior spaces, too. The design/construction team chosen by Interstate Theaters represented the finest local firms for each of their disciplines.

Denton, Texas has a history of enjoying cinemas, which pre-dates 1930. Two cinema theaters, controlled by Publex Theaters in February of 1930, the Palace Theater and the Dreamland Theater, were downtown businesses. Ritz Theater began operating, downtown too, in 1934. The Ritz Theater operated only part-time within two years and was remodeled into The Plaza in 1937. Interstate Theater's first foray into Denton was with the Texas Theater in 1935. The movie mogul group, Interstate Theaters, operated 250 movie palaces in the state of Texas<sup>46</sup>, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with over 400 show houses across the nation<sup>47</sup>. Denton had these four theaters operating downtown at end of 1939.<sup>48</sup>

Following the national trends in film, the themes of cinema underwent a shift. After 1945, following the World War II, movies became less about 'escapism' and turned to more realistic storylines. The first movie shown at the Campus Theater, *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), fit this 'realism,' in its connection with the times. This movie was also the "first American comedy filmed extensively on European locations."<sup>49</sup> The movie also starred a former Denton resident, Ann Sheridan. From the beginning, the Campus Theatre tied the community together, as its function dovetailed with the people of the community.

During the 1950's and 1960's, as other downtown theaters were suffering to stay open, the Campus Theatre stayed vibrant. Credit for this achievement is given to longtime Campus manager J.P. Harrison (1884-1974). "Harrison's career "in show business," as he called it, began when he did promotional for vaudeville shows."<sup>50</sup> Interstate Theatre group brought Harrison to Denton to manage the group of three theaters that they already owned, which were also located in the downtown district. Harrison championed for the establishment of the Campus Theatre, and became its first manager; a position he held until the late sixties, when he retired at the age of eighty-two.<sup>51</sup> J.P. Harrison utilized his experiences in vaudeville promotions to promote the

theaters under his charge. He was so adept at it that he received the movie industry's Quigley award on two separate occasions. As prestigious as the Quigley awards, in 1950 and 1952,<sup>52</sup> are within the film industry, the citizens of Denton rewarded Harrison with their customer loyalty and fond memories. As Hall and Hasbrook recount, even though he was known to award prizes of stray pets sometimes, "everybody loved him for the children's shows he presented on Saturday mornings."<sup>53</sup>

Arriving in Denton in 1938,<sup>54</sup> Mr. Harrison's primary job was as theater manager for the three cinema houses which were owned by the Interstate Theater Group. Mr. J.P. Harrison was instrumental in the growth of theaters in Denton, and was very appreciated by the community for his talents of providing entertainment on Saturday mornings at the theater, and also for his business acumen. As was encouraged by Karl Hoblitzelle, the owner and developer of the Campus Theatre's parent group, Interstate Theater, Mr. Harrison was dedicated to the betterment of the local community. Mr. Harrison's activities included such diverse community involvement as founder and first president of the Denton County Pointer and Setter Club; member of the local Kiwanis Club; honorary member of the Denton Downtown Optimist Club;<sup>55</sup> and was also instrumental in swaying other local businessmen in the civic development of nearby Lake Dallas in 1963<sup>56</sup>. In a copy of his self-penned obituary, Mr. Harrison also writes with pride of his contribution in directing the "George Bragg Civic Boy's Choir," and raising funds to help provide air conditioning for the elementary schools of Denton.<sup>57</sup>

After Mr. Harrison's retirement, in 1966, Occupancy Certificates issued for the city of Denton listed McClurkan Estate as the owner in 1970, with occupancy at 1300, the manager was Betty Anderson, and it was used as Campus Theatre. In 1985, the Heart of Texas Concerts were



the tenants, Plitt Theaters was the owner and live concerts the designated use, with the balcony seating not to be used.

