Opening Night

It was a cool Friday evening in March and the air was filled with a sense of anticipation and excitement as the long awaited grand opening of one of the most elegant playhouses in the state was about to take place.

That was the atmosphere generated by the audience 56 years ago on March 26, 1926, when the Kennedy Theatre in Kirksville, Missouri, opened its first season with the play *Let's Get Married*, starring Richard Dix, and a three-act vaudeville show. The Kennedy Theatre, fashioned after theaters in Kansas City and St. Louis, was a half-million dollar venture financed by Mrs. J. M. Kennedy and her son, Sam.

Entering the auditorium in the Kennedy, it is easy to imagine what that Friday night 56 years ago, was like. An usher, dressed in a tuxedo, would have shown you to your seat. As you walked down the aisle, you would have begun to appreciate the size and elegance of the theatre: the 15-piece orchestra warming up in the orchestra pit, the hum made from an audience of nearly 1,200 people and the dome ceiling almost 50 feet high. As the usher seated you, you would have noticed that the seats were leather and the decor was highlighted by elegant molding. Then, as the curtain was raised and the orchestra began its opening number, you would have noticed the stage, a stage equipped with the latest stage equipment, lights, draperies, and props, suitable to accommodate the best road attractions.

One major obstacle you might have had to overcome during the performance was hats. Some were tall; some were wide. Seeing over and around them was a job in itself. After the play, you might have gone to a little place around the corner called the Kennedy Inn for a bite to eat.

The Kennedy was truly a community theater with entertainment produced locally as well as entertainment produced nationally. Among the locally produced performances were the Charleston Dance Contest, which lasted four days, a dance recital presented by Mametta Ewais School of Dance, and a junior high school production of the play, *Seeking a Servant*. The Kennedy Theatre also hosted performances by many other community groups.

On November 7, 1929, the Kennedy family sold the theater to Fox Interests. In the late months of 1953, Fox Interests installed a movable wide-vision screen, which is still present.

*Picture below: An artist sketch of the Kennedy theatre as it appeared in 1936.*

The modern Kennedy as seen through the eyes of a photographer in 1982.
Recent Installation of $10,000 Biophone for Talking, Singing and Sound PHOTOPLAYS

$25,000 Robert Morton Organ

Standard Stage Equipment for Presentation of Best Road Attractions

This advertisement was taken from the KCOM yearbook. It shows and describes the elegance of the Kennedy Theatre.
This screen could be moved so that the stage could be utilized for plays.

As times changed, so did the Kennedy. In the late 20's and early 30's, talking pictures were becoming more popular. On March 4, 1929, the Kennedy introduced its first "talkie". Among the first talking picture shows were *The Goose Woman*, starring Jack Pickford, Louise Dressler and Constance Bennett; *The Road to Glory*, starring Everett Horton; and *Monte Carlo*, starring Lew Cody and Gertrude Olmstead.

During the drought years of the 30's, people would go to the Kennedy just for the air conditioning. The superb heating and cooling system earned the theater the name, "Kirkville's only cool spot," boasting ice-washed air and a temperature never exceeding 70 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Kennedy Theatre, which has a marquee made in France, had its last live performance, a lolly pop concert sponsored by the local merchants, in 1976. The Kennedy was also used by KCOM to hold graduation before they began using Baldwin Hall.

On a cool Friday night in October, 1982, as you, dressed in your tennis shoes and blue jeans, go to the Kennedy to see a movie, you may have noticed, as you walk through the hall into the auditorium, that the Kennedy has lost much of its elegance. The musicians no longer play and the ushers have all gone home. The paint is peeling, the plaster is cracked and the orchestra pit has been boarded up. But, as you sit down and the midnight movie begins, like so many before you, you have become a part of the history of the Kennedy Theatre.

*Photo at top, Taken in 1976, this is a picture of the last live performance, "A Lolly Pop Concert," at the Kennedy. The photo at right shows a spectator's view of the stage; the stage appears close, even though you are in the farthest seat.*

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