

WWDHS NEWSLETTER No. 454 Jan 2023– March 2023 ISSN 2207-1016

Meetings: The next meetings will be held on **Monday 20th February 2023:**

Committee meeting at 1.30 p.m.

Special Meeting to discuss the New Constitution at 2.30 p.m.
With **General Meeting** to follow

Venue to be confirmed later

COMMITTEE

President: Geoff Burch; Vice President: Geoff Haddon

Secretary: Margaret Hill; Treasurer: Geoff Burch

Committee: Brian Andrews, Mark Christinson, Leanne Diessel, Craig Dixon, Di Lovett, Peter Morris, Sherry Morris, Margaret Nowlan-Jones Rhonda Reedy, Judy Buik

Our Christmas Party at Okami Japanese Restaurant on 20 November last year was attended by sixteen members and was enjoyed by all. Good food! Good service! Good company! Several members enjoyed our tour of the Museum of the Riverina late last year (November?) and looking forward to having our meetings there in the near future!

HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL MEMBERS

WWDHS Patron: Michael McCormack,
Federal Member for Riverina,

WAGGA WAGGA & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.
PO BOX 90, WAGGA WAGGA. 2650.

President: Geoff Burch Mob. 0417 277 592
Vice-President: Geoff Haddon

See our web site for additional details.

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Committee meetings: 3rd Monday of the month .

General meetings: 3rd Monday of the month .

Annual Subscriptions: Single: \$20, Couple: \$30.
Corporate: \$50. Due by 1st July each year.

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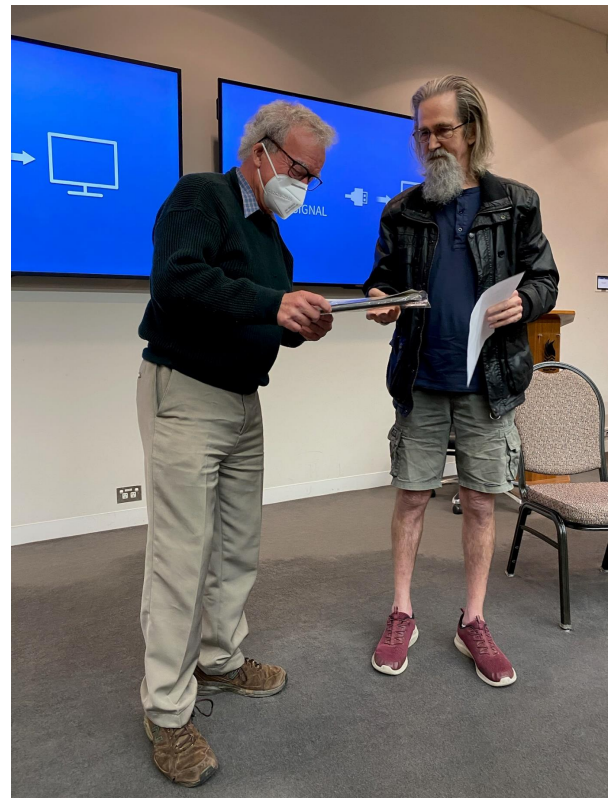
Peter Gissing

On 21 November 2022, Peter Gissing was presented with an Honorary Life Membership. He has been a member of Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society for a long time and is a member of the management committee. He was President of the Society from 2013 to 2017 (apart from 2014) and a Vice-President 2012-2013, 2015-2016; 2018-2019. Peter was instrumental in ensuring the Wagga Newspaper Digitisation Project was successful. The outcome of this early venture is that all available copy of Wagga Wagga's two main papers is available on TROVE. Peter's tenacity, and his influence within the community, were critical in ensuring the project was able to get off the ground.

Peter's contribution to promoting the society and our objectives have been very evident in our online presence, through social media and established media. Peter was prominent in establishing the society's web page, our Facebook page, and other social media such as Twitter. The society's most successful interactions with community in contemporary times are through Facebook.

Peter is also responsible for the weekly articles that appear in the *Daily Advertiser*, under the heading of 25 & 59 Years Ago. Peter laboriously peruses the old newspapers to ensure continuity of these articles, which attract a wide audience, both from the readers of the paper and from the associated online posts. Peter's contribution, in terms of time and commitment, to this publicity are to be commended. The Society is indebted to Peter Gissing for his contribution to our Society and its objectives, and I would ask Peter to accept this award with our sincere thanks and appreciation for all that he has done for the Society.

Presented by President of the Society's President, Geoff Burch



President, Geoff Burch (right) presenting Peter Gissing (left with his Honorary Life Membership).

