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'Going to keep going for generations': Barrington's historic Catlow Theater sold to new owner



The Catlow theater in downtown Barrington, which has been closed since March 2020, has been sold to a new owner. It's gotten a little income through its message board.

(Paul Valade | Staff Photographer)



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Barrington's historic Catlow Theater, with roots that reach back to the dawn of the talkies, could find new life under new ownership.

Tim O'Connor, who owned the Catlow for 41 years, said Thursday that he sold the iconic venue to Barrington store owner Brian Long, a Barrington resident and owner of Long & Co. Jewelers on Main Street.

"I had asked him if he would be interested in becoming an investor to help me pay back taxes, because we haven't been doing any business the last two years," O'Connor said. "He said, 'Better than that. I'd like to buy it.'"

Long, who was unavailable for comment, has been a big supporter of the theater, O'Connor said. He said the future of the theater could involve movies or music.

"My main concern with selling the theater was that somebody would keep it as the Catlow," he said. "We had planned on maybe putting live music in there and maybe showing movies at the same time. He seems to be on board with it. This is going to keep going for generations."

The theater first opened under the ownership of Wright Catlow on May 28, 1927, in the waning days of silent films and the dawn of the sound era. The theater originally had both movies and vaudeville.

During its early days, the Catlow was the scene of many memorable events.

When news about the bombing of Pearl Harbor was released, Wright Catlow pulled the curtains shut, turned off the projector and sent customers home.

The Catlow hosted the popular radio show "The National Barn Dance." Western movie star Gene Autry also appeared there. Both were popular attractions for the local farming community.

O'Connor -- who owned a sandwich shop, Boloney's, next door -- and his late partner, Roberta Rapata, bought the theater from Ed Skeehan, who had bought the theater in 1960.

"I had always wanted to own a movie theater," O'Connor said. "And we asked the owner, if he ever decided to sell it, let us know. And he did."

Patrons could buy food at the sandwich shop and take it into the movie theater.

O'Connor said another feature he added later was asking customers to vote on which movies they wanted to see.

For many years, the Catlow was a popular and affordable option for moviegoers.

"When we first opened, the average price for a movie was \$4.50 if you went to Woodfield," he said. "We charged \$2."

O'Connor said the theater created a niche between the first-run and subrun theaters.

"We did very well. We had lines around the block. We would have to turn away 300 people on the weekends, because all the seats were full," O'Connor said. "And that's how we found out where our customer base was from, because they would go, 'Oh, we drove all the way from Arlington Heights' or 'I drove all the way from Crystal Lake.'"

The theater adapted to the new standard for digital projection, starting a successful Kickstarter campaign in 2012 to acquire the necessary equipment.

The goal of \$100,000 was met within seven days, and people were asking what else the theater would need.

But the theater fell on hard times even before the pandemic.

Rapata died in August 2016, and O'Connor closed Boloney's and opened the Showtime Eatery.

"It just wasn't the same without Roberta's involvement," he said.

Then the theater was shuttered by the pandemic in March 2020, and the Village of Barrington kept the theater closed because it didn't meet fire code standards last year.

O'Connor recently acquired an associate partner, Cindi Williams. He said Williams came up with the idea of putting up messages on the marquee, a source of income while the theater was closed.

"People have proposed on the marquee," he said. "And on the days when we don't have it filled, she'll come up with an inspirational message."

But economics tipped the scales in favor of a change in ownership.

"I didn't have any money left, so I decided to sell," O'Connor said.

O'Connor said the sale is "bittersweet" for him.

"It was like our child," he said. "It was our whole life. And then when Roberta passed away, it just was getting harder and harder. It wasn't the same.

"I'm glad Brian's going in. He's younger. He and his son (Brenton) are already in there working on it, cleaning it up. I think that the town's going to be happy that they are going to bring new life into it."

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