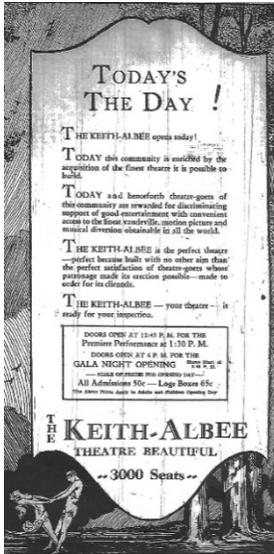


THE KEITH-ALBEE HUNTINGTON, WEST VIRGINIA PAST AND PRESENT

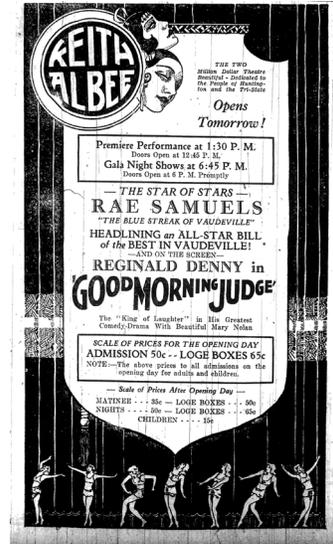


On Monday, May 7, 1928, when the doors of the magnificent Keith-Albee were thrown open to the public, Vaudeville's most famous single, Rae Samuels, known the world over as "The Blue Streak of Vaudeville," was the headliner who performed under the illusion of drifting clouds and twinkling stars. "Good Morning, Judge," a light comedy starring Reginald Denny, was the featured film. Of Ms. Samuels' performance, columnist Geneva Kent wrote: "Rae Samuels is a whole vaudeville bill herself. She has a voice especially well adapted to jazz and blues songs, with a slight husky quality that takes well. With plenty of pep and personality, the audience was hers from the first moment she strutted on the stage." Four other "splendid

acts of first-class vaudeville” followed Ms. Samuels. Nineteen ushers in dark red uniforms with gold buttons escorted patrons to their seats. The Keith had its own eight-piece orchestra conducted by Joseph E. Kroberger and a Wurlitzer organ played by H.B. Brown.

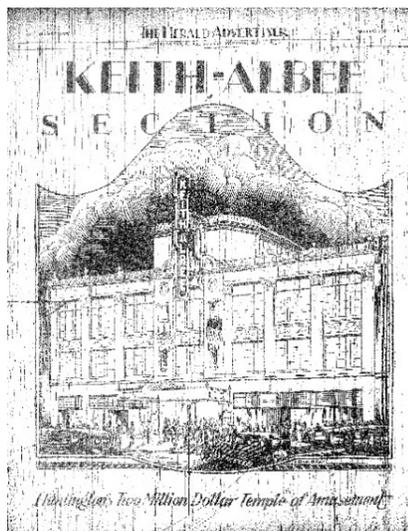


Rae Samuels



The Hyman brothers, majority owners of The Greater Huntington Theatre Corporation, had built the Keith-Albee, to greatly enhance their family of downtown theatres that then included the Huntington, the Orpheum, and the State.

Understandably, this theatre was eagerly awaited following its announced construction and was immediately recognized as an ornament to the city when completed. With its opening, a special “Keith-Albee Section” in Huntington’s Herald-Advertiser gushed over the dazzling new theatre, lauding it as a “temple of amusement.” Now, nearly a century later, Mr. Lamb’s only operating atmospheric theatre is still, very much, a temple of amusement... and very much an ornament to its city.



Built at a cost of \$2 million and requiring 14 months to construct, it has retained its original red and gold color scheme, stained glass lighting, and a mix of Moorish and Spanish décor. It is the only *fully intact*

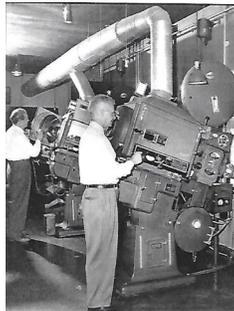
*atmospheric theatre*¹ designed by Scottish-born, American architect Thomas Lamb in the United States; and, remarkably, it is located in Appalachia.



Architect Thomas Lamb

During construction, two million bricks, 550 tons of steel, 97 cars of cement, and 15 cars of plastering were used. Except for the stage floor, the entire building is constructed of brick, concrete, and steel. The lobby is 30 x 55 feet. The main auditorium measures 155 x 120 feet. At its center was a 3,000-seat main auditorium with superior acoustics, a fully rigged stage 90 feet wide and 45 feet deep, and four floors of adjacent dressing rooms, each named for large American cities. Trap doors on the stage enabled animals, performers and equipment to rise to the stage or sink into a large room below.

One of the proudest boasts of the Keith-Albee upon opening was that its projection room housed the first three commercial machines ever placed upon the market by Peerless Manufacturing Company in large, fireproof, comfortable quarters for operators. They were equipped to show both silent and sound motion pictures. This projection system is one of many building elements that demonstrate the Keith-Albee's importance to the transitional era between vaudeville and sound movies. Other improvements to projection and sound have been made over the theatre's lifetime.²



¹ **What is an atmospheric theatre?** One of America's most prolific and revered theatre architects, New York based Scotsman, Thomas L. Lamb, designed the Keith-Albee. That Lamb did so in the rare "atmospheric style" arguably makes the Keith-Albee his most special confection still operating. Thomas Lamb and his firm designed more than three hundred theatres worldwide. However, they only created eight of the expensive and exotic "atmospherics."