Members of the Wagga Wagga District Historical Society send our Condolences to Barry Williams and his family on the death of the wife Sonia Williams who passed away peacefully in her sleep on Friday 30th December 2022. She was the mother of Kathleen and Glen and grandmother and great-grandmother of eight children.

The Story of the *CAPITOL* Wagga Wagga's Lost 'Xanadu'

By Stephen Walsh

Wagga's Capitol Theatre was an early casualty of the cinema industries not so golden era and as such was not only a tragic loss of a substantial building for Wagga and the theatre world but it was also robbed of the opportunity for the accreditation and documentation its sister theatre the Plaza has received. Fortunately, due to the important existence of Organizations such as ACTS it can now at least be afforded its rightful place in history. Affection for the Capitol by those who remember it still runs high along with a genuine lamenting of its loss. The Capitol was propelled into its now legendary status courtesy of an unstable beginning, in itself a three-act play, an inviting charisma that one was easily affected by everybody wanting control, but primarily its premature demise. Whether or not the Capitol really was 'all' we remember is probably by now a subject for conjecture but from all press accounts of the period we were told it certainly was going to be!

Prologue

An advertisement in the *Wagga Daily Express* on Saturday November 9 1929, for the opening of Talkies at the Wonderland Theatre lead off with '**SOON :::: SOON :::: SOON**' The Great City of Wagga Wagga will acclaim of having one of AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST THEATRES, THE '**CAPITOL**' The Theatre which will have a 1,000 Wonders in store for you. £42,000 will be spent FOR YOUR ENTERTAINMENT, and under the hands of capable directors every effort will be made so that 'THE CAPITOL WILL BE THE HOME OF HAPPY HOURS' and so it continued. One month later, the press stated work had commenced on the building of the theatre and that the brickwork was to be completed within six weeks with a contractual completion date by 21 December 1930. However, it would be another eleven months before the Capitol would finally open its beveled edge plate glass doors to the public. Even more surprising, was a line in an advance opening advertisement stating that "*within the four walls of the original theatre is being constructed a palatial home for your leisure hours*". What did that mean? Surely the Capitol was the original theatre! Well yes and no, the saga had really started three years earlier.

Act One

By 1928, Wagga's population was nudging towards 11,000 and being halfway between Sydney and [the slightly closer] Melbourne was an ideal Mecca for all sorts of sporting events and amusements. It had been noted in the August press, that '*while Wagga was well catered for in regard to picture entertainment in the spacious Strand and the well-appointed Southern Cross Gardens an actual modern theatre with adequate accommodation both before and behind the stage was an urgent necessity*'. The movement for such a venue emanated from Melbourne and principally by a Mr. George Rupert Kanake recently in Wagga Wagga to see Charlot win the Wagga Cup. Among the promoters was a Mr. R Greenlees, a Returned Soldier, back in Wagga to represent the Melbourne interests and make the various arrangements including '*the procuring of an excellent site, that of the State Stores on the southern side of Gurwood Street, with additional land from a Mr. Kerfoot to be utilized as the exit on the side of T. Edmondson and Co. and a portion for shop purposes there by creating the nucleus of an arcade which would probably extend right through to Johnston Street*'.



Strand Theatre, 1930



Plaza Theatre in Baylis Street

Act Two

Such an ambitious project must have been just that for by the middle of the New Year a dramatically scaled down version along the lines of the new Capitol Theatre Tamworth was now ready to proceed under the direction of a company of shareholders known as Wagga Capitol Ltd. The *Daily Advertiser*, July 18, 1929, stated, *‘Definite word was forthcoming last night that the shareholders in Wagga Capitol Ltd. had decided to proceed with the theatre on the Gurwood Street site. The contract has actually been let to a firm, which has built recently a new theatre in Tamworth. The plans and specifications have been prepared by the architects who designed the State Theatre, Sydney, [in actuality the State, Melbourne] and the Tamworth Theatre. The cost of the building will be in the vicinity of £32,000 and it will have a frontage to Gurwood Street of 76 feet with a 10-foot right of way extending to Johnston Street. Four handsome shops are to be erected on the frontage and the theatre itself will accommodate 1800 persons. Not only will the theatre be suitable for plays and musical comedies but provision is also being made to project ‘talkies’. Mr Kouvelis, who is a big theatre proprietor, having a chain of theatres in country towns in New South Wales has secured a twenty-year lease and it is expected the theatre will be named the Capitol. The Tamworth theatre is a handsome building and accommodates 1200 persons. The contractors have until December 21 next to complete the building and operations are expected to begin within a few days’.* In the interim The Wonderland Theatre which had previously in August been re-launched as a Dance Palais now found itself re-opening again in November as an ‘All Talkie Picture Theatre’ under the expert ‘management of JACK KOUVELIS [Also of ‘THE CAPITOL’ TAMWORTH, ARMIDALE, YOUNG AND YASS]”

