



THE DALLAS COUNTY CHRONICLE

The Newsletter of the Dallas County Historical Commission

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July 2008

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Historic Grand Prairie Theater to Reopen

The historic Uptown Theater opened at the beginning of the 1950s as a first-run movie theater and the third and most ambitious Grand Prairie business by a family transplanted from Minnesota. Over the years, the Uptown changed hands and served the community in varying capacities before being restored as a performing arts venue this year.

In 1948, brothers Jerry and Sherman Silver and their sister, Helen Meagher Fisher, a young widow with three children, bought the Wings Theater on Main Street in Grand Prairie. The brothers, who were already in the theater business, were excited about the possibilities in this small but growing Texas town of 13,000.

Soon after arriving, the family also leased the Texas Theater, located a block down and across the street from the Wings. The Texas, which featured second-run movies, was thought to have been a converted grocery store and had a rickety wooden floor and a segregated balcony for its African-American customers.

The Silver family saw a market for first-run movies in Grand Prairie and soon began the design and construction of the Uptown, which opened on March 17, 1950, with 1,100 seats and a small stage for live performances. It opened as an unsegregated business years before other theaters in the area followed suit.

The Uptown was considered state-of-the-art for its time and featured a sloped floor in the seating area for optimal viewing of the stage and screen. Other amenities included a glass-enclosed "cry room" in the back for mothers and babies and oversized chairs with ample leg room for customers "of size."

The theater's spring-loaded seating units returned to a vertical position when vacated compared with the stationary seats found in most theaters of the day. A large canvas mural on the lobby wall depicted the history of the town from its pioneer beginnings to a view of the Dallas skyline as seen from Grand Prairie.

During the 50s, parents rou-

tinely dropped off unattended children as young as 3 years old for Saturday's kiddy shows. Donna Meagher, Mrs. Fisher's youngest daughter, began working in the family business at age 10 playing full-time usher and part-time babysitter at these shows. Her older sister, Pat, worked in concessions and the box office.

When the Uptown first opened, adult tickets were 35 cents and tickets for children cost 12 cents. The theater became known for its unique pickle juice snowcones, which the frugal Mrs. Fisher recycled from the juice left in jars of giant pickles, and its "old maid" popcorn bags of half-popped kernels left on the bottom of the popper.

Over the years the Uptown featured films, children's entertainment, various types of live shows, midnight shows for Ling Temco/Chance Vought late-shift employees, and personal appearances by actors promoting their films. In the 1960s, battles of the bands and go-go contests replaced stage and minstrel shows.

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New Appointee Joins DCHC

Phillip Williams, MD, has been appointed to the Dallas County Historical Commission by Commissioner Maurine Dickey.

He is a neurosurgeon in private practice affiliated with Presbyterian Hospital of Dallas and Baylor Medical Center. Williams graduated from Southern Methodist

University in 1959 and Tulane University School of Medicine in 1963 and completed his neurosurgery residency at Parkland Memorial Hospital. He served as a captain in the US Army medical corps in Tokyo.

A Dallas resident for 64 years, Williams has served on numerous community

boards, including the Salvation Army and the American Federation for the Blind.

He lives in Dallas with his wife, Bobbie Sue, whose community affiliations include the Dallas Woman's Club, Our Friend's Place and the American Federation for the Blind. They have four children and five grandchildren.

DCHC Receives Service Award

The Dallas County Historical Commission received the Distinguished Service Award from the Texas Historical Commission for service in 2007. The award is based on activities of the Commission as a whole and the contributions of its members to local historical organizations and efforts. The award was presented at the annual Texas Historical Commission's Historic Preservation Conference in Corpus Christi on May 2 and was accepted by chairman Lindy Thomas. This year's conference focused on heritage tourism and ways that historic sites can complement one another in appealing to tourists. DCHC chairman Lindy Thomas is shown with John Nau and Larry Oates.



Historic Marker Dedication

Highland Oaks Church of Christ
10805 Walnut Hill Lane
Dallas
Sunday, August 10
11:30 am

The church will mark 150 years in Dallas with a video presentation and historic marker dedication.

DCHC Board Meeting

The next meeting of the DCHC Board will be Thursday, August 14, 2008 at noon at the Commissioners Court 411 Elm, Dallas.

Details will be posted on the DCHC website at www.dallaschc.org



Lindy Thomas, DCHC chairman, spoke at the dedication of the Historical Marker for the Bill and Maude Dodson House in the Farmers Branch Historical Park. The dedication was followed by a concert by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra and a spectacular fireworks show. This marker was the only Registered Texas Historic Landmark approved in the 2007 cycle of markers.



Former Farmers Branch mayors (left to right) Dave Blair, Lawson Lewis, George Grimmer and Bob Phelps with current mayor, Tim O'Hare.

Join the Friends of the DCHC

The Friends of the Dallas County Historical Commission is a Section 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. The mission of the Friends is to provide private funding support for Texas historical markers and other educational programs sponsored by the DCHC and to raise awareness of the history of Dallas County and its cities, neighborhoods and communities.

Your membership contribution is tax deductible as allowed by law. The Friends has no paid staff. As a result, all of your contributions support DCHC activities except for out-of-pocket expenses incurred in operating the Friends. All members receive a copy of *The Dallas County Chronicle* and invitations to the Friends annual meeting and other events. To join, complete the following information, pick a membership level and send your check, payable to the Friends of the Dallas County Historical Commission, to:

Charlene Orr
Historic Mesquite, Inc./City of Mesquite
Box 850137
Mesquite, Texas 75185-0137

Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Membership Level: _____

Membership Levels

Basic	\$35
Big D	\$100
Pioneer	\$500

Charter memberships

(limited to contributors who joined by December 31, 2006) will be valid until December 31, 2008.

For information, call Charlene Orr at (972) 216-6468.

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The Silver brothers and their sister owned and operated the Uptown for 15 years until 1965, when ownership was transferred to Mrs. Fisher's daughter, Donna Meagher Easterling, the young usher who by then was an attorney. Mrs. Easterling continued to operate the theater as a movie house well into the 1990s. As megaplexes and multiscreen theaters became the norm, however, the Uptown eventually closed as a movie theater. It was leased intermit-

tently as a church until it was purchased by the City of Grand Prairie with plans to restore the downtown landmark to its former glory.

The restoration and renovation design of the Uptown were performed by noted San Antonio architect Killis Almond, FAIA, who has numerous theatrical restoration and renovation works to his credit through the country. Mr. Almond grew up in

Grand Prairie in the 50s and 60s and has fond memories of his many visits to the Uptown as a young boy. The theater plans to reopen this year.

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The Dallas County Historical Commission is a county board appointed by the Dallas County Commissioners Court. *The Dallas County Chronicle* is a quarterly publication of the DCHC for historical groups in Dallas County and the general public. This issue was edited by Ann Spillman and Rick Loessberg and was published with the assistance of The Sixth Floor Museum. Articles should be sent to Ann Spillman via email at acspillman@sbcglobal.net or by mail to the Dallas County Historical Commission, 411 Elm Street, 3rd Floor, Dallas, TX 75202-3301. Visit the DCHC on the web at www.dallaschc.org and the Dallas County government website at www.dallascounty.org.

