

# THE POLK THEATRE STORY

What happened with the Polk Theatre in Lakeland is a telling example of the influence asserted by Paramount Publix:

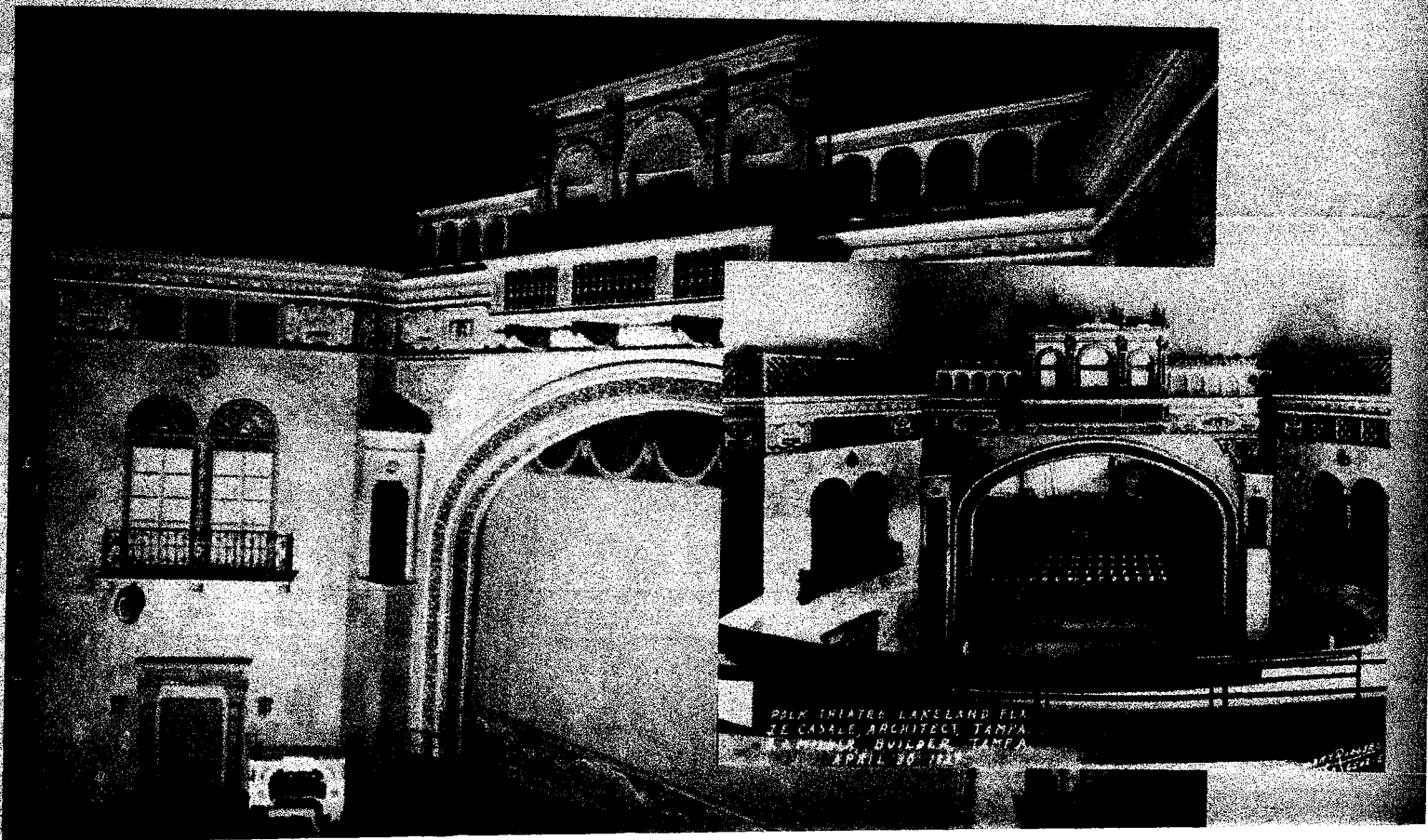
In 1925 John E. Melton, a Lakeland real estate developer, assembled land and financing to build a multipurpose office building "anchored by a grand movie palace." He hired Italian-born architect James E. Casale, from Tampa, who specified and designed an atmospheric auditorium. Casale, in press reports, credited his inspiration to Andrea Palladio's famed atmospheric Teatro Olimpico (1580) in Vicenza, Italy. (Note: historic namesake for Miami's Olympia.) It is more likely that Casale received his inspiration to build an atmospheric movie palace, especially one with a plaster ceiling and electric stars, not from Palladio, but from John Eberson. Casale had opened his architectural office in Eberson's 10-story Tampa Theatre Building in 1925 at the time of its opening. He was obviously familiar with Eberson's work and techniques. Casale designed a lovely theatre in the Italian Renaissance style, though less exotic and opulent than Eberson's work.

Perhaps the austerity was due to the fact that Melton ran short of money. The theatre sat unfinished for a time. To obtain funding, the builder had entered into a Faustian agreement with Paramount Publix, which was his undoing. Publix took a lease on the uncompleted theatre to tie it up, apparently with no intention of opening it; Publix had other operations in Lakeland and was in no hurry to increase its operating costs by staffing the Polk while likely not increasing overall revenue.

When the theatre was finally completed in spring of 1927, Melton was stymied. Unable to open the theatre, he could not lease out the stores either. Publix would not open the Polk and would not advance further funds. As Publix had done so often, their apparent intention was to freeze out the partner, which they did. The Polk finally opened December 22, 1928—after Melton sold his interest in the theatre to Publix. The formerly parsimonious Publix then came up with \$65,000 to upgrade the house to sound for talkies. When it opened in 1928, the Polk was the sixth-largest movie palace in the state.