In atmospheric theatres the auditorium is designed to create the illusion of being entertained outdoors in a magnificent courtyard. The audience is typically surrounded by the faux facades of various village homes and shops. Overhead, the domed ceiling simulates an expansive, blue night sky holding twinkling stars that are crossed by lazily drifting clouds. Intricate plasterwork, chandeliers, sconces and balconies create an air of sophistication. Even the restroom lounges are fittingly elegant. The atmospheric Keith-Albee clearly exemplified the opulence and grandeur of the 1920's through its endless Spanish Baroque features.

² In June 1997, Digital Theatre Stereo was installed at the Keith-Albee. DTS allowed for optimum reproduction of voices and sound effects without hardly any background noise. In August 2020, improved projector and cinema surround sound systems and other equipment upgrades were funded, in part, with an anonymous gift to the Marshall Artists Series. Additional funding to supplement the project came from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the West Virginia Humanities Council drawing on money from the federal CARES Act, Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security.

The outside circular ticket booth was constructed of Verdi antique marble and bronze grills with two antique lanterns for decoration. The main lobby was floored with rubber matting panels with dividing stripes of white Italian marble. The marble base is of imported Belgian black. An advance ticket booth on the left faces a large ornamental mirror on the right. The lobby is filled with amber colored chandeliers.



Outside Ticket Booth



Ceiling Chandelier



Recessed Ornate Stained-Glass Medallion – Orchestra Level

Approximately 20,000 yards of graystone wilton carpet, rich in texture, had been originally laid on floors in the foyer, auditorium, balcony, mezzanine, and corridor. The carpet's dark red background contributed to the red and gold color scheme of the big house. A grand foyer 85 feet across and 25 feet deep with a 35-foot-high ceiling includes 13-foot x 9-foot mirrors recessed in ornamental plaster. The walls have an adobe finish.

Two 12-foot-wide stairways with steps and risers of Botticino marble and railings of ornamental wrought iron lead to the mezzanine. Carpeted and draped with Spanish mission furniture, the mezzanine promenade stretches the length of the theatre. The promenade is 110 feet long and 24 feet deep.

On the mezzanine promenade, three Spanish balconies of ornamental iron overlook the grand foyer. Drinking fountains are made of Botticino marble. Described as offering patrons a "millennium in convenience," the rest rooms, cosmetic rooms and smoking rooms reflected luxury. The Keith's lounges for both men and women feature fireplaces, English and French architecture, couches, and phone booths



Mezzanine Promenade with Balconies



Front View of One Balcony Overlooking Grand Foyer

The balcony view provides a marvelous impression of the theatre. The walls are designed to give the effect of a Spanish town and garden on the left or right, including potted evergreens. The great dome is finished in beautiful Mediterranean blue creating a true skyline effect. Small lights in the ceiling give the impression of stars when lit. A series of spotlights known as cloud machines creates the illusion of fluffy white clouds drifting along the ceiling.

At either side of the house, there are structures resembling opera house box seats, with massive ornamental plaster arches, each supported by four twisted columns that are 25 feet high. These arches conceal the pipes of the organ³. The walls of the Keith-Albee are lined with intricately carved plasterwork, that include cherubs, gargoyles, and other darker more foreboding characters.



Plaster Ornamental Arches



Balcony View of the Theatre with Ceiling of Fluffy Clouds and Twinkling Stars

³ In the Keith-Albee's early years its audiences were treated to music from a top-quality Wurlitzer theatre organ. It was a three manual (having three keyboards) and pedal organ and boasted 13 ranks of pipes. It possessed the traditional tuned percussions and traps (sound effects) which were very useful in accompanying silent films. The organ was sold sometime in the 1950s. However, thanks to Dr. Robert Edmunds and the Huntington Theatre Organ Project, Inc. he founded, the Keith-Albee's original organ was found, purchased, and returned to the Keith-Albee in 2009. In the years of its absence, it had been installed in Muscatine, Iowa, Charleston, West Virginia, and Greensboro, North Carolina. The reinstalled Keith-Albee organ now has even more musical breadth than it did in 1928 as more effects have been added, including an English Post Horn and a brass Saxophone. The Keith-Albee's Wurlitzer is one of only two built for theatres in West Virginia which have now been returned to their home theatres. The other absent Wurlitzer was recently returned to the Granada Theatre in Bluefield, WV.



Carved Cherub



Intricately Carved Plasterwork



Wurlitzer Organ



Dr. Robert Edmunds working on Wurlitzer Re-installation



View, Right of Stage

Though air conditioning had yet become commonplace, the theatre boasted a sophisticated seven-unit ventilation system⁴ with a battery of fans to ensure proper temperature and air circulation.

