

Twenty-year-old Brian Thompson remembers it was hunting season when the Rialto burned. On the evening of Saturday, November 4, 2006, at his family's hunting camp, he climbed a hill for cell reception and called a friend—who turned out to be on Main Street with the rest of Deer Lodge, watching the town's historic theater burn. Soon, a photo arrived on Brian's phone, or his family wouldn't have believed him.

Similar pictures were zinging around the state and country. At his niece's volleyball tournament in Missoula, people kept showing them to Steve Owens. Soon enough Owens, president of the Rialto's board, saw the fire with his own eyes. "It burned for days, and thoroughly," Owens says, pointing to a picture of the ornate old lobby's concession area, where the fire, cause still unknown, started. It traveled up a nearby ramp to the floors above to rain down flames and burning debris from the attic. An asbestos fire curtain meant to save audiences from stage fires worked the other way around, protecting the stage and the theater's historic painted backdrops. Similarly, super-thick walls for containing fire—from the days when film was flammable—saved the projection booth at the back of the auditorium. ▶



Encore

Performance

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY JEREMY LURGIO

Community effort is bringing the Rialto Theatre in Deer Lodge back to life

Steve Owens walks down the street in front of the historic Rialto Theatre.

‘Theaters take you to another level.
They’re a sophisticated place to go.
They’re next to a church, they’re awe-inspiring.
You have a more civilized town when you have a theater.’

Cindy Holst, Deer Lodge music teacher

The local sawmill lent its boom truck; from its cherry picker bucket, the volunteer fire departments of Deer Lodge, Garrison and Racetrack poured water down into the now roofless structure, managing to save the theater’s walls and the buildings on both sides. The town kept its vigil. Fourteen-year-old Matt Blair remembers, “People cried on each other’s shoulders.” Deer Lodge hardware store owner Ron Mjelde, a long-time Rialto volunteer who was on his way to open the theater when the fire started, recalls one onlooker saying, “There should be enough tears here to put that fire out.”

Townsppeople weren’t crying because the Rialto was beautiful and had graced downtown Deer Lodge since 1921, though both were true. The Beaux-Arts-style façade, which survived the fire, boasts gleaming terracotta tiles, elegant globe lights, oval windows, bas relief and columns. Harold Hansen, who built it, owned several other theaters in town but wanted a showpiece. Film was replacing live theater as entertainment, but a line of antique tomato seeds along the bottom of one backdrop attests to some vaudeville shows in the theater’s past.

Explaining their bond with the Rialto, townspeople young and old pause and begin, “Well, you know, we bought it.” In 1995, the old movie theater came up for sale. Rumor had it that a casino was ready to pounce. At lunch one day, some residents who had just participated in a community focus group in Deer Lodge began tossing around the idea of turning the Rialto into a nonprofit community-owned theater. They offered the Hansens \$65,000. The family accepted, but required the money in one month. A scramble began. With five days to go, the community of about 5,000 still hadn’t raised it.

That’s the moment says Cindy Holst, Deer Lodge’s K-8 music teacher, that explains not just what the Rialto means to Deer Lodge, but also why they decided to

rebuild after the fire, and why they will succeed even though the cost is huge.

“We cut up the phone book,” Holst says. “We gave all the teachers a section and called everyone in Deer Lodge. We said, whatever you can give, it would really help.” They netted \$80,800. “The theater really does belong to everyone.”

“After we bought it,” Holst continues, “everyone cleaned it. It was filthy dirty”—the couple who had owned it was elderly and couldn’t keep up. Everyone from “little old ladies” to the football team to Park Service employees from the local Grant-Kohrs Ranch scrubbed floors and seats. “There was no hot water,” mortician Lee Jewell remembers. “We got it at the bars.”

Later, 300 volunteers coordinated ticket-taking, ushering and popcorn making at a full schedule of school concerts and performances, community events and movies. Nimble kids like Ron Mjelde’s changed the marquee. “They climbed out the office window with a bucket of letters,” the store owner says, “changed one side, then crawled underneath and did the other. It was so much fun in the rain.” Meanwhile, Steve Owens and the Rialto board kept raising money for improvements. They repaired and restored the theater, from new sound systems and lights to carpet and a boiler. It took 11 years and about \$350,000.

