



The Rivoli Theater in Pendleton is being restored by the Rivoli Theater Restoration Coalition.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

A tale of two theaters

Athena and Pendleton movie houses come back to life

By KATHY ANEY

The two Umatilla County theaters closed their doors just as color televisions started appearing en masse in Eastern Oregon living rooms.

The pair of movie houses was shuttered and ignored for decades, layers of dust forming in the gloomy darkness as life got more computerized and high-tech in the world outside. Now both theaters — Athena's Gem Theatre and Pendleton's Rivoli Theater — are returning to their former luster.

Athena got started first. Ten years ago, residents formed a nonprofit group called Athena's Gem to restore the town's vintage 300-seat movie house and chiseled out a vision for the beloved building. The town will eventually use the space for movies, plays, school functions, streaming concerts and other performances. The theater will also house a Hodaka Museum, as Athena was once the place Hodaka motorcycles were assembled. Rent from an on-site apartment will help defray expenses.

A saloon and restaurant occupied the 1901 building until 1908 when Athena's town council voted to close all saloons. The watering hole was converted to a cinema, and for 60 years people gathered at the

HISTORIC RESTORATION

Gem to watch the big screen. In 1968, then-owner Chet Dugger bowed to the times and closed the movie house. Dugger, also Athena city recorder, continued to live in an upstairs apartment. The dusty time capsule yielded a trove of film reels, projection equipment and other artifacts when it was finally opened up again after the building was gifted to the city.

Board member Rob McIntyre said the facelift is being financed by a long list of donors and multiple large grants: \$200,000 from the Meyer Memorial Trust, \$35,000 from The Collins Foundation, \$200,000 from the Ford Family Foundation and \$9,000 from Trust Management Services. Donors continue to purchase sidewalk pavers at \$125 apiece.

Board member Rob McIntyre is the mover and shaker behind the effort, the only original member still serving on the board. McIntyre stops by the theater almost every day. "Right now, we're waiting on the roof," he said. "We tore the roof off last summer. It's covered with plywood decking and plastic. We're waiting for a break in the weather."

Volunteers already gutted the theater and replaced the saloon's façade. Replacement of the theater's floor will come soon. The bulk of the work will finish this year.

"We're planning on pushing it through," McIntyre said.

Volunteer labor is critical to the effort, he said. Athena volunteers have logged over 3,000 hours. Volunteer jobs included steel work and hauling more than 16 tons of roof material.

"That time can all be counted towards grants match dollars and that part of the equation is critical to success," McIntyre said. "The group does not have to be big or all the same age, but they do have to be tenacious."

McIntyre said the Gem is a theatre, not a theater. Historically, a theatre (such as the Gem) has a stage, while a theater does not.

In Pendleton, efforts to restore the Rivoli Theater are rolling. In 2010, the Pendleton Development Commission donated the property to the Rivoli Theater Restoration Coalition.

The Rivoli, though it has a stage, is going with the modern spelling. The group has already chiseled out a comprehensive plan, restored the façade, painted the lobby,



An old section of black and white film reel depicting Santa Claus was found in the projection booth during renovation of the Gem Theatre in Athena.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

restored electrical service, cleared asbestos and debris, had the roof resurfaced and signed Opsis Architecture of Portland to do design work. The Oregon DEQ sponsored removal of two 400-gallon fuel tanks in the basement. A Portland 3-D imaging company, i-10 Associates, used lasers to gather measurements and 3-D images of the building.

Fundraising for the first phase of renovating the 93-year-old theater is almost complete, said coalition president Andrew Picken.

"Our target is just shy of \$134,000," he said. "We have raised \$98,000."

The coalition is pinning its hopes on two grantors that are considering Rivoli grant proposals — the Collins Foundation

and the Community Foundation.

"We hope grants from those organizations will close the gap," Picken said.

Grants from the Ford Family Foundation (\$25,000), the Kinsman Foundation (\$15,000), Pendleton Foundation Trust (\$10,000), Wildhorse Foundation (\$10,000), Aetna Foundation (\$9,491), Umatilla County Community and Economic Development (\$7,500) and about 10 other smaller gifts will fund the design phase.

Eventually, the theater will provide a venue for performances, conferences, lectures and other gatherings. This promises to be a long slog toward the finish, but Picken said he doesn't mind the journey.

"We're having fun. It feels like important work that we need to do," he said. "This is not a marathon — it's a labor of love. We just need to stay focused."

In Athena, McIntyre offered some hard-won advice to the Rivoli board.

"You just have to not give up," he said.

The coalition intends to open the Rivoli as a multipurpose performing arts center in 2020 and estimates the cost of the entire project at around \$4.4 million. The group plans a fundraising brunch at 11 a.m., Jan. 30 at the Sundowner Bar & Grill. Tickets are \$30, available by calling Peter Walters at 541-310-1768.

To keep track of progress at the Gem, visit www.gemtheatre.org. For news of the Rivoli, go to www.rivolitheater.org.

Contact Kathy Aney at kaney@eastoregonian.com or call 541-966-0810.

**Board Certified
Sports
Medicine &
Arthroscopic
Shoulder
Surgery
Specialist**



Jeremy Anderson, D.O.
Board Certified

- In Office MRI Machine • Outpatient Surgery Center
- Modern, Minimally Invasive Techniques
- Most Major Insurance Plans Accepted
- Worker's Compensation • Motor Vehicle Accidents

- GENERAL ORTHOPEDICS
- SPORTS MEDICINE • ARTHROSCOPY
- FOOT & ANKLE • HAND SURGERY
- JOINT REPLACEMENT

"We are dedicated to providing the most advanced possible orthopedic care available."

**Advanced Orthopedic
& Sports Medicine Institute**
541.289.7075
620 NW 11th St., Ste. 201, Hermiston, OR 97838
www.hermistonortho.com



JOBSTHATFIT.

Express
EMPLOYMENT PROFESSIONALS

At Express Employment Professionals, we are dedicated to helping businesses secure high quality, experienced workers quickly & easily.

Express Employment Professionals can provide your business with skilled clerical, accounting, light industrial, sales and farm labor assistance.

Express Employment Professionals handles all payroll costs and reports, including Worker's Compensation, FUTA, SUTA and FICA.

- Replacements for short or long term temporary assignments
- Payrolling of new employees • Full service project staffing
- Flexible staffing for peak seasons • Efficient, fast service
- Competitive Rates • Permanent placements, all levels

120 E. Hurlburt • Hermiston • 541-567-1123
Pendleton • 541-276-4070 • www.expresspros.com