The Hymans named their new theatre in honor of the then premiere “vaudeville” booking company in the East, the “Keith-Albee Circuit.” Though largely forgotten today, vaudeville was once considered the most popular form of entertainment in the country. Vaudeville circuits fielded programs throughout the nation that presented an array of performances in a series of unrelated acts that, when aggregated, provided an enjoyable, live variety show. With the growth of motion picture popularity in the early part of the Twentieth Century, the nation’s top theatre operators adopted programming that alternated the

⁴ Among the cutting-edge technology that Abe and Sol Hyman provided to the Keith-Albee was its cooling system. By 1925 New York’s pioneering mechanical engineer, Willis Carrier, had refined his early version of air conditioning sufficiently to adapt it to very large spaces. Carrier convinced William Fox, who then controlled Paramount Pictures, to test his new system in Paramount’s Thomas Lamb designed Rivoli Theatre in Times Square. Fox agreed to the successful trial since business lagged terribly at the Rivoli and at all theatres during hot weather. Three years later the Hymans approved the expensive and elaborate Carrier system for the Keith-Albee. In Carrier’s system a chiller would cool water to a range of 35-40 degrees which was then pumped to a large air handling device on the top level of the theatre for distribution. The process began as already geothermal cool water was provided to the chiller from a well drilled under the theatre. Air passed then through a mist of the further chilled water thereby removing heat from the air. The freshly chilled air was then circulated into the auditorium through vents at the seat bases thus providing an air-conditioned environment—astounding at the time. With the Keith-Albee’s early cool air system added to its state-of-the-art steam heating system, its full house capacity of 3,000 patrons could enjoy the fantasy courtyard in complete comfort in summer or winter.

screening of feature films with the presentation of vaudeville programs. The Keith-Albee was built to accommodate that format.

Benjamin Keith and Edward Albee were master vaudeville producers, and their contracted entertainers were among the best in America. At the outset, this dazzling theatre exclusively featured vaudeville entertainers under contract to the then famous Keith-Albee Circuit to complement its feature length films.

By the end of 1928 vaudeville's "Orpheum Circuit" had merged with the Keith-Albee Circuit and fast-growing company in the new field of radio, RCA had purchased control of the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Circuit and its collection of more than 700 medium-sized and large theatres. RCA then formed RKO Radio Pictures (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) to produce, exhibit and distribute a then new technological marvel, sound movies, "Talkies," as they were known. In doing so, RCA could make full, profitable use of its newly patented sound-on-film technology. Sound motion pictures quickly became America's preferred entertainment and the vaudeville art form all but disappeared by 1940.

A new phenomenon in the early 1960s was the rise of multiplex theatres in shopping malls. This major change in theatre design soon spread to downtown theatres. In the mid-1970s, the lower section of the Keith-Albee was divided into one 650-seat theatre and two 225-seat theatres. A fourth theatre was later added behind the concession counter. Jack and Edwin Hyman, Abe Hyman's sons and heirs to whom care of the theatre was passed, were very careful with the historic fabric of the showplace they operated. Changes that were made in subdividing the auditorium could easily be reversed as a result and later were.

In 2006, the Keith-Albee stopped showing regularly scheduled movies, but the theatre's use as a live performance and special events venue was uninterrupted. In that same year the Greater Huntington Theatre Corporation graciously donated the theatre to the Marshall University Foundation. Later that year, title was transferred to the newly formed Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, Inc., (KAPAC), the tax-exempt, charitable corporation which operates the Keith-Albee today.

KAPAC immediately began to restore the Keith-Albee in preparation of the premiere of the movie "We Are Marshall" by returning the front lobby and theatre to its original configuration. Jack and Edwin Hyman, Abe Hyman's sons and heirs to whom care of the theatre was passed, had been very careful with the historic fabric of the showplace they operated. Changes that were made in subdividing the auditorium were easily reversed.

KAPAC continued with renovations of the facility, including all of the theatre's roofs, addition of a ADA restroom on the main floor, restoration of the upper front façade, west wall and Paris Signs' refurbishment of the iconic vertical sign. In 2011, the sign was damaged during a windstorm and was taken down after 80 years. Members of the community along with Trifecta Productions, a local multimedia company, came together to promote what was known as the Save Our Sign campaign. A concert was held

at the Keith-Albee to raise funds for the restoration of the iconic sign. Here is a video documenting the restoration process of the famous Keith-Albee sign:

[\(1\) Keith-Albee Theater Sign Rebuilt - YouTube](#)

Today, KAPAC is focused on completing its seat refurbishment and other major mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and structural renovations that include (1) basement ceiling demolition and plumbing main line replacement, a new fire alarm system, and a new automatic sprinkler system; (2) demolition and replacement of basement dressing rooms and basement restrooms; (3) additional demolition and

replacement of multi-level back of house dressing rooms; (4) replacement of the main electrical system; (5) replacement of theatre lighting system and existing sound system; (6) repair of stage support system and replacement of stage floor.

Facing changing times and tastes of audiences, economic trends, and different lifestyles, the Keith-Albee has been threatened with becoming an endangered species over its lifetime. But the theatre has stood the years, varying its bill of fare, physical structure, and technology to meet the mood of the public, all the while retaining its original feeling of design. And today, the Keith-Albee is more than just a performance stage for quality arts, culture, entertainment, and special community events. It is an important part of our heritage, an economic driver for the City of Huntington, and a venue for understanding our past and envisioning a more equitable future for all.

