

# IT WAS THE LARGEST THEATER IN NORTHWEST COLORADO, THE CHIEF THEATER.

BY SUSAN BETTGER,  
SUSAN MEYER



In the fall of 1986 the Village Theater in downtown Steamboat Springs closed during the slow season in Steamboat. Where were we going to go on our dates? We were pleased to find out that the renovation of the theater was going to be short. When it opened December 19th it was renamed the Chief Plaza.

Susan and I wanted to do a story on the theater from day one. We were glad to find out a story had already been started by Paul Van Horn. When we found this out, we were bound and determined to do a story.

Paul Van Horn graduated in 1984. He interviewed Verna Myers and George Fick. We finished the story by interviewing Mike Barry, who is the owner of the theater.

Paul Van Horn starts the story off: As a kid growing up in Steamboat, the theaters have always had a place in my life. My father, Bob Van Horn, has managed both the Village and Time Square Cinemas since 1973. I have always been especially fascinated with the downtown theater in particular; the old Indian paintings and the sheer size of the building portray a sense of majesty not found in modern movie theaters. Then I began hearing stories about the old Chief Theater. The facts were never all there, so in an effort to learn what the Chief Theater was really like, I bought a ticket to memory lane in the form of a tape recorder and set up an interview with long-time theater employee, Verna Myers.

Verna remembered the theater vividly and provided me with a wealth of information. "The theater itself was built by Harry Gordon. He was an Indian that struck it rich in tin in Oklahoma. He married a lady from this country."

Paul goes on: From court house records and through a substantial amount of old copies of the *Pilot*, I discovered that Harry Gordon purchased the building from Mark Schafermeyer in 1926 for



**"I HAD NO ACTIVE INTEREST IN THEATERS UNTIL 1964, WHEN I PURCHASED THE CHIEF THEATER."**

\$25,000. The original building was very large, 50' X 140'. Gordon put A.E. Gumprecht in charge of construction, and in 1927, Steamboat Springs became the proud host to the largest theater in Northwest Colorado. The theater had a capacity of 500 people and had all of the most modern equipment. Harry Gordon sold the theater and building to John Grieve in 1936.

Mr. Grieve was the owner when Verna Myers began working there in the early 1950's. Verna told us what the theater was like back then. "At the time I knew it, it was a movie theater and a stage. A lot of people rented the theater just to use the stage. Down on the right hand side there was an orchestra pit with a player piano. They played it before the movie; that was their music. They just pedaled it, and then we had different rolls with different songs on them. It was a beautiful thing. Not only was the piano beautiful, but the interior decor of the theater was something to behold."

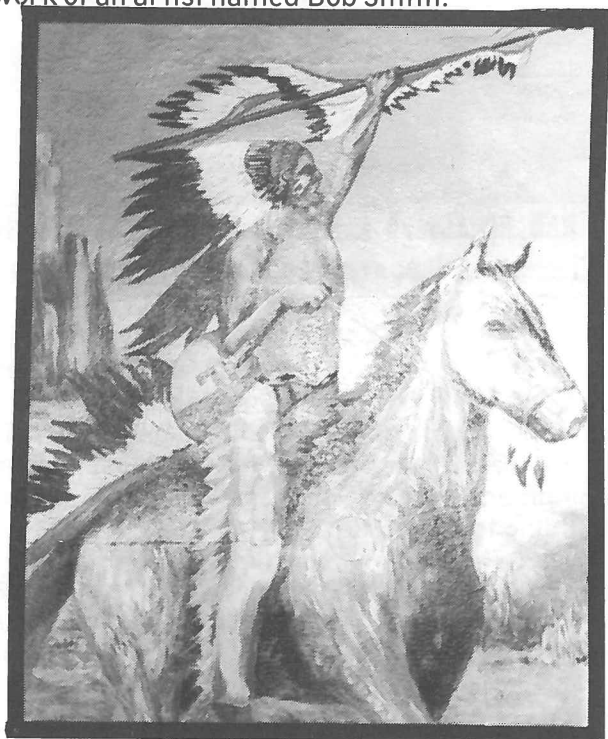
As Verna remembers, "It had really expensive carpeting that would last forever. The carpet was real dark red, like it used to be in the old opera houses, with a yellow floral design. It was really pretty, but it got paint splotches all over it, and they took it up and put down cheaper carpet, but it was still expensive.

