

Reviving theaters across Eastern Oregon

By Jennifer Colton
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In the early 20th century, small theaters dotted Eastern Oregon to bring vaudeville, musical, and theatric acts to towns both big and small. With the rise of television and cinema, many of those theaters closed down or transformed. Now, four separate theaters are in the process of being brought back.

THE BAKER ORPHEUM, BAKER CITY

Of the four projects, the largest capacity theater is in one of the smaller cities. Aletha Bonebrake, chair of the building committee for Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre, said the plan is to restore the 325-seat Orpheum Theater for live performances.

"The goal is to have a high-quality performing arts theater with good acoustics in downtown Baker City," she said. "We're moving into the final stage, and we're so excited."

The Orpheum building dates



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Rivoli Restoration Coalition President Andrew Picken looks at the brickwork Tuesday, Dec. 14, 2021, where a former beam spanned the interior of the Rivoli Theater in Pendleton. Developer Parley Pearce is using parts of the 50-foot beam in the Oak Hotel, the former brothel in downtown Pendleton he plans to open as a boutique hotel.

back to 1889 and has had different looks over its 133 years as a vaudeville theater, a showplace for silent movies, and a hardware store. Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre took over the building in 2016, and the restoration has another three to four

years remaining.

Bonebrake said the restoration is focusing its design to both represent the theater's heyday and to match with the design of the buildings in downtown Baker City.

"It's going to be beautiful, and

it's going to transform downtown," Bonebrake said.

The colors and decor inside are being designed to match a pair of murals discovered in the attic in 2017, shortly after the restoration began. The two murals once stood on either side of the stage and illustrate the Greek musician Orpheus. The original murals contained asbestos, but reproductions will be installed on either side of the stage in the restoration.

The plan calls for a full-size stage, professional acoustics, and specialized lighting. When complete, Bonebrake said they hope to provide space for local artists while also attracting traveling theater.

"We've had to tear apart the entire commercial space, eliminate all the hazardous materials and take it down to its shell," she said. "We are now at that magical point of actual construction, rebuilding an empty shell into a theater space."

For information, visit easternoregonregionalthatre.com.

THE LIBERTY, LA GRANDE

For decades, few people knew the building next to La Grande's City Hall had once been a theater.

A music store, the EOU bookstore, and a pizza chain have all called the Liberty home, but for the last 10 years, the facility has moved closer to restoring its past.

Liberty Theatre Foundation Chairman Ashley O'Toole said the Liberty was built in 1910. Then the Arcade Theater, it was a vaudeville-only theater for decades until a major renovation in the 1930s added a cinema system, increased the seating and renamed it. When the Liberty closed in 1959, it was converted into commercial space with the theater — even its chandelier — hidden behind new walls and a drop ceiling.

"There was a huge false ceiling from front to back that completely cut off the rest of the theater from this commercial building. You'd walk into Domino's and just have no idea

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