

University of Washington Tacoma

From the Selected Works of Elizabeth 'Libi' Sundermann

Spring 2013

A "Temple of Pleasure:" Missoula's Wilma Theatre

Elizabeth 'Libi' A. Sundermann, *University of Washington - Tacoma Campus*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/libisun/2/>

A “Temple

The Wilma Theatre in downtown Missoula, Montana, has provided the city and surrounding area with entertainment since 1921. W. A. “Billy” Simons, president of the Northwest Theatre Company, commissioned the building’s construction in 1920, during the heyday of the movie palace. In addition to the well-appointed theatre, the building housed a café, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a gymnasium, offices, and apartments.

Missoula’s WILMA Theatre

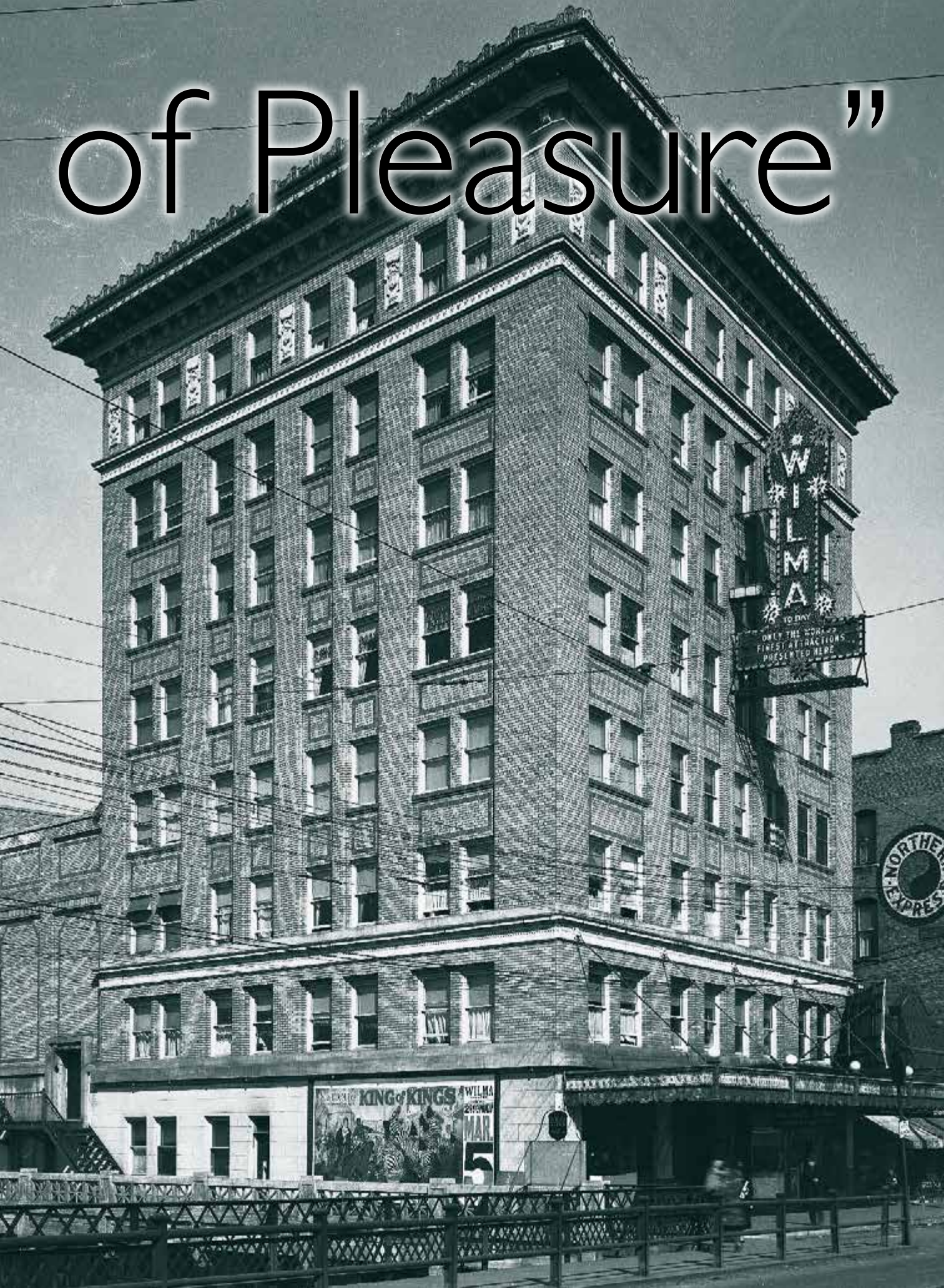
BY ELIZABETH “LIBI” SUNDERMANN

The theatre’s history began with the dreams of W. A. “Billy” Simons. Simons lived the classic American “rags to riches” life. When he was a boy in West Virginia, his father, a logger, drowned, leaving Billy the head of a family of six. Young Simons first found employment as a furniture maker’s apprentice but disliked the work and bought a millinery stand with his meager savings to enhance his mother’s dressmaking business. He also borrowed a hundred dollars on the collateral of his father’s gold watch and opened a lunch stand in Cherryvale, Kansas, a railway town. With the profits, Simons took his first steps into the business that would make him successful—entertaining the masses. He bought a drugstore with an empty hall on the upper floor, purchased fifty pairs of skates, and opened a roller rink. In 1886, he left Kansas for Montana with five thousand dollars in his pocket to begin running Wild West shows. Simons moved on to Alaska, where he built a theatre in Dawson and the Standard Theatre in Nome during the Klondike gold rush. Around the same time, he became proprietor of a log hotel at the popular Lolo Hot Springs south of Montana, before the property burned down in 1900.¹

