

emerald

Preserving a bit of Eugene

By Marian Green
Of the Emerald

Eugene may have its first historic intersection if federal authorities approve two downtown buildings for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Ax Billy Department Store building, and the McDonald Theater building will join the Schaefer building, which became part of the national register in 1978, making the intersection of 10th Avenue and Willamette Street a three-cornered historic area, says Judith Rees, the Eugene historic preservationist.

Notification from the Keeper of the National Register is expected in July, Rees says.

"Architecturally, Eugene does not have a lot of early buildings left," Rees says. "This intersection is relatively unique."

The buildings — all constructed in the early 1900s — were the business ventures of four Schaefer brothers — Frances, George, Charles and Albert, who purchased the Ax Billy dry goods store, originally located at Broadway and Willamette streets.

Local folklore has it that the store got its name from the original owner's broken English. Whenever a customer wanted an item, he would say "Ax (ask) Billy," says Rees.

She says their business "fared very well," and in 1910, the brothers moved their store to the present building at the northeast corner of 10th Avenue and Willamette Street. Ax Billy soon became a downtown fixture and was advertised as "the largest department store in the state outside of Portland."

The cream-colored, terra cotta brick building, designed in the Chicago Commercial style, offered two-stories worth of goods, ranging from Buster Brown shoes and Simmons' kid gloves to groceries, flour and feed, according to the nomination form.

Native Eugenean Ethan Newman, 71, who retired from his position as Eugene postmaster last year, remembers the Ax Billy and the intersection well.

"That department store was quite an institution," Newman says. "I remember my mother taking us kids in and getting us outfitted for school."

One childhood memory stands out vividly, he says. "About once a year, Buster Brown in his suit and Tyke, the dog with the circle around one eye, would come into town and perform for us," Newman says.

Newman and his classmates would get the afternoon off from school, and small "crackers," a tin toy that snaps when pressed, would be passed out.

The streets at that time were partially paved, and Newman, riding his Shetland pony, used to share the streets with clanging streetcars in the early 1920s.

Ax Billy — painted in the 1970s with murals depicting the store's earlier days — is owned by the Eugene Renewal Agency, which is taking proposals to rehabilitate and renovate the store for private use, Rees says. Proposals must be in line with established federal and city guidelines for national register listings, she says.

The McDonald Theater building, also considered for the national register, houses the still-operating theater and seven other businesses — just as it did when it was constructed in 1925, according to the nomination form.

The movie palace — designed by Portland architect Lee Thomas — was originally called the Lowell Theater in honor of Lt. Lowell Smith of the United States Army aviation corps, Newman says. The corps, which had several members stationed near Eugene to fight forest fires, stopped off in Eugene before taking off on its first around-the-world flight, he says.

When Aaron McDonald, who collaborated with Charles Schaefer on the McDonald building, died shortly before the theater's opening, Smith asked that the name be changed to honor McDonald.

The theater received much attention from the local newspapers at its "gala" opening 57 years ago today, with detailed descriptions of the grand events and of the theater's ornate decorations.

The McDonald's first film feature was "Madame Sans Gene," starring Gloria Swanson. Currently, the theater is showing "If You Could See What I Hear."

"The McDonald for many years was *the* theater," Newman says. "You could buy a Coke for 5 cents and go to the show for a quarter — 5 cents if you went in the afternoon."

The McDonald also played its part during the depression, Newman says.

"The McDonald Theater, during hard times, during the 30s, would have dish nights," he says. And sometimes a cash prize would be raffled off, he adds.

The McDonald building was a mix of Classical, Mediterranean and Nordic architectural influences, according to the nomination form.