"We also had curtains, big thick curtains that were one-half inch thick. Up in front we had big blue ones; then in back we had heavy gray ones with all Indian figures, and they came from New Mexico. They were real Indian drapes.

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"In the lobby, the concession stand was straight back. It was called the 'Kiva,' and in Indian that meant the meeting place. Where the concession stand is now, was a mural that pictured an Indian maiden with a herd of sheep; on the other side was an Indian brave on a spotted pony in a desert scene. It was the full length of the lobby."

Paul took up his story again: Upon further investigation, I discovered that the paintings in the auditorium were even more spectacular than those in the lobby. Measuring 12'x13' each, there were four scenes; one depicted an Indian woman doing beadwork, the second showed two Indians engaged in a snake ritual, in the third a plains Indian was hunting, and in the last two, masked southwestern Indians were engaged in a tribal dance. These magnificent paintings were the work of an artist named Bob Smith.



**THESE TWO OLD INDIAN PAINTINGS...PORTRAY A SENSE OF MAJESTY NOT FOUND IN MODERN MOVIE THEATERS."**

Verna remembered where the idea for the paintings originated. "That was in New Mexico where the original pictures were. At one time I had a **National Geographic** magazine, and it had everyone of those original paintings in it. They were just exactly like the ones on the wall. Bob went down to New Mexico and just sketched them off of the original paintings. He must have had a machine that enlarged them to put them up on the wall because they were perfect.

"Complementing the paintings were a complete array of authentic Indian symbols painted on the ceiling and on the top of the walls. In the corner there were Indian signs like the Thunderbird; they were in every corner. Every one of them meant something; they were about eight inches in size."



Verna makes us aware that the interior has received changes and so has the exterior. "At the time I worked there, the place where you sell tickets (box office) was out on the street, and then on each side we had glass cases that opened up, and you put great big posters in there. We also had signs out on the street, boards on the street with the marquee. Up on top of the theater was an electric chieftain in full feather head-dress; it was colored, and it flashed, and you could see it from both ends of town."

George Fick describes the changes that have been made in the theater. "The old chief sign was designed to bring people into the theater, and in an effort to bring in even more business, the management came up with some interesting promotions. The merchants would pay for a movie to get the country people to come into town. And then I remember one year that we turned live turkeys loose from the top of the building on Thanksgiving Day to get the farmers into town. Then another time we turned a greased pig loose in the street to get them in. We had what we called family night, no matter how many kids you had, they all got in for a certain price. You had to prove that they were yours, but that was all. We had a money night where we gave a slip of paper with each ticket that had your name and a number on it. We had a drawing, and if nobody drew it, why, it kept building up until someone did win. We did everything to get people in.

"I guess my interest in theaters began at an early age. When I was 16 years old I got a job



operating the movie projectors at the old Alden Theater owned by Alden Wessels, an early day Civil Engineer. The projectors in this theater were the type for the silent screen movie with captions printed in. My three brothers and I ran these machines for a number of years. The highlight of my experience was running the second Dempsey-Tunney prize fight. It may be interesting to note that Bill Allen's Men's Store had been the Alden Theater, and the old projection room is still in the apartment above.

"I was operating the projectors at the time Harry Gordon was building the present day Village Theater, then called the Chief Theater. Mr. and Mrs. Wessels were very concerned that they would not be able to compete with the 'newfangled talking projectors,' since they had just remodeled at considerable expense for those days. I remember talking to them about the problem and trying to comfort them, saying that it would not last, but I knew it was the coming thing. The Alden Theater only lasted a short time after that.

"I had no active interest in theaters until 1964, when I purchased the Chief Theater. I had considered purchasing the theater earlier, but the time just did not seem right. Television had a devastating effect on theaters all over the nation,

and most of them had not recovered. I did, however, maintain an interest and felt that if the Yampa Valley College and skiing would progress, the theater could become sound. Both of these did happen, and I was able to purchase at the low point.