THE KEITH-ALBEE AS A SURVIVOR

The Keith-Albee faced adversity long before the changes in modern tastes and trends yet has still survived. To understand the history of the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, one must become familiar with vaudeville, Benjamin Franklin Keith's and Edward Franklin's contribution to vaudeville entertainment, the Marshall Artists Series, and the evolution of the Keith-Albee Theatre from its opening to the present.

Vaudeville had a lifespan in the United States and Canada of about 50 years, starting in the 1880s and ending in the 1930s. It became the place where entertainers from around the world could make it big with 10 minutes of stage brilliance, buffoonery, or bombastics. Singers, dancers, jugglers, magicians, musicians, actors, comedians, dog and pony shows, and specialty acts of all kinds were welcome. Vaudeville also grew from America's love of other types of entertainments, such as the circus, minstrel shows, and medicine shows. In a way, vaudeville became the crossroads where many different forms of entertainment met to create a new form.

Huntington's Keith-Albee theatre opened in May 1928, approximately 18 months before the cataclysmic Stock Market Crash in late October 1929. Although facing tough economic times, Depression or not, people flocked to the Keith in 1935 to see Jean Harlow and William Powell in MGM's "Reckless," a film depicting a love triangle with a tragic ending. A day or night at the movies was expected to be a stress-free escape from the worries of the day. Time spent in the theatre was time spent in a different world, a world where finances were of little importance, and men were not worried about providing for their families. People were able to forget about the despair and hardship of the Depression for precious hours, or even for just a few minutes.



During the Depression years (1933-1939), theatre owners across the country also tried various devices to draw crowds. People out of work could not afford the theatre. But true to human nature, they found the

admission price for a gamble. When Bank Night was instituted, the crowds poured in. In 1936, the Keith-Albee followed the national trend by offering Bank Night under the name of Greater Theatre Day. Persons registered once for a \$1,000 prize to be offered until claimed, and then registered weekly. Registration followed paying the admission price to the theatre.

In the 1930s, vaudeville began a steady decline, and by the end of the decade it was dead. The Depression certainly hurt attendance. Sound motion pictures quickly became America's preferred entertainment. Ironically, it was Keith and Albee who first started showing movies in their theatres as a novelty many years before. Along with the depression, the growth of radio and later of television also contributed to the rapid decline of vaudeville and to its virtual disappearance after World War II.

In November of 1937, the depth of the Ohio River reached 69.45 feet. This caused the city to experience the worst flood in its history. Water flooded the streets of Huntington, and Fourth Avenue was completely underwater. The effects of this were disastrous. Buildings were destroyed, and people were killed. The Keith-Albee suffered terrible water damage. The original carpeting and seating were removed, and the height of the floodwaters could be seen on the theatre's walls. The Keith-Albee was among several buildings that had to undergo restorations because of this event.



However, live shows continued on the Keith-Albee stage. The Marshall Artists Series was formed in 1936 and moved to the Keith-Albee in 1939, bringing a wide variety of entertainment to Huntington, including touring Broadway shows, great American and international orchestras and operas, beloved comedians, and wonderful film festivals. Many nationally known acts and performers have appeared at the Keith-Albee to present day courtesy of the partnership enjoyed with the Marshall Artists Series.

Changing demands of the public were still part of Keith-Albee's future. A new phenomenon in the early 1960s was the rise of multiplex theatres in shopping malls. This major change in theatre design soon spread to downtown theatres. In the mid-1970s, the lower section of the Keith-Albee was divided into one 650-seat theatre and two 225-seat theatres. A fourth theatre was later added behind the concession counter. Jack and Edwin Hyman, Abe Hyman's sons and heirs to whom care of the theatre was passed, were very careful with the historic fabric of the showplace they operated. Changes that were made in subdividing the auditorium could easily be reversed as a result and later were.

On February 5, 2001, an early morning fire damaged the H.K. Kauffmann Jewelry Repair Center in downtown Huntington's Keith-Albee building. The theatre suffered smoke damage. Shows resumed February 9, 2001, in the smaller theatres. The main auditorium reopened in May 2001.

In 2006, the Keith-Albee stopped showing regularly scheduled movies, but the theatre's use as a live performance and special events venue was uninterrupted.

Facing flooding, fire, changing times and tastes of audiences, economic trends, and different lifestyles, the Keith-Albee has been threatened with becoming an endangered species over its lifetime. But the theatre has stood the years, varying its bill of fare, physical structure, and technology to meet the mood of the public, all the while retaining its original feeling of design. And today, the Keith-Albee is more than just a performance stage for quality arts, culture, entertainment, and special community events. It is an important part of our heritage, an economic driver for the City of Huntington, and a venue for understanding our past and envisioning a more equitable future for all.

THE KEITH-ALBEE'S LAVISH PREMIERES

It is unusual for a theatre anywhere outside of a few metropolitan areas in the country to host a major motion picture's worldwide premiere. Nevertheless, the magnificent Keith-Albee has had the distinction of hosting two of them and even one preview "premiere" prior to that film's actual worldwide premiere in New York City.

On June 25, 1969, the Warner Brothers film "Bridge at Remagen," starring George Segal, Robert Vaughn and Ben Gazzara, was first screened before a capacity audience at the Keith-Albee. The movie was based on a novel by Ken Hechler who served West Virginia via multiple terms in the U.S. Congress and as Secretary of State. Congressman Hechler had actually participated in the army campaign that sought to capture the bridge at Remagen, Germany in 1945, the subject of the film.