Simons met his wife, Edna Wilma, in Missoula while she was there performing, and they married in Portland, Oregon, in 1909. Edna hailed from Collinsville, Kentucky, and started her acting career as a light-opera vaudeville star. Edna, with her stage partner and sister, Edith, toured with the well-regarded Pantages Vaudeville lineup as a headliner on the vaudeville circuit. Edna did not let her marriage to Simons end her career. She continued performing in a variety of venues—including the Wilma—throughout her life.²

In the view at right, the billboard on the side of the Wilma advertises Cecil B. DeMille’s 1927 silent film *King of Kings*, playing “2 days starting Monday, Mar. 5.”

of Pleasure"



Billy Simons (far right, 1930s) met vaudeville star Edna Wilma in 1909. They married and built a chain of theatres across the Northwest. Named after Edna (right, 1920s), the Missoula theatre became the heart of the Simonses' entertainment conglomerate.



Edna Empire, photographer, courtesy Ranstrom Family



Courtesy Ranstrom Family

After Billy and Edna's marriage, the couple built their Northwest entertainment enterprises. Their properties included the Grand Hotel in Wallace, Idaho, where they settled for a time to run the Masonic Opera House. By 1920, Simons had become president of the Northwest Theatre Company in Missoula, which he ran with partner W. H. Smead, and he also headed the Simons Amusement Company, handling his and Edna's entertainment concerns across western Montana, northern Idaho, and eastern Washington. As movies became increasingly popular, the Simonses' theatres made a mark on the region.³

By the 1920s, movies were a wildly popular form of entertainment. They had gotten their start in 1887 with Thomas Edison's patent of his Kinetoscope, a technology that entrepreneurs quickly parlayed into nickelodeons, where customers spent a nickel to see "moving pictures." By the early 1900s, movies were attracting large audiences because they were cheap and appealed to a wide variety of people, including immigrants, who did not need to speak a word of English to appreciate the action on the screen and the organ music that accompanied it. Movies also appealed to the young, who found theatres a place they could go with the approval of their parents (but without their company), and to parents, who found them a place to take the family.⁴