"I bought the theater from John Grieve who had bought it from Harry Gordon. I was also fortunate that Mr. Grieve trusted me with a payment plan that would enable me to pay it off and later loaned me the money to remodel.

"The remodeling included a new front in the Alpine motif which resulted in a name change to the Village Theater. The entire lobby plus the box office and refreshment stands were changed. New carpeting was installed in the lobby as well as the auditorium. The entire auditorium was cleaned and repainted except for the four murals on the walls that depicted Indians in various costumes and dances. Even though these did not complement the new image, I just could not paint over them."

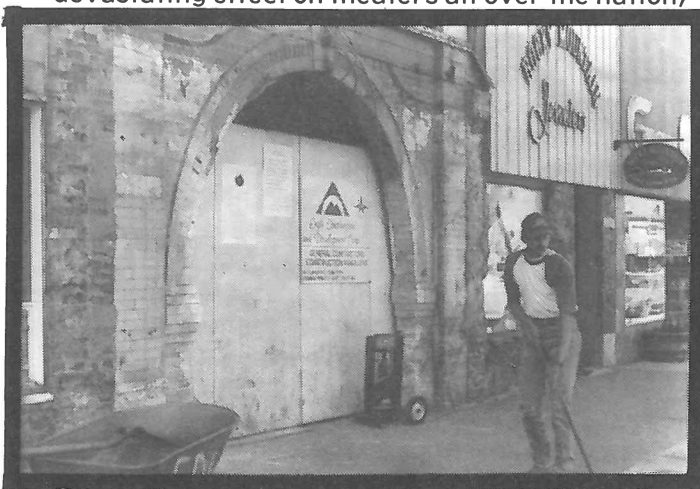
To find out more about the renovation, I (Susan Bettger) talked to Mike Barry. Mike started his story with a little history on the Gordon family.



**"THE FRONT PORTION WHICH REALLY MADE UP THE OLD LOBBY, HAD BEEN THE FIRST 30 FEET OF A LIVERY STABLE."**

"The Gordon family ended up in Oklahoma, and as luck would have it, the land that they were on turned out to be very rich in tin deposits. A mining company bought the rights on it, and the Gordon family and some other families became extremely wealthy. Harry Gordon, at the time, was then quite well-educated, as were all of his brothers and sisters. He ended up in North Dakota where he married an Irish lady, and they really enjoyed Steamboat Springs and the Yampa Valley. One of their children was born in Meeker, and they traveled to Steamboat many times in the summer and finally moved to Steamboat Springs in 1921.

"Mr. Gordon built the Chief Theater, which is really a unique building which was two



**"THE REMODELING INCLUDED A NEW FRONT."**

buildings; the auditorium portion was added on to the great big part in the back in 1922. I think that the front portion, which really made up the old lobby, had been the front 30 feet of a livery stable. That lovely arch, that is shown there, would be the big livery door."

Mike told me a little about the film process; it's something that is not talked about much. I found it very interesting. "Films were made with a process using silver nitrate, and it is extremely flammable. Probably in science class you have burned a little piece of magnesium; it just flares with a bright hot light, so the projection booths of that day were built like bunkers. The one at this theater was one foot thick solid concrete; it had little metal doors where the projectionist would look out. They were held up, when I bought the theater, with little pieces of lead, so that if it would catch on fire the poor guy who was in there would be disintegrated, and the heat would melt the lead, the little doors would come down, and the audience would then be protected. All the fire would be confined in the cell. Early in September these big machines knocked down this enormous vault." (This was done to renovate the theater.)

Mike told us how he ended up in Steamboat and bought the theater. Mike had an interesting life before he started the theater business. He tells us a little bit about what he did before he got started in the theater business, and how he got started in it.

"I was in business in Michigan with a company that is well know today, Amway Corporation. I joined them and was their national sales manager, and then decided I wanted to go out West. I took my car, rented a house, and started skiing in Winter Park. I went to all the ski areas

and came through Steamboat Springs, and it was just so apparent to me that Steamboat was going to do really well. It was a neat mountain town and had neat people.

