

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: The York Theatre

A mainstay of downtown Elmhurst for generations, the York Theatre opened with much fanfare at 150 N. York Street on Labor Day 1924. Designed by architect Elmer Behrns, the theater had a single auditorium with a seating capacity of approximately 1,100. The building had a Spanish Revival-style decor that included terrazzo tile on the lobby floor, stenciling on the lobby ceiling, and brass, copper and wrought iron light fixtures. A large pipe organ and an electric marquee were also standout elements of the state-of-the-art movie house.



*The York Theatre with its original façade circa 1925, M2005.71.93*

The York was not the first theatre in Elmhurst. The Elms Theatre at 105 W. First Street had been open since 1913, but it was driven out of business within months of the 1924 opening and success of the York Theatre. For the first several years of operation the York Theatre only showed silent movies, but it developed a reputation for installing the latest enhancements in cinematic experience. In 1929 Vitaphone and Movietone equipment was installed in the York, bringing talking and sound motion pictures to Elmhurst. There was a full house at the York Theatre the night that the new equipment was used to present the allsound picture, *The Canary Murder Case*. The York Theatre distributed handbills to let customers know what movies would be playing each week. The schedule was helpful since the movies changed several times a week. The advertisements also announced live shows, like Little Joe Warner, the NBC radio star that performed at the York Theatre in 1925.

In 1938 the exterior of the building was modernized with the installation of an art-moderne marquee that featured three-foot bands of stainless steel bordered by double bands of neon for a more dramatic look. This façade still graces downtown Elmhurst today.

Economic hardship in the 1960s took its toll on Elmhurst's central business district, and by the mid-1970s the York Theatres was falling into disrepair. Leaks had resulted in extensive damage that led to the removal of the ornate ceiling and replaced with a dropped panel ceiling. Willis Johnson, president of Tivoli Enterprises, purchased the property in 1984 and made a commitment to restore the building. In 1991 the theater building underwent a major restoration and remodeling project with the division of one auditorium into three; the excavation of the orchestra pit that had been filled in; the installation of

a Barton pipe organ; the repositioning of a movie screen to expose a proscenium arch, the restoration of elements original to the building; and a face-lift to the marquee. Today, the movie theatre boasts of 10 screens with reclining seats, and continues to entertain audiences in downtown Elmhurst.

*By Nancy Wilson, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, Updated October 2021*