Ken Hechler with Ben Gazzara on the Set of The Bridge at Remagen, Davle, Czechoslovakia, 1968, Source:West Virginia History on View.

In 1988, Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise starred in the United Artists film "Rain Man." As a kindness to the Autism Services Center in Huntington, which was formerly housed in the Keith-Albee building, and its former Executive Director, Dr. Ruth Sullivan, Dustin Hoffman and others associated with the film came to Huntington for a pre-premiere benefit for Autism Services. Thus, the film was screened in Huntington before its official premiere in New York. Sullivan assisted in the production of the Rain Man by serving as a consultant on autistic behavior, and Dustin Hoffman worked with Sullivan and her son Joseph, who has

autism, when practicing for his role. Hoffman thanked her and Joseph in his Oscar speech. Sullivan has the last credit in the movie, and the extended DVD version features an interview with Joe.

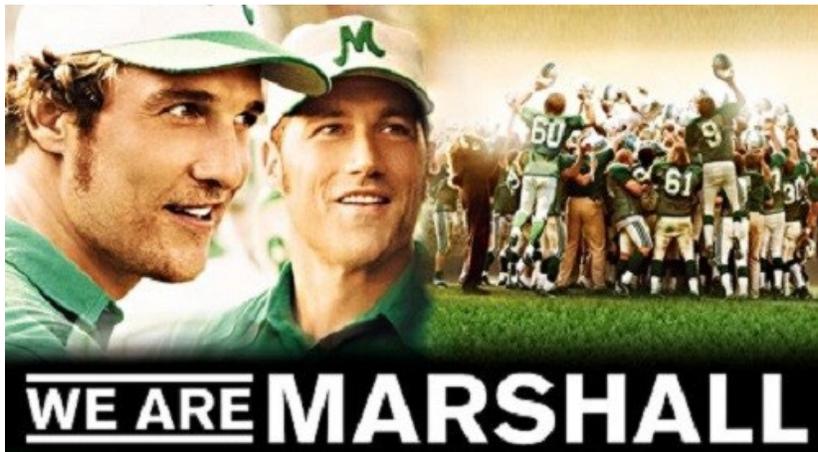
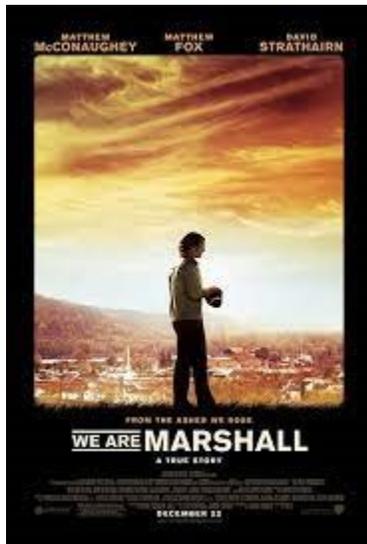


Left to right - Dustin Hoffman, Dr. Ruth Sullivan, and her son Joe Sullivan

The most important film for Huntington to premiere at the Keith-Albee is "We Are Marshall." This movie tells the story of the tragic 1970 plane crash near Huntington which killed all onboard, including nearly all of the Marshall University football team and many key staff and supporters. The film starred Matthew McConaughey and much of it was filmed on location in Huntington. In fact, part of the filming even took place in and outside the Keith-Albee, yet another compliment for the theatre.



AP Photo/Jeff Gentner Members involved with the movie "We Are Marshall" from left, former Marshall coach Red Dawson, screenwriter Jamie Linden, producer Basil Iwanyk, actor Anthony Mackie, actress Kate Mara, actors Matthew McConaughey, Matthew Fox, Arlen Escarpeta, director McG, former Marshall coach Jack Lengyel and former Marshall quarterback Reggie Oliver all pose for a photo at the movie premiere of "We Are Marshall" at the Keith-Albee Theater in downtown Huntington, W.Va., Tuesday, Dec 12, 2006.



WHO WERE ABE "A.B." HYMAN AND SOL HYMAN?



Abe Hyman

Abe "A.B." Hyman and his brother, Sol, were Huntington's first theatre entrepreneurs. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, they later moved with their parents to Pocahontas, Virginia, where their father was a merchant. Following their father's death, Abe, then a young man, became head of the family of nine. According to Derek Hyman, Abe's grandson, the family sold some property to a coal company and headed west by train. When they reached Huntington, they decided to settle in the young city.

Derek Hyman says that in 1907, Abe and Sol went into the tavern business. By 1909, the two owned the Palace Saloon at 328 Ninth Street. Derek adds that the Hyman brothers put in a nickelodeon in the saloon to show the new two-reelers, and this launched their career in the theatre business. Later, they also went into real estate development and had a coal and tubing company.

Around 1909, a theatre named the Hippodrome opened as a vaudeville house on Third Avenue near 11th Street. The Hippodrome later was the site of the State Theatre. During its career as a vaudeville theatre, the Hippodrome was acquired by the Hyman brothers who later also purchased the Orpheum.

In 1910, an old skating rink in the 800 block of Fourth Avenue was purchased and converted into a movie theatre named the Lyric. Several years later, the Lyric was purchased by the Hyman brothers and

remodeled. The theatre was a successful venture for the Hymans and, later, they opened the Dixie Theatre, almost directly across Fourth Avenue from the Lyric.

