



The hit Broadway play, "The Bat" was the first live play at the Avalon on Jan. 10, 1923.



Mary Pickford's film, "Tess of the Storm Country," began a two-day run at the Avalon on Jan. 8, 1923.



Douglas Fairbanks' take on the Robin Hood tale arrived at the Avalon in March, 1923.

# AVALON THEATRE *100 years ago*

## *Concerts, movies, plays and presentations highlighted first year*

On Monday, January 8, 1923, area residents could pay 40 cents apiece (10 cents for children) to watch Mary Pickford in the film, "Tess of the Storm Country," at Grand Junction's highly touted new theater called "Oda-roloc."

Whoops. Wait a minute. The Oda-roloc (Colorado spelled backward) wasn't the name chosen for the new edifice, although it could have been. Out of more than 500 names suggested, the Grand Junction Theatre Co. chose the name, "Avalon" in April, 1922. Kathryn J. Forrest won \$10 for suggesting the chosen name.

Avalon was derived from the Welsh word for apple, The Daily

Sentinel wrote on April 14, 1922, in announcing the selected name. "The New International Encyclopedia calls Avalon 'The Land of the Blessed, an earthly paradise in the western seas,'" the paper added.

The Grand Junction Theatre Company was formed in January 1922, at the urging of Sentinel Publisher Walter Walker. But Walker was just one of the prominent names in the original charter of the company. Others involved were: William Moyer, President; James Rankin; Ollie Bannister, and Clyde Biggs. Walker was listed as vice president and general manager of the soon-to-be-built theater.

The first order of business was to get investors to purchase stock to help fund the project, and stock sales began immediately. By March 24, 1922, the company was three-quarters of the way to its initial goal. It had sold \$74,500 of the \$100,000 in stock it hoped to sell. Most of that came from Grand Junction residents, but investors also came from across the county. They purchased lots of stock ranging from \$100 to \$5,000.

Next, a site had to be chosen for the new building. That was accomplished on Feb. 28, 1922, when James Nelson and A.C. Milne sold several lots to the theatre company for \$11,000. They were reported as being be-

tween Sixth Street and Seventh Street on Main Street.

Across Main Street from that lot was land on which The Sentinel was building its new office and print shop.

The directors of the Grand Junction Theatre Company had plenty of names to choose from in early 1922 with the naming contest. There were theater standards such as the Strand, the Regent, and the Tivoli. There were

less familiar suggestions such as the Harmonic, the Community, the Rothwell and the Magic.

There were a number of suggestions to name it after people: the Roosevelt, the Caruso, the Walker (after Walter Walker) and Chipeta's Teapey. Because Chief Ouray's widow Chipeta, a Ute leader in her own right, was still alive and visited Grand Junction at least once a year, the suggestion made sense, even if the spelling did not. The Oda-roloc was suggested by someone named T.W. Rowe.

By the time the theater opened on Jan. 5, 1923, there was no question what the name was. "Avalon" was literally chiseled in stone above the building's entrance.

That first night, the 1,500-seat theater was filled nearly to capacity to hear songstress Lucy Gates, a recording star who sang opera and popular music. A native of St. George, Utah,



Gates was one of Brigham Young's many grandchildren.

Sentinel reporter and columnist Merle McClintock called Gates "one of the most famous and most gifted, as well as the most gracious of the concert artists of today."

Three nights later the Avalon showed Pickford's "Tess of the Storm Country," which was actually a 1922 remake of a 1914 Pickford film of the same name. In it, Pickford played the poor-but-plucky daughter of a squatter who lived on land owned by a wealthy man who was trying to run off the squatters.

Then, on Jan. 10, it was the first live theater production at the Avalon, the comedy-mystery play called "The Bat," which had successful runs on Broadway and London before taking to the road.

However, it wasn't just films, concerts and plays at the Avalon. One of the most intriguing early offerings occurred on Feb. 20, 1923, when famed gorilla hunter Carl Akeley appeared, told of his three trips to Africa to hunt gorillas and presented short films showing gorillas in the wild.

Akeley's methods may be appealing to 21st century readers. He killed gorillas for display in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. But he was also a conservationist in the Theodore Roosevelt mold. He helped convince King Albert of Belgium to create a national

park in the Belgian Congo to preserve gorilla habitat. Today it is known as Virunga National Park, a UNESCO Heritage site in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Akeley's show was one of a half dozen Avalon attractions promoted in September of 1922, with the expectation that the theater would open in late October or early November. They had to be postponed or moved to other venues because the opening of the Avalon was delayed by brief labor strikes and delays in getting the steel girders from a Minnesota manufacturer.

Once the Avalon opened, it was a frequent object of news items and advertisements in Grand Junction, not surprising, given Walter Walker's involvement. However, newspapers in Delta, Montrose and Telluride frequently mentioned what was playing at the Avalon. Newspapers on the Front Range didn't mention it as often, but they did occasionally.

In the Sentinel, throughout 1923, the Avalon warranted several mentions a day — in advertisements, news briefs and longer news stories about upcoming attractions.

Those included everything from live plays and concerts to church gathering to meetings of farmers and ranchers. There were also occasional political meetings at the theater. New silent films were highlighted in the Sentinel ads for the Avalon

every week, including Douglas Fairbanks in "Robin Hood," in March.

By 1939, showing films was the theater's primary function. There were still occasional concerts, mostly with local musicians, and other meetings of local groups.

That continued for the Avalon until 1947, when it became the Cooper Theatre. It had actually been purchased by the J.H. Cooper Co. in 1943, but they kept the Avalon name for several years.

My first experience in the building was watching "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi" in 1983 at the then-Cooper Theatre.

That theater closed and the Avalon building went dark in 1989. Two years later, Grand Junction banker and community leader Pat Gormley spearheaded the Avalon Project Inc., to raise money to restore the old theater.

By 1994, the city of Grand Junction had purchased the building, and in 1996 the original stone- and-brick façade of the building was restored. It wasn't until 2014 that the large addition to the Avalon and refurbishing of the interior, known as the Avalon Cornerstone Project, was completed.

Today, the Avalon is operated through the Avalon Theatre Foundation. This month marks the beginning of a yearlong celebration of the Avalon Theatre Centennial, with concerts, historic films and live entertainment.

For a century, the Avalon has provided a home for unique attractions in the Grand Valley, and it continues to do so. Even if it isn't named the Oda-roloc.

**Sources:** Historic editions of The Daily Sentinel at [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com); historic editions of other Colorado newspapers at [www.coloradohistoric-newspapers.org](http://www.coloradohistoric-newspapers.org); "100 Years of the Avalon Theatre, Timeline," by the Avalon Theatre Foundation.

Bob Silbernagel's email is [bobsilbernagel@gmail.com](mailto:bobsilbernagel@gmail.com).



SCOTT CRABTREE/The Daily Sentinel

Avalon 100th anniversary dancers celebrate the occasion on the second floor mezzanine on Thursday.



SCOTT CRABTREE/The Daily Sentinel

Avalon 100th anniversary greeters welcome the crowd with souvenirs Thursday at ARTrageous, a performance at the Avalon Theatre. This month marks the beginning of a yearlong celebration of the Avalon Theatre Centennial, with concerts, historic films and live entertainment.