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THE CORKTOWN NEWS

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THEN & NOW

Corktown's Last Picture Show

By Coralina Lemos, corktownhistory.com

It's interesting how we walk past houses and buildings all the time, yet are unaware of the stories behind these structures that form the landscape of our community.

Few know that in the early 1900s, the area around Queen and Parliament Streets was dubbed the "high rent district" by John F. Brown, owner of the Home Furniture and Carpet Company Ltd. This was where Eastenders came to shop, whether it was for a pair of shoes from Mr. Walkin, a new hat from Sarah Willinsky's millinery shop, a musical instrument at G.W. Shepheard's, or view an amusing silent movie at the Idle Hour Theatre, ca. 1909, Corktown's first movie house.

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...the Imperial Theatre that served as a community meeting and entertainment venue; completed at a time when neighbourhood nickelodeons were increasingly popular.

Main street real estate was scarce but when a lumber yard at the northwest corner of Queen and Tracy Streets came up for sale in 1912, the Very Reverend John L. Hand of St. Paul's Catholic Church, on Power Street, did all he could to acquire the lot for a parish



1919

hall. Following the purchase, architect Charles J. Read was hired to design and manage the construction of a three-storey building and basement.

On Sunday, May 24, 1914, the building corner-stone was laid in the presence of a number of people, area school children and special guests. St. Paul's Parish

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Starting in the 1920s the Imperial was renamed the Paulton Theatre and subsequently, the Rialto until the 1940s when its newly installed marquee displayed—the Empire.

Hall officially opened in January of 1915 and upon completion, the edifice housed three additional rental units that allowed for income to its owners. This included the Imperial Theatre that served as a community meeting and entertainment venue; completed at a time when neighbourhood nickelodeons were increasingly popular. In comparison, when the Idle Hour opened there were approximately 30 film and variety show venues. Yet, six years later there were just over one hundred throughout Toronto.

The buildings first two occupants included William Sullivan who operated a drug store at the corner of Tracy (formerly

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LAST PICTURE SHOW... CONTINUED

Hanover Pl) and William Sturgess, theatre manager from Detroit Michigan who oversaw the daily operations of the Imperial Theatre, Corktown's second motion picture and vaudeville venue.

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As to when the last movie played on the silver screen of the Empire Theatre has yet to be verified...



Notably, this theatre underwent name changes that occurred due to renovation, address or management staff turnover. Starting in the 1920s the Imperial was renamed the Paulton Theatre and subsequently, the Rialto until the 1940s when its newly installed marquee displayed—the Empire.

In 1926, as silent movies were transitioning to sound, Brothers Hyman and Charles Rothenberg began managing the Rialto Theatre. Throughout their work-life and with help from family, the two men oversaw the operations of a handful of Toronto movie and vaudeville locations at different time periods. At last count this included the Rex, Greenwood, Mary Pickford, Chateau, and Rialto (renamed the Empire).

The prospects of theatre ownership must have seemed promising to the Rotenbergs despite newspaper reports that motion picture laboratories were predicting the transmission of Hollywood movies through home TVs. By World War II the brothers were leasing the Chateau and Empire theatres, in addition to a small store within the Parish Hall complex. A new canopy marquee was installed and seating capacity increased but home television sales resulted in the downturn of movie ticket revenue.

As to when the last movie played on the silver screen of the Empire Theatre has yet to be verified, but it's estimated to have been between 1955-57. By 1963 the former Empire Theatre showed obvious signs of deterioration including the absence of marquee sign lettering. That same year the Little Brothers of The Good Shepherd took over the management and eventual ownership of the building, with the goal of repurposing it into a hostel for homeless men; marking its 60th anniversary in September 2023.

It is the opinion of the writer that this location, like other historic buildings in Corktown, deserves a heritage plaque as a reminder of people and events that have shaped the built heritage of this neighbourhood.