
CHAPTER 8:

There's No Place Like Home: The Fallon Theatre

Diane Gauthier-Novak

When Dorothy wished to return from Oz, she just clicked her heels and instantly found herself back in her own little house on the Kansas prairie. In the 1990s, if I or my children had done that, we would have found ourselves in the top story of the Fallon Theatre! How did we come to live in such a large commercial building in the center of the city? And what was it like there?

Small Town Connections

In any town of Fallon's size, everything is connected. In our case, step one in our chain of events began when we needed to move into town and I decided to place a "Want to Rent" ad. On my way to the newspaper office I got sidelined when I noticed a brand-new business just opening its doors – Manpower Temporary Services on South Maine and Stillwater. I walked in, filled out a job application, and took my typing test while sitting on a packing crate, hunched over a large, energetic IBM Selectric typewriter which swayed precariously atop a stack of cardboard boxes. Passing that test was step two.

This led almost immediately to step three: a six-hour stint at the *Lahontan Valley News and Fallon Eagle Standard (LVN)*. I had indeed made it to the newspaper office but was way too busy to place my own ad!

In 1989, the *LVN* was housed where La Fiesta Mexican Restaurant is now. While today's restaurant is a bright, classy place, the old *LVN* building was not quite so much; it had more of a dingy motif with much of its actual newspapering being done in what could most kindly be called the dungeon in the cellar. But that's another story.

In any event, my temporary shift at the *LVN* quickly morphed into a full-time job taking classified advertising which brought step four: Fallon's then-Mayor Robert Erickson placing an ad not just for a rental but for a rental which could accommodate me, five children and all the flotsam and jetsam of a large, lively family. I innocently asked if the rental was near the center of town, was told it was as close as you can get, and arranged to view the place.

Fallon Theatres 101

Although I had taken my children to every Disney movie and animated film shown in Fallon, I had never noticed or even suspected that the theater actu-

ally included an apartment. Therefore I was a bit chagrined while I followed Bob Erickson into the theater, then through a heretofore unnoticed door, up some steps to a landing, through another door, and up a long staircase which turned at the top to open into a large foyer. Amazing! I thought as I began to realize what an intriguing building this was.

For one thing, the theater, seen from a bird's-eye view, is L-shaped: one part begins at the big entrance doors on Maine Street and leads to the snack bar; the other part is the actual theater. Since the apartment is over the entry part, that means the two matching windows facing Maine Street are part of the large living- and dining-room areas.

Also the apartment is not only wider than would seem from the first floor, but also longer. Behind the apartment's front rooms are the kitchen and that large foyer at the top of the stairs (large enough to accommodate my eight-place dining room table plus a sideboard), followed by three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a pantry/storage room, and finally the laundry room which also included steps leading up to an attic!

During this tour I also learned some surprising facts about theater construction: Originally called the Rex Theatre, this building not only looks massive but its walls are actually two bricks thick. Erickson explained that early film reels were dangerously flammable so theaters were built with many safety features; indeed in its first thirty-five years this theater survived two potentially big fires and several earthquakes.

The question was, could it survive my five children and their friends? Since the apartment was designed by famed Nevada architect Frederic DeLongchamps as part of the Rex Theatre in 1920, and had been lived in by a succession of owners, managers and miscellaneous tenants since then, I decided to present the planned move to my kids as an adventure . . . and so it was!

Not Your Typical Little Bungalow

While moving into a new house is exciting and sometimes traumatic to children, my brood was positively speechless when first I led them into the theater and up the stairs to their new home. My "Won't this be great fun?" attitude was met by stunned skepticism broken only by a sudden bone-shaking screech from outside our front window – Fallon's fire alarm/noon whistle! Formerly just a distant noise to be ignored, now it was something to be reckoned with. We were not only very close but were actually on eye-level with the beast and it was loud! "You'll get used to it," I promised, and indeed they did. Eventually we reached the point where we could listen to the alarm, track the fire trucks as to direction and distance, and come up with a pretty accurate estimate of where any given fire might be, all without leaving our beds!

In fact, in the late '90s when the Palludan Arcade building, just a few doors south of us, burned during one long night, the kids slept through the whole event – fire alarms, sirens and trucks, shouts and equipment ruckus – only to awake in the morning to find me up and dressed, frazzled and exhausted, keeping watch lest

we needed to evacuate. They wondered aloud what all that white stuff was on the ground until I pointed to the burned-out upper story of our neighboring building. So much for all those skeptics who warned that the children would never get any sleep living in the center of town.