Jack Kouvelis [and family], trading under the name of the J K Capitol Theatre Co., had taken a lease on the Wonderland to establish his presence in Wagga pending the construction of the Capitol and establish his presence he set out to do. Press ads urged patrons to ‘Watch this Space’ for news on the construction of the spectacular Capitol Theatre and also for information regarding the Wonderland whose opening talkie attraction would be *‘Innocents of Paris’* direct from the Prince Edward Theatre in Sydney. From all reports one would be forgiven for thinking this was the premiere of talking pictures in Wagga but Wagga Amusements had actually installed talkie equipment at the Strand Theatre to screen the *‘Broadway Melody’* which premiered on September 9 some two months before it gave the Wonderland. It was itself a simple one level brick auditorium off a laneway parallel to Baylis Street and with its entrance verandah actually facing the rear of the Strand, all the status of the major palace the Capitol would ultimately become. The Wonderland opened to a packed house, soon 1,000 up-to-date spring upholstered tip-up seats were installed, and with the box plan open daily at Hunter Bros. Newsagents ‘100% All Talkie’ top quality attractions were presented weekly.

Meanwhile in October Wagga Capitol Ltd., the beneficial owner of the Gurwood Street site had mortgaged the land to the Automobile Finance Co. of Australia Ltd. for £20,000 to be lent for the commencement of the Capitol project. They had also entered into a contract with F. L. Walton Pty. Ltd. of Melbourne, the third firm, to undertake the construction work. Finally, after considerable difficulties and delays and to the relief of the shareholders work did commence on the Capitol on Friday December 6, 1929. The *Daily Advertiser* noted that [the firm] *‘has had wide experience in this class of work. During the last five years, it has constructed 10 theatres, including four for Hoyt’s theatres and two for Union Theatres in Melbourne.’*

For Hoyts the firm has erected the recently completed Regent Theatre Fitzroy, Hoyt's and Union Ltd., Hampton, New Glenhuntly Theatre, and the Gardenvale Theatre; and for Union Theatres, the Western Theatre, Brunswick, and the Burnley Theatre. In the country it has constructed four modern theatres, the Prince Regent, Sale, the Prince Regent, Bairnsdale, and a theatre at Horsham'. It was also noted that the firm had carried out all the necessary alterations for 'talkie' installations in Union Theatres. Then regarding the Wagga project, 'the firm intended to as far as practicable secure local tradesmen and supplies and when construction was in full swing, it was expected that an average of 50 men would be employed'. Welcome news indeed for some of Wagga's unemployed men with Christmas coming on. It was also expected that because the building was finally in the course of construction a share selling campaign would be commenced by the Directors early in the New Year. On January 5, 1930, the new share issue was launched to raise a further needed £10,000 in an offer to 'afford Wagga businessmen an opportunity of investing in large or small parcels of shares' and because a twenty-year lease at an annual rental of £3,500 pounds to an established exhibitor had been secured it was the Director's firm belief that 'it would be a dividend paying proposition immediately the shares were sold'.

January 1930 also heralded the beginning of many dramas that were about to befall the Capitol long before its stage was completed or the screen ever installed, for instance the Wagga branch of the ALP was complaining about Wagga Capitol Ltd. bringing Italians from Melbourne to work on the theatre while so many Wagga men were unemployed. However, by July the directors had more to worry about. With Wagga sliding into the grip of the great depression the share issue may not have been as successful as originally anticipated as Wagga Capitol had now become indebted to F. L. Walton Pty. Ltd. in respect to monies payable [about £7,000] under the contract. To secure payment, a second mortgage was entered into between both parties. Then in December, with the original contractual completion date approaching the first major crack appeared. Wagga Capitol Ltd. suddenly found themselves making urgent application for a court injunction '*forbidding the sale of a picture theatre and land at Wagga*'. The sale was to have been held at Melbourne on Monday December 15 and the action was being brought against F. L. Walton Pty. Ltd., contractors, Sussex Street, Brighton. Apparently on or about November 29 Wagga Capitol had received a notice to pay dated November 26. Walton, assuming they could not, reasoned his only chance of recovering the debt would be to sell the property. However, as the 'second' mortgagee he had no right to do so, particularly as the theatre was subject to a twenty-year lease. Furthermore he was actually criticized for '*not taking proper steps to ensure selling the theatre and shops to the best advantage. It was proposed to sell the property in Melbourne and should not have determined to submit it for auction on the last day for contributing to the Commonwealth Loan*'. An injunction was granted until the following Tuesday to give leave to serve the summons asking for the continuance of the injunction.

