The Mysterious East Meets the Pragmatic West:

How Boise Idaho’s Egyptian Theater Came to Be

The 1927 theater recalls an era when Boiseans searched for the mysterious and exotic through fantasy architecture.

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“We Sell Tickets to Theaters, Not to Movies”
- Marcus Lowe

The forty-five foot vertical movie marquee burned brightly on that spring night in downtown Boise. It was April 19, 1927 and the Egyptian, Boise’s first exotic movie palace, opened. At six o’clock PM, the line started to form along Main and Seventh. The box office was doing brisk business. Even the spring snow that Boise had received the day before had not stopped moviegoers, as they bundled up and waited. By six-thirty, the line turned into a crowd, and by seven o’clock, Boise’s Municipal band provided a musical diversion. Main Street Building Company’s investment showed great promise of return.¹

A Business Venture Takes Shape

The Egyptian provided Boise with its first exotic movie palace. Boise had five movie theaters in April 1927: the Pinney; the Majestic; the Rialto; the Grand and the Strand (built in 1906 and originally called the Boz, today it is the Blues Bouquet.) Out of these five, the Pinney was the closest in design and scale to the Egyptian. Commissioned by Boise area businessman James Pinney, it was designed by the local architectural firm of Toutelotte and Hummel. The theater’s location at 809 W. Jefferson was across the street from the site of Pinney’s demolished Columbia Theater. Completed in 1908, the Pinney was Boise’s primary vaudeville, live music and theater venue. It was also outfitted for the movies.²

Boise’s history for "legitimate" entertainment went back to its frontier days of the mid-1860s. When the streets were dirt, dramas, comedies, vaudeville and musical shows were put on in the bars, and were performed by both traveling theatrical troupes and the locals. Bars provided the largest common space for public gatherings, outside of churches. As the city grew, more permanent structures were built – among the “Pre-Egyptian” theaters were Emma’s Opera House and the Old Main Street Fire Hall, which became the Empire Theater.³

In the spring of 1926, three local businessmen - Leo J. Falk, Harry K. Fritchman and Charles M. Kahn - ventured into this sixty-year business of local entertainment. The Main Street Building Company’s Articles for Incorporation were filed with the Ada County Recorder on April 24, 1926. According to the Idaho Statesman, the company was “capitalized for $100,000; divided into 1000 shares, at $100.00 a share.”⁴ With Leo J., Harry and Charles each having one share of the company, it started out with $300.00 subscribed. The articles empowered the company to “engage in purchase, sale and lease of real estate; operate theaters and places of amusement; engage in the bond brokerage business, and conduct mercantile or manufacturing business.”⁵

Their first purchase was a portion of the frontage at the corner of Main and
Seventh. This property, valued at $47,500.00 in August 1922, had been part of Miss Emma Broadbent’s estate, willed to her by her uncle JB Broadbent, one of Boise’s original and more successful businessmen. Emma had cared for her bachelor uncle during his later years. JB was a jeweler by trade, but his “hobby” was real estate. He always paid cash and in 1865 he paid $400.00 for his original business property at Main and Seventh. In early July 1922, he paid $90,000 for the Oxford Hotel, his last purchase. He preferred properties on Main Street, but also purchased on Bannock and Idaho. When he passed away on July 29, 1922, his Boise real estate holdings were valued at $1.5 million.6

On April 10, 1926, Leo J. Falk purchased the Main and Seventh property from the Trustees of Miss Emma Broadbent. He deeded it to the Main Street Building Company on May 4, 1926, and on September 11, 1926, the titled was “quieted by decree” to the company. The property consisted of a 93-foot frontage on Main and a 122-foot frontage along Seventh. The funds were secured partially through a $100,000 bond financed by Childs and Company, of Boise.7

Notice to vacate by May 1ˢᵗ was given to the businesses along the frontages of both Main and Seventh in first week of April 1926. The Main Street businesses included: Peter Menderta’s and Luptola’s Barbershop at 702 Main, T.D. Jones’s Furniture Shop at 706 Main, as well as both Abraham Mishkind’s Clothing Store and Adolph Ballott’s Watchmaker and Jeweler Store at 708 Main. Along Seventh Street the businesses included: Li’s Noodle House, Miller and Love’s Cigar Store and the Arcade Buffet. Shortly after the May 1ˢᵗ deadline, demolition began.8

The Retail Man, The Broker and The Lawyer – Leo J., Harry and Charles

Leo J., Harry and Charles were well-established businessmen at the time of Main Street Building Company’s incorporation in April 1926. Leo J. Falk came from a pioneering family who was active in both business and the community. The Falk’s also had a passion for polo playing. The second member, Harry K. Fritchman, was a grocery broker by training and had entered into politics. The final member, Charles M. Kahn, made a living as an attorney.

