

Local

Former local reminisces about Orpheum

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Author of this piece and lawyer George Kirklín lived in Baker from 1937 until college in 1955. As a little kid he watched many movies in the old Orpheum Theater. Later when after the war he gutted Orpheum was replaced by the Baker Theater he saw many more in that theater. When he was in Baker City for Miners Jubilee earlier this month, he was inspired to pen this article.

We moved to Baker in August, 1937, when my dad, Harold Kirklín, became music director in the Senior and Junior High Schools. There were three movie theaters in town then, all on Main Street. On the east side of Main were the Clarick and the Empire. The Orpheum was on the west side of the street, flanked by Muegge's Drugs to the south and Clegg's Market to the north.

In November, 1937, the Clarick burned to the ground, a daytime spectacle watched by much of Baker's population. While the owners, the Buckmillers, planned its replacement, the Orpheum and Empire continued to operate on Main.

I saw my first movies at the Orpheum in 1940, and I was enthralled.

I loved sitting in the balcony, and I'll always remember the red stage curtain and the Polka Dot Café, which occupied a shallow space at the front of the theater immediately south of the theater entrance and marquee.

At that young age, I was not allowed to be taken to the Empire, or, as dubbed by my mother, the "Impure," because kids reputedly urinated in the aisles. I didn't get to go there until after I started school in 1943.

The Orpheum's entrance was recessed from the street (as it always had been) and the ticket booth was a stand-alone affair with loud speakers mounted on its roof. The underside of the marquee was lit with rows of incan-

descent lightbulbs.

As old photographs show, for most of its existence the Orpheum was only one storefront wide, with an arched entryway and no marquee.

The theater opened on Labor Day, September 6, 1909.

Before then the space was occupied by retail establishments.

A photograph from around 1890 (at right) shows that the theater space was once occupied by the "New York Store." Old photos also show that the space was in a separate building adjoining a building to the south which housed a retail store next door to the theater.

At some point, probably in the 1930s, the theater was widened to include the adjacent space.

I suspect the balcony girder, which spans both the original theater space and the adjacent retail space, was added then.

By the time I came along in 1937, or very shortly afterward, the theater occupied both spaces.

I recall fragments of many movies I saw at the Orpheum as a little kid, and two that stand out in detail: Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush," and, a week or two before the theater was destroyed by fire, Irving Berlin's "This Is the Army."

Another of my Orpheum memories is the ritual followed before each matinee after the U.S. entered World War Two.

A member of the theater staff came out on stage and led the audience in the Pledge of Allegiance and a stanza of "God Bless America."

For a short time, we followed the original manner of saluting the flag while reciting the pledge, which was to extend the right arm out and upward, palm down.

That practice ended in December, 1942, because the flag salute was identical to the Nazi salute. We began reciting the pledge with the right hand placed over the heart.

In the early morning hours of September 15, 1943, the Orpheum Theater burned.

The fire was not discovered until around 6 a.m.

after the theater roof had collapsed.

All the fire department could do was prevent the fire from spreading to the roofs of the adjacent buildings. The interior of the theater, except for the lobby and the little cafe, was totally destroyed.

The south wall of Clegg's Market next door to the north was badly discolored from the heat which had penetrated the common wall it shared with the theater.

One could see the complete destruction of the theater from the alley where the rear door was ajar. Nothing remained but charred rubble and scorched brick walls.

The front wall of the theater building facing Main Street had been weakened by the fire, with long cracks extending from the two supports for the marquee.

Wooden posts were placed under the marquee to prevent it from collapsing onto the sidewalk.

The gutted remains and propped-up marquee remained in that condition throughout the remainder of the war.

Baker was back to two theaters, the Empire and the Eltrym, which had opened in 1940 as the Clarick's replacement, and which was named for Myrtle Buckmiller who had died during its construction.

Meanwhile, a group of juveniles calling itself the "Panther Gang" made its headquarters in the gutted basement of the theater until they were apprehended in 1946, as I recall, for the thefts they had committed.

Work began on the construction of a new theater in the old space in late 1947 or early 1948. When the rubble had been cleared, all that remained were the four brick walls and the balcony girder—the same one now visible as work progresses in restoring the "Baker Orpheum Theater."

During the summer of 1948 I frequently watched the progress of construction from the alley behind the theater.