"I was at the movie one night and thought this would be a terrific business to get into. I could ski all day and run movies at night. George Fick was close to retirement, and he wanted to move to Arizona. I asked him if he would consider selling his theater; that was in late December of 1969. The next day he gave me the figures on it. I took them on my trip, and I wired him an offer from Sun Valley where I was at that time in January, 1970. George accepted it, and I took over the



**SUSAN BETTGER AND MS. MARTI WHEN THEY WERE INTERVIEWING MIKE BARRY ABOUT THE THEATER.**

Village Theater August 1, 1970. The first movie was **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.**"

Mike told us about how George got the name of the theater. George held a city-wide contest to name the theater, and that's when he took down the old facade and put up the new clapboard kind of Nordic, Scandinavian style facade.

Mike sold the theater in 1978 and had to take it back in March, 1986. The remodeling started in the fall of 1986.

Our perception of the Chief Plaza, once it was remodeled, is that it was an aesthetic improvement! The new complex has two small theaters, each with about 100 seats. We asked Mike why he came up with the idea of a smaller seating capacity for the theater. "I would say that you would never use 400 seats; you would never fill up unless you had one special movie or something like that. On a single show, about 70 percent of our audiences are within 100. So we will make up for the occasions when we have 300 a show by doing multiple showings, and during ski season we are going to experiment by doing

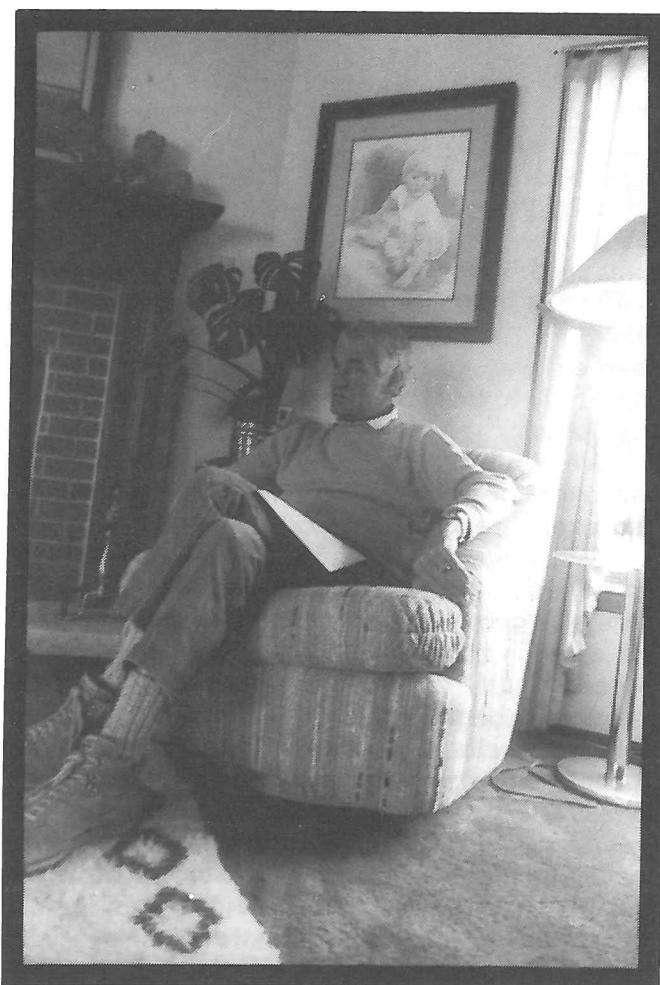


**"THE OLD CHIEF SIGN WAS DESIGNED TO BRING PEOPLE IN."**



four showings a day in each theater. We will start by having a 2:00 matinee, then we will have a pause, and then start at 5:00 or 5:30 and do a series of three movies or three showings of the same movies: one at 5:30, one at a quarter to 7:00, and one at 8:45. This will give people a lot of options as far as what time they can attend. They won't all have to show up at one time, and I think that overall that will work out a whole lot better. The price will remain the same; the only deviation that I could conceive would be on an awfully big movie where the price to me is real high. A lot of people don't understand the industry; the profit is made in the concession stands between the costs and what you have left over. The price can be as high as 90 percent on the price of a ticket after an allowance for overhead. For example, if you average 75 percent of that as going to the film company, I am only making \$1.25 to cover all of our overhead and \$3.75, unfortunately, is going to Paramount Pictures. It was a totally different industry in 1978. At that time, there were no video rentals or H.B.O. cable hookups like there are now.