Leo J. was a city boy with a regional pedigree. He was born in Boise on September 24, 1882, and educated in the Boise schools. He attended military school in California as a teenager, and came back home to join the family firm. His father, Nathan Falk, had gone into business with his brother David at the corner of 8ᵗʰ and Main in 1868. It was there that “David Falk & Brother” transformed into “Falk’s Mercantile,” with Nathan as the company President. In 1903 Nathan passed away, and his brother Sigmund took over as company President, while Leo J. became Treasurer. In 1915, Uncle Sigmund sold his interest in the company and Leo J. took over as President.9

Leo J’s diverse business interests kept him busy. Among them were the Owyhee
Hotel, which he commissioned at the age of twenty-one; mining interests in Atlanta, Idaho and the Star Orchard Company, in Star, Idaho (he was Vice President). He also engaged in charity and civic work with the American Cancer Society, the United Jewish Appeal Fund, and the Rotary Club. He was also the founder and President of the Boise Polo Club. He married Helen Friendly on February 3, 1914, in Elmira, New York, and they had three children - Elaine, Jane and Leo Jr.10

Harry K. Fritchman was a country boy gifted with business sense. He was born on February 10th, 1865. Shortly after his birth his family moved to Andrew County, Missouri, settling on a farm. After completing his high school education in the Andrew County schools, he went directly to work as a grocery clerk.11

At the age of twenty-three, Harry moved to Savannah, Missouri, where he started at Pearce and Roberts Grocery Store, then moved on to Nave and McCord. Harry had a natural talent for the business and within one year, was promoted to sales. This position took him to Boise, a stop along his route. He established the first firm of merchandise brokers in Boise, and became the first commercial traveler to establish residency in January 1900.12

Harry’s drive and ambition matched Leo J’s. Harry’s partner at the merchandise brokerage firm, the Fritchman-Atkinson Company at 506 South 9th Street, was Riley Atkinson, son-in-law to Governor Hawley. He worked in the merchandise brokerage area for twenty years. Among his accounts were Schilling and Company of San Francisco, California, the Cream of Wheat Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the California Vegetable Union/California Fruit Growers Exchange of Los Angeles, California. Harry entered politics and served one term in 1911 as Boise’s Mayor, running as a Taft Republican.13

Like Leo, Harry also involved himself in civic activities. He belonged to the Boise Commercial Club and held the office of Director. He held office at all levels of the United Commercial Travelers group – he represented Montana, Idaho and Utah as their delegate to the Supreme Council in 1913. He also belonged to the Knights of Pythais and the Elk’s organization. On January 1, 1891, he married Miss Leota A. Sickel in Caledonia, Ohio. They had two children, Norris, born November 1892 and Frank, born in Boise on February 5, 1903. Frank passed away in November of 1904.14

The last of the three, Charles M. Khan, was the mystery man in the partnership. He was listed in the 1927 City Directory as an attorney, with an office in the Idaho Building (at 8th and Bannock), number 224. He had equal share in the Main Street Building Company through his background, expertise and contacts.15

Leo J., Harry and Charles realized that Boise had movie theaters, what it didn’t have was a “movie palace.” Their market research showed area growth, a steady economy and convenient transportation, both public and private. Movie goers in
Boise’s rural areas (Barber, Eagle, Kuna, Meridian, Mora, Owyhee, Star and Ustick) traveled by car, by the Boise Valley Railway or Traction and by the Boise Interurban Trolley to see and experience the Egyptian. In commissioning the design, the three ventured on spectacle and opulence, and they wanted a profit.16

**A Young Architect “Travels” to Egypt**

In 1909 Frederick Hummel joined the family firm of Tourtellotte and Hummel and became a partner in 1922. The firm’s original members, his father Charles Hummel and business partner John Tourtellotte, dissolved the partnership in 1926 and John established his own office in Portland, Oregon. Both the Boise and the Portland firms however, kept the name of “Tourtellotte and Hummel.”17