All work on the Capitol ground to a halt. By the middle of the cold winter of 1931 and seven months past the original opening date the Capitol's 'restrained classical' facade and internally uncompleted bulk resting silently under its landmark split level 'Igloo Roof' had become a spectacular monument to the doom and misery the depression had brought to Wagga.

The beginning of spring saw the curtain raised well and truly for Wagga Capitol Ltd. when the Automobile Finance Co., the first mortgagee, sort leave to foreclose on the mortgage they held over the theatre. They claimed in the Court of Petty Sessions that they were owed a sum exceeding £19,000 pounds and not only that, Wagga Capitol Ltd. had not paid any money under the securities

but that the first mortgagee [Automobile Finance Co.] had been compelled to spend money in architects' fees, legal expenses, insurance premiums and rates. A witness added that *'the security today was less than that at the time the mortgage was taken. The value today was in his opinion about two-thirds the amount owing. To complete the building for use for its intended purpose would take the best part of £10,000 pounds. The interiors had not been completed nor the furnishing supplied'*. The Applicant [Automobile Finance Co.] believed that unequipped unless by the applicant [them], the theatre would remain empty and the company could obtain foreclosure [anyway]. Richard Blake, an auctioneer on the staff of the Mercantile Land and Finance Co. Ltd., deposed that *'He had a good knowledge of town properties and their value. He had inspected the Capitol Theatre. It was almost 18 months since the building was erected and in that time there had been a considerable fall in land and property values. He did not think there was money available for investment in the theatre at present as a place of entertainment. There was no money in the picture business in Wagga at the present'*. After hearing the evidence, the police magistrate granted the leave sought. This meant that the Automobile Finance Co. had the right to apply to the Supreme Court in equity for an order for foreclosure, which would have the effect of vesting the theatre property in the mortgagee [Automobile Finance Co.] absolutely.

Then on September 12, an article in the *Daily Advertiser* reported under the heading **Capitol Theatre Opening**: *'After a lengthy delay and when there was growing conviction in the public mind that the new Capitol Theatre, in Gurwood Street, was doomed to remain closed for an indefinite period – possibly years – the welcome news breaks that the Theatre will be definitely opened on December 7. It is learned from a reliable source that Mr. Jack Kouvelis who, it will be remembered, opened the Wonderland Theatre as a Talkie Picture Show, has concluded a contract with the Automobile Finance Company of Victoria for a lease of the Capitol Theatre, and that he proposes to spend several thousands of pounds on completion of the interior fittings and furniture of the theatre. The work will be put in hand at a very early date and when completed the Capitol Theatre will be one of the best equipped provincial theatres in Australia capable of projecting pictures or allowing of the presentation of legitimate dramas etc. We learn from the same source that Mr. Kouvelis is negotiating for the purchase of exclusive picture rights of Wagga from Messrs. Smythe Bros of the Strand Theatre. A definite announcement on this point will be made at an early date. It is unfortunate that the original shareholders of the Capitol Theatre Company appear to have lost their investments, but when interviewed yesterday several of those shareholders declared that while it was a financial loss to them they were pleased to know that Wagga was to have a fully equipped theatre'*.

It was good to note the benevolent attitude of some of the shareholders, however, with the Automobile Finance Co. the outright owner of the Capitol now placed Jack Kouvelis in the 'box seat' to payout the mortgage and own the Capitol himself. Also gaining control of the Smythe Bros. interests, who no doubt conceded it would be pointless trying to compete against the Capitol anyway, put him in an extremely powerful not to mention enviable position as a leading independent exhibitor with total control of exhibition in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales' leading country town. With the Capitol's woes seemingly behind it, and now under expert direction, the publicity machine went into orbit! The front page Strand Theatre advertisement in the *Daily Advertiser* at the end of October's headline announced, "AND SOON, PREPARE YOURSELF FOR YOUR BIGGEST THRILL, THE OPENING OF WAGGA'S NEW CAPITOL. *'Within the four walls of the original theatre is being constructed a palatial home for your leisure hours. Every detail is being studied. No expense is being spared to make the Capitol worthy of your town and district. Not a semblance of the*

*original building will remain. Entirely redecorated throughout, sumptuous furnishings and drapings. Soon you will hear the best in motion pictures, recorded with the naturalness of the human voice, in marvelous surroundings, where every consideration has been given to your comfort. **Wagga's Capitol is indescribable. It will be a Revelation, a boom and advertisement for Wagga, the envy of every town in the Commonwealth, a demonstration of our confidence in your town and district**".*

'Not a semblance of the original building will remain' was an over statement, basically designed to distance the theatres 'new' image from the previous board of management and the drama with the builder, but at least the Capitol as we were to know it was finally on its way! The Strand's ad on Wednesday November 25, *Daily Advertiser* front page announced below the Strand's current attraction, Marlene Dietrich in "Dishonored" MONDAY DECEMBER 7 '**Gala Opening of WAGGA'S NEW CAPITOL**'.