As the movie business grew, increasingly lavish movie palaces were built as owners and managers searched for larger markets and middle- and upper-

class audiences. By the 1920s, movies had changed the style of popular entertainment in the United States, crippling vaudeville and leaving live theatre relying on smaller audiences. Movie palace architect Thomas W. Lamb described the ideology behind the new theatres:

To make our audience receptive and interested, we must cut them off from the rest of city life and take them into a rich and self-contained auditorium, where their minds are freed from their usual occupations and freed from their customary thoughts. In order to do this, it is necessary to present to their eye a general scheme quite different from their daily environment, quite different in color scheme, and a great deal more elaborate. The theatre can afford this, and must afford it for our public is large, and in the average not wealthy. The theatre is the palace of the average man. As long as he is there, it is his, and it helps him to lift himself out of his daily drudgery.

The palaces that Lamb and other architects designed were typical of what every city aspired to: a venue "part theatre . . . part mansion and part luxurious hotel" with ladies' waiting lounges, fresh flowers, canaries in cages, and uniformed ushers, not to mention the elegant furnishings and red plush seats. Every

theatre had an organ fitted out with the usual stops—standard equipment for the silent movie houses—as well as various percussion and bell sounds needed for film scores.⁵

The sumptuous style of the Wilma Theatre followed nationwide theatre trends. In 1920, Simons commissioned the Smead-Simons Building, known as the Wilma in honor of his wife. The Wilma rivaled the movie mansions of much larger cities. Designed by Missoula architects Ole Bakke and H. E. Kirkemo, the building housed a Louis XIV-style palace theatre with seating for more than a thousand people, a Robert Morton Company pipe organ, and loge seats. The building's basement held a café with a mezzanine orchestra balcony for diners' listening pleasure, a gymnasium, and the Olympic-sized Crystal Pool—Missoula's first indoor swimming pool—as well as offices and apartments. The modern and utilitarian Chicago-style building dominated the Missoula skyline: the building—towering eight stories above-ground and extending two stories below—was the

tallest building in western Montana in the 1920s. While Missoula had other theatres, none—including the Rialto, built at the same time as the Wilma, and the Northwest Theatre Company's Empress and Liberty theatres—was as luxurious as the Wilma.⁶

The *Daily Missoulian* noted the building's spectacular form and function in a review of the Wilma's grand opening:

The new theatre is a luxurious place, with 220 loge seats, as comfortable as your easy chair in front of the fire at home. There is not a stair in the house; ramps give access to the mezzanine floor, where are some of the best seats. The lower floor has the right sort of slope and the decorations of the theatre proper are in good taste. It is a splendid theatre, and last evening it lived up to the press agent's promise that it would be found to be the finest place of its sort between the Twin Cities and the Pacific coast.⁷

TOURISTS ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO VISIT THE NEW

Smead-Simons Building

THE TAVERN CAFE


MONTANA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL CAFE

Distinctive Service
Highest Quality Food
Moderate Prices

Music and Dancing

Private Banquet and Dining Rooms
Under the personal management of

W. A. SIMONS,
Owner



THE CRYSTAL POOL

Furnishes Missoulians with one of the most modern recreation and pleasure natatoriums in the west.