The April 4, 1926, edition of the Sunday *Idaho Statesman* reported on the new theater and stated that the “plans have been drawn by Tourtellotte & Hummel of Boise.”18 Leo J. gave Frederick, more commonly known as “Fritz”, the commission, and at age 42 he designed one of his signature buildings. The Bungalow and the Mission Revival styles were the architectural preference in Boise in the 1920’s. As a marketing strategy, Leo J. wanted the new building done in the Neo-Egyptian Revival style. The 1920’s Neo-Egyptian Revival gave architects the opportunity to take “advantage of the decorative potential of concrete.”19 Fritz drew on his avid interest in Ancient Egyptian art and architecture. He had acquired this interest while a student at the University of Pennsylvania, which had an extensive collection. He did part of his research in Los Angeles, California, studying the design of Sid Grauman’s Egyptian theater (it opened in 1922). He also studied both Peery’s and Belluschi’s Egyptian Theaters in Ogden, Utah and Portland, Oregon, respectively. Both of these theaters opened in 1924. His research in Los Angeles was not strictly a business venture however – it was there that he met and married his wife, a schoolteacher in the area.20

Back home in Boise, he used the Carnegie Library at Washington and 8th to do a “thorough research of everything in the way of Egyptian.”21 He carried his stacks of books from there to his office at 220 E. Idaho. Russell Sturgis’s *A Dictionary of Architecture and Building, Vol. 1*, published in 1905, was most likely among them.22

The 1920’s Neo-Egyptian Revival was not the first time the style appeared in American architecture. Napoleon’s 1798 Egyptian expedition brought back archaeological finds to France and in 1802, the results were published. The work of his archaeologist, the Baron de Denon, opened up this new world of Egypt to the west. From this, Benjamin Latrobe incorporated the Egyptian design elements in his proposal for the Library of Congress in 1808.23

The first American Neo-Egyptian Revival period, from 1830 to 1850, was used
primarily in public buildings, monuments and cemeteries. The style resurfaced worldwide in 1922, with Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon’s discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb. This discovery along with the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs Industriels et Modernes (more commonly known as “Art Deco”), fueled an intense need and desire to learn of all things Egyptian.24

Let The Building Begin…

Construction began shortly after May 1, 1926, when the tenants of the Main and Seventh Street frontages left. With the paperwork finalized, the architectural plans in place, and the contractors ready to go, the building began. Movie theaters were transitioning from transformed vaudeville/music halls to buildings designed for motion pictures. Movie theaters were becoming movie palaces and the bigger and more exotic they were, the better. In his book American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy, David Naylor states “the theaters were spectacles in their own right...to serve a purpose purely economic in nature; to draw patrons to the box office”. Combining the discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb, the technological advancement of film and the rise of the middle class made the market of “exotic” architectural movie theater design viable at this time.25

The primary source for Fritz’s interpretation of Neo-Egyptian theater design was Sid Grauman’s Egyptian Theater in Los Angeles, California. Hummel’s Egyptian utilized a rectangular concrete building, with walls one foot thick and pylons accenting the window bays on the exterior of both Main and Seventh Streets. The tan exterior finish used “special California stucco scored to imitate smooth ashlar blocks and finished with vertical combing.”26

The theater construction became a community project with J.O. Jordan and Son acting as general contractors. The sub-contractors were the E.W. Little Roofing Company; C.J. Westfall for stucco and plaster; and Dave Addison for tile work. The exception was the plumbing, heating and ventilation work done by Gooding Plumbing and Heating from Gooding, Idaho.27

Local suppliers included: Boise-Payette Lumber Company, headed by A.H. Smith, for building materials; Burnham Manufacturing Company, headed by L.G. Olson, for structural steel and iron; Pioneer Tent and Awning, headed by G. G. Rohrer, for exterior and interior awnings; Wholesale Dealer Lumber and Building, headed by J.G. Doerr, for plaster; and W.P. Fuller and Company for paint and glass. The Falk’s Drapery Department provided the draperies for the windows, lounging rooms and the offices.28

Other suppliers came into the picture as Idaho Power coordinated with Electrical Products Corporation out of Los Angeles, California, for the electrical signs and the marquee; John Van Wye from Portland, Oregon, provided the stage curtain
and H.H. Clausen and Company from Salt Lake City, Utah, took charge of the exterior and interior decorative fresco paintings. According to Fritz, a group of German craftsmen from Salt Lake City were the artists behind the intricate interior decorative work.²⁹