Parents may have paid for it, but Deer Lodge kids felt ownership for the Rialto too. Even in the age of video games, the Rialto was their gathering space. Brian Thompson, now in college, remembers the awe of being onstage in school productions and the pleasures of seeing affordable movies. He saw *Titanic* at the Rialto; Matt Blair especially remembers his first Harry Potter movie. Continues Blair, “At the Rialto, I could relax and hang out with my friends. It had a diverse popularity, not just with ▶



Steve Owens, president of the Rialto Theatre board, and Gayle Mizner, board member, sit in two of the newly acquired seats that will eventually fill the newly remodeled Rialto Theatre. Mizner’s great-grandmother moved to Deer Lodge and lived in the building next door to the theater. Her family spans six generations in Deer Lodge. Owens’ dad was born in Deer Lodge in 1920.



The fireproof curtain between the auditorium and the stage helped stop the 2006 fire from burning the back stage area and the five original 1921 backdrops that were part of the Twin City Scenic Company Collection. There are still tomato seeds stuck to one of the backdrops left over from vaudeville days.

kids. No one wanted to vandalize or ruin it. We respected and loved it. We miss it. We've got to get it back."

The morning after the fire, the Rialto board met. "We never questioned whether to rebuild," Mjelde says. "We wanted it exactly as it was." The price tag, they learned, would be \$3.5 million. Insurance payments totaled \$308,278.

That same day, unbidden, someone created a Rialto website. In another blink of an eye, junior high students donated \$300 from a bake sale. Four years later, money raised by Deer Lodge kids alone totals close to \$20,000. "It's very encouraging," Steve Owens says. A Deer Lodge native and pharmacy tech who first fundraised for his high school prom in the 1970s, Owens relentlessly identifies potential donors and foundations, writes proposals and churns out reports. During school reunions, he tours alumni through the theater. A retired chef in

town has spearheaded three elegant dinners for 200, netting \$50,000 per event. Twice, Mjelde, Matt Blair and others have made their case before the Montana legislature in Helena, and twice they have returned with money. As of this writing, Deer Lodge residents have about \$2.8 million of the \$3.5 million the Rialto needs.

The theater can't be exactly like it was. Rebuilt so much from scratch, it now must conform to building codes. There are good things about this—more bathrooms, for example, and better handicap-accessibility. In addition, there's been room for improvements—insulation in all the walls, efficient radiant heat in the floors, a utility tunnel for access under the floor. If movies go digital, the Rialto is ready. And volunteers no longer have to climb a wall-mounted ladder into the fly loft over the stage or dangle from a rope to change bulbs in the chandelier. Backstage, there's now a staircase, and the new auditorium light

fixture can be lowered. The remodel's architect, Nathan Blanding, grew up in Deer Lodge and studied theater; he thought to hide theater-light panels as well as air-circulation ducts in what had been a purely decorative motif on the ceiling.

Engineers, contractors and the Rialto board constantly brainstormed ways to save money. They cut \$300,000 by using trusses for the balcony instead of a steel beam; they built a platform to work on the ceiling, then reused all the materials in the platform; they punched a door in one wall for truck access, which saved on pumping cement. The contractor, Bozeman-based Martel Construction, agreed to collaborate with a weekly crew of locals, leaving labor-intensive tasks for them to finish. Martel's project superintendent John Beck went above and beyond when he rescued a discarded satellite dish and a utility sink from an alley for the theater. The satellite dish, transformed by turquoise and gold paint, is the perfect replacement for the original dome in the ceiling.

Owens didn't cry when the building burned—"There wasn't time"—but attempting to list some of the thousands of ways people have contributed to reviving the Rialto—from the elderly couple who set aside \$20 a month for the theater, to the grandmother who brings the work crew cookies and also maintains the Rialto website, to the newcomer who sweeps up every Monday after the crew, to the kids who raise money by selling cookie dough

and candles—chokes him up.

Brian Thompson, a history major at Montana State University, has learned "there really is strength in numbers. It took the whole town and more."

Walk into the theater now and there are no seats, but the risers for them are ready and waiting. Smooth concrete surfaces, dust-covered, call softly for paint. Outlets are working in raw holes cut in the walls. Plugged into them, powerful construction lights glow like large candles in the cavernous space. Cords crisscross everywhere. A big plastic sheet hangs over the stage. But it's still a stage, breathtaking, inviting. You have a primal urge to get up there and dance, sing, declaim. What will happen there? The possibilities are endless—but you want to stay to see it.

That's at this writing. But just like the fundraising, Rialto rebuilding progresses constantly. It may be finished by the time this article comes out. Music teacher Cindy Holst sure hopes so. She's retiring in the spring of 2011 and hankers to see the kids perform there again before she goes.

"Theaters take you to another level," Holst muses. "They're a sophisticated place to go. They're next to a church, they're awe-inspiring. You have a more civilized town when you have a theater." ■

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