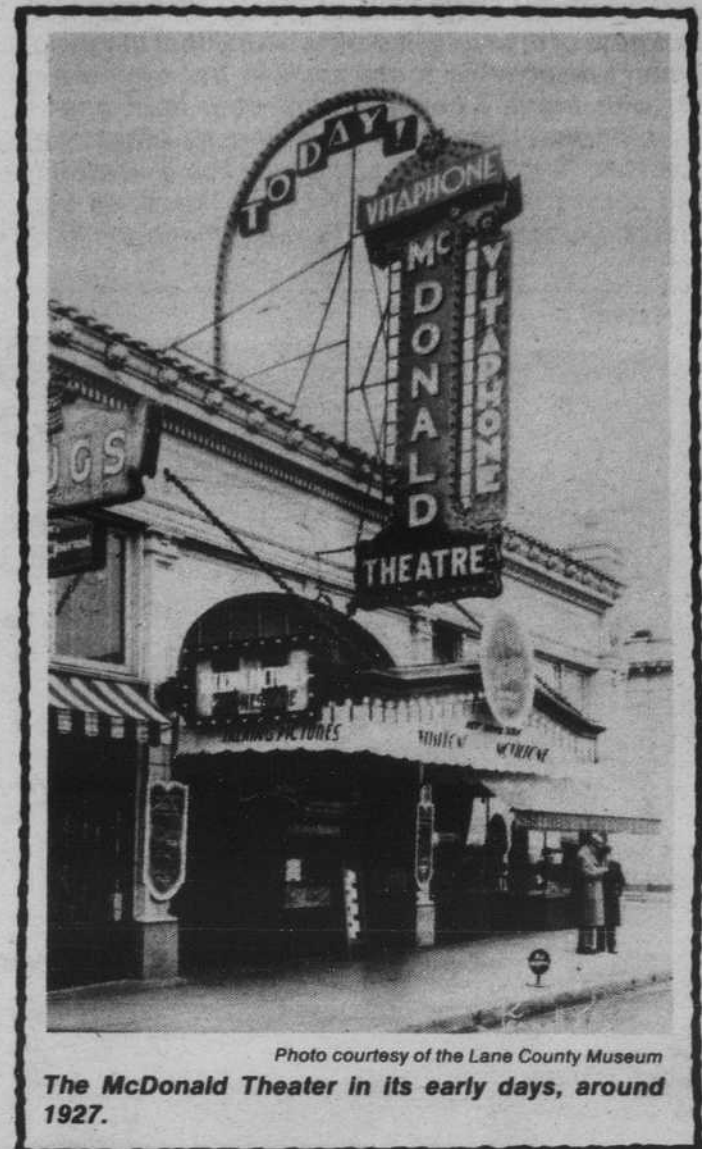


Photo courtesy of the Lane County Museum

The McDonald Theater in its early days, around 1927.

The outside walls used to sport a Mediterranean decorative tile roof and two piers topped by a pedestal and urn. The piers are lower now and bear neither the pedestal nor the urn.

Still existing is a row of open-mouthed lion heads that circles the top of the outside wall, indicating the classical influence of the building.

The original etched glass ticket booth was dismantled in 1971 in favor of a ticket table inside the lobby. However, restoration of the booth would not be difficult, and the display windows with black marble panels still are intact, the nomination form states.

A double ramp leading up to the balcony and lounge dominates the inside of the theater. Five arches spread out from the ramp from a base of iron-grilled openings, wrought by the Eugene Foundry, according to the nomination form.

Hand-painted murals depicting five old Norse tales adorned the theater walls before they were plastered over.

The large Wurlitzer organ provided entertainment between showings. The organ was donated to Willamette University, but the iron organ grilles, highlighted with gold and Oriental motifs, still rise from the floor to ceiling.

The Schaefer building — completed in 1929 — was placed on the national register in 1978. The building is designed in an Art Deco style, the "only example of that style in Eugene" and an "excellent example on the West Coast," says Rees.

During the Schaefer's heyday, Rees says the Eugene Commercial Club, a forerunner of the Eugene Chamber of Commerce, was doing "a great deal of promotion of the city as a wonderful place to live."

"Things were pretty good here," Newman agrees. "There was a big boom here in the '20s."



Murals painted on the old Ax Billy storefront depict a scene from the past. The building was built around 1910

Walking tour shows city's historic homes

Celebration of National Historic Preservation Week begins Sunday with the second annual walking tour of homes in the east Skinner Butte area.

The self-guided tour will be held between noon and 4 p.m., and the five homes open for viewing will feature period flower arrangements.

A garden party also is scheduled at the Shelton-McMurphy House, 303 Willamette St., from 1-5 p.m.

The tour begins at Celeste Campbell Senior Center, 155 High St., and tax-deductible tickets can be purchased there for \$2 per person, \$5 per family and \$1 for seniors. The houses are within walking distance, and canopies will cover the garden party if it rains.

The tour is sponsored by the city of Eugene historic review board, the Lane County Museum and the Lane County Historical Society, with assistance from

the Junior League of Eugene. Money raised from the event will support the historical society's special fund for the county museum.

Other events during the week include a bus tour of historic Eugene on Wednesday from 9 a.m. to noon. The tour leaves the Lane County Museum, 730 W. 13th Ave., and costs \$2.50. For ticket information, call 345-2448 or 687-4239.

Two lectures on the National Building

Museum will be presented at the University by Bates Lowry, director of the National Building Museum.

"Filling a National Need" is scheduled for Monday at 8 p.m. in Room 177 Lawrence. "Building Building" will be presented on Tuesday at 10:30 a.m. in Room 107 Lawrence Hall.

The lectures are sponsored by the School of Architecture and Allied Arts' historic preservation program.