**The Organ Played and The Curtain Went Up**

At seven-fifteen on that April night in 1927, the doorman opened the plate glass doors, framed in pylons painted a muted jade green. Recessed lighting in the marquee’s canopy and a large alabaster light, set in brass and hung from the center of vestibule, lit up the entrance. Uniform accents of blues, reds and greens framed in gold ran along the vestibule’s molding, giving a hint of the color to come. The boisterous crowd, with tickets in hand, clamored past the octagonal ticket office in the exterior vestibule. By seven-thirty the theater was almost filled to capacity. Even the fifteen-minute delay caused by the late arrival of two pieces of stage equipment had not dampened the affair.³⁰

It was written in the *Idaho Statesman* the next day that, “more people were of the opinion that the beautiful theater was worth fighting to get into than were hurt by the necessity of fighting.”³¹ A feast for the senses awaited them as they passed through the tiled lobby and walked down the softly lit corridor. The incandescent sounds of water fountains quietly resonated as the moviegoers treaded across the thick black carpet done in an intricate floral pattern. Along the natural colored walls, finished to resemble cut stone, were detailed frescos of blues, reds and greens taken from the papyrus of Ani. According to designer E.C.A. Bullock of the firm of Rapp & Rapp, the lobbies had to be spectacular “to keep the patron’s mind off the fact that he was waiting.”³²

The gold leaf coffered ceiling was luminescent, and in niches and alcoves the patrons rested on chairs and divans done in both luxurious crème and red colored silks. The acoustical enticement of the state of the art Robert Morgan theater organ came from behind the auditorium’s velvet green curtains. Before the intricately detailed proscenium arch, a gateway decorated with lotus buds and hieroglyphics, was Gretta Brattain, playing softly at the organ as the patrons made their way to their seats. Those sitting in the loges had overstuffed leather chairs.³³ Escapism and dreaming were topped off with the summer night sky blue ceiling, accented with back lighting from along the walls and from the large alabaster light hanging in the center of the auditorium.³⁴

Four pillars, taken from the design of the hall of columns in Karnack, framed the screen. Between each set of pillars rested a golden pharaoh, keeping watch on all who entered. The opening ceremonies completed and the curtain parted. The “Star Spangle Banner” played and when it was done, Warner Brothers Studios production of “Don Juan” filled the screen with John Barrymore and cast. It was a magical night.³⁵
Endnotes


5 “Articles of Incorporation.” Idaho Sunday Statesman, 25 April 1926, p. 11- 12; see also, Hardy Foundation 2002, www.boisetheater.netfirms.com/egyptian_theater.htm; see also, RL Polk’s and Company Boise City and Ada County Directory 1925 Vol. XV; see also, Idaho Sunday Statesman, 25 April 1926, p. 11-12;

6 “Big Theater To Be Built,” Idaho Statesman, 4 April 1926, Front Page, col. 1; see also, Idaho Statesman, 30 July 1922, p. 1, col. 5 and p. 2, col. 4 –5; See also, Idaho Statesman, 31 August 1922, p.3, col. 1.


8 Hardy Foundation 2002, www.boisetheater.netfirms.com/egyptian_theater.htm; see also RL Polk’s and Company, Boise City and Ada County Directory, 1925 Vol. XV; see also, “Big Theater To Be Built, Cost $200,000: Main Street Building Company Plans to Shift Center of Business Eastward; New Structure First Step”, Idaho Statesman, 4 April 1926, Front Page, col. 1; see also, “Big Theater To Be Built, Cost $200,000: Main Street Building Company Plans to Shift Center of Business Eastward; New Structure First Step,” Idaho Statesman, 4 April 1926, Front Page, col. 1.


10 Leo J. Falk’s Obituary, Idaho Statesman, 14 September 1955, Front Page and p. 12, col. 3; see also, Hawley, History of Idaho, p. 232.

12 Ibid. p. 713-714.

13 Ibid. p. 713-714.

14 Ibid. p. 713-714.


17 Patricia Wright and Lisa B. Reitzes, Tourtellotte and Hummel of Idaho: The Standard Practice of Architecture, (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1987), 5; see also, Renk and Wheaton. Historic American Building, 1 and X.

18 “Big Theater To Be Built, Cost $200,000: Main Street Building Company Plans to Shift Center of Business Eastward; New Structure First Step.” Idaho Statesman, April 4, 1926, p. 2, col. 1.


22 Ibid.


27 Ibid. p.2.


29 Ibid; see also Renk and Wheaton. *Historic American Building Survey*, p. 2.


Bibliography


*Historic American Building Survey (HABS) – General Interior View of Proscenium HABS, ID: BOISE.*