Saved by a group of concerned citizens who banded together in 1982, the Polk remains in the elite group of 1920s Publix movie palaces that have been saved as performing arts centers for the people of Florida. The group formed a non-profit, secured a grant from the state, and purchased the theatre for \$300,000. They had the Polk listed in the National Register in 1993. After a major fund-raising effort, theatre restoration was completed in October 1999.

An organ was ordered for the Polk but never installed, and the once-empty chambers are now home to a fine Robert Morton organ. The organ installed there today was originally a 3/11 Robert-Morton built in 1927 for Loew's Theater in Canton, Ohio. Later moved and subsequently installed in a Texas pizza restaurant, it was acquired in the mid-1980s and relocated to the Polk. Tom Drake, a representative of Wicks Organ Co., led a multi-year restoration effort on the organ. A Post Horn rank was added to bring the organ to its present 3/12 size. Rosa Rio performed in concert on October 18, 2002, to dedicate the instrument.



## The Robert Morton Pipe Organ in the Polk Theatre

The pipe organ in the Polk Theatre was manufactured by the Robert Morton Organ Company of Van Nuys, California. In 1926 it was shipped from the factory as opus number 2296 to Loew's Theater in Canton, Ohio where it went into service on February 7, 1927 under the talented fingers (and feet) of organist Larry La Ross. The first film presented at the new theater was the comedy *Waning Sex* starring Norma Shearer, but also on the bill that night was a complete vaudeville show featuring Rita Owen (a dancing star formerly with Ziegfeld's Follies), songstress Peggy Owen, and Art Landry's Victor Recording Orchestra. The organ continued to provide accompaniment for films and vaudeville shows in Canton until the end of the 1920s when it fell into disuse with the rise of talking pictures and the demise of vaudeville. It then gathered dust for nearly thirty years in Loew's Theater until it was removed to storage in the late 1950s. From the late 1960s to the mid 1980s the organ spent time in a private residence in Solon, Ohio (the neighbors are said to have phoned in requests when it was played) and Scampi's Pizza Parlor in Austin, Texas before finally arriving at the Polk Theater. After many years of installation and restoration by volunteer organ enthusiasts, the instrument was first played for Lakeland's moviegoers on December 14, 2001. Its official dedication program under the experienced hands of legendary theater organist Rosa Rio took place at the showing of *The Phantom of the Opera* starring Lon Chaney on October 18, 2002.

The Robert Morton Organ Company was the second most prolific of the many manufacturers which built theater organs during the heyday of silent films (after The Wurlitzer Company, the largest of these firms, and the only one which still resides in popular memory). Organ building was not a particularly profitable enterprise until the demand for organs to accompany silent films exploded beginning about 1915. As a result, Robert Morton was born (in 1917) as the descendent of a long list of bankrupt California organ firms dating back to 1894. Such companies as Fletcher & Harris, The Los Angeles Art Organ Company, The Electrolian Organ Company, The Johnston Organ and Piano Manufacturing Company, and the California Organ Company all figure in the corporate genealogy of the Robert Morton Organ Company. Interestingly, there never actually was a Robert Morton. Founder Harold J. Werner named the firm after his two sons - Robert and Morton.

The new company proved to be extremely successful and eventually sold over a thousand theater organs as well as countless residence organs, church organs, mortuary organs, photo players and other specialized instruments. The firm was paramount in sales in California, but it also had a very significant presence in the South where mass procurement contracts from theater chains resulted in most Southern towns large enough to have a theater also having a small Robert Morton organ. But there were also Robert Morton organs in nearly every single state, the District of Columbia, and several foreign countries. The firm produced high-quality instruments and obtained many patents for economical and dependable mechanisms. Unfortunately the loss of the theater business spelled the company's financial demise just as it did for many other organ-building firms of the golden age. Robert Morton suspended manufacturing in April, 1929 and by the early 1930s the firm had been completely liquidated.

For those interested in such details, Robert Morton opus 2296 was constructed as a three manual, eleven rank theater organ - larger than most of the organs Robert Morton made, but not as large as the organs the company produced for flagship theaters such as the Saenger in New Orleans or Loew's Ohio in Columbus. Our organ's original eleven ranks were: Diaphonic Diapason, Horn Diapason, Tibia Clausa, Flute, Violin, Violin Celeste, Tuba, Clarinet, Kinura, Orchestral Oboe, and Vox Humana. It included four tuned percussion instruments (Xylophone, Glockenspiel, Chrysoglott Harp, and Cathedral Chimes) as well as the normal complement of traps (Tambourine, Castanets, Drums, Cymbals) and sound effects for use in accompanying silent films (Auto Klaxon, Steamboat Whistle, etc.) The organ is installed in two chambers one on each side of the stage, each chamber having its own five horsepower blower. The original electro-pneumatic relay has been replaced with a modern Peterson electronic relay, and the original keyboards have been replaced with Peterson keyboards. Subsequent to the organ's installation at the Polk Theatre, one additional rank (a homemade English Post Horn) and numerous additional traps and sound effects have been added. In addition, the Peterson electronic relay has made possible several innovative modifications to the console controls which make the organ considerably more versatile than it was originally.

We are proud of our historic and well-traveled instrument, and we are always pleased to arrange an up-close look for interested groups or individuals. Please contact theater management if a visit is desired.