The new theater opened in December, 1948, as the "Baker Theater" with a new, modern marquee

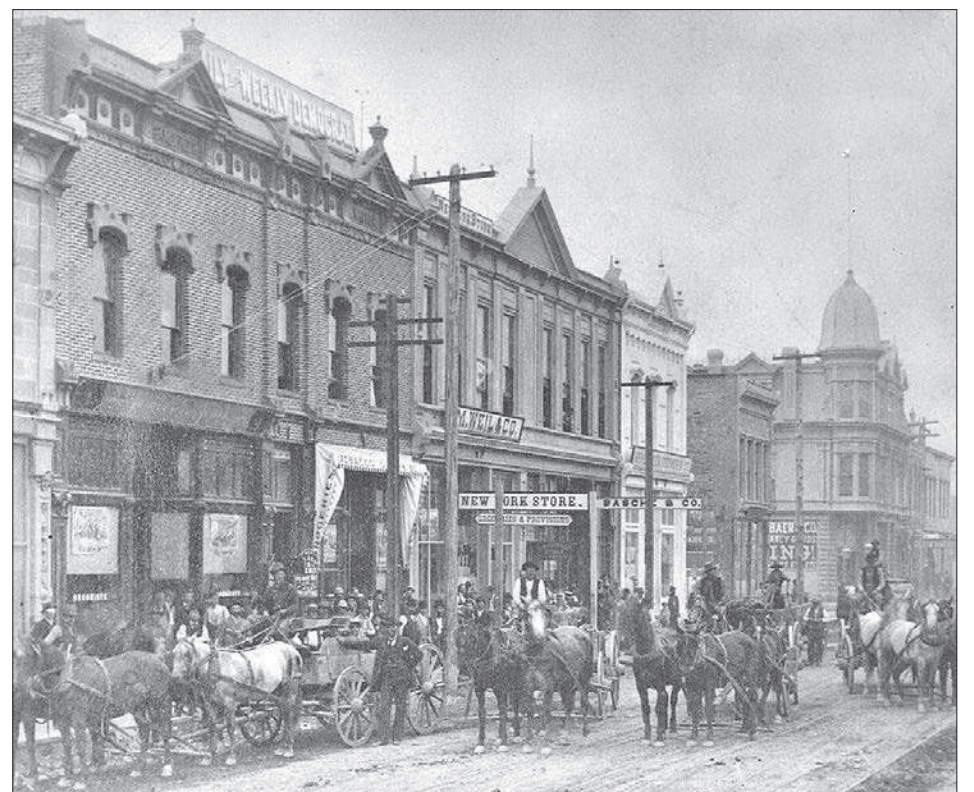


Photo courtesy of the Baker County Public Library.

The location of the Orpheum circa 1890 from the library's archives via Gary Dielman.

