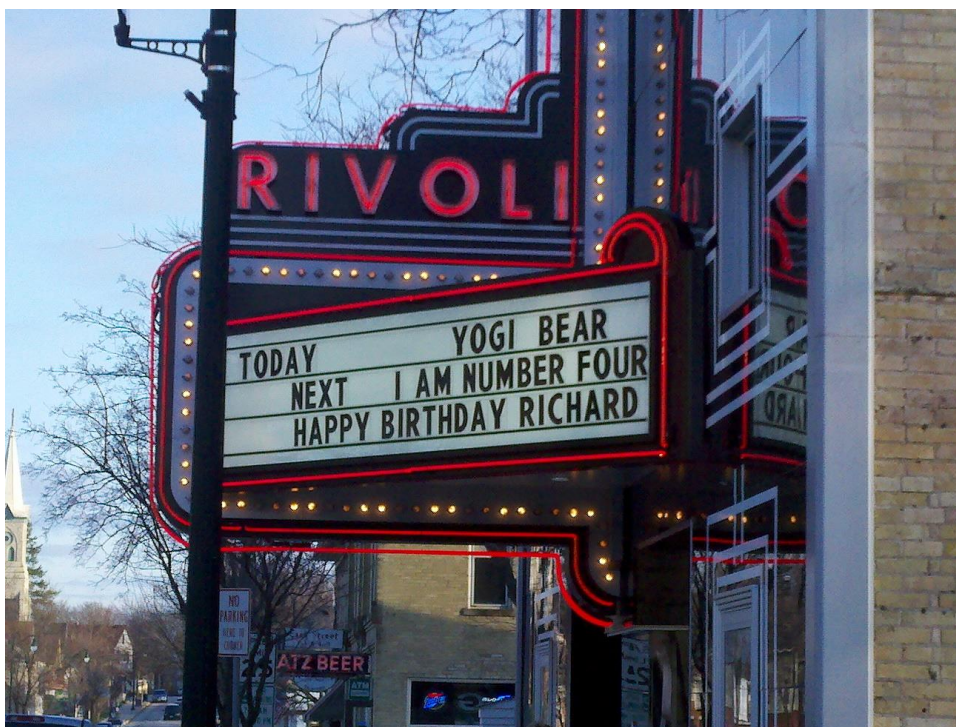


Now Showing: Revive the Rivoli

Richard Jacob
American Cinema COM-260-1
March 4, 2022

The Legacy

The sun rose over Mequon, Wisconsin on Sunday, April 10, 2011. A boy named Richard turned 8 years old. Every inch of Richard's body tingled with excitement. At noon, Richard hopped into the car with his mom and began the five-mile trek to Cedarburg, Wisconsin. The car pulled up to the Rivoli Theater in Cedarburg and Richard's excitement exploded. Richard saw "Happy Birthday Richard" on the marquee of the Rivoli Theater.



2011 – Rivoli Marquee saying Happy Birthday Richard – Photo taken by Bonnie Jacob

Twenty-five of Richard's little friends were going to celebrate his birthday at the Rivoli Theater, eat cake, and watch the movie Yogi Bear. The Rivoli is one of the last single screen movie theaters in Wisconsin located on W62 N567 Washington Avenue in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. For the community of Cedarburg, the Rivoli Theater is a historical landmark. A theater that has been with the community for almost 90 years. I am that boy named Richard. I am now 18 years old, attending college at the University of Tampa, and studying film production. While growing up in Mequon, my family frequently visited the Rivoli Theater in Cedarburg. My first recollection