Seven weeks ago the intention was to spend £12,000 within the four walls of the original CAPITOL to create a theatre worthy of Wagga. As every day has passed that amount has been added to until it has reached the COLOSSAL AMOUNT OF £16,500. It's impossible to describe the NEW CAPITOL but imagine seating at a cost of £2500s, curtains and drapings at a cost of £1500, fittings and furnishings at a cost of £1500, entirely new decorating scheme at a cost of £2000, rubber carpeting throughout the entire Lounge Circle, Dress Circle and Stall passages at a Cost of £800, additional cooling system, gorgeous and elaborate lighting scheme. Try and Imagine all these things – AND EVEN THEN YOU WILL NOT HAVE THE SLIGHTEST IDEA OF JUST HOW WONDERFUL THIS GORGEOUS THEATRE IS GOING TO BE.

Prepare for the Biggest Shock to Your Imagination When THE CAPITOL OPENS. *Soon we will Open the Box Plan and Remember, despite rumours to the contrary, there is Not One Single Seat Reserved. Neither will there be until the Advertised Time of the [box plan] Opening. Which will be announced as soon as possible. Then the whole of the Dress Circle will be available for reserves to everyone without preference to any person whatever. The stalls cannot be booked, but 1000 stall seats will be available at the theatre on the Opening Night.*

SCALE OF ADMISSION PRICES: 165 LOUNGE CHAIRS AT 3/-; 500 DRESS CIRCLE SEATS at 2/6; 1000 STALL SEATS AT 2/1 and 1/6. Those prices included Admission Tax and Booking Fee. **The Capitol Prosperity Motto: 'Those Who Have Should Spend, so that Those Who Haven't May Earn'- which is the Example set by this Courageous Undertaking'.** Then at last two years and one day later to the day F. L. Walton Pty. Ltd., turned the foundations, the big night came. On the front page of Monday December 7 1931, the *Daily Advertiser* had a large display ad in the Strand's usual spot, a sign of things to come, heralded '**TO-NIGHT ALL ROADS LEAD TO WAGGA'S NEW £50,000 POUND CAPITOL THEATRE. The Capitol Beacon Light will Lead You to the Most Courageous Undertaking in Wagga's History – a Practical Demonstration of Confidence in the Stability of Wagga and District**'.

The Capitol's beacon light supported on '*a tower of sturdy steel posts*' constructed on the apex of the dress circle roof was indeed a landmark that could be seen all over Wagga Wagga including the Tent City of displaced families that had sprung up just over the Murrumbidgee and beckoned to those *with* money to join the excited throng packing into Gurwood Street to snap up one of the 1050 stalls seats on sale at the door or at least be in some way a part of this historic event. Thus the Capitol was

officially opened at 8 o'clock by the Mayor Alderman E. E. Collins with a ninety percent British Australian program which was guaranteed as '*the most entertaining program ever presented to the amusement lovers of Wagga*'. So this is Australia headed the bill with a selection of shorts, musical revues, Fox Australian Movietone News and main attraction, the appropriately titled "Tons of Money" a British Dominion Picture. The opening program was to run until Thursday inclusive with a matinee Thursday at 2.30 o'clock. It was also mentioned in the tiny Strand Theatre ad section that the entire Capitol opening program would be presented at the Strand on the Wednesday night only.



The Capitol Theatre in Gurwood Street

Act Three

On Tuesday December 8, 1931 *The Daily Advertiser* described last night's opening of the Capitol as an '*overwhelming and instantaneous success and the first real stepping stone in Wagga's return to prosperity*'. It exaggerated for publicity original £42,000 price tag back in 1929 had in reality now escalated to £50,000, indeed a colossal amount considering the current circumstances, but the Capitol was open! It was well worth the wait for the fortunate 1645 plus members of the audience who were not disappointed with the Capitols '*dazzling magnificence*' to which Mr. J Kouvelis himself was given full credit '*for his courage and flair for artistic settings which have made possible the creation of an entertainment house unequalled anywhere in Australia*'. In reality fate had directed the combined effort that had created the Capitol's unusual eclectic style.