The Campus Theatre maintained its viability through times that had closed many theaters in town and nationwide. It was not until 1986 that the owners closed the doors. Within ten years, the building was re-embraced by Denton as “as a venue for live performances and since then has had huge impact on the town. Booked over 300 nights a year,”<sup>58</sup> the Theater has stimulated the “nightlife and development of the downtown area. It has helped Denton in another way too by serving as a catalyst to unite the various arts groups, each of which used to try to go it alone.”<sup>59</sup> According to Hall and Hasbrook, the people have a “sense of ownership about the place...where they shared popcorn or held hands with their first love.”<sup>60</sup> Hall and Hasbrook opinioned that it is “as if memories of larger than life characters have taken up residence in the bricks and mortar, judging by the audiences and managers, even young people crave to share that nostalgia.”<sup>61</sup>

Interest in re-opening the Campus Theatre as a community oriented theater venue began in 1990. The Greater Denton Arts Council raised funds for the theater project, including matching grant challenges, donated funds, and utility forgiveness. The city and Greater Denton Arts Council drew up final papers, and in 1994, the renovations on the Campus Theatre began. By July 1995, the Theatre was re-opened in service to the community.

Among the interior and exterior improvements stated in the 1993 Historic Landmark Zoning Petition for the city of Denton, Texas, the brick on the west wall of the building was treated to retard deterioration in 1973, and repairs to the flat composition roof were completed in 1992.<sup>62</sup> Denton City Planning and Zoning approved the request that the building, known as the Campus Theatre, receive local designation as an historic property; the structure was registered as H-93-002, on October 13, 1993.<sup>63</sup>

On July 5, 1994, architect Alan Nelson and the general contractor Steel-Freeman, Inc., of Fort Worth, Texas, began the physical work involved in remodeling the 1,350 seat<sup>64</sup> cinema theatre into a 300 seat live-venue theater<sup>65</sup>. The back wall of the auditorium was removed, as was the block of restrooms along the west wall on the first floor to allow for the new seating arrangement and to provide an emergency exit along the west wall. All seating was removed to be replaced by new seating in the auditorium on the first floor and an open area for the lighting and sound management during performances on the second level. Along the east exterior wall, a two-story addition was constructed. The ell includes new dressing rooms, stage access, actor restrooms, and costume final-prep space. This compatible addition was added in such a way as to be reversible and is apparent in the exterior brick color and design, and the support beam for the ell is obvious and ‘freestanding’ to the original structure, as per Secretary of the Interiors’ Standards. Additionally on the exterior east wall, a brick stairwell has been added to the emergency exit door for the auditorium.

Many of the original nuances of the Campus Theatre were left in place during the remodeling such as the original custom aluminum-framed glass doors at the entrance. The original marquee was totally refurbished during the remodel, showcasing the detail of smooth surfaces and curved elements that are the hallmark of the Art Deco style.

Many unique details of the original structure remain, even after the 1994-95 remodeling. Small details, evidence of the nuances of the cinematic experience, dating from 1949, provide continuity with the history of the building for those who, today, work at the building daily, participate in productions, and theater goers, alike. The many examples of craftsmanship, which currently remain in the building, dating from its original 1949 completion, continue to attest to that era’s renowned pride in workmanship.

## II. SIGNIFICANCE

The Campus Theatre, *though not listed in the National Register of Historic Places*, is referenced on page 46, in the Multiple Property Survey for Denton, Texas, in the National Register for Historic Places. Registered by the Keeper on December 12, 2000; the Campus Theatre is listed as an example of the ‘two-part Commercial Block Moderne building’ in downtown Denton. Listed in that National Register document as ‘214 W. Hickory,’ it is currently recorded as ‘200 W. Hickory’ in the City of Denton’s Historic Landmark Zoning Petition.<sup>66</sup>

The Campus Theatre provided an anchor for community life in downtown Denton, in part because of the leadership of J.P. Harrison. The native of Sherman, Texas<sup>67</sup> was adept at combining his skill for showmanship with civic service. In a letter to the editor of the Denton Record-Chronicle, in June of 1995, long after his retirement, on April 1, 1966,<sup>68</sup> J.P. Harrison was remembered as an instrumental economic and humanitarian force in Denton, Texas. J.P. Harrison was born February 19, 1884 and died on September 30, 1974.<sup>69</sup> He was move to Denton from Amarillo, Texas, in the capacity of city manager for Interstate Theaters, in 1938. When Mr. Harrison moved to Denton, three theaters were placed under his tutelage, all of them downtown; the Palace, Dreamland, and the Texas<sup>70</sup> (still standing as the Fine Arts Theatre building, on the West side of the downtown square, a scant two blocks from the Campus Theater). Mike Sitz, a friend and former employee of Interstate Theaters, recounts Mr. Harrison’s leadership in the Chamber of Commerce, the Denton Pointer and Setter Club, the Texas Wildlife Federation Congress of Sportsman, the Denton Downtown Kiwanis Club and an honorary member of the Denton Downtown Optimist Club, and the Citizen’s Water Committee.<sup>71</sup>