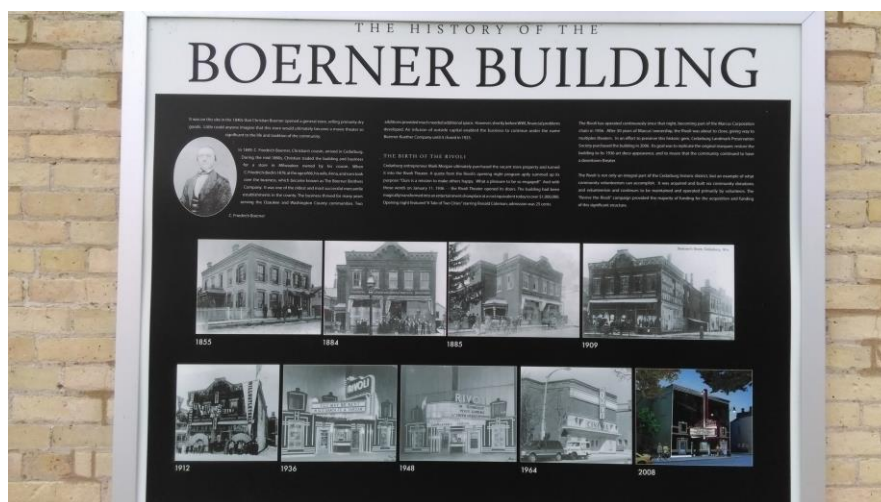
involved watching the movie “*How to Train Your Dragon*” at the Rivoli at the age of seven years old. My mom took me to the movie at the Rivoli. The tickets sold for three dollars each and the kids snack tray which included popcorn, a candy choice, and a soda cost three dollars. What an awesome memory for a kid and what a bargain for ten dollars! At age 17, “1917” was the last movie I watched at the Rivoli Theater before heading to college. Through the years, my family preferred to attend movies at the Rivoli because the movies were family-friendly and for twenty dollars we got four tickets, popcorn, and sodas. I will take the opportunity to travel through time and discover the legacy of the Rivoli through the decades and its impact on those who have visited. The Rivoli has become an incredibly special place with many treasures to behold.

Cedarburg and the Local General Store

Cedarburg is a small town in Wisconsin located approximately 15 miles northwest of Milwaukee. Cedarburg was founded by Irish and German immigrants in the early 1840s. The immigrants were lured to Cedarburg because of the potential power of the Cedar Creek rapids. Cedarburg began as a mill town.¹ Approximately 900 people lived in Cedarburg in the early 1800s. The population of Cedarburg remained flat until 1950 when the population began trending up. Today, approximately 12,000 people call Cedarburg home and Cedarburg remains a vibrant, small town in America and boasts eight listings on the National Register of Historic Places.²

In the 1840’s, Christian Boerner opened a general store in Cedarburg Wisconsin, selling mostly dry goods. In 1849, Christian’s cousin, Friedrich Boerner moved to Cedarburg. In the 1860’s, Christian traded the general store for Friedrich’s store located in Milwaukee. Through the years the store named the Boerner’s Brothers Company served Ozaukee and Washington counties, during this time two additional spaces were added. Unfortunately, before the

outbreak of World War I the store was hit with financial difficulties and forced to shut down in 1925.



Boerner Building Historical Marker – Photo by Devon Polzar 8/12/2015

The store remained abandoned until a local entrepreneur named Mark Morgan and his partner Harry Melcher, who owned 40 movie screens around Wisconsin purchased the building and turned it into the Rivoli movie theater. In 1935, Morgan refurbished the building and fashioned the exterior in an art deco style with an angular marquee. The original general store transformed into a magnificent, stunning, and majestic masterpiece. The building's new façade showcased black Carrara glass with extensive chrome trim, a grand and flashy Electrolite Silhouette marquee, and sidewalk ticket booth. The Rivoli single-screen movie theater in Cedarburg, Wisconsin was born.³

The Show Begins

On January 11, 1936, a year after the reconstruction, The Rivoli opened its doors to the public. Opening night featured "A Tale of Two Cities," a newsreel, and a cartoon. The program stated the purpose of the Rivoli was to make others happy with the statement "Ours is a mission to make others happy. What a pleasure to be so engaged!" The theater had 425 seats

and tickets sold for .25 cents for adults and .10 cents for children: with .15 cent Bargain Tuesdays. The Rivoli boasted luxurious fully upholstered velour seating, modern lighting, and ultra-modern carpet design⁴; a treasure for the townspeople of Cedarburg (pop. 2,045⁵) to enjoy. Movies became a big deal for the Cedarburg townspeople. Movies changed twice a week. Patrons attending a show would view more than one movie and in-between the movies, cartoons and newsreels were shown.⁶



