

Another groundbreaker for Buffalo: The nation's first motion picture theater may have been in Ellicott Square

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FULL TEXT

Nov. 25--Buffalo lays claim to the air conditioner, grain elevator, windshield wiper and pacemaker.

It may be time to add another: The first motion picture theater.

Mitchell Mark and his younger brother, Moe, opened Vitascope Hall in the basement of Ellicott Square in October 1896. Moviegoers entered through the Marks' first-floor Edisonia Phonograph Parlor, an early penny arcade using inventions of Thomas Alva Edison's factory.

"This is one of those very hazy areas of theater history. Really, no one can say with any certainty what was the very first purpose-built movie theater," said Karen Colizzi Noonan, president of the Theatre Historical Society in Elmhurst, Ill., which records and preserves the history of America's theaters.

"Given the date, it is more than probable that this one was the first in the U.S. We have no evidence of any earlier movie theater."

Craig Morrison, a theater historian and author of the 2005 compendium "Theaters," also said it's plausible.

"It was incredibly early for someone to have the idea of a stand-alone piece of entertainment, but there it is in the paper," Morrison said, referring to newspaper clippings at the time.

The research is the result of efforts by local movie buffs, including Edward Summer, president of Buffalo International Film Festival, and Ranjit Sandhu, a former Buffalonian and author of the forthcoming book, "Buffalo: The Birthplace of the Movie Theater."

The rediscovery of Vitascope Hall also underscores the more than a dozen early movie theaters from Buffalo's past that still remain. Only Shea's Performing Arts Center, the 1926 movie palace, is still a theater.

Heather Sabin, Academy Awards archivist in Los Angeles, thinks Buffalo should capitalize on this forgotten history.

"You have such an opportunity to say movie theaters as we know them really were born in Buffalo, and to then be able to point to a handful of them, still standing, and hopefully one day restored," Sabin said.

Summer recently found evidence of Vitascope Hall in a scrapbook belonging to the building's owner, developer Carl Paladino. A photo of the building with the Edisonia entrance also hung on the wall.

The theater is believed to have been located in what's now a carpenter's shop under Crinzi &Gullo Jewelers reachable by a spiral staircase.

Paladino said there are plans to install a window display in the building's atrium commemorating the Mark brothers and their groundbreaking theater, with artifacts and possibly a computer-aided diagram of what the theater looked like. He also wants to erect a plaque outside the building.

"It was pretty cool finding out," Paladino said. "I thought [Summer] was nuts when he first came in, but when we went through the old scrapbooks he found the picture of the theater, and articles from that era."

The Vitascope, an early film projector, made its debut in April 1894 at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta.

The inventors had a falling out, and sold the rights to Edison, who insisted on being credited with the invention and that it be renamed the "Vitascope." Its first commercial screening was in April 1896.

First films were short

The short films, often under a minute long, were shown mainly as traveling-show novelties or add-on attractions at vaudeville theaters before Vitascope Hall opened.

The Mark brothers had grown up in Richmond, Va., and were haberdashers before getting into the theater business. With Rudolph Wagner, a former Edison employee, they opened Edisonia Phonograph Parlor and hired an architect and designer for Vitascope Hall.

"They built a beautiful theater exclusively for the purpose of showing motion pictures. That had never existed before," Summer said.

One month after the Vitascope was introduced, a New Orleans entrepreneur rented a store, painted the windows black, hung a sheet, laid out chairs and ran movies for a short period. A theater opened in Toronto the same year. But the Vitascope appears to have been the first space constructed to be a movie theater.

The first 12 months were a banner year for Vitascope Hall, according to a Buffalo Express article in which Mitchell Mark claimed some 200,000 ticketbuyers had attended the small theater. He announced it was going to be open seven days a week to meet the demand.

With just 72 seats, that would have required almost 2,800 sell-outs, but the continuous operation and short running times of the programs -- each package of films lasted under an hour -- made it possible.

10 cents admission

Here's what the Illustrated Buffalo Express wrote about Vitascope Hall, also referred to at the time as the Vitascope Theatre and the Electric Theatre, on Oct. 18, 1896:

"There's a theater in Ellicott Square now -- a new Bijou theater, beautifully decorated in white and gold, with an

inclined floor carpeted in Wilton velvet, nine rows of luxurious orchestra chairs arranged in sets of four on either side of the central aisle -- 72 in all -- a handsome stage with an elaborate proscenium arch, lavishly carved and daintily decorated, rich maroon plush hangings, incandescent electric lights flooding the place with radiance, perfect ventilation . . ."

The cost of admission was 10 cents, and the films -- American and French -- changed Sundays and Thursdays.

"This miniature theater is one of the prettiest places in Buffalo," a press release printed in the Buffalo Express said in proclaiming the theater's opening.

The Mark brothers went on to become movie theater impresarios, opening more and bigger theaters in Buffalo as projection technology improved. In 1914, they opened the first \$1 million movie house, the Mark Strand Theater, on New York's 47th Street and Broadway.

The Academy Awards' Sabin was among 15 members of the Association of Moving Image Archivists who visited Buffalo on a daylong tour in September. They saw the 1910 Savoy Theatre, William and Krettner streets, the 1914 terra-cotta Sattler Theatre, 516 Broadway, and the former Regent Theater on 1365 Main St., also built by the Mark brothers and now Bethesda World Harvest Church. Sabin was blown away.

"As someone living in the town that tore down [classic theaters], it just amazes me to see theaters from the early 1900s still standing in Buffalo," Sabin said.

Sandhu has long marveled at the sheer number of early, hard-to-detect theaters in Buffalo, while at the same time lamenting their decline.

"There are a lot of cities that may have had comparatively as many movie theaters as Buffalo did, but what's amazing about Buffalo is that so much is still here. You can look at theaters from the turn of the century to the '30s that are still standing," Sandhu said.

A visionary

Buffalo's theater sleuths want the movie world to recognize the trail to Hollywood ran through Buffalo.

"It is clear that Mitchell Mark of Buffalo, New York, was the great visionary of the future of the motion picture theater. He had this sparkling, clear picture in his mind of the potential of exhibiting movies in a beautiful place that would draw huge numbers of people in a way that was undreamed of, and the facts bear that out," Summer said.

"The vision of the movie theater as an extraordinary and special place came from that Vitascope theater in Ellicott Square."

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