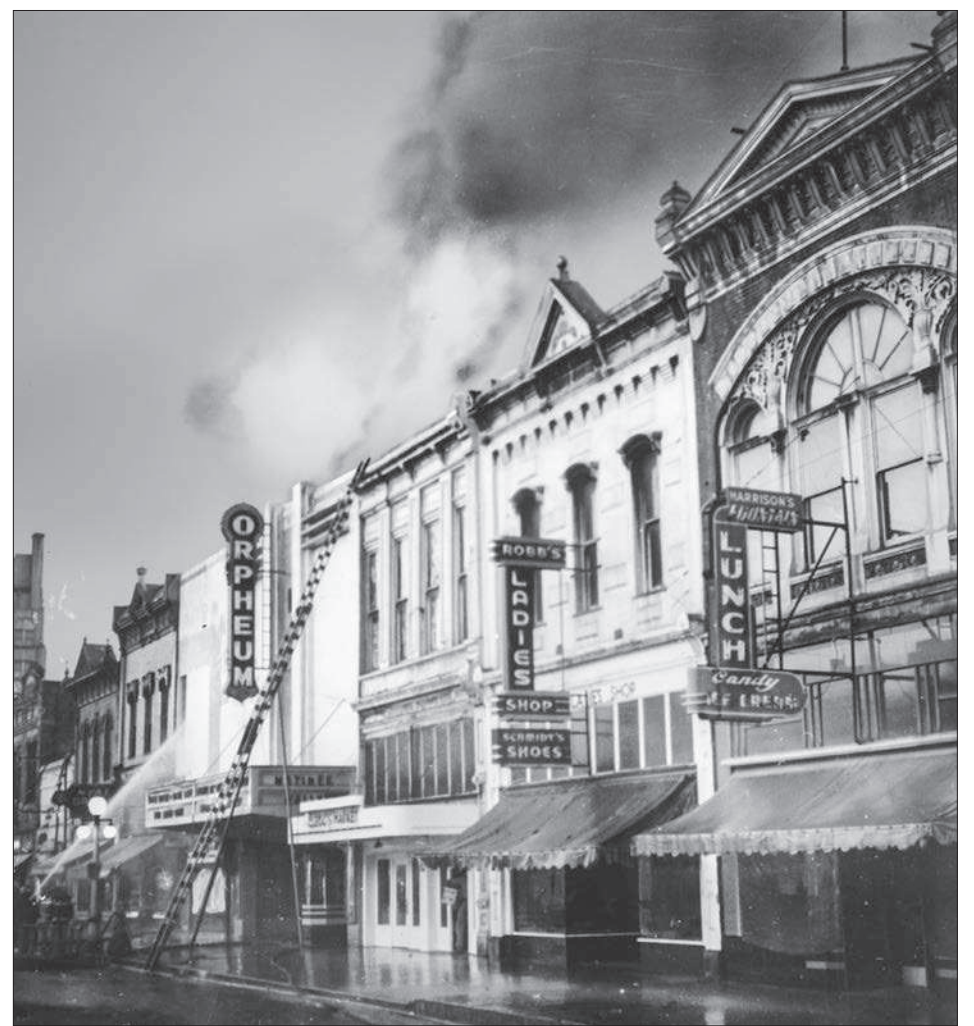


Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society

The Orpheum Theater on fire.

which spanned the full width of the theater. The same girder which had supported the Orpheum's balcony now supported the new theater's balcony.

The first movie I saw at the Baker that December was "Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid," starring William Powell and Ann

Blythe.

After the Baker Theater ceased operations the space was occupied for many years by several retail establishments.

The theater was hidden behind a false ceiling, false floor, and wall partitions, but the presence of the balcony girder was evident

in the store's ceiling which had a vertical projection spanning the store's width.

When I was in Baker for Miner's Jubilee last year I was happy to learn of the plans to recreate a new theater 108 years after the original opened for business.

Free pheasant hunts happening around Oregon

Youth hunters (age 17 and under) can sign up now for ODFW's free pheasant hunts happening around the state in September.

The events are being held in Baker City, Central Point, Corvallis, Eugene, Irrigon/Umatilla, John Day, Klamath Falls, La Grande, Madras, Portland, The Dalles (Tygh Valley). See dates below and register online (see Register for a Class/Youth Upland Hunts), at a license sales agent or at an ODFW office that sells licenses. Note that the Ladd Marsh and Fern Ridge hunts do not require advance registration.

ODFW and partners stock pheasants at these special hunts that give youth a head start on regular pheasant seasons, which don't begin until October. Quail and dove can also be hunted.

Volunteers often bring their trained hunting dogs to hunt with participants. Some events also begin with a shotgun skills clinic, so participants can practice clay target shooting before hunting.

These events are only open to youth who have passed hunter education. (ODFW has many hunter education classes and field days available before the events.)

An adult 21 years of age or older must accompany the youth to supervise but may not hunt.

"If your child made it through hunter education but is still new to the sport, this is a great way to get them started," says James Reed, ODFW hunter education coordinator. "These events happen before regular pheasant seasons open and are a great opportunity for kids to get out hunting."

ODFW stresses safety during the hunts. Both hunter and supervisor must wear a hunter orange hat, eye protection and a hunter orange vest—equipment provided by ODFW at the clinics to anyone who doesn't have it. Hunters also need to check in and out of the hunt.

The hunts are free, though participants need a valid hunting license (\$10 for youth 12 and older, free for age 11 and under) to hunt. Youth hunters age 12-17 also need an upland game bird validation (\$4).

Purchase online, at a license sales agent or ODFW office that sells licenses.

Licenses and validations will not be sold at the events.

While most areas have a hunt both Saturday and Sunday, youth hunters may only sign up for one hunt. They are welcome to hunt

stand by on the other day. See the links below (from www.odfwcalendar.com) for more details including who to contact for more information.

Baker City area, Sept. 23 and Sept. 24. Note this event is not near the Baldock Slough Wetlands Project (regulations are in error).

People who register for the event will be notified of its location via email.

Central Point, Denman Wildlife Area, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17.

Corvallis (near Camp Adair), EE Wilson Wildlife Area, Sept. 23 and Sept. 24.

Eugene, Fern Ridge Wildlife Area, Sept. 9 and Sept. 10. Registration not necessary but appreciated.

Irrigon Wildlife Area (between Irrigon and Umatilla), Sept. 23 and Sept. 24, sign up for morning or evening hunt (morning



Photo courtesy of ODFW.

Pheasant rooster.

only on Sunday), see event listings at www.odfwcalendar.com

Klamath Falls, Klamath Wildlife Area, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17. Additional hunt on Oct. 21 when Miller Island Unit open to youth hunters only from 10 a.m. on a first-come, first-serve basis.

John Day Valley, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17
La Grande, Ladd Marsh

Wildlife Area, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17. No advance registration required.

Madras, Gateway Canyon Preserve, Sept. 9 and Sept. 10, sign up for one of several three-hour hunting shifts.

Portland, Sauvie Island Wildlife Area, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17.

Tygh Valley/The Dalles, White River Wildlife Area, Sept. 16 and Sept. 17.