In March 1916, the Orpheum (now the Cinema), opened in the 1000 block of Fourth Avenue. It was also later purchased by the Hyman brothers.

In May 1928, the Keith-Albee, one of the nation's largest motion picture theatres outside of New York City, opened with Abe Hyman as President. The "Keith" is the creation of celebrated architect Thomas Lamb, who designed some of the most opulent theatres in Europe and in North and South America. When Abe Hyman decided to build a new showplace for both vaudeville and movies in downtown Huntington in the 1920s, he wrote Thomas Lamb asking if he would design the theatre. Lamb agreed to design the theatre beginning with the basement and working up. By the time they had completed the basement, the initial \$250,000 that they had raised had been exhausted. The theatre ending up costing \$2 million.

A.B. Hyman said at the grand opening, "We have realized our ambition to give Huntington something she is entitled to. Huntington has been kind to us and we are anxious to repay that kindness with real service, such as this house represents."

Sol Hyman added, "We wish the people of Huntington to feel that this is their theatre. It was built for them... and we hope and believe they will use and enjoy it. Not only now but through the long years. We anticipate that this house and the character of attractions which it will afford will not only appeal to the people of the city, but will draw people to Huntington from a radius of 100 miles around."

On March 15, 1947, the Tipton Theatre, located on the north side of Fourth Avenue and Eighth Street, opened. Billed as "Huntington's newest major theatre," the 1,500-seat Tipton was built by Abe and Sol Hyman. The Tipton was located on the site of the former Lyric Theatre. On October 22, 1950, a newspaper account stated that "a fire completely destroyed the Tipton."

The Greater Huntington Theatre Corporation, started by Abe and Sol Hyman in the mid-1920s, eventually controlled most of the theatres in the region including the downtown theatres and the Park Place Cinema 7 in Charleston, a theatre complex with seven screens. The corporation also owned the East Drive-In, the Starlite Drive-In in Lawrence County, Ohio, and the Ceredo Drive-In.

A new phenomenon in the early 1960s was the rise of multiplex theatres in shopping malls. This major change in theatre design soon spread to downtown theatres. In the mid-1970s, the lower section of the Keith-Albee was divided into one 650-seat theatre and two 225-seat theatres. A fourth theatre was later added behind the concession counter.

Derek Hyman explained that screens were added in the downtown theatres in order to accommodate all of the movies being released by Hollywood. Prior to this, the downtown theatres were missing out on about 20 percent of the movies being released.

(Source: The Huntington Quarterly, Summer 1996, Huntington's Silver Screens by Joseph Platania)

WHO WERE BENJAMIN KEITH AND EDWARD ALBEE?



Vaudeville, to many people, is and will always be synonymous with Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edwin Franklin Albee. In the 19th century, “variety theatre” was structured much differently than the type that would have been showcased at the Keith-Albee Theatre in the early 1900s. Such entertainment catered mainly to all-male crowds. Female waitresses in short skirts and fitted tops would flirtatiously greet and serve the male patrons who were less than friendly. These patrons would drunkenly shout profanities and “boo” at shows that did not please them. Keith, who saw this type of show firsthand while working at a New York dime museum in the 1870s, described the audience and entertainment as “indecent.” Mr. Keith was also influenced by Tony Pastor, who worked to cleanse the stigma of the vulgar working-class men-only “variety” acts. This was known as “Respectability Mania.” Others felt this way, too, and began lobbying for a more “family friendly” show.

The solution came to be known as “vaudeville;” and in the 1870s, the growing trend came to New York. Theatre owners who were hoping to attract a more “wholesome” and diverse audience labeled their shows as “vaudeville” instead of variety. This title immediately elevated the show. Vaudeville shows were more inclusive by encouraging women and children to attend and did not entertain profanities or indecency. The editors of *Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times* in New York City commented on the shows’ popularity in 1874: “There is no doubt that vaudeville entertainment is the most satisfactory and appealing to the largest class of people in this city who frequent our theatres...” Vaudeville was beginning to thrive at this time, and B. F. Keith took notice.

Benjamin Franklin Keith was born in Hillsboro, New Hampshire on January 26, 1846. Keith grew up on a farm with a strict religious upbringing. This would later influence his desire for wholesome entertainment. He was described as tenacious and a hard worker by those who knew him. Keith worked several jobs before finding his niche in entertainment. These jobs included grocery store clerk, mess-room boy for the Atlantic coastal steamer, the *S.S. Ashland*, street-corner peddler, and circus gaffer. The circus became a permanent job for Keith, and throughout the 1870s he found jobs with several traveling circuses where he learned skills that would become crucial to his later endeavors. One such circus was P.T. Barnum’s “Greatest Show on Earth.” During his time there, Keith witnessed the diverse audience to whom the show

appealed. He also became familiar with shows that were structured around many acts and performed at a fast pace. This experience would influence how Keith organized and promoted his vaudeville shows.