Competent Instructors in Attendance
at All Times

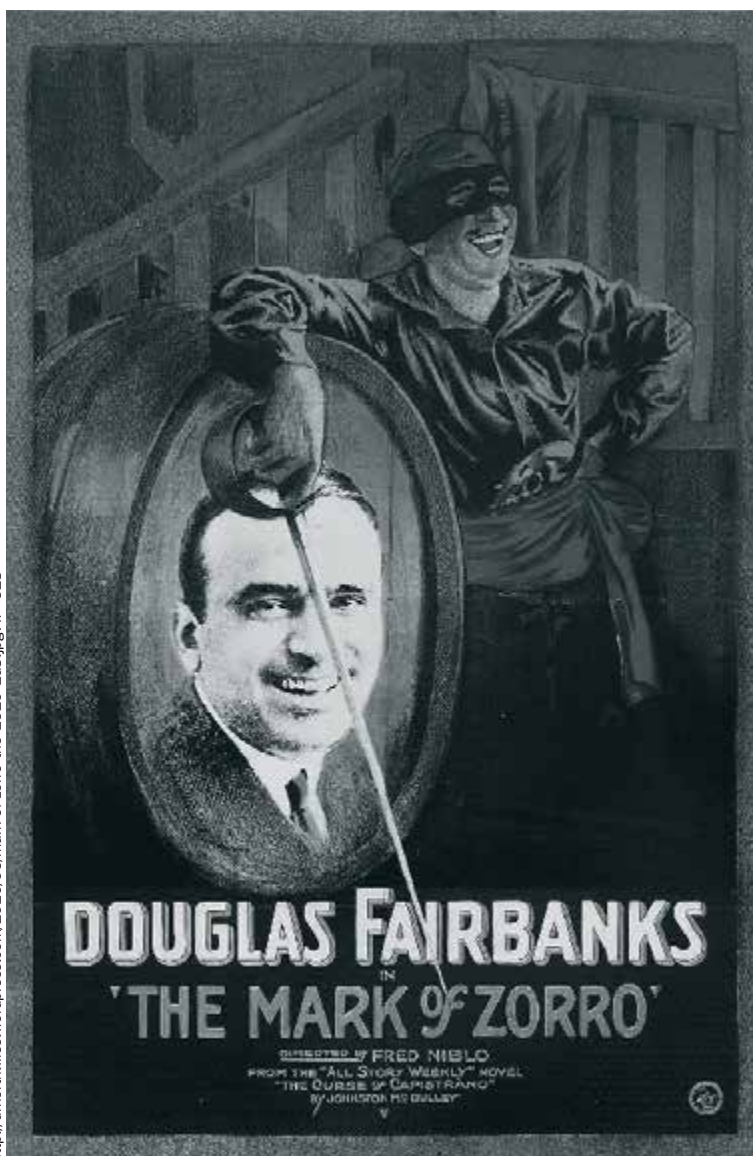
The Jewel Filtration System Insures
Absolute Sanitation

Open 10:00 A. M. to 11:00 P. M.
Every Day

Under Management of
CHET McINTYRE

MONTANA'S FINEST BUILDING AND THE PRIDE OF
MISSOULA—STRICTLY FIREPROOF AND MODERN IN EVERY RESPECT.
EIGHT STORIES ABOVE THE STREET, TWO BELOW, TEN STORIES IN ALL. CON-
TAINS THE WILMA THEATRE, TAVERN CAFE, CRYSTAL POOL, TWO STORES, FIFTY OFFICES
AND TWELVE APARTMENTS

One of the many opulent features of the new Wilma, then known as the Smead-Simons Building, was the Crystal Pool, Missoula's first indoor swimming pool and "one of the most modern recreation and pleasure natatoriums in the west."



The first “photoplay” feature shown in the new Wilma was the 1921 film *The Mark of Zorro*.

Missoulians turned out for the grand-opening performance on May 11, 1921, a concert by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, featuring eighty “of the world’s finest musicians” and eight soloists under the direction of Walter Henry Rothwell. To the reporter, it seemed that “nearly every one in Missoula was there to enjoy the wonderful music and the lovely new theatre.” The diverse crowd included not only the “Mayor and Mrs. Wilkinson” but “the young married people [who] could not stay away,” the “old timers who have celebrated the opening of each new opera house,” and the “musicians of Missoula and their families.” Seats cost from three dollars for the

lower-floor front rows and up to six dollars for loge seats in all sections of the theatre.⁸