"We used to play nine or ten different movies in Steamboat per week. We would run three different movies a week at 7:00, three at 9:00, and then three entirely different ones out at the mountain. We did that by bringing back films over and over again. Now those films go on H.B.O., Cinemax, and the video market. So the secret now in the film business is to get a film just as quickly as you can, because basically, you'll get only one run out of it. Depending on what they have done, you might get another run out of it. The only reason a small town like this can do good film business is because of our tourist population. I am going to have the movie **Star Trek IV** for three weeks and the **Color of Money** simultaneously. People come here at Christmas time and stay for two weeks, and my



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thought is to run the one film through that whole period (**Star Trek IV**), and then to get perhaps three or four movies and run them for four day stretches in the second theater. Then there would be more options for people here. We will get **Crocodile Dundee**, and it depends on whether they will let me have other films by the dates I've requested them for a four day run."

Mike then described what was being done to remodel the theater. "The front will be brick and Colorado sandstone. The awnings over the windows of the two, street-facing, shops will be a turquoise color with violet or purple pin striping. Inside, Irene Nelson is doing all of the decorating for me; the interior is in art-deco. The mall-way will all be a tile mosaic using a coral, blue, and beige tile pattern. There will also be a display case, and each month we are going to feature a Routt County artist that is working here. We will have sculptures and posters just as kind of an eye catcher that will induce people to come in. There are two large sky lights in the internal mall; we will have benches so people can sit there. The theater will be different colors, and we will run carpet in the center aisle in a decorator print. On each side, the carpet will run



**"THE BEST ADVERTISING IS THE MARQUEE."**

four feet up the wall, and on the walls will be a curtain material. One theater is turquoise color, the other one is a grape color. There will be ceiling lighting which will wash down on those curtains. The screen will be a floating screen; there will not be a curtain that opens and closes. It will be of a design so it doesn't look like it's attached. The speakers will be behind it, and we will have a state-of-the-art stereo system in both theaters. The screens will be smaller than the screen was in the old theater, but proportionately to the size of the room it will be quite a bit larger. It will be surrounded with sound. There will be three big voice-of-the-theater-speakers behind each screen, then there will be speakers in each corner and along the walls.

"We have new seats. The seats will be staggered, and it's also ramped; the side lines are all figured out. It's sloped downward; there is about a three foot drop. You are restricted because of the handicap rules as to how steep the ramp can be. We are right to the max. The seats are arranged so that you are able to look between people, and also with the sloping, you are able to see over the person in front of you to see the whole screen.

"We tried to return the theater, as much as possible, to what it used to look like, in the beginning. We started calling it the Chief Plaza because of the exterior. There is a great crafts-person that just came to town who does work called marblizing. It's just fascinating; she will take wood and paint it. The end result is it looks like a piece of marble. What we are going to have her do is wainscot along here and some of the same treatment around the windows. There are archs right here, and they will be done in a



**"THE REMODELING INCLUDED A NEW FRONT."**

marblizing technique that will make them look like marble. At the very end of the concession counter are the ladies' room and gentlemen's room and two small theaters. We are not going to have the same stuff in our stand; candy is not a good concession item. It's hard to keep fresh, and it just doesn't sell. Pop and popcorn are good sellers. In addition, we are going to have nachos and pretzels, and maybe something else."

The outlook of the new theater is fantastic; it enhances the looks of the downtown area. It displays features returning it to its original theme of the "Chief Theater."



**THE CHIEF PLAZA  
DISPLAYS FEATURES  
RETURNING IT TO ITS  
ORIGINAL THEME OF  
THE "CHIEF THEATER."**