

TEXAS-STYLE CLIFFHANGER

Dallas group seeks happy ending in battle to save landmark theater

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DALLAS — What can you say about a 59-year-old movie theater that died? That it outlived its usefulness? That it should have gone multiscreen? That no one would care if not for the capture of Lee Harvey Oswald in the darkness of its back rows? Once, the Texas Theatre was a show-place. Palatial, elegant, not quite ostentatious.

"It was an architectural work of art," says John Rowley, whose father owned the Texas in the 1930s.

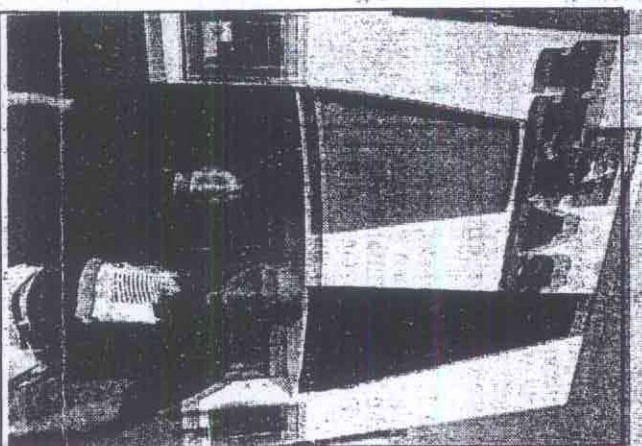
Today, stripped of its marquee and the neon stars that spelled T-E-X-A-S, its Renaissance motif lies hidden behind a tawdry stucco facade. If a theater could show embarrassment, the Texas would blush.

A subsidiary of a company owned by Howard Hughes opened the 2,000-seat Texas on April 21, 1931. Crowds of 7,000 turned out on a Tuesday for the first performances of *Parlor, Bedroom and Bath* starring Buster Keaton.

An organist, a Mickey Mouse cartoon and a Movietone Newsreel were included in the price of admission — 10 cents for children, 25 cents for adults attending the matinee, a dime more for the evening show.

Those kids grew up, met at the Texas on weekends, kissed in the balcony, married and brought their kids to the theater. Images of Bogart, Cagney, Gable, Monroe, Cooper, Stewart, Newman, Redford, Fonda and Streep flickered on the screen while outside the neighborhood changed.

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Photos by David Sams
Warren Burroughs and his wife are trying to save the Texas Theatre.

The last picture show



Warren Burroughs sits where Lee Harvey Oswald was found after shooting President Kennedy and a Dallas officer.

Theater

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Jefferson Boulevard, once *the* business district of southwest Dallas, lost out to suburban malls. The Texas Theatre became an anachronism.

The theater was closed Dec. 31, 1989, by United Artists, its owner. The seating had been rearranged through the years. Restrooms, cry rooms, offices and concession stands came and went.

The Texas could have accommodated 1,350 people for its final double feature — *Old Gringo* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

Far fewer attended.

On the day the Texas opened, the United States was suffering through the Great Depression and President Hoover was railing against a Nicaraguan rebel named Augusto Sandino, who fought the U.S. Marine occupation of his country.

On the day the Texas closed, the United States was edging closer to recession and President Bush was questioning whether an ambassador of Nicaragua's Sandinista government really needed all the weapons confiscated by the U.S. strike force that invaded Panama.

Life cycles; history repeats.
The Texas Theatre lived.
The Texas Theatre died.
Friends wondered if the Texas Theatre could live again.

Day that lived in infamy

If everyone remembers where they were on Nov. 22, 1963, Warren Burroughs has more vivid recollections than most.

Just 22 years old, Burroughs was the theater's jack of all trades. He

ushered, took tickets, sold popcorn — whatever needed to be done.

On Nov. 22, the candy counter needed to be stocked for the weekend and he had come in at noon to take care of the chore.

News that shots had been fired at President Kennedy's motorcade came to him from a transistor radio. But the theater was open and there was a 1 o'clock matinee and the candy had to be stocked, so Burroughs went about his task.

"I heard the door, but by the time I got to the front whoever it was had already gone upstairs," he remembers.

Finding the gate crasher would have meant abandoning the candy counter. He didn't bother.

"There were only 18 people in the theater," Burroughs said. "That's where Oswald was fooled. He thought there'd be a lot of people."

Police came in minutes later looking for the man who had fatally shot officer J.D. Tippett a few blocks up Jefferson.

"They went upstairs looking for him," Burroughs said. "He came down the back stairs and sat in the third row, fifth seat."

Burroughs heard a man yell: "I guess this is it." A .38-caliber snub-nosed pistol fell to the floor. Police dragged Oswald into the lobby.