The final experience that shaped Keith before he took on his own business was acquired during his time at George B. Bunnell's dime museum in New York. Just as he was influenced by Barnum's wholesome shows, Keith felt the same about Bunnell. "... Bunnell stressed an educational and morally uplifting environment for his customers." The dime museum had become a popular form of entertainment in the 1870s after P.T. Barnum had great success at New York's American Museum. Bunnell, the mentee and partner of Barnum, opened the New York American Museum, charging ten cents for admission. Keith worked at Bunnell's museum for a brief two seasons before moving on to open his own dime museum in Boston.

The New York Dime Museum was Keith's first independent venture. Located in Boston, it was named the New York Dime Museum because Keith showcased acts that had been performing in New York. In its beginning, Keith experimented with different types of acts, including vaudeville. His initial vaudeville-inspired show was incredibly successful and popular. This led Keith to reorganize his entire museum. The shows became more fast-paced and frequent. Following this initial success, Keith expanded his museum and entered into partnerships with investors. They continued to evolve the business in hopes of increasing their success. One of the lasting improvements made was the implementation of continuous shows. Traditionally, at this point in time, continuous shows meant multiple shows a day with small breaks in between. However, Keith, being in the dime museum business, realized that the only way to make a significant profit would be to implement continuous performances. "By guaranteeing a constant audience turnover, the continuous format was a successful box-office strategy." This would become the famously recognizable vaudeville format coined by Keith and earned him the title of "Father of Vaudeville."

B. F. Keith was a determined businessman and continuously set out to grow and change his visions for big, lavish, successful entertainment. But the history of B. F. Keith is incomplete without his right-hand man, Edwin Franklin Albee. Mr. Albee was born on October 8, 1857, in Machias port, on Machias Bay, Maine. Like Mr. Keith, Albee also had a religious upbringing and a love of money. After his family moved to Boston when Albee was a child, he experienced the adversity of growing up in a family that "struggled to make ends meet." This led Albee to begin working at a young age and instilled in him a strong work ethic. While working as a stock boy and messenger at a department store, he was offered a role in a theatre production. After this experience, his passion for theatre never stopped growing. When Albee was 19, he joined the P.T. Barnum Circus in 1876 and worked as a ticket seller. He also worked as a "fixer", which was a type of advisor for the entertainment business who worked through problems of personnel and sales. Albee continued to work at circuses over the course of ten years and learned a great deal. This made him instrumental as Mr. Keith's advisor for transforming the museum into big time vaudeville entertainment. After making a home in Boston with his wife in the 1880s, Albee reconnected with Keith whom he had previously met through circus connections.

Albee recalled going "into Boston after several years of trouping in the south and middle west with a wagon show. Right on Washington street, in the best part of Boston, I saw a little doorway with the sign 'Museum.' The camaraderie that exists between showmen impelled me to enter. Here was B.F. Keith's first venture in the show business. A few freaks, some snakes, and the midget 'Baby Alice' justified the name that had attracted me. We talked. I liked Keith and remembered him, so when I returned to Boston a little later, I looked him up. He had enlarged his place. He had rented the candy store next door for an auditorium. But he wasn't doing so well and asked me if I could suggest a way of building up his museum."

Albee “suggested that he (Keith) couldn’t drag Back Bay into a museum without more alluring bait than freaks...That evening, I went to the premiere of ‘The Mikado,’ beautifully presented. Boston went wild over it. Boston liked opera.” Albee told Keith that he “must produce opera to get the crowds.” Albee sold Keith on the idea. Between Keith and Albee, they raised \$500, bought some costumes, painted the scenery, and hired their singers. That was when Keith conceived the idea of a continuous performance at which everyone laughed but which was the beginning of his fortune. Keith and Albee gave eight performances a day, and their prima donna received \$15 a week. Between February and May, Keith took in \$40,000 in his opera museum. It was a matter of expansion from then on.

Keith had hired Albee to manage utilities at the museum. Albee thrived and soon received a promotion to assistant manager. Keith trusted Albee’s business sense and would often look to him for suggestions on how they could improve. Albee suggested elevating the show with high-class acts to justify charging more for admission. Keith liked the idea and welcomed more suggestions from his partner. This partnership led to the evolution of what Keith had envisioned for his entertainment business – a wholesome, refined show with a crowd that yearned for cultured entertainment.

What they really did was make the variety show respectable. They cleaned it up, washed its face, combed it hair, censored its utterances, gave it new clothes, and called it vaudeville. Once the two men saw significant success with their model, they opened luxurious theatres decorated and remodeled in accordance with a desire to create a complete experience for the audience. In the general division of labor, Keith always attended to the theatrical side and Albee to the business part. The names Keith and Albee became a brand of vaudeville unlike any kind that had preceded it.

After opening theatres along the east coast, Keith and Albee established the United Booking Office in 1906 to maintain their stronghold. Every act that sought employment at any of the member theatres had to work through this central office, which in turn charged a five percent commission per act. Thus, Keith and Albee expanded their power base. This organization took the place of agents or actors themselves doing their bookings, setting routes, and bargaining salaries. With this, Keith and Albee had control over the entire vaudeville entertainment industry. The UBO became so powerful that theatres not owned by Keith and Albee were using it to book performers. This led to a complete monopoly on entertainment by the two.

