

THE HISTORIC AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ALASKA

By Grant Callow



1947

The fact that Cap Lathrop began building the Fourth Avenue Theatre at age 76, and completed it at age 82, reflects his extraordinary vision, dedication, and hope for the future of Alaska.

It is important because, probably more than any building then built, the Fourth Avenue Theatre symbolized and announced to the world that Anchorage had become a major U.S. city north of the 60th parallel, a city that in the fast-developing era of aviation was destined to become an international hub for air travel between Europe and Asia and a strategic location for the development of major U.S. military bases.

It is important because of its prominent place in the cultural and architectural history of the United States and, in particular, the cultural and architectural history of the great era of cinema. Movies and movie theaters were important cultural phenomena of the first half of the 20th Century. Along with the development and proliferation of the telephone, the electric light, the automobile, and aviation, movies and movie theaters were a key part of the rural to urban movement in the U.S. during that time. Movie theaters helped draw Americans from the countryside into towns and cities. The movies opened peoples' eyes to things they might have never seen nor even imagined, expanding their view of the world and, in the process, expanding their imaginations.

“Going to the movies” became a cultural event and for many was a kind of magical experience. As the movie industry grew and its technology developed to create what became known as the Golden Age of Hollywood, the experience of going to the movies changed as well. Local movie theaters ceased being old dance halls with temporary screens and chairs.

The Fourth Avenue Theatre is of great and unique importance to the historic and cultural heritage of Alaska and the United States for many reasons.

It is important because of the man who built it—Austin E. “Cap” Lathrop, often called the “Father of Modern Alaska”—and the prominent role he played in transforming the settlements of Alaska into modern towns and cities with thriving, diverse economies.

It is important because of Lathrop’s purpose in building that kind of grand building in Alaska at that particular time—an elegant and extravagant building of modern American design, decorated with world-class murals by world-class muralists depicting the natural beauty, the natural resources, the industrial progress and the promise of the future of Alaska. It was risky to build such a large, elegant and expensive 1,000-seat theater in a town of about 10,000 residents.

Proper movie theaters began being built in towns and cities throughout the country—cinemas designed specifically to present the new 20th Century art form. Cinema architects, designers and entrepreneurs understood that watching movies could be a magical, transformative experience. To that end, they sought to make the theater itself part of that experience, building grander and more elegant cinemas referred to as “movie palaces,” often giving them grand names like “The Coliseum,” a place for spectacular events, and “The Orpheum,” named after the Orpheus of Greek myth whose performances were so spellbinding that they even mesmerized the gods.

The Fourth Avenue Theatre is important as the leading example of such a cinema, the only one like it in Alaska.