The Wilma’s first “photoplay” feature, opening on May 13, 1921, was the eighty-minute silent film *The Mark of Zorro*, starring Douglas Fairbanks. Fairbanks played a dual role as the ineffectual Don Diego and his dashing and heroic counterpart Zorro. The charismatic Fairbanks and the film’s swashbuckling adventure was a sure crowd-pleaser.⁹

It took large and regular audiences to make movie palaces viable, and in the 1920s, the broad appeal of the movies kept the business going. Montana’s burgeoning population—fed by railroad developments, the timber industry, and mining—brought workers and their families to the state’s urban centers and created demand for various types of recreation. The Associated Press noted that “the activity about the Anaconda mine operations brought the number [of theatre venues] to a new high figure.” During Prohibition, movies triumphed as the most popular form of working-class entertainment. Indeed, Prohibition reformers lauded the movie houses, calling them a place where “men now take their wives and families . . . where formerly they went alone to the saloon.”¹⁰

By 1926, twenty thousand movie theatres dotted the American landscape, and millions of Americans attended each week, earning theatre owners \$750 million from admissions. The novelty of the moving pictures did begin to wear off toward the end of the decade, but the perfection of sound—a necessary technology in the new radio culture—brought audiences in droves to see the “talkies.” Although sound films have a long and complex history, Warner Bros.—still a small company at the time—is credited with advancing the technology. The company released the Vitaphone “sound-on-disc” system in 1926, and its 1927 film *The Jazz Singer*, featuring Al Jolson’s singing, is credited with capturing the pub-



After Billy Simons died in 1937, Edna continued to run their company's eighteen theatres. In 1950, she married Ed Sharp, a former representative of Fox Theatres, which had contracted to operate the Wilma. In 1951, the *Missoulian* pictured Ed and Edna (left) and told how they had gathered ideas for remodeling the Wilma.

lic's attention and demand for more sound film. In 1928, the company released *Lights of New York*, which film scholars consider the first "full talkie."¹¹

As the film industry continued to grow, film's escapist charms and formula-style plots maintained its broad-based appeal, and customers returned again and again to see Hollywood's latest productions—even through the dark days of the Great Depression when tickets cost ten cents for children and twenty-five cents for adults.¹² Yet running a theatre took a lot of time, energy, and money, and even in good times theatre ownership was a gamble. In hard times, the risks increased significantly. Thus, in the 1930s, Billy Simons decided to lease the Wilma to a rival film management company, Fox Inter-mountain Theatres, a move his wife opposed. When Simons died in 1937, Edna became head of the Simons Amusement Company. She continued to expand the company's holdings, including adding a drive-in—the Silver Star—located seven miles outside Spokane, to her regional businesses. She also ran ranch inter-

ests, owned a share in the Daly Meats Co., and built another Wilma Theatre in Wallace, Idaho. However, it would take years for her to reclaim management of Missoula's Wilma Theatre.¹³

Movies remained an affordable and exciting outing into the 1940s. They typically ran from noon until midnight, interspersed with cartoons and newsreels, which were an important source of information for the public. Weekend "serial" days saw hordes of children rushing the theatres to see the latest installment of Flash Gordon's adventures. The Wilma's general manager for decades, Bob "Rat" Ranstrom, a Missoula native, remembered movie attendance as a major event when he was a boy and one worthy of the twenty-five-cents admission, one-quarter of his weekly allowance.¹⁴

In 1950, the theatre's management returned to its namesake. That year, Edna married Ed Sharp, twenty-five years her junior and a former representative of



Wilma Theatre, Missoula, Montana

Before Fox Theatres returned management of the Wilma to Edna and Sharp, it had stripped out the theatre's seats, furnishings, and organ. Edna and Ed's honeymoon featured a tour of theatres to get ideas for the Wilma's makeover. This marked-up photo of the bare interior touts the planned improvements. After its 1951 grand opening, the Wilma was, according to the *Missoulian*, "the most elaborate show case in this part of the country."