Oddly, in all the Press Accounts during the project, the architect's name was never mentioned, but it certainly started out as a typical Charles Bohringer design from the trade mark Blue Dutch Tiles on its façade to its Igloo Roof, a style ideally suited to a picture theatre reflecting as it does the typical Hollywood sound stage. The Capitol was a refined version of his by now 'off the rack' styles you could see coming from the **Gardiner Regent, Western Brunswick**, the **Tamworth Capitol** itself and the **Homebush Vogue**. In particular, the latter's gracefully curved proscenium, and all theatres having similar rectangular and square variations on their facades as well as external Bio Cabins above the lounge foyer roof. However, the Capitol's centrally positioned entrance now between two, not four, '*handsome shops*' had escaped Bohringer's usual treatment of a large arch and fanlight, in favour of three pairs of entrance doors that paralleled internally three pairs of stall entrance doors plus an outer pair separated by a square column that lined up with the mezzanine stairs. A roller shutter between the left pair and stairs gave access to a café but was later sealed on the theatre side. A small door under the right stair led to the switch room. The ticket lobby space between the stairs was virtually square and lack of free wall or any space, the foyers only drawback, dictated an island ticket box.

Just how complete the Wagga Capitol's interior was before the rift with the builder is hard to determine, a close examination reveals traces of the Adamesque style of the aforementioned theatres including the foyer's Edwardian style floor laid in small flat white hexagonal tiles with a black tile Greek key pattern border, however, the collapse of Wagga Capitol Ltd, had provided opportunity for a complete change of direction. Now under the control of the lessee the JK Capitol Theatre Co., A.E. Higgins Furnishing Co. Pty. Ltd. 'of the Bungalow', Queens Bridge Melbourne were called in to complete the decorating and furnishing of Wagga's new "*Wonder Theatre*". The popularity of the recently opened Roxy Parramatta and the Sydney Plazas exotic Spanish décor was the inspiration for the Capitol's desperately needed rebirth. It was a clever choice as on second look there is not as much to the Capitol's structural decoration as there originally might have been. Relying heavily on paint and stencil work, the walls were washed in shades of mustard coloured plaster stucco while the foyer ceiling, really the reinforced concrete underside and truss work of the mezzanine was finished and stenciled with similar designs to the city Plaza theatres. Two Spanish style pendants were the main source of illumination along with brass candlelight brackets on pillars, at the commencement of the stairs. These pillars continued up through the mezzanine to support a reinforced concrete truss which itself supported the rear wall of the dress circle. Ascending the solid concrete left hand mezzanine stairs covered in caramel and white marble effect 'rubber carpet' to the first landing, one faced the first of six tall solid brass electroliers with seven candlelights in a curve above a smiling sun god face. Manufactured by Bedford's Ltd of Melbourne they were identical to fixtures in the Palais Theatre St. Kilda. Here to one's right a full size ornately framed mirror of rectangular panels of beveled edge glass cleverly angled to face an identical mirror at the top of the next run of stairs, reflected one's image into infinity.

From here a short flight of stairs through a square arch to the immediate right led to the dress circle and around to the left was the mezzanine promenade, which ran the full width of the building to the same symmetrical arrangement in reverse. The front corners of the building contained the restrooms and the space in between formed the lounge with three pairs of tall elegantly draped windows that overlooked Gurwood Street. The corners each side of the windows featured an L shaped built in ottoman with its wood veneer back inlaid with the theatres insignia sweeping up to a shelf in the

corner on which an electric fan provided relief on Wagga's hot summer nights. Leadlight pendants hung from the stenciled ceiling and four of the spectacular sun god wall fixtures complimented a plethora of guilt-framed mirrors, tapestry covered bench stools and armchairs, occasional tables and smoker's stands. The sum of this 'refined opulence' facing back to a soda fountain counter between the stairwells set the scene for many a social intermission. The auditorium at seventy-one feet wide was perfectly balanced and symmetrical in every detail apart from the backlit clock hanging on the right hand box. A lofty split-level ceiling, whose main treatment over its original Edwardian finish was in multi-coloured stencil work on a background of burnished cream, featured a large cove-lit oval dome over the lounge area. The brick pier wall supports, on which cameos similar to the Gardiner Regent remained, were painted to look like sandstone blocks thus reinforcing their true purpose and giving the theatre its strong look. The five back-lit filigree medallions across the proscenium sounding board giving substance to this area, as if to anchor the ceiling, were nicely counterbalanced by virtually no wall adornment apart from the 'Royal' boxes set against a background of pumpkin coloured stucco. A virtually uninterrupted area led one's eye beyond the simple back-lit filigree proscenium to the stage and screen. The first five rows of the U-shaped balcony made up the lounge circle with 175 well-sprung tip-up lounge chairs while the remaining thirteen rows with 419 quality tip-up chairs completed the dress circle.

