

Carolina Theatre retains early opulence with interior technological advances

By LISA CARL

The date was October 14, 1942. Americans had been fighting in World War II for almost a year, but construction of the opulent new Carolina movie theater had gone on through the summer as scheduled.

Projectionist Duke Williams fondly remembers opening day. "The Major and the Minor" ran three days long. It was the longest picture we'd ever run in Chapel Hill. We were sold out the first two nights," he said.

In those days, there was a space in front of the auditorium for the piano player. A fan system blew air over cool water or ice to cool moviegoers. "That water cooler would get the theater twenty degrees cooler easy," Williams said.

Williams went to work for the original Carolina Theatre, now the Varsity, in 1935. He worked part-time for three years; then became a full-time projectionist until his retirement this year.

Williams followed the Carolina owners when they moved across the street to the Pick-Wick, which later became Jasper's. Then construction began on the new Carolina Theatre, the first theater in town to be built specifically for showing movies.

The new theater, with 1,145 seats (the Pick-Wick held only 500), was big even by today's standards. The exterior was modelled after 17th-century Williamsburg with creamy fluted columns and a two-story hand-made brick facade.

Inside, guests could relax in "ultramodern" overstuffed chairs in the Art Deco style lobby. Sofas decorated with brilliant peacock feathers framed a round blue mirror and two gazelle statues graced the main sitting area. Large-cushioned chairs were placed to the side beneath large framed floral prints.

Even the women's lounges were lavishly furnished with sofas, thick carpets, framed pictures and mirrors.

Chapel Hillians, weary of gas rationing, scrim-

ing on luxuries and worrying about the war, were eager for the grand escape to the movies. Moviegoers of the 1940s respected the privilege of their escape, Williams said.

"That was the only entertainment you had in those days. People took care of the theater. They were more obedient. They went to the show and really listened—they didn't cut up the seats or throw trash around."

Going to the movies now is not such a special occasion, Williams said. "Now, you go to the movies to love a little in the back seats, or to carry on a conversation you forgot to finish at the office. It's not entertainment like it used to be."

Williams retired this year after 46 years with the theater. Williams and his partner, Thurman Tripp, who also retired this year after nearly 40 years, are sometimes called out of retirement to make emergency repairs on "their" projectors.

"Don't ever retire," Williams said, "you'll find yourself busier than before."

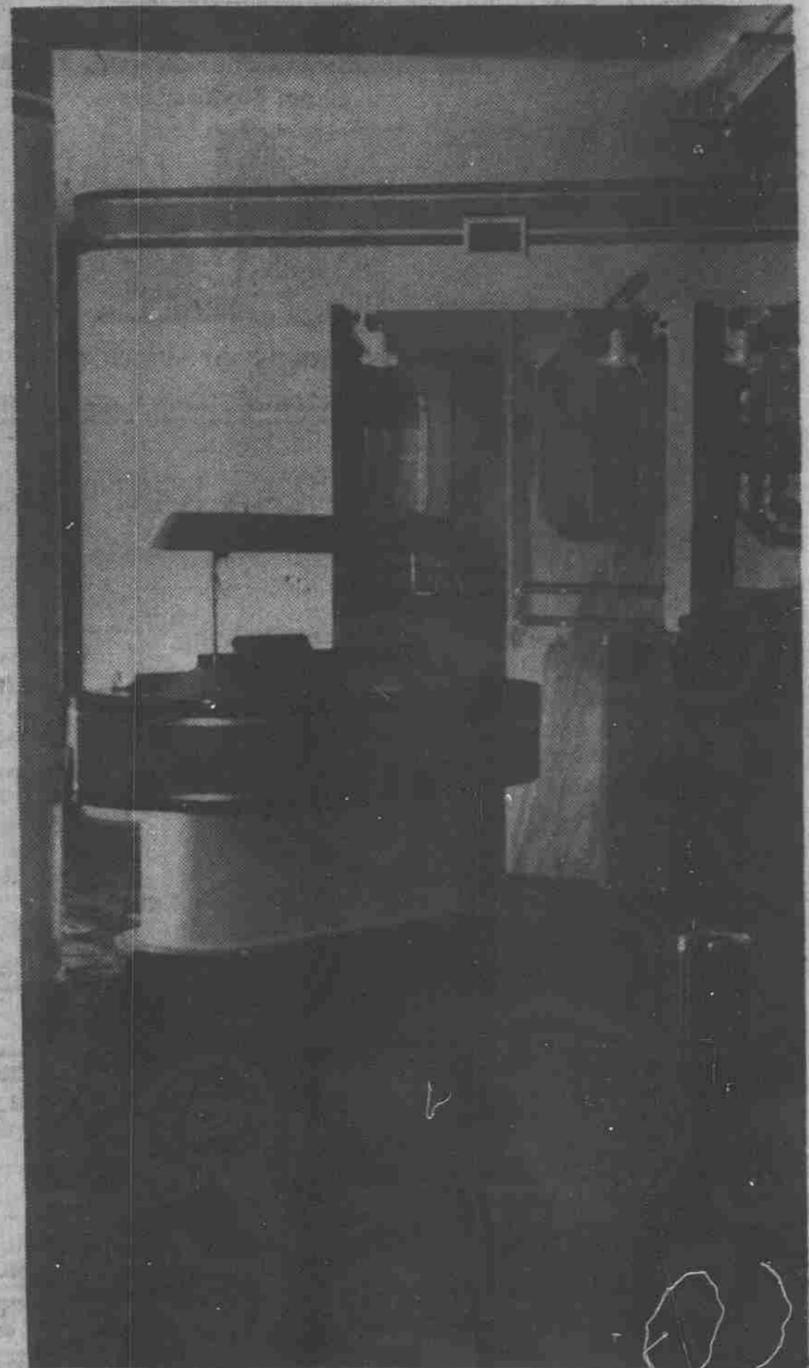
Today, the theater's exterior looks much as it did 40 years ago. The same black and white tiles pave the entrance and two of the lounges. During the school year, the theater shows classics of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Some afternoons visitors can return to be transported to the days of the theater's opening.

But inside, several changes have been made. The auditorium has been divided into two theaters, the "Blue" and the "White." The concession booth sells popcorn for quite a bit more than the five-cent bags that used to lure war-weary crowds.

But most noticeable are the technological advances made since the war years.

"If you'd have seen the (projection) equipment in those days, you'd've been scared to come and watch the show. It was so easy for the whole thing to catch fire," Williams said with a rueful laugh.

"Back then, you had to know everything (about running the projectors). Now the projectionist just punches a few buttons."



Original Carolina Theatre: a sell-out for the first two nights after its opening in 1942, offering a delightful escape for weary Villagers