FROM Princess TO PALACE

Sieren's Palace, located at 200-202 South Franklin, holds many mysteries. Many who have gone there have never noticed the heavy chandeliers or the ornate carvings on the walls. Most have never looked up to see the triumph mask gazing over what once was the orchestra pit. Even scrutinizing shoppers don't know about the secret door used to get into the aging balcony. Setting aside a clothing rack, opening the hidden door, and looking up the balcony stairs, the history of the Princess Theatre starts to unfold into the 1980s. Pieces of the past can be viewed, like the yellowing plaster, and chunks of what once were cherub's delicate faces are broken over the floor. The balcony carpet is the original piece installed when the Princess was built in 1914. It was obvious the Princess Theatre had seen many years, but with a little imagination one could be transported back to the Roaring Twenties when life was just beginning for the young theatre.

There were two sects of Presbyterians in Kirksville, the Cumberland and the Presbyterian. Around the turn of the century the two churches decided to start negotiations and in 1912 they merged. Mrs. Pat Severn, a literature teacher at Northeast Missouri State University, believes that the owners of the church sold the unused church to Mrs. Caroline Kennedy, who financed the construction of the Princess Theatre. Irwin Dunbar, a local architect, designed the plans for the theatre. The plaster work designs inside were believed to have been done by St. Louis designers, because the railroad connecting St. Louis and Kirksville made it easy to transport these people at a lower fee. The construction was completed in 1916, and on Tuesday, February 29, 1916, the Princess Theatre officially opened. The opening night play was "Misleading Lady" in five acts. On Saturday and Sunday vaudeville acts were performed.

Until 1926 the Princess showed only first-run movies. It was that year that Mrs. Kennedy had the Kennedy Theatre built for her son, Sam, to run. The Princess was then used as a second-run theatre, one of the first of its kind in America. It was not unusual for the Kennedy to run through a film and take it to the Princess to be re-run one hour later for cheaper admission.

Many times the Princess would have local acts like magicians and tumblers. On the days the theatre could not find acts to perform, the Kirksville Senior High School would send the Glee Club or the band.

In the Princess Theatre's prime years it was the place for celebrities to be seen. This would be the equivalent of where Vincent Price would go if the theatre was in operation today. Stars of that era, like Ernest Tubb and Jimmy Dickens, visited the Princess and the Kennedy on occasion.

Before "talkies" were introduced to the Princess, silent movies were shown with an organist playing. Between movies the orchestra would perform for a change of pace.

Mrs. Jane Denslow, a long-time resident, recalled her first night out in 1918. She was four years old when her father took her to see Mary Miles Minter, a popular silent screen star of that time.

When Mrs. Denslow went there as a teen in the 1930s, admission was 25 cents. She saw "The Perils of Pauline," a serial that Mrs. Denslow said, "Always ended with Pauline tied to a train track with a train coming. You'd always have to go back next week to see what happened."

Mrs. Erma Auer, who worked there as an usher from
1946 to 1952, remembers the types of shows popular at this time. The B- and C-type movies were shown, as well as westerns, such as The Cisco Kid and Roy Rogers. A typical theatre venture was going to the Princess after school and on weekends, and when the show was over, everyone met at the White Cabin.

The real hangout, however, was the Kennedy Theatre. It was a nicer theatre than the Princess, for the Princess had become run down. Caroline Kennedy’s granddaughter, also named Caroline, was financially unable to remodel the Princess. In the early 1950s the theatre found itself deeper in debt. The plaster began to crack and the velvet curtains needed replacing. Even the stability of the balcony was questioned.

In 1957 the theatre was closed. In 1962 the marquee was taken down because it was deemed a pedestrian hazard. The Princess lay vacant for 16 years, until Mr. Fred Hulse purchased the building from the Kennedy family and began remodeling. Mr. Hulse saved the detailed ornaments and closed the basement and balcony areas. He put a false floor over the orchestra pit and stage and removed the seats. His store, Tina’s Fabrics, flourished until 1973, when Herb Sieren leased the building as a women’s dress shop, Sieren’s Palace, which is at the present site today.

The theatre is important to describe, because it has changed since 1916. The outside had thick marble columns with small white tiles on the ground around the ticket booth. The marquee was of a triangular design with the name Princess on two sides. Underneath hung the coming attractions. The ticket booth was located outside. One would buy a ticket, give the ticket to a woman dressed in the theatre’s colors of red and gold, and find a seat. Two loges on both sides of the theatre were entered by the east side of the theatre. The real use of the loges was for the vaudeville era. Being in a loge was like sitting right on top of the stage in a box seat.

Many intriguing rumors still circulate today, including the reported tunnel connecting the Kennedy and the Princess for actors to travel between theatres between acts to change clothes. Mrs. Sevrens believes this idea started because steam pipes ran underground from the Princess to the Kennedy. During the time the theatre was built, a popular way to heat was steam. The hole is big enough to crawl through, but no other evidence of a tunnel has been found.

Another unseen and unknown feature is the balcony. Left untouched since the closing of the theatre, it still has the original carpet and movie room. Old movie reels and posters once lay in the back room until they were cleaned out some time in the sixties. There are small holes in the floor where the seats once were connected. Even the color of the walls, a deep lime green, is still on the walls.

The ushers have all gone home now, and the ticket takers have lost their lonely vigil for someone to buy a ticket. But walking into present day Sieren’s Palace and envisioning silent movies beaming onto the screen, with organ music being piped into the audience, one can be instantly enveloped into the past of the Princess Theatre.

This beautiful fresco is from inside the theatre. It is made of plaster and horsehair; the horsehair was used as a reinforcement to the plaster. (Photo courtesy of Burt Beard)

An inside view of the theatre remodeled as Sieren’s Palace. Seen to the extreme left, right, and top of the photo are examples of the detailed plaster work which are still the same today as they were 71 years ago. (Photo courtesy of Kirkville Daily Express)