

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES: THE OWOSSO CAPITOL THEATER

The Capitol Theater in Owosso, Michigan was constructed in 1926 as a vaudeville theater and has lived a life of performance, community involvement, culture, worship, destruction, and rebirth. The now Joseph H. Lebowsky Center was nearly lost to a suspected arson fire in 2007 but has been rebuilt to previous external architectural standards in 2014. In 1986, the Lebowsky Center was added to the Michigan State Register of Historic Places by its then owner, the Christian Independent Fellowship, Inc. Owosso's downtown historic district was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 2014, with the theater as a major part of its application process. This document will explore what already exists in regards to the process of adding the theater itself to the National Register, with the intention of completing the process with the Lebowsky's current owners, the Owosso Community Players.

Act I: The Capitol Theater and Joseph H. Lebowsky Center

The story of the Lebowsky Center in Owosso starts not with its opening night of March 4th 1926, but in April of 1925 with the sale of the city's old City Hall to prominent merchant Joseph H. Lebowsky. Newspaper reports from the city commission meeting state that the transaction was made for \$25,000 cash, and that "Mr. Lebowski [sic] will wreck the structure and build on the site a modern theater, to be leased by the Bijou Theatrical Enterprises, better known as the Butterfield interests."¹ It was also noted that the site was attractive to Lebowsky due to its location on the corner of Main and Park streets, allowing for abundant parking space. In a particular bit of irony, Lebowsky is quoted in the *Owosso Argus-Press* article as suggesting that the new theater would be fireproof. In a second bit of irony, the tenant of the Old City Hall that was to be evicted as a result of the transaction was Owosso's fire department.

¹ "Old City Hall Sold to J.H. Lebowski By Commission." *Owosso Argus-Press*, April 14, 1925.

Before progressing with the tale of the building constructed by Joseph H. Lebowsky, we should first spend time discussing the man himself. A Russian Orthodox Jew, Lebowsky's father (a man who was impressed into and survived the Russian-Turkish wars) sent his oldest son to America rather than see him enlisted to fight in the Russo-Japanese War. Lebowsky (born August 15, 1883) was smuggled across the Austrian border, placed on a ship in Germany, and processed at Ellis Island in 1904. Relocated to Owosso, Michigan, he found work in a tailor's shop while he paid the chattel mortgage and immigration fee required of him. Lebowsky's father was a tailor himself and Joseph apprenticed for six years prior to being sent to the United States.

Upon paying his debts, Lebowsky opened his own clothing store, which was popular with the railroad, automotive, and stove workers in the area, providing him with financial stability and the means to bring the rest of his family, parents and siblings, to Owosso with him. A respected and well-liked man, Lebowsky was invited to participate in real estate, which he took a keen liking to and widened his influence in Owosso's West Town district during the 1910s and 20s. It is then in 1925 that Lebowsky made the decision to buy Owosso's old City Hall and replace it with a theater to be operated by vaudeville impresario Col. Walter S. Butterfield, a proposition that he felt would be both financially lucrative and a cultural boon to the neighborhood.²

The story of Joseph H. Lebowsky is one well-known in Americana: an immigrant, sent to America at a young age with nothing to his name but determination, making a name for himself and succeeding at improving his community. His legacy would be memorialized in 1990 when his descendants (having re-translated the family name from Lebowski to Lebowsky) offered the funding to the Owosso Community Players to acquire the theater their grandfather built seventy years prior.

² "New Theater is Monument to Joe Lebowski, Immigrant." *Owosso Argus-Press*, March 9, 1926.

Three months after Lebowsky purchased the old City Hall from the City of Owosso, the fire department finally vacated (due to a delay with their new home) and demolition work could begin.³ The building \$50,000 permit fee was by itself the equivalent to one-quarter the entire amount raised by the City of Owosso in 1925.⁴ Lebowsky used theater designer and architect George J. Bachmann on the project. Bachmann's previous work had resulted in theaters throughout the State of Michigan.⁵ Included in Bachmann's design were cushioned seats for 1,140 people, a full "lamp house" projection room deemed fireproof, opulent smoking and lounge rooms, and "six boxes, decorated with plush drapes, and from which a splendid view may be had."⁶ By November, the external structure and roof were completed, and the theater's pipe organ, deemed a "monster" by the Owosso Argus-Press, was installed. Further, the first production to take the stage was chosen: *Abie's Irish Rose*, which had played six successful months at Butterfield's theater in Detroit.⁷ W.S. Butterfield, operator of the soon to be completed Capitol, was a twenty-year vaudeville veteran, owning and operating more than fifty theaters throughout Michigan. In most cities where vaudeville was offered, it was pioneered by Butterfield and was commonly the first available venue for motion pictures as well.⁸