French doors under the boxes provided access to backstage and an ornamental balustrade designated an orchestra space although there was no actual recessed pit. Seating in the stalls was laid out in three sections on a well-raked floor all the way to the rear cross over which terminated at the side aisles and rear exits. A door on the left accessed the ladies retiring room built behind the café, and the gents was in the same position behind the right-hand shop only accessed externally from the side laneway. Above, the sweep of the cantilever balcony terminated in walls painted entirely in a 'finished sandstone' block effect either side of it and contained exits, down from the lounge and up several steps to ground level from the front stalls. Behind the filigree wall panels, were wooden roller shutters that could be wound open or closed internally by inserting a crank handle into a key way in the wall. A large exhaust fan in a porthole either side of the theatre drew air off from the back stalls via plaster ceiling grills under the balcony as well as down through floor grills under the dress circle space.

Over flush brass framed ruby glass exit signs hung art nouveau brass lanterns with blue sculptured glass, identical to fixtures in the Newcastle Civic. These remained illuminated at all times and along with concealed aisle lights in the ceiling that could be operated from the usher's station at the right hand circle entrance, lit the patron's path to the exits. Refinements and extra touches as such distinguished a 'palace' from an average country theatre. The strong use of masonry themed designs in autumn tones suggested a solid masculine effect, counterbalanced with the use of brocade and velvet drapery. The most striking feature of the auditorium however was the lighting. With a hint of the new art deco style, vertical columns of half round tin cones with brass filigree trims, mounted one above the other, each reflecting light up from one to the next stepped their way up the wall piers from the lounge to the dress circle exits. These fixtures were also duplicated in the stalls in lots of five and a run of twenty-eight soared up from the front stalls towards the ceiling either side of the balcony. Four large circular ceiling fixtures with four spun aluminum cone style shades, dropping down like stalactites, reflected light up through a large brass medallion in each corner of the ceiling. Three across the rear of the dress circle and a larger one in the center of the dome completed the main source of light. The best type of lighting for theatre auditoriums in a decorative sense is

generally reflected which the Capitol's designers had down to a fine art. The effect of multiple rows of dimly glowing wall columns and pools of ceiling light rising to their mellow brilliance really was stunning. With the acquisition of the Strand nine weeks earlier and the unbridled success of the new Capitol, J. K. had in just over two uneasy years well and truly established his presence in Wagga. The J. K. Capitol Theatre Co. could justify its money well spent as their 'Spanish Castle settled in for a long run, not only as Wagga's but also the entire Riverina and districts' pre-eminent *showplace*. As a 'picture palace', the Capitol with its corps of smartly attired well-mannered attendants was indeed handsome but as far as being the promised '*best equipped theatre*' behind the footlights, it was still basic.

The flat stage, about 26 feet deep although with a generous proscenium opening of 36 feet was flanked either side by a dressing room with an ensuite toilet to cater for performers. There was no fly loft; instead, tracks in the floor enabled the screen to be rolled to the rear for stage presentations that included a live pageant in 1932 to celebrate the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge by a local drama group. Also re-enacted on the Capitol's stage was the epic trip by Sir Charles Kingsford Smith from London to Sydney. A major highlight was in 1945 when the famous Jack Davey bought his troupe of Radio Quizmasters to Wagga and the Capitol was '*packed to overflowing.*'

In 1947, Hoyt's acquired the entire J. K. Capitol Theatre Co. of nine theatres in six inland towns including the Wagga Capitol and Plaza, thus forming the nucleus of Hoyts Country Theatres Pty. Ltd. of which J. K. Kouvelis remained a director until 1958 and E. B. and B. M. Kouvelis until 1960.



Hoyts Theatre, Baylis Street, Wagga Wagga

1954 was a busy year for the Capitol which commenced with the theatre being suitably decorated for the Queen's visit to Wagga [Legend has it the wall cones were re-lamped in alternating red, white and blue, imagine the sight!] Then in readiness for the arrival of Cinemascope, the auditorium was given a streamlining with the removal of all excess décor including the ornate orchestra pit balustrade and the Appliqué and Tassels on the Proscenium's Valance. The gold velvet exit curtains were 'de-braided' and dyed Royal Blue to match the leatherette seat upholstery. The glass backlit clock survived and new 'tangerine' velvet travelers with bright gold fringe installed to 'protect' the new 'Miracle Mirror' screen. The Capitol was set to continue as Wagga's favorite '*home of happy hours*' presenting first release cinemascope attractions in its 'subdued' splendour.