The Rivoli Theater in 1936 – Photo from Cinema Treasures

Harry Melcher managed and operated the Rivoli Theater throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Films came on reels containing 15 to 20 minutes of film. A typical film averaged a little over 60 minutes. The Rivoli used the two-projector method to show films. The projectionist loaded both projectors with a reel and just before the film ran out on the first projector, the projectionist started the second projector. The projectionist used the red dots at the end of the film as a signal to start the second projector. The projectionist continued the process of switching projectors until all the reels were shown. At the end, the projectionist rewound the reels for the next showing.⁷

In the 1940s, the Rivoli mailed postcards advertising the upcoming movies and schedule to potential patrons in Cedarburg and nearby towns. The postcards and marquee listed multiple movies as part of the program. For example, a postcard from 1936 listed “*You May Be Next*”, “*In Old Sante Fe*”, and “*Tarzan*.” Each film lasted approximately 60 minutes with cartoons and newsreels in between movies. Going to the show meant a patron would see all movies listed as part of the program.⁸



The Rivoli Theater in 1948 – Photo: Rivoli Facebook

The Platters and Marcus

The Rivoli operated continuously from opening night. The Rivoli Theater saw minor renovations over the years. The Rivoli renovations included updates to the outside marquee and expanding space between seats and aisles for patrons. Each renovation reduced the number of available seats in the theater. In 1953, Ray Nichols became the manager of the Rivoli. In 1953, the number of seats totaled 379 and ticket prices were .65 cents for adults. Another update in the 1950s involved replacing the two-projector system with the new, modern film platter system.⁹ Filming equipment upgraded to the platter system. The platter system

required only one projector, changeovers and rewinding became unnecessary. Films continued to come on reels; approximately six reels for one film. The last frame of each film was scotch taped to the beginning of the next film. The film was placed onto a horizontal rotating table called a platter. The film was fed from the center of the reel into the projector and then back onto another platter.¹⁰ The Rivoli Theater had five platters. Two platters were used for each film. The Platter system operated at the Rivoli until 2012.¹¹

On January 3, 1956, the Rivoli became part of the Marcus Corporation. The Marcus Corporation leased the building for 10 years with a 10-year option. Obviously, Marcus Corporation renewed a few times because Marcus operated the Rivoli Theater for fifty years until 2006. The Marcus Corporation began showing movies in the 1960s. The Rivoli maintained its iconic marquee.¹²

In the 1960s, the mills in Cedarburg closed. However, the population in Cedarburg began to trend upward. In 1960, Cedarburg's population was 5,191; almost double the population from 1950. By 1970, the population was 7,697. The upward trend was due to people moving out of the city to more rural areas. Tourism became the new economy of Cedarburg.¹³ Cedarburg boasts eight listings on the National Register of Historic Places and the Rivoli Theater became a nostalgic visit on the tour.

Marcus and the Big Remodel

Marcus Corporation continued to operate the Rivoli Theater through the 1970s. The Rivoli Theater underwent many renovations. Marcus Corporation renovated and changed the whole exterior of the Rivoli. White brick in an art deco style replaced the black Carrara glass and chrome trim on the front of the building. The sidewalk ticket booth was removed. In 1976, the marquee was removed, and a green text sign was added to the front of the building. In 1977, remodeling of the interior began. The number of seats was reduced to 330 seats to

create more space for patrons and additional space was added to the theater. The renovations intended to modernize the theater with the culture of the 1970s hoping to draw in more people. Some Cedarburg residents felt their nostalgic movie theater looked more like a bank than a movie theater. Ticket prices increased with adults paying \$2.50 and kids paying \$1.25. The theater continued to use the same film equipment from the 1950s. Marcus Corporation modified the film selections to include R-rated movies with less emphasis on family-friendly movies.¹⁴



The Rivoli in the 1970s – Photo: Rivoli Theater website

Rivoli in the 21st century

Since January 1956, Marcus leased the building home to the Rivoli theater, showed movies, and provided daily upkeep. Marcus Corporation continued to raise ticket prices throughout the years. In 2005, adults ticket prices were \$4.00 each and kids ticket prices were \$3.00. Following September 11, 2001, Marcus participated in the "Victims Benefit Day at the

