

Atlanta Const., Oct 10, 1982

Liberty prepares for grand return

Columbus theater holds special memories for many

by Linda Horton
Staff Writer

Columbus
Charlotte Frazier and her friend Evelyn Ford were sharing their memories of adolescence and Saturday afternoons when it was something special to visit the Liberty Theatre, once the city's only movie and playhouse designated for blacks.

Mrs. Frazier remembers fervently collecting the Royal Crown Cola bottle caps which could win her free admission to the Saturday matinee. There, she would join her spruced-up friends and "cry like a baby" while Lena Horne crooned love songs in "Stormy Weather." Or thrill to live performances by "Little Red and His Harlem Revue" out of New York City, "Big Snake" the comedian or "The

Mrs. Ford gets a faraway look in her eyes as she recalls the fresh smell of buttery popcorn and the "best hot dogs in town," that could only be found at the Liberty. For her the serials, Flash Gordon and Zorro, meant savoring a whole week of anticipation before the next show.

Mrs. Frazier, 50, an agricultural inspector at the State Farmers Market of Columbus, and Mrs. Ford, a former elementary school teacher, belong to an organization of 25 black women that now owns the Liberty and the four storefronts that make up the block on Eighth Avenue.

The theater was donated in 1980 to the members of the William H. Spencer Owlettes Inc. by the family of Roy Martin Sr. Martin — the founder of the successful chain of Martin Theatres — who built



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SEE Liberty

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OLD MEMORIES: Columbus theater will be restored.

Liberty

FROM 1F

the theater in 1924.

The Owlettes intend to restore the \$40-seat movie and playhouse, which has been closed for 10 years, and open it once again for performances, concerts, movies and dances. In the adjoining buildings they plan a historic museum, art studios and art gallery.

The Liberty Theatre holds very special memories for blacks who grew up in this town during the '30s. They could dance all night at the Elks Club Dance Hall, watch minstrel shows once a year at the local fairground and entertain each other at house parties. But the Liberty was the only place they could enjoy a movie without being forced to accept the stringent restrictions placed on them in segregated white theaters.

"The Liberty meant we didn't have to go upstairs anymore," said Mrs. Frazier. "You didn't have the stigma that says you can't go any further."

Ironically, that rows of red corduroy seats at the Liberty were occasionally roped off for white patrons who might want to view a Vaudeville show. The seats were usually the best in the house.

Bringing the theater back to its original splendor will cost between \$30,000-\$60,000 and could be completed in 12-14 months, according to a feasibility study conducted by Dan Joslyn of the Southern Arts Federation.

The Owlettes plan to have the theater open and at least partially complete by February, so it can be used during Black Month.

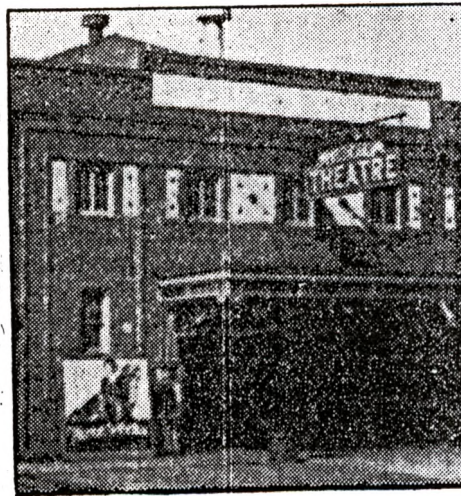
This will be the group's second venture in the restoration of sites of historical importance. Last year, they completed renovation of the 1912 two-story home of William H. Spencer, a black educator whose efforts help bring the first black high school to Columbus in 1930. Until that time, black parents who wanted their children to go beyond ninth grade had to send their children to Atlanta.

The Owlettes were all graduated from Spencer High School, named after the educator, and the owl is their school mascot.

"Spencer High was the backbone of every black individual in Columbus before the '60s when we had integration," said Mrs. Frazier, founder and president of the Owlettes. "And we knew we had the same love of the Liberty that we had for Spencer."

It took \$52,500 — collected from fund-raisers and federal and state grants — to buy the Spencer House from the Muscogee County School Board and restore it. (Thinking that segregation would last forever, Spencer's widow, Martha Love Spencer had willed the house to the school board for a library for blacks.)

The Spencer House is now on the National Register of Historic places and is open for tours, prominent guests of the city and even weddings.



LIBERTY: Theater opened in 1924.

The women expect the same success collecting funds for the Liberty as they had for the Spencer House.

"What I found was an extremely effective group of women who did a very successful restoration of the Spencer House," Joslyn said. "There have been very few attempts to restore black historical sites and when I looked at the Liberty I knew that the group was strongly committed."

"There won't be any huge struggle to raise the money," said Joseph B. Mahan, Columbus historian and regional preservation planner for the lower Chattahoochee Area Planning and Development Commission. "There are many people in this city who have strong feelings about the Liberty."

The Liberty opened with a performance of "Three Weeks" a play based on a 1910 novel by British writer Eleanor Glynn, according to Mahan.

The April 29, 1925 issue of the Industrial Index, a publication devoted to building and development in Columbus, states that the theater cost \$30,000 to build. "The building has the largest seating capacity of any motion picture theater in Columbus," the newspaper reported.

Along with the usual fare of movies, in its heyday, the Liberty was the showcase for the top black entertainers doing the Atlanta-Columbus-Augusta-Savannah circuit.

Eugene Smith, a teacher at the Manchester Middle School who researched the history of the Liberty for his masters degree, found that during 1925 and 1945 the theater was regularly visited by the likes of Cab Calloway who scatted "Minnie the Moocher," Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, who excited audiences with his acrobatic dancing antics; Jackie Robinson, baseball star of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and "Ma" Rainey, a native of Columbus who was considered the "mother" of blues and is credited with discovering blues singer Bessie Smith. Even operatic singer Marian Anderson made a stellar appearance at the Liberty.

The theater closed in 1973 after a drastic decline in attendance, integration and television making it an anachronism. ■