This outstanding success continued into the early 20th century. Following Keith’s death on March 26, 1914, he left one-half of his fortune to Albee. That was how fast a friendship developed between the two men out of the vicissitudes of the show business. Following the death of Keith’s son in 1918, Albee became the head of the Keith-Albee circuit. At this point, the organization owned or controlled approximately 1,500 theatres. The only issue up until this time was that the UBO only controlled theatres from the Atlantic to the Midwest. Albee sought nationwide control of vaudeville, and he secured it when he merged his bank with the prominent Orpheum Circuit on the west coast. Thus, the Keith-Albee circuit came to be known as the Keith-Albee-Orpheum Circuit in the 1920s.

However, new entertainment and investors became too much for Albee and the vaudeville industry to hold out against. In 1928, \$4,500,000 worth of stock was sold to Joseph P. Kennedy’s Radio Corporation of America (RCA) establishing the Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO). Mr. Kennedy now had the controlling interest. The Keith-Albee Orpheum Circuit merged with Kennedy’s film company, and the Keith-Albee vaudeville houses became the RKO theatres. After this merger, motion pictures became the primary form of entertainment, while vaudeville survived only as an accompaniment to the feature film.

Not long after losing control of his empire, Edwin F. Albee died on March 11, 1930.

Sources: The Herald Advertiser September 25, 1927, "Showman Albee Builds His Finest Theatre as Tribute to His Friend"; B. F. Keith: Controversial Vaudeville Entrepreneur by Christopher B. Vasquez-Wright; Edward Albee: Controversial Father of Vaudeville by Anna Jennings.

LEGENDS AND LORE: GHOSTS IN THE KEITH-ALBEE AND TUNNELS IN THE BASEMENT

GHOSTS: The Keith-Albee is purportedly one of the most haunted locations in Huntington. Some of the paranormal phenomena are concentrated in areas where verifiable deaths have been reported in the past: in the basement where two electricians were electrocuted; and in the projection room, where a maintenance man died, possibly of a heart attack. Another story, unverified, holds that a homeless man taking shelter in the basement froze to death one winter under the stage area. In fact, the areas of the deaths are reported to be some of the "hot spots" in the theatre. Movement and shadows are often seen in the projection room where the maintenance man has died.

The most famous ghost at the Keith-Albee is not related to a known fatality, however. The Lady in Red wears a fancy red dress from the 1940s and high heeled shoes. Reportedly, she tends to occupy the ladies' restroom on the mezzanine level. There is a mirrored parlor that leads into the restroom, and this is where she is often seen as a full-bodied apparition. She also wanders about the main stage after hours when patrons have gone home.

In the basement, mysterious noises, voices, and footsteps are heard, and the area has a foreboding feeling to it. The apparition of a man has been seen flitting about. There are different versions of the story about the electricians and how they supposedly met their end. According to one version, the electricians were summoned to check out some wiring difficulties and inspected the electrical panel. They shut down the power in sections of the theatre. When the lights went off downstairs, they assumed the power was cut to the basement. They touched a live wire with their tools and were electrocuted. Staff found them dead at the scene. The ghost of the man that is seen in the basement is thought to be the spirit of one of the unfortunate electricians.

Also, in the basement is a ghost that lurks around the ladies' restroom. Unlike the Lady in Red, this one is heard and felt but not seen. Visitors feel as though an invisible presence follows them on the stairs to the restroom and comes inside and watches them.

Is the Keith-Albee haunted? That is for you to decide!

Sources: The Big Book of West Virginia Ghost Stories by Rosemary Ellen Guiley; Theresa's Haunted History of the Tri-State: Combining Fact with Folklore.

TUNNELS : There is something mysterious about a tunnel. Former Huntington Main Street Director Renee Maass says that a rumor that has been around for decades states that there were tunnels leading from the Ohio River into downtown. Specifically, these tunnels connected with downtown vaudeville theatres and were used by performers to transport their props, baggage, and other equipment, including animal from riverboats to the theatres, says Maass.

But some of the most intriguing reasons given for the tunnels underneath Huntington include bootlegging, a secret courier service, and a getaway route for members of the Mafia who were here on business from Cleveland and Pittsburgh. The rumor states that the underworld figures could hide out at a hotel or private club and then, if necessary, sneak out via an underground passageway.

Derek Hyman, president of The Greater Huntington Theater Corporation, states that he has heard a rumor that there was a tunnel connecting his Keith-Albee and the Frederick Hotel in order to shuttle guest performers between the theatre and the hotel. This rumor is false, says Hyman, as is the rumor of a tunnel connecting the Keith with the Cinema Theater almost two blocks away on Fourth Avenue. He adds that there are several tunnels underneath the Keith-Albee, but they are for maintenance and delivery purposes, and they end at the curb. He has explored "both sides of the wall" at the ends of Keith-Albee's tunnels and underneath the Frederick and has found no evidence of any connecting underground passages.

William Ritter (now deceased) has also heard the rumor of a tunnel connecting the Hotel Frederick and the Keith-Albee as well as other tunnel rumors, but he believes there is nothing to them.

Huntington architect Keith Dean, now deceased, stated that there are tunnels all over town that run underneath sidewalks, but usually end at the curb.

The Keith-Albee basement area is a maze of hallways and corridors and storage rooms. It is and of itself, a tunnel-like system; so, perhaps, the construction itself lends to people's confusion and merging reality with the rumor of underground tunnels.

Sources: The Mystery of Tunnels in Huntington by Joseph Platania; Theresa's Haunted History of the Tri-State