The leadership he exhibited in his civic life mirrored the leadership he brought to his work as a theater manager. He is credited with having been the primary force in Interstate Theaters selecting downtown Denton to receive one of the “28 largest theaters in Texas.”<sup>72</sup> Mr. Harrison was the city manager of the Interstate Theater’s three other cinemas in Denton at the time, however he took on the personal management of the Campus Theatre once it was complete. The Dreamland and the Palace were closed upon the opening of the Campus, in keeping with anti-trust laws in place. His leadership proved to be noteworthy, as he received the Quigley Award for the “most outstanding exploitation, advertising, and publicity campaigns on motion pictures,”<sup>73</sup> twice. Maintaining his unique style of promotion, he created one of the longest lasting legacies of the modern era in downtown Denton. The degree with which Mr. Harrison was involved with the community is revealed in the unusual activities with which he is credited. He persuaded “John Wayne and a busload of top movie personalities [to come] to Denton to help in the war [World War II] cause,”<sup>74</sup> he assisted actress Nancy Gates and singer Pat Boone in starting their careers, helped secure a water source for the city of Denton, and participated in raising funds for air conditioning at the Denton State School. He is well known for creating and maintained ‘Children’s Shows’ on Saturday mornings at the Campus Theater, and provided ‘prizes’ for the children there; which were sometimes live animals.<sup>75</sup> At his shows on Saturday mornings, he also provided the opportunity for the children to select volumes from a used book collection he kept for the purpose.

Harrison also engaged the local business, partnering with them in mutual promotional campaigns. He as noted for his involvement, a few of the different joint promotions provide clarity on the variety of ways he sought to promote not only the Campus Theatre, but also other local businesses. For his promotion of the show “Onionhead,” he worked with a grocery down

the street from the theater. The grand opening of the theater was announced with a winner writing contest for the “best resume of eight newspaper articles, which have been appearing in the Record-Chronicle weekly.”<sup>76</sup> Balloons filled with paper slips that could be redeemed at over 35 area businesses were released on opening day. The Campus Grill, at the time across the street from the new Campus Theatre, took the opportunity to remodel and scheduled their grand opening for the same October 5<sup>th</sup> date. A local dress shop, H.M. Russell and Sons, held an evening fashion show at the Theatre on October 12, 1949.<sup>77</sup> His legacy was so strong, that his retirement from the Campus Theatre in Denton, Texas was written about in the Waco, Texas newspaper. Waco is over one hundred miles from Denton. His work in Waco, which he had left in 1935 after twenty years as manager of the Orpheum cinema, had endeared him to that populace, too.<sup>78</sup>

The dedication of Mr. J.P. Harrison to the community is mirrored by the community today, in their continued care for the Art Moderne and Art Deco structure. The stability of the structure has been both physical and, for the community, emotional. The longstanding civic ownership of this building can be attested to by the short four-year period which it sat idle between the 1986 closing of the structure and the 1990 commencement of efforts to re-occupy the structure as a live-performance venue;<sup>79</sup> housing two vibrant community arts organizations. This structure is an excellent testament of the communities entertainment needs in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, before television became prevalent. The Campus Theatre continues to fulfill the community’s needs as a live-performance venue in an era of two-dimensional video media prevalence.

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#### IV. DOCUMENTATION

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78 Waco Tribune-Herald, p 2, 1966, Courthouse on the Square Museum Archive Collection.

79 Denton Record-Chronicle, That's the ticket: Campus Theatre renovations reflect community-wide effort, July 2, 1995.