"He was yelling, 'I demand my rights,' and 'Police brutality,'" Burroughs recalled.

Two days later Oswald was dead. Before long, the Texas was dying.

No longer economical

Billionaire Howard Hughes owned the Texas for only a year before selling it back to the partnership that included John Rowley's father. United Artists joined the partnership in the 1950s, Rowley recalled, and moved his father to New York.

The younger Rowley ended up in charge of UA's Southwest district, which included the Texas.

"With the changes in our industry



David Sams / Special to the Chronicle

Warren Burroughs strolls through the lobby of the Texas Theatre with his wife, Maxine. Burroughs worked at the theater when Lee Harvey Oswald came rushing in Nov. 22, 1963. "There were only 18 people in the theater. That's where Oswald was fooled. He thought there'd be a lot of people." Police nabbed Oswald a few minutes later. "He was yelling, 'I demand my rights,' and 'Police brutality,'" Burroughs recalls.

and modernization there came a period of time when multiplex theaters — four, five, six and eight plexes — became the economically successful way to operate theaters," Rowley explained last week.

"Single theaters became uneconomical 20 or 25 years ago," he said. "We only kept the Texas alive, so to speak, economically by going to the bargain admission. It lasted another 10 years that way. Time marches on."

Burroughs' wife, Maxine, was the manager of the Texas when UA ordered it closed.

"I've shed a lot of tears," she said. "We were like a big family. It was very sad for all of us. I worked there for 11 years and my husband had been there for 27 years . . ."

"A lot of people don't realize the significance it's played in the community other than it's the theater where Oswald was caught."

UA moved Maxine Burroughs to another theater. Warren Burroughs retired. Rowley took a consultancy

with UA. Movie patrons found the malls. Business being business, UA Realty Inc., put the idle Texas on the market for \$300,000.

No one expected another movie to be shown there.

Other old theaters in the area had closed or been converted to gospel missions.

But those old theaters had never matched the grandeur of the Texas. They never were neighborhood institutions. They may have had customers, but they did not have family. The Texas did. And does.

And in a rush of sentiment over economics, the Texas Theatre's family decided to save it.

\$800 makes difference

Last Monday was the latest of the financial deadlines that have terrorized members of the Texas Theatre Historical Society.

UA Realty had given the society every opportunity — price breaks, donations, deadline extensions. This

time, \$10,000 was due by the end of the business day. This was the escrow money that would buy time to raise the \$150,000 that was the balance due on the reduced-price theater.

If they ever gained title, society members would have to raise thousands of dollars more to restore the Texas.

Dennis Hamilton, founder of the non-profit society and himself the son of a former manager of the Texas; the Burroughs; and their friends were \$800 short.

You want to know how this turns out? Well, how would Hollywood have handled it? How would it have played on the screen at the Texas?

Bobby Goldstein, a Houston native, who quit practicing law in Dallas in order to become an investor, heard about the deadline and the deficit.

Goldstein *always* has fancied himself to be ideally suited for the entertainment business. "It's in my blood," he says. In reality, it's never been closer than his fantasies.

Goldstein had never been to the Texas Theatre. He had never been to its Oak Cliff neighborhood. But, hey, the Texas is show biz — or was, or could be — and he always wanted to be a show biz kind of guy. So he picked up the telephone and called until he found someone who would accept his \$800 donation.

"I couldn't imagine anybody going to so much effort and getting so close and not being able to ring the bell," he said.

And that, as the narrator of the Saturday morning serials used to say, got our heroes out of that jam.

But no cinematic serial star ever survived one calamity without soon facing another. In this case, half of the balance on the purchase price is due Nov. 1.

In almost a year, friends of the Texas have raised \$15,000. Hamilton is a hospital electrician. Warren Burroughs is disabled by a degenerative muscle disease. His wife was disabled by an accident. Like many

other members of the society, they are people of aspiration and perspiration but not of wealth or fundraising sophistication.

They sit with Pam Mount, another society member, in the office of the Texas most afternoons talking about sugar daddies — big Hollywood stars or producers or directors who might pour \$50,000 into the project. They talk about finding deep-pocketed donors outside Dallas and beyond Texas and how good everyone will feel when the Texas is saved.



Hamilton

"The people who are involved in trying to make this an historical site are partly motivated by sentiment," says Rowley. "As far as the people who own the property are concerned, they're headquartered in Denver. They have a business to run. They're a public company and they have stockholders they're obligated to . . .



Mount

"There's no room for sentiment in business. Sentiment in this instance is an expensive item. You have to have an individual who has a lot of money *and* sentiment, and we don't have that set of circumstances."

A few checks trickle in.

A few callers offer encouragement.

The Nov. 1 deadline approaches.

The theater is eerily dark.