Movies” by donating 100% of ticket sales and concessions to the United Way’s September 11th Fund. Overall, the community raised \$10,000.¹⁵

In 2005, rumors about the Rivoli closing began circulating around Cedarburg. The building owner actively entertained the idea of selling the building. The small town of Cedarburg would lose their quaint, nostalgic theater. In 2005, Marcus decided not to renew the lease of the building for another 10 years, potentially leaving the Rivoli abandoned once again. Marcus Corporation’s interests switched to pursuing multi-screen cinema complexes. The rumors began to become a reality. The building owner considered selling the building and changing the building into something else, which did not include a movie theater.¹⁶

In 2006, the nonprofit Cedarburg Landmark Preservation Society stepped in and bought the building and business for \$1 dollar assuming all the debt.¹⁷ In June 2006, Marcus announced the Rivoli Theater would close by the end of the year. The new owner, Cedarburg Landmark Preservation Society, pledged to renovate the Rivoli and return it to its original 1930s appearance by restoring the façade, marquee, and ticket booth.¹⁸ The Revive the Rivoli campaign kicked off. The entire town of Cedarburg participated in a fundraiser to raise the money to restore the Rivoli.

Originally, the Cedarburg Landmark Preservation Society searched for a new theater tenant and found one who would pay more rent than Marcus Corporation. However, during a meeting it was learned the proposed tenant would not be playing “Cedarburg kind of movies” but, R-rated and X-rated movies. The head of the Preservation Society decided the Rivoli would be run as a “volunteer operation.” Jerry and Alice Voight raised their hands and became the first volunteers.¹⁹

On Wednesday, December 20, 2006, the 70-year-old Rivoli Theater closed as a Marcus Corporation theater. The Rivoli reopened on December 29, 2006, under the direction and

ownership of the Cedarburg Landmark Preservation Society with the showing of the movie "Flicka." The Rivoli had 280 seats and ticket prices for all movies were set at \$3.00, except for Tuesdays when ticket prices were set at \$2.00. The Rivoli had films nightly at 7 pm with late shows on Friday and Saturday nights. Saturday and Sunday afternoons hosted 3:30 pm matinee. The films include only family-friendly movies not R-rated movies.²⁰

The work to keep the Rivoli going became a communitywide effort. Six months after the Rivoli reopened, under the direction of the preservation society, 260 volunteers worked at the Rivoli. For each show, three volunteers ran the concession stand, one volunteer sold tickets, and one volunteer took tickets. \$450,000 of the \$750,000 goal had been raised to pay off the cinema mortgage and to restore the building's exterior to its original 1930s appearance complete with a sidewalk ticket booth, marquee over the sidewalk, and black glass. Ticket prices were \$3.00 except Tuesdays when admission was \$2.00. The theater grossed between \$1,500 and \$2,500 per week. The receipts exceeded the expenditures since reopening under the direction and ownership of the preservation society. The Rivoli ran second-run movies to keep costs down as studios required 30% - 40% of admissions.²¹

In late 2007, the Rivoli gained its grand marquee back, black glass exterior to the building's facade, and glass-enclosed, sidewalk ticket booth recapturing the old-fashioned grandeur from 1936. In 2012, the preservation society updated the Rivoli Theater's projector to a digital projector and upgraded to Dolby surround sound allowing for digital screening and supplying a better movie going experience; replacing the platter system from the 1950s. Traditions live on at the Rivoli, every December, the Rivoli hosts the December Holiday Film Festival. Patrons enjoy classic family-friendly holiday movies in a classic theater. In the year 2017, the Rivoli Theater became a venue for the annual Milwaukee Film Festival hosted every October. The Rivoli Theater continued to be a venue for the Milwaukee Film Festival in 2018

and 2019. Today, Jerry and Alice Voight manage the Rivoli Theater. On any night of the week, you can catch Jerry selling tickets at the Rivoli Theater and Alice taking your ticket or helping with concessions. ²²



The Rivoli Theater 2008 – Photo: Cinema Treasures

The Legacy

The Rivoli Theater in Cedarburg, Wisconsin is the last single-screen theater in Ozaukee County. The Rivoli Theater is where the community comes to meet and is the center of entertainment for Cedarburg. The Rivoli Theater continues to be the place for first dates that lead to marriages, birthday parties, and family outings. Everyone in the small town of Cedarburg young and old has a happy memory of watching a show at the Rivoli Theater.