the Fox Theatres.¹⁵ A dispute with the theatre chain over her desire that Sharp manage the Wilma led to Fox's relinquishment of its lease, but, in retaliation, the company stripped the theatre of its seats, furnishings, and organ.¹⁶ Edna and Sharp faced a desperate refurbishment of the theatre, and their honeymoon featured a tour of theatres to get ideas for the Wilma's makeover.¹⁷

The Wilma held a grand reopening in February 1951, complete with fireworks above the marquee. Newspaper ads that appeared in conjunction pledged to bring "New York stage plays and concert personages" so that "Missoula will always share the cultural growth of the theatre world." Edna dedicated the theatre "to you [Missoulians]" in a moment she called

"one of the greatest of my life." She and her husband affirmed that "the effort and work involved is gratifying and justifies the contribution to the better progress and development of community enterprise." It was a sincere pledge that Wilma Theatre management would honor in the years to come.¹⁸

Judging by reports, the theatre was indeed a place the city could take pride in. In addition to its "Amazing New Cycloramic . . . Magic Screen of the Future," "Voice of Theatre" speakers, and new patent-leather concessionaire, the new Wilma featured rocking-chair loge seating, patent-leather doors, mirrors, draperies "of spun gold material highlighted with festoons and colors of red, gold and blue," and carpets specially designed so that "the theatre patron feels

Courtesy the Ranstrom Family



Ed Sharp continued to run the Wilma after Edna passed away in 1954. He took on partner Robert Sias in 1956 and then, starting in the early 1970s, Robert Ranstrom, who managed the theater for twenty-six years. Though its owners struggled with expenses and competition from television, the Wilma continued to provide the community with a variety of entertainment. Missoula businessman Tracy Blakeslee bought the Wilma in 1993. Today, the Wilma's ornate auditorium (above, circa 1980) continues to delight audiences.



This Missoula post-card features the Wilma Theatre's marquee advertising the movie *Thunder over Hawaii*, made in 1956, and *Circus of Horrors*, a 1960 British film.

that he is walking in a cloud of luxury.” The “Wishing Well with Magic Fountain” in the lobby sprayed perfume for the scenting of ladies’ handkerchiefs from a “colorful blue water boy,” with proceeds collected benefiting the Crippled Child’s Association.¹⁹

Despite the Wilma’s varied attractions, the theatre’s fortunes declined as the birth of television changed entertainment drastically. Average weekly movie theatre attendance was around 90 million a week in 1946. By 1956, that figure had been cut nearly in half, in large part due to television. By the mid-1960s, aided by drive-in theatres, the movie-house business hobbled along with about 40 million customers a week. Missoula caught on to the new nationwide trend—its first television station, KGVO, aired in 1954. For better or for worse, public movie culture evolved into private viewing at home.²⁰

In 1956, two years after Edna passed away in her Wilma apartment, Sharp formed a partnership with Robert Sias, a prominent local businessman, to help out with finances. Sharp and Sias sold off many of the Simons Amusement Company’s theatres because the cost of running them through regional management had proved too expensive. The partners focused their interests in Missoula and purchased the local Roxy Theatre and the Go-West Drive-In. They also continued to provide a variety of entertainments: the Wilma hosted performances by John Philip Sousa, Mahalia Jackson, Ethel Barrymore, Carlos Montoya, and

featured New York shows. Over the years, the Wilma also served as a stage for a number of home-grown arts and entertainment organizations, including the Missoula Symphony Orchestra (organized in 1954), the Missoula Children’s Theatre (with roots in the early 1970s), the International Wildlife Film Festival (begun in 1977), and the Garden City Ballet (formed in 1984).²¹

Yet the plight of the Wilma became increasingly grim in the late 1980s as the building deteriorated.²² In 1993, due to his advancing age and the expensive repairs needed to bring the Wilma back up to building and safety codes, Sharp sold the theatre to Missoula businessman Tracy Blakeslee, under whose management the Wilma continued to serve its community. Today, the Wilma is an axis for Montana’s diverse cultures and a venue for theatre magic.²³

Elizabeth “Libi” Sundermann grew up in Missoula, where she regularly visited the Wilma Theatre for movies and other “lively arts,” particularly the art-house films shown in its basement theatre, the funky Chapel of the Dove. As a student at the University of Montana–Missoula, she earned a BA in journalism and a BA in history. She is currently a full-time lecturer in history and global studies at the University of Washington–Tacoma. She earned her master’s degree and PhD in modern European and world history at the University of California–Davis.