The Capitol Theater opened on Thursday, March 4, 1926, three weeks behind schedule. Contrary to earlier reports, *Abie's Irish Rose* was not the opening act, instead replaced by vaudeville routines of the Keith Circuit, orchestra, vocal, and pipe organ music, and comedic "kinograms," or photos displayed on the theater's movie screen with live music and voice acting. The crowd was so eager to enter the theater on opening night that the crush of people broke a

³ "Fire Department Deserts Historic Station for New." *Owosso Argus-Press*, July 10, 1925.

⁴ "Building Permits in July Amount to \$63,640 in Owosso." *Owosso Argus-Press*, September 10, 1925.

⁵ "Opening Program." Capitol Theater, Owosso Michigan. March 4, 1926.

⁶ "Open New Theater Thursday, March 4 Plan of Manager." *Owosso Argus-Press*. February 26, 1926.

⁷ "Abie's Irish Rose Coming to Capital [sic]." *Owosso Argus-Press*. November 19, 1925.

⁸ "Capitol Opening is Near Butterfield's 20th Anniversary." *Owosso Argus-Press*, March 2, 1926.

glass window in the entrance.⁹ The addition of the theater was a rousing success for Lebowsky and Butterfield and a phenomenon that delighted the people of Owosso like Fred Zimmerman, who recounts a typical experience in his autobiography:

“But the new Capitol Theater soon became our movie hangout because it offered more entertainment, first for having a fabulous six-manual theater organ with which the audience, before the movie began, was treated to at least a fifteen-minute concert played by a talented organist. Then following the movie, the screen would be lifted out of sight and the curtain would open onto a stage of vaudeville performances. Three or more acts would feature song-and-dance teams, magicians, comic skits, acrobats, trained animals, and so on.”¹⁰

Big-time theater had come to Owosso, and the opulent Capitol Theater would be a point of pride for decades to come.

Vaudeville as a predominant form of entertainment quickly waned in the tastes of Americans, and as such so did it decline at the Capitol Theater. The theater quickly transitioned to stage plays, music acts, and of course, films. The films made from the stories of James Oliver Curwood, Owosso’s most well-known author, were special events at the Capitol. The entryway to the building would be redecorated to look like a log cabin for each grand premiere, such as for 1945’s *Northwest Trail*.¹¹ The theater upgraded its marquee and projection facilities to account for its life as a movie house in 1952, where it remained as such until its closure in 1984.¹² The theater, still owned by the Lebowsky family, sold it to the Christian Independent Fellowship Church in 1985, who then renamed it the then “Joseph H. Lebowsky Center,” having yet to

⁹ “Capitol is Jammed on Opening Night, Program Pleases.” *Owosso Argus-Press*, March 5, 1926.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, Fred R. *Destiny and Decision: The Molding of a Minister in the Twentieth Century*. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2013: 50-51.

¹¹ “Photograph of Capitol Theater Decorated for Northwest Trail Premiere.” Photograph, c.1945. Electronic. <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/4138/photos/136190>

¹² Douglass, James F. Michigan Department of State. Michigan History Division. Form MH-86. *Building – Structure Inventory Form* for Joseph H. Lebowsky Center, Owosso, Michigan. May 20, 1986.

discover the proper translation of their family name.¹³ It was then that James Douglass, pastor of the church, applied to have it added to the Michigan Register of Historic Places.

The State Register contains plenty of information that is useful for an attempt to gain entrance onto the National Register. All of the basic identification information is present: The building name (and any historic names it may have had), its physical address and owner, its uses, both historic and current, and its accessibility to the public are all intact on Form MH-86 from the Michigan Department of State's History Division. Further information includes a physical description of the building, denoting its brick exterior with iron frame, it's (at the time) fair but deteriorating condition, and its original site integrity. The note about its 1952 remodel is also present, including the name of the remodeling architect: C. Howard Crane & Associates of Detroit. Its use as a commercial building is included alongside a hand-drawn map of Park and Main streets in Owosso with a Polaroid photo of the building as it was in 1986 included. Also included was the note that the original rigging, backdrops, and light panels were still inside the building at the time of its application. The final section of the application, relating to its significance, discusses the date of construction, its architect, and information relating to the contractors that helped complete the structure. Below that is the historical significance of the site to the Owosso area. The application was submitted to the State of Michigan on May 20, 1986.¹⁴ Nearly seven months later, the Michigan Historical Commission informed Christian Independent Fellowship, Inc. that the Capitol Theater was listed on the State Register.