Then on June 19, 1964, entertainment for the '*amusement loving people of Wagga*' changed forever when the local television station RVN2 commenced transmission. Broadcasting in limited hour from 4pm daily [mid-day on Wednesday] until approximately 11pm had people riveted to their sets for fear of missing something, whilst the Capitol, which during the early depression had struggled hard for its very existence would always be there, somebody else would surely be going! Twenty weeks later without any fuss the 'Hoyts Guide to Better Movies' in a Monday edition of the *Daily Advertiser* advised patrons in a type set line at the bottom of the Capitol's ad that "*as from next Friday the Capitol Theatre will open on Fridays and Saturdays Only, with a Special Children's Matinee every Saturday Afternoon*".

With the Plaza, the still relatively new Sturt Drive-In and now Television all competing for a limited audience, the Capitol was selected to go and the countdown had begun! The following Saturday's Hoyts directory led off with a large artwork block for *Exodus* [an almost cynically appropriate title] at the Plaza in the Capitol's usual spot and the Capitol had 'sunk' below the Drive-In with *We Joined The Navy*'. Four months after that with winter fast approaching, it happened! A short article in the *Daily Advertiser* on April 9 under the heading **CAPITOL TO CLOSE AFTER 33 YEARS** detailed the grim future of the theatre that had once had 1000 wonders in store for us. '*The Wagga manager of Hoyts Theatres Mr. N. J. Kitney, said yesterday the decision to close the theatre had been made by Hoyts Head Office in Sydney. He said the theatre was 'probably closed for good'. Mr. Kitney said he didn't know yet whether any decision had been made yet to sell the theatre*'. The article continued with a brief history.

On Saturday, April 10, 1965 the Capitol's ad announced 'Last night tonight at 7.45 'Apache Rifles' G plus 'The legion's Last Patrol' A, then at the bottom **PATRONS PLEASE NOTE AFTER THE FINAL SCREENING TONIGHT THE CAPITOL THEATRE WILL BE CLOSED.**' And it was! Without fanfare, it's towering blue and white vertical neon name was switched off forever! For the next few weeks, the Capitol sat in the autumn sun in its own stunned silence just as it had once done in the winter of 1931. If it had been blessed with the back stage facilities bestowed on the recently completed Civic Theatre then Wagga would have had the '*actual Modern Theatre with adequate accommodation both before and behind the stage*' that was such an '*urgent necessity*' in 1928. Unfortunately it was not, instead its '*dazzling magnificence*' that had delighted thousands for decades was suddenly now considered out of date, so the Capitol's projection equipment was removed and sent to Hoyt's stores in Sydney and the seats, and lounge furniture to the Plaza for storage. The Commercial Club a block further west on fashionable Gurwood Street purchased the six 'Sun God' fixtures for their new dining room but nobody was really that interested in much else. Rumours abounded that the theatre had been sold to Coles however the Capitol served out the next

three years as storage for its neighbour, T Edmondson & Co., whilst they rebuilt a modern department store in stages. In December 1969 the Capitol turned forty and with its grand proscenium valance and cone light fixtures all still in place could still summon enough magic to excite, but life wasn't about to begin. It was officially announced that Coles *had* bought the site and that of the Southern Riverina County Council building, the former 'Glamis Court' arcade, next door for a large one level fully 'Air-conditioned' New World Supermarket. Demolition of both properties, permanently extinguishing the Capitol's hovering threat to 'Wagga's exhibition monopoly' was to begin early the following year once the Southern Riverina County Council had vacated for their new building [behind the Capitol] in Johnston Street where the proposed arcade of Mr. Greenlees original project had been planned.

Epilogue

Whelan the Wrecker won a six-week contract to demolish the theatre and Swanson Bros. of Sydney the adjoining arcade. The Capitol that had been built by a Melbourne firm and decorated by one was now going to be demolished by one. January 1970 saw the theatre café closed and with passive acceptance, the Capitol's final show began! A few weeks later on a hot afternoon as I was filming on 8mm the theatre and its remaining contents becoming land fill for the Wagga tip, a vision of my first Capitol experience as a *far too* impressionable kid, drifted to mind. As I sat in a comfortably oversized chair in the cool safety of the lounge [an upgrade my candy bar allowance subsidized] and the supporting attraction concluded, the proscenium surround came to life with a soft twilight glow as silently out of the darkness, either side of it appeared the edges of the tangerine velvet traveler. Then just a faint glow from the footlights illuminated the gold fringe as each side snaked its way [courtesy of a chain weighted helm] towards each other. The top of the curtain led the charge to the centre and met first [as the pictures end credit faded] stopping abruptly causing the bottom halves caught in the momentum of the fringe's weight to swing silently across one another, swish back, swing forward, then back, then in the amber glow of the footlights, rippled to a stop.....as its momentum ran out. **Vale Capitol.**



Capitol Theatre on the right next to Edmondsons, Gurwood Street