A "Temple of Pleasure"

1. W. A. Simons's life history as told by Edna Wilma, in "The Wilma Theatre Section—Advertisement," *Daily Missoulian*, Feb. 14, 1951, 1. See also Bruce Weide, "Missoula's Masterpiece Theatres, Old-Fashioned Glamour and Oddball Glitz," *Montana Magazine* 79 (Sept.–Oct. 1986): 51–52; Myrtle Ryan, "Diary, 1900–1901," UAA-hmc-0344-d, Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska–Anchorage; Charlene Porsild, "Lolo Hot Springs," *Montana* 53 (Winter 2003): 67–68. Sources refer to the Wilma (and other theatres) as both "theatre" and "theater." I have chosen to use "theatre" for consistency following the Library of Congress heading for "Wilma Theatre (Missoula, Mont.," except when "theater" has been used in a proper name or quotation.

2. "Edna W. Sharp, Theatre Owner, Dies," *Missoulian*, July 26, 1954.

3. *Spokane (WA) Daily Chronicle*, May 17, 1946; "Boomer to Manage Two Idaho Theaters," *Spokane (WA) Daily Chronicle*, Mar. 22, 1949; "Drive In Theater Manager Arrives," *Spokane (WA) Spokesman-Review*, Mar. 11, 1953; "Wilma Theater Honors Simons," *ibid.*, Mar. 27, 1947; "Ingrid Bergman Films Banned in Simons Theatres," *Roundup Record-Tribune and Winnett Times*, Jan. 5, 1950; Bob "Rat" Ranstrom, interview by author, Missoula, Mar. 11, 1997. Additional information comes from reading the run of the *Daily Missoulian* and *Missoulian*, 1949 to 1996.

4. See Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (New York, 1983), 151; Russell Lynes, *The Lively Audience: A Social History of the Visual and Performing Arts in America, 1890–1950* (New York, 1985); Russel B. Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America, Two Centuries of American Life* (New York, 1970), 364.

5. Lynes, *Lively Audience*, 281.

6. "Wilma Theatre," Gibson, Kirkemo, and Bakke Architectural Drawings, Series XXVII, 114, Toole Archives, UM; Ranstrom interview; *Daily Missoulian* and *Missoulian*, 1949 to 1996; "Northwest Theatre Company Ledger, 1922 Jan. 1–Dec. 30," Toole Archives, UM, <http://nwda-db.wsulibs.wsu.edu/findaid/ark:/80444/xv55905>.

7. "Palace of Beauty," *Daily Missoulian*, May 12, 1921. Today, the Wilma's architecture is recognized as nationally significant. See James R. McDonald, "Missoula Historic Resource Survey," Historical Research Associates report, Missoula, 1980; and David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York, 1981).

8. "Palace of Beauty."

9. "Attractions in Missoula Theatre," *Daily Missoulian*, May 8, 1921.

10. Stuart Halsey & Co., "The Motion Picture Industry as a Basis for Bond Financing," *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio (Madison, WI, 1976), 172–79; Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*, 197; Associated Press, "20,000,000 People Attend 20,415 Movie Shows Daily," *St. Petersburg (FL) Evening Independent*, Nov. 28, 1925, 16.

11. Stuart Halsey & Co., "The Motion Picture Industry"; Andrew J. Rausch, *Turning Points in Film History* (New York, 2004), 80.