Another accommodation had to be made for what we called “movie time.” Since there were only two legitimate ways for us to leave the building – either via the big front doors on Maine Street or by going through one of the theaters and out its emergency exit door – we had to plan our comings and goings. For example, if it were your turn to take out the trash, you couldn’t very well put it off until a movie was playing. Walking in front of people trying to watch a movie is bad enough; carrying garbage cans is definitely a no-no. Either you had to schedule chores for mornings or walk through the black theater after hours. And that was downright scary! All large, empty buildings are less than welcoming at night and, as one of my then eight-year-old twins confessed, she knew what Anne Frank must have felt like having to tip-toe around strange noises in the dark.

As it turned out, scheduling our comings and goings around movie schedules was especially tricky when it came to blockbuster movies. For much of our time in the theater apartment, the large back exit door in the theater was a one-way arrangement – you could go out but, for obvious reasons, you could not get back in unless you walked around the block and re-entered through the front doors. Problem is, try getting in those front doors ahead of a Star Wars fan who has been waiting for



Still a single screen theater, this image shows the Fallon Theater after a remodeling in the 1930s. (Churchill County Museum & Archives photo collection.)

hours to buy his ticket. Explaining “We live here!” just didn’t work; everyone in line was sure we were not only taking “cuts” but were being smart mouths. Finally we learned to smile and say “We work here.” That got us in every time.

Eventually, those back doors were modified to allow anyone with a key to unlock them and enter into the rear of the theater but not before that building taught me the most embarrassing lesson of my life. You see, I had become so used to living in the theater that I had forgotten that this was not so much a Brady-Bunch-type house as it was a public business edifice with quirky challenges. Having back doors which, once closed, could not be re-opened, for example.

Every morning after the kids left for school I would casually walk through the empty theater and leave through those doors to get my car in the back parking lot. One morning I was especially harried because we were having a celebration at the LVN and I rushed through the dark theater carrying my briefcase plus a decorated cake for the potluck. More important, I was proudly wearing a new outfit – a two-piece that included a long, flowing skirt. When I opened the back door, an unusual easterly wind roared at me so I struggled to balance the briefcase and the cake while closing the door with my elbow. Then I stopped.

Actually, I couldn’t move. I quickly ascertained that the wind had blown my skirt backwards and I had slammed the door on it. Panic time! The door held the skirt in a death-grasp and I was basically pinned to the wall. What to do? First, I dropped the briefcase. Then I thanked heaven that Kathy Lee Gifford had eschewed fashion snobs and opted for elasticized waists – very practical when you have to slither out of your skirt. In fact, I immediately realized that I couldn’t climb out of it, though onlookers know how I tried; instead I had to maneuver myself halfway out the bottom, juggle the cake to the ground, then slip the skirt over my shoulders and head, leaving me on the back steps of the theater in my underwear.

Ironically, this outfit was, for me, very expensive so I knew what I had to do – somehow get into the theater and open that back door again to release the imprisoned skirt. No way was I going to rip it! I once heard a con man say that you can get away with anything if you just look like you know what you’re doing and you’re doing it on purpose. I tested the theory, assuring myself that most people rushing to work would not notice a woman walking purposefully down the Maine Street wearing only a lace top and a short slip over her pantyhose and high heels. That might have worked, too, but I had forgotten that the new little coffee shop next to the theater had outdoor café seating. I don’t know who was more surprised – me or the restaurant patrons sitting at the outside tables, sipping their wake-up coffees. When they saw the strange, half-dressed and wild-eyed woman suddenly stop and mutter “Damn!” under her breath, they probably thought she had just remembered that her workplace was not “Clothing Optional.” In fact, I had just realized “Why didn’t I just get into the car and drive around the block?” Never again did I forget that I lived in a special building – except for the fuzzy slippers and jammies moment, but that’s another story.

C'mon Up!

Life also had its little ironies in our theater home. Many times guests we'd invited would call from a pay phone because they could not find the door leading to our apartment, yet somehow so many theater-goers found the little hidden doorbell button that we finally had it disconnected. Some people would stand outside pushing the button, wondering what it was supposed to do while those of us upstairs were covering our ears and wincing!

Of course many people live in unconventional homes and consider it fun. It's all a matter of attitude. True we had no yard to relax and play in but few apartment dwellers do. What we had instead was Fallon's parks and playgrounds. True, everything we owned was pretty much saturated with Eau de Popcorn but then again my annual corned beef and cabbage feast probably infused the ground floor. True, we didn't live in a conventional neighborhood but we did have great landlords in Bob and Mary Beth Erickson; some of their employees became good friends and when we suffered a death in our family, everyone in the theater helped us, just as neighbors do.

