

Verde Heritage: Rialto Theater — Old Town Palace

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Rialto Theater with a large entry and foyer on the north (right) and a retail store and entrance on the south (left). The original canopy was replaced and wood posts were added, perhaps due to 1967 snow damage. Board-and-batten siding and flagstone skirting was also added to create an “Old Western” appearance during 1970’s. Posters across the front advertise current movies. (**Helen Dickinson-Moxcey** photograph)

Constructed during 1923, the Joe Becchetti Theater became the oldest single-screen theater in continuous operation in the United States during the 1990's. Rialto Theater had been renovated to install equipment and a larger screen for the "talking" movies during 1929 and 1930.

Boomtown Cottonwood included the Portola Theater in 1917. Joe Becchetti took over its management and eventually called it the "Rialto Theater." When the Bungalow dance hall was no longer profitable, Joe Becchetti and Peter Tonelli bought the building in 1920, and in 1923 decided to demolish the north 27 feet to provide a space 30 by 100 feet for a modern theater. The remaining 47 feet of the Bungalow was a dance hall until it was rented out as a restaurant and later a grocery store until it burned and became a parking lot.

Demolition and salvage of materials began during July of 1923 with contractors Jess Hood and O. C. Stewart, who were also constructing the neighboring building for John MacIntyre. "About 20 men were engaged in laying the foundation" and walls of the poured concrete buildings. (Verde Copper News; Aug. 3, 10, 1923) Local businesses and craftsmen worked on these buildings.

Joseph and Ermelinda Becchetti became the sole owners of the property. Joe Becchetti and John MacIntyre, the owners, were "on the job every spare moment to aid in the work." Mr. Bigelow hauled in sand, gravel, and other materials. Wood for the roof came from the L. W. Pugh Lumber company on the north end of town. W. A. Brachter and his crew of men constructed the roof. Frank Jordan and Arthur Estey supplied the pipe, drains and gutters. The concrete walls were completed by November, and the roof was finished by December. Both buildings had decorative metallic ceilings installed. The "New Rialto Theater" was one of the first structures in Cottonwood to have a Moderne/Streamlined architectural style.

"The new theater of Joe Becchetti's will be a credit to any city in the state when completed. The proscenium arch with its decorations, the specious stage with dressing rooms below, the elevated seating arrangement, the large balcony and the excellent lighting system will give it some class. The building is practically fireproof. Joe has spent many a hard day on his building." (Verde Copper News; Dec. 31, 1923)

"The New Rialto was formally opened with a boxing carnival including a 6-round semi-final and two 4-round preliminaries which furnished some good sport and got the appetite of the spectators whetted up for the main event." Rivalry ran high between the fans of Jerome, the home town of Ralph Pena and fans of Clarkdale favoring smelter employee Young Allen. (Verde Copper News; Feb. 5, 1924)

For Joe Becchetti, managing the Rialto Theater was a family business. His wife and their five children helped by ushering, selling tickets at the booth, cleaning up after movies, etc. Each of the children sang and played an instrument. The Becchetti Family Players entertained the audience when the vaudevilles performed at the theater. The family home was across the alley in back of the theater.

Over 100 "Rushes" for movies filmed in the area were reviewed in this theater, bringing Hollywood stars, actors, crews, movie producers and directors to the streets and businesses of Cottonwood. The last "Rushes" were reviewed in 1964, when "The Rounders," starring John Ford and Henry Fonda, was being filmed. "Rushes" were closed to the public, but Josephine Becchetti See remembered seeing the movie stars; John Wayne, Jane Russell, Tyrone Power, Burt Lancaster and others.

The Becchetti family sold their Rialto Theater after Joseph Becchetti was killed in an auto accident on Nov. 1, 1943. In 1960, A. F. Allen, owner of the Rialto Theater, leased the building to Wes King, who had managed theaters in Cottonwood in 1955 and 1956. The business became "Old Town Cinema." (The drive-in theater no longer exists)

New owners, David and Carolee Austin, named it the "Old Town Palace" during the spring of 1985. The fire on Dec. 8, 1998, left the concrete walls standing. The ruin was sold on Dec. 12, 2000, to Patrick Scanlan, who made plans to preserve and restore the building.

The building was sold on Nov. 25, 2003, to Eric Jurisin. The historic structure was rebuilt with a new architectural style and other changes. Although the Tavern is located in the Cottonwood Commercial Historic District, it is not considered to be a "contributing element" because the structure lost its historic architectural integrity when it was rebuilt. (National Register of Historic Places; Historic Property Inventory Form; 1999.)

(See: Verde Independent: "Rialto Theater;" Oct. 19, 22, 2013.)