¹³ Harrelson, Helen. *Souvenir of Owosso, Michigan: 150 Years of Owosso Highlights, 1836-1986*. Owosso, Michigan: Locally Published, 1986: 67.

¹⁴ Douglass, p. 1-2.

Act II: Completing the National Register of Historic Places Application

Before digging into the NRHP Application, the remainder of the Capitol Theater's story must be told. The Christian Independent Fellowship Church lasted only four years in the old theater. Meanwhile, the Owosso Community Players, who had performed so many times on its stage, mounted a bid to acquire the theater. The Lebowsky family once again came through, helping the OCP purchase the structure. Armed with the knowledge of the proper spelling of the family name, the Center replaced the letter I for a Y in 1990, and resumed holding stage productions inside.¹⁵ This remained the case for the next seventeen years until a disastrous arson fire completely gutted the theater (despite its claims as fire-proof,) destroying two exterior walls and so much of the interior that the building was feared a total loss. At great effort and cost to the community, the funding was raised through state grants and loans to restore the external structure to its 1952 condition, with the exception of a digital marquee designed to look like the original.¹⁶ The interior, however, was completely modernized for the present-day demands of stage lighting, rigging, and seating.¹⁷ The Lebowsky Center reopened triumphantly in 2014, right as Owosso's Downtown Historic District was finalizing its own application to the NRHP.

The Downtown Historic District was added to the NRHP in 2014, with the Lebowsky Center as part of more than 110 structures comprising everything from domestic structures to a literal armory and everything in between. Much like the 1986 State Register application, there is plenty of information that can be used on a potential individual application to the NRHP. In addition to information already mentioned, the Owosso DHD application mentions specifics

¹⁵ Christensen, Robert O., Elaine H. Robinson, and Shelley Greene. U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service, NPS form 10-900. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for Owosso Downtown Historic District, Owosso, Michigan. PDF.

¹⁶ Ridley, Gary. "Lebowsky Center bids finalized, construction upcoming." *Owosso Argus-Press*, April 8, 2010. Accessed February 3, 2017. http://www.argus-press.com/news_local_top/article_0f9ac5cf-b26c-5f29-bd47-42173d236d7d.html.

¹⁷ Christensen, Robinson, and Greene, p. 26.

about the exterior of the structure, from the “red-brown brick walls and cream-color terra-cotta trim” to the “shallow-pitched front gable roof” and “four lion heads spaced out near the center.”¹⁸ The main concern regarding the choice of the theater for this project was in its lack of strict authenticity due to the rebuild after the fire, but the Owosso DHD was added to the NRHP without issue, despite openly discussing the fire and reconstruction on the form.¹⁹ Also included in the Owosso DHD application is a representative photograph of the current exterior of the Center.²⁰

Because the application for a district is different from that of a single individual property, a recently completed local application of one structure is of great help. Lincoln School, still in use as an Alternative High School in Owosso, was approved for the NRHP in 2016. One particular point of interest for the NRHP application is that the form must be prepared by a Historic Architect before it is submitted to the State Historic Preservation Office for consideration. In the case of Lincoln School, the form was prepared by Heather DeKorte, a Historic Architect out of Grand Rapids.²¹ Acknowledging that the following information is, then, purely theoretical (though it is intended to be submitted to the Owosso Community Players to do with what they will,) the remainder of this paper will be written as a more or less straight-forward response to the format of the form, using NPS Form 10-900 as a guide.²²

The first section relates to the name of the property, which is the Capitol Theater. The Joseph H. Lebowsky Center is then inputted into the entry for “Other names/site number.”

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 25-26.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 141.