One of the most difficult aspects of living in a public building really involves peoples' perception of you and your home. While the children worried at first that other kids would think us "weird," that only lasted until the first time a friend said "Wow! You live in the Fallon Theater? Can I visit?" After that it was merely a question of drawing lines: Yes, the snack bar is open; No, you cannot sneak into the movie; No, you cannot "borrow" some popcorn! Or Yes, you can come up after the (choose one) Labor Day Parade, Christmas tree lighting, street fair. And finally, No, you cannot climb out on the neighboring roof and spy or drop things on friend and foe below!

Up On The Roof

This last rule was the hardest to enforce because at least twice a year we would find strange intruders climbing up onto adjoining rooftops, totally unaware that we were watching their escapades! This usually happened at night, with or without police in pursuit, and was a bit scary though sometimes downright comical. Like the young gentlemen from the Base who figured how to access the roof one summer evening, but then forgot and couldn't find their way back down!

Whatever peoples' fascination with roofs may be, those large flat roofs around and on top of us really impacted our lives. They literally exude heat in the summer and in cold weather they make perfect surfaces for icy winds to skate upon. Add to that the number of birds that perch or nest atop flat buildings and those roofs become characters to contend with.

I was never more aware of that than during an early-morning earthquake in the mid '90s. For some unknown reason I awakened to something very unusual in the center of town – total silence. Then, suddenly, there was a strange roaring sound as though a giant creature were inhaling deeply; next, as though on a signal, dozens, or perhaps hundreds of birds took flight from the roof over our heads and swirled in a huge circle around the building. Only then did the rumbling and moving start and I heard what I thought were bullets hitting glass.

Once the building stopped moving, I hustled the kids to the first floor and tried to decide: run out into Maine Street and risk injury from falling buildings and power lines or run through the theater to the back exit? Then I remembered reading about Fallon's earthquakes and thinking how the theater had withstood those disasters better than the schools, churches and businesses around it. Through the building we ran and when we emerged from the back doors there were already people driving up to stare at the east side of the theater, thinking, I suppose, that it was old and vulnerable and would probably collapse. I was beginning to feel more confident, however. The birds had alighted back on their rooftop perches so I had to assume that the worse was over and, except for contending with a few cracked windows, it was.

Theater Apartment FAQs

Two questions almost always come up when people learn where we lived. The first always amuses me because, until someone asked it, we ourselves never thought of it: Did we get to watch movies for free? My first response is always "Of course not!" If we lived over, say, a clothing store, would we have been allowed to sneak into the store at night and pick out the next day's outfit? There is an exception, however. Bob and Mary Beth Erickson were and are generous and considerate people. They frequently donate their resources for good causes and were truly good to us all.

The other FAQ makes more sense: Wasn't it noisy living in a theater? Actually, although the Rex was built by a vaudevillian in an era of silent movies, the interior was revamped for "talkies" early on and when the original theater was redesigned to become two separate theaters over 35 years ago, great care was taken to manage/control the sounds.

My son, Rich, does remember hearing some great sound effects from a Star Wars film but the rest of us rarely heard anything until Titanic arrived. At that time the sound system was upgraded to Surround Sound and, in our large back bathroom, we could vaguely hear that giant ship sinking every night for months! Like all sounds, however, we quickly became accustomed to it just as anyone living in town adapts to constant traffic noises.

A Treat and A Privilege

Friends have asked if, given a chance, I would make the same choices. I tell them, Yes, in a minute! My one-day job at the *LVN* in 1989 turned into an amazing twelve-year stint in one of the most dynamic businesses possible. I got to participate as the paper grew, moved into a new building, and expanded its coverage.

Would I still raise my children in a theater in the center of town? Absolutely! In that apartment we lived and grew as a family, and celebrated every major holiday; we enjoyed every scout meeting, parade, music lesson, sports event, and graduation. I moved in with five school kids; I moved out an empty-nester whose offspring included a career Airman, a school teacher, several college students and grandchildren.

What's more, we got a ringside seat to some of the biggest events and changes in the city's history. If I could have climbed onto our roof and taken one panoramic photo of the center of Fallon each day, then put those pictures in a flip-book, it would show constant activity: buildings being renovated, new businesses showing in the windows, new *Fallon Star Press* stands; the Fallon Theatre's celebration of its 75th anniversary; the beginnings of trees and flowers in planters along sidewalks, a fountain and a new park; street fairs and farmers' markets.

From a personal point of view, living literally in the center of town was incredibly convenient; and living in a truly unconventional residence cannot be matched for creating memories. But maybe best of all was having my grandchildren grow up believing that I always had the best Christmas tree ever -- a Christmas tree so huge that it had to stand in the middle of the street and that people came from all over to watch it light up. Now that's priceless!



The Fallon Theatre in the 1950s. (Churchill County Museum & Archives photo collection.)