12. John Stromnes, "Furious Flames Level Half-Century Old Roxy Theatre," *Missoulian*, Feb. 20, 1994.

13. Ranstrom interview; Puget Sound Pipeline Online, "Wilma (Missoula) Theatre," www.pstos.org/instruments/mt/missoula/wilma.htm; *Daily Missoulian*, Apr. 6, 1949; "Drive In Theatre Manager Arrives"; "Edna W. Sharp." By the time the Wilma was leased, the pool had failed due to condensation problems that threatened its structural integrity.

14. Ranstrom interview.

15. Sharp began his show business career in college playing piano for meals. He ushered at the Taber Opera House in Denver and later worked for Fox in Montana. After Pearl Harbor, he entered the U.S. Navy and returned to Missoula. "Edna W. Sharp"; "Wilma Owner Ed Sharp Dead at 77," *Missoulian*, Dec. 14, 1993, 1A; Ranstrom interview; *Missoulian* articles, 1951 to 1995; Weide, "Missoula's Masterpiece Theatres."

16. About the same time, Ranstrom recalls, the Fox company also built Missoula's Fox Theatre with a "tower that reached to the sky" to rival the Wilma. See Fox Inter-mountain Theaters, Inc., "Inaugural Program," December 8, 1949, Theater fldr, Toole Archives, UM.

17. Ranstrom interview; *Daily Missoulian* articles from 1951.

18. "Wilma Theatre Section," *Missoulian*, Feb. 14, 1951, 1–6; 1921 program in Bob Ranstrom personal collection.

19. "Wilma Theatre Section."

20. Eugenia Kaledin, *Daily Life in the United States, 1940–1959: Shifting Worlds* (Westport, CT, 2000), 133; Ranstrom interview; KECI Station History, www.nbcmontana.com/keci/station-information. Family-friendly drive-ins boasted low prices, a child- and pet-friendly atmosphere, plus the added attraction of novelties like miniature train rides.

21. Ranstrom interview; "Edna W. Sharp." The Wilma also served as one of the first public venues for Montana's

LGBT movement in the quirky Chapel of the Dove, a theatre and event venue that has been called "a fever dream," a "Puerto Rican funeral parlor," and a "small cocktail lounge decorated by a demented monk." Ed Sharp also performed in the Dove, with his pet pigeon, Koro Hatto. Sharp played piano, and Koro Hatto performed the parlor tricks that made the pigeon a local star. See Deirdre McNamer, "Chapel of the Dove," *Missoulian*, Apr. 8, 1982; Weide, "Missoula's Masterpiece Theatres"; Edward Sharp, *Chapel of the Dove, Missoula, Montana* (Missoula, 1990); and Cathy Free, "Dead Pigeon Still Star of the Show at Missoula Theatre," *Spokane (WA) Spokesman-Review*, Feb. 21, 1992.

22. In 1980, Sharp and Sias put another screen in the Wilma, known as the Wilma II, a bow to the trend of bland but economically efficient multiplex theatres sweeping the country.

23. The plight of the Wilma Theatre was especially grim between 1988 and 1993. Sharp died in 1993, just weeks after the theatre had been sold to businessman Tracy Blakeslee, best known for his exotica shops in Missoula and Portland, Oregon. A Missoula native, Blakeslee kept the Wilma alive for the community and future generations. See Ginny Merriam, "New Life for the Wilma," *Missoulian*, Dec. 27, 1993; Jim Ludwick, "Wilma Theatre Sells," *Missoulian*, Dec. 4, 1993; and Michele Parente, "Blakeslee Uncensored," OregonLive.com, http://blog.oregonlive.com/atwork/2007/10/past_story_on_tracy_blakeslee.html. In recent decades, the Wilma earned recognition as a historic building and a part of Missoula's historic downtown. See Naylor, *American Picture Palaces*; and United States Department of the Interior National Park Services, "National Register of Historic Places Registration Form," www.historicmissoula.org/Portals/hm/Historic%20Districts/Downtown/Downtown_Nat_Register_Full.pdf.