²¹ DeKorte, Heather. U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service, NPS form 10-900. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for Lincoln School, Owosso, Michigan. PDF. Retrieved from State of Michigan, Lansing, MI. March 28, 2016. https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mshda/mshda_shpo_20160427_nr_lincoln_school_522935_7.pdf

²² U.S. Department of the Interior. National Park Service, NPS form 10-900. National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. Microsoft Word File. Retrieved from National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/nr/publications/downloads/2012_10-900_final.doc

Because it is not part of a related multiple property listing, “N/A” is to be used for any entry that the theater does not apply to. Section two relates to the location, which is 122-124 East Main Street, Owosso, Michigan, in Shiawassee County, Zip Code 48867. Section three is designated for the certifying official from the State of Michigan that would either nominate or refuse to nominate the property for addition to the National Register. That individual must determine whether the theater meets the National Register’s criteria, as listed in the Code of Federal Regulations Title 36, Part 60.²³ If the certifying official believed the site belonged on the National Register, they would then sign and date the first page of the form. The Keeper of the Register then marks their certified action and signs the form.

The next section deals with the classification of the property. Ownership of the theater is private, and as mentioned previously it is a single contributing building. Because it is already on the National Register as part of the Owosso DHD, it should be counted as one in the number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register. Question six relates to the building’s function, which was and is “Entertainment/Theater.” Section seven is the descriptor information. Architecturally, it is a Neoclassical, commercial brick structure, made primarily out of brick and terra-cotta. Following this section is a summary paragraph of the physical appearance of the site, which would necessarily contain much of the material previously found on the State and National Register applications that preceded it. Information of particular interest would relate to its architectural style, its square footage, its retention of historical appearance, and its specially chosen site by Lebowsky in 1925. This information would then be elaborated upon in a longer-form narrative description, including in addition to what has been previously discussed internal dimensions and any retrofits, such as the digital marquee.

²³ "36 CFR 60.4 - Criteria for evaluation." LII / Legal Information Institute. Accessed April 9, 2017. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/36/60.4>.

The next section, a statement of significance, addresses the criteria previously mentioned. In the case of the Lebowsky Center, the site appears to satisfy three of the four criteria: (a), that it is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history (the rise of vaudeville and motion picture as cultural phenomena, as well as the rise of live-action entertainment in Owosso in particular,) (b), that it is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past (Joseph H. Lebowsky,) and (c), that it embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, represents the work of a master, possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction (a Neoclassical architectural live-action theater from the mid-1920s.) It would not, however, satisfy (d), as it does not yield information important in prehistory or history. Because it appears to satisfy the criteria on its own merits, it does not need to address any of the considerations the National Register can grant properties and sites that would not ordinarily qualify. The next aspect is a discussion of its significance. The theater's areas and dates of significance are in Entertainment and Architecture between 1926 and 1984, with 1926 a significant date of note. Joseph H. Lebowsky is a significant person (as stated earlier,) with George J. Bachmann recalled from previous notes as the architect of record. Following this, as with the descriptor summary and narrative, are areas to fill in summary and narrative paragraphs for the significance of the theater, of which this paper has demonstrated. This section also requires a full bibliography.

Section 10 requires latitude and longitudinal coordinates for the site, which are 42.997240 latitude by -84.169613 longitude, and a verbal boundary description of the property, including alleys, boundaries, lots, and additions. Accompanying this information should be USGS maps of Owosso and the Lebowsky's lot, as well as photos of the façade of the structure

from all directions. The Photo Log should also contain physical data on the photos, such as where the photos were taken, where the original data files are stored, and their photographer. Each photo should be captioned with what the photo is taken of, as well as what direction the camera is facing. The document is then certified and signed by the historical architect contracted to compile the information.

The Lebowsky Center was chosen in part because the non-profit that owns and operates it, the Owosso Community Players, is a fellow member of Historic Shiawassee, a collaborative group that promotes fellow historic sites and museums, and shares academic data. This project was completed with the collaborative efforts of most other members of the group, from the director and researchers at the Shiawassee District Libraries in Owosso and Durand, the Shiawassee County Historical Society, the museum housed within James Oliver Curwood's former castle-esque writing studio, and, of course, the Owosso Community Players themselves, who do not have much of their own original history left after the 2007 fire. The information regarding Owosso DHD's application came directly from a member of Historic Shiawassee who helped build the information from her position at the Shiawassee Arts Center. Whether the theater ever actually ends up on the National Register of Historic Places is frankly beside the point. The effort of all the aforementioned groups to combine resources to help their fellow historians and build a narrative package for one of their own is a massive success, and shows the true value of historic preservation.

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