The Rivoli Theater's past is amazing and intriguing. Amazing that a dry goods store from the 1800s transformed into a vibrant single-screen movie theater and has survived for almost 90 years. The Rivoli Theater overcame changes and adversity due to the love and

commitment of the community of Cedarburg. I hope you enjoyed the journey through time. The Rivoli has been revived!

NOTES

1. City of Cedarburg, History of Cedarburg, City of Cedarburg, 2021, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.ci.cedarburg.wi.us/residents/pages/history-cedarburg>.
2. Population.us, Cedarburg, WI population, Population.us, 2016, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://population.us/wi/cedarburg/>.
3. Devon Polzar, "The History of the Boerner Building", The Historical Marker Database, 2020, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=88548>.
4. The Rivoli Theater, About | Rivoli, Rivoli Theater, 2019, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://rivoliofcedarburg.com/about/>.
5. Population.us, Cedarburg, WI population, Population.us, 2016, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://population.us/wi/cedarburg/>.
6. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Program venue at the Rivoli, Phone, February 21, 2022.
7. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Filming equipment used at the Rivoli, Phone, February 21, 2022.
8. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, How the Rivoli advertised upcoming shows, Phone, February 21, 2022.
9. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Past managers, Rivoli renovations, and new Platter equipment, Phone, February 22, 2022.
10. Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias, "Movie Projection", en-academic.com, 2010, Accessed February 24, 2022, <https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/383581>.
11. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, The platter system at the Rivoli, Phone, February 22, 2022.

12. Bobby Tanzilo, "Urban spelunking: New MKE Film Fest location, Cedarburg's Rivoli Theater", onMilwaukee, October 14, 2019, Accessed February 26, 2022, <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/rivoli-cedarburg-spelunking>.
13. Population.us, Cedarburg, WI population, Population.us, 2016, Accessed February 20, 2022, <https://population.us/wi/cedarburg/>.
14. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Rivoli managed by Marcus Corporation, Phone, February 22, 2022.
15. Business Editors, "Marcus Theatres To Donate September 25 Ticket and Concession Sales to United Way September 11th Fund", *Business Wire*, (2001):1, Accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www-proquest-com.eseach.ut.edu/docview/445691954?pq-origsite=summon>.
16. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Marcus Corporation not renewing lease, Phone, February 21, 2022.
17. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Rivoli purchase for \$1, Phone, February 21, 2022.
18. Lawrence Sussman, "Historic Cedarburg theater to stop daily movie showings," *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, (2006):1, Accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www-proquest-com.eseach.ut.edu/docview/459915909?pq-origsite=summon>.
19. Bobby Tanzilo, "Urban spelunking: New MKE Film Fest location, Cedarburg's Rivoli Theater", onMilwaukee, October 14, 2019, Accessed February 26, 2022, <https://onmilwaukee.com/articles/rivoli-cedarburg-spelunking>.
20. Lawrence Sussman, "Rivoli to reopen Friday with lower prices: Community group takes over 70-year-old Cedarburg theater," *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*, (2006):1, Accessed February 28, 2022, <https://www-proquest-com.eseach.ut.edu/docview/462994490?pq-origsite=summon>.

21. Lawrence Sussman, "New light flickering brightly in old Rivoli: Cedarburg theater enjoying revival as second-run, family-oriented movie house," *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*, (2007):1, Accessed February 28, 2022,
<https://www.proquest.com/docview/459319296?accountid=14762&parentSessionId=asy7PCN59ArX1t35nS17PcDAv7oH4CBNRIRUES2Xu4Y%3D&pq-origsite=summon>.

22. Jerry Voight, interview by Richard Jacob, Rivoli Today, Phone, February 21, 2022.