



# Palmer Historical Society

\* Preserving Our Past \* Sharing Our Stories \* Making History for Future Generations  
Volume XXX No.2 February 2014 Newsletter

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## Greetings!

Wow! It's February already! What great summer weather we've had this winter! With temperatures reaching in the high 50s it's certainly proven to be a historic start to a new year. The longer days are a welcome delight and more measurable each day.

Have you spotted any historic results of the unseasonably warm days? It's rumored golfers have been seen at Palmer Golf Course! There have been sightings of a Johnny Jump Up in bloom and pussy willows!

The down side – winter sports take a big hit! I admit to enjoying the ease of driving and surviving. As we enjoy the warm sunny days it seems we wait for the 'payback'.

Living in Alaska we know the hard knocks of the unpredictable weather changes. No matter, because we are on the upswing – renewed energy, longer days - and spring is not far off! It won't be long until we are once again spoiled with fresh Alaska grown bounty from local farms and gardens.

This brings us full circle to Palmer's roots – beauty and bounty, plus a lot of hard work by hard working people. Palmer is a great place to be!

Now daydreaming of spring ~ **Sheri**

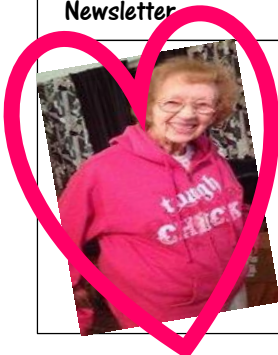


## Notes and Reminders:

**Sheri Hamming, President:** Thank you for becoming a PHS member or renewing your dues! We are still looking for a grant writer and a large, dry storage space for the PHS collections.

**Joan Campbell, Treasurer/Membership:** Dues cover the calendar year from January through December. They support our mission to research and preserve our great history. If you would like to receive the e-newsletter in color, please give us your email address, and indicate your preference to change from paper copy. Also, if you are an Individual member and wish to change to another designation to add family members, or you would like to recognize your business with a Patron membership, or you desire to become a Lifetime member indicate this at the time of payment. Dues may be paid at our monthly programs, or mailed to PO Box 1935 Palmer AK 99645. **Individual \$25, Household \$40, Patron (Business) \$100, Lifetime \$500.** We appreciate our dues-paying members and their support!

**Barbara Hecker, Newsletter:** The PHS e-newsletter is available free to anyone interested. Simply send an email to [blhecker@mtaonline.net](mailto:blhecker@mtaonline.net) with the words "subscribe PHS e-Newsletter" in the subject line.



Happy 96th  
Birthday  
Pat Lawton!



## Valley / Center Theatre

### Hub of Palmer SHOWBIZ for Three Decades

**“Drink Pop, Eat Popcorn; Clean Entertainment for the Whole Family”** states the barebones ads for “The VALLEY Theatre” in the February 1952 issue of the Matanuska Valley Record. For thirty-two years, Palmer’s movie house served to bring enjoyment to all – cartoon matinees for kids, ‘hang out’ and date nights for teens, family fare at an affordable price.

Al Hagen worked in theaters to finance his way through college, and frequently as an adult as he worked his way west. A multi-faceted man, he played professional basketball and serviced ‘Caterpillars’. But it was his skill as a diesel mechanic that brought him, his wife Imogene, and daughter, Shelia, to Alaska in January 1939 to work at Independence Mine, near Palmer.

The theater was conceived almost immediately when Hagen came down from the mountain to Palmer looking for fun. Movies were shown once per week in the Palmer (Central School) Gym, but that was about all the town had to offer. He was sure a movie house would pay for itself as the town grew. In due course, Hagen had sufficient collateral to acquire a loan and begin to build.

Not all was smooth sailing. Those who showed movies in the school gym, the “Palmer Theatre”, first agreed that they would offer no opposition; in fact, they proposed to close their operation. Instead, they opened a second show per week, saying they were intent on staying in business. Because of the tight competition, the bank pulled their support, causing checks for thousands of dollars in payroll and supplies to bounce. Without tradesmen, Hagen was stuck. Fortunately, most of the men who’d been working on the building agreed to finish the job on condition that their pay would come “if and when...”

Owing to major furnace difficulties, it was impossible to open Christmas 1945, as planned. Officially, the theater opened on January 1, 1946 with an early bird showing on New Year’s Eve. It was a balmy 60 degrees inside as people huddled inside their parkas.

In July 1948, movies at the gym were discontinued. At last the Valley Theatre could work its way out of the red.

Hagen was as visionary as he was civically active. He spearheaded the Matanuska Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Matanuska Valley Fire Association, the Fair Association, the “1949 Colony Days Celebration”, and for five years he was the stimulus and organizer of the annual merchants’ Christmas party for all valley children. He headed the steering committee for the

incorporation of the City of Palmer. He was elected city councilman and in 1952, Mayor.

Dave Lenhart purchased the Valley Theatre in 1959. He completely remodeled the theater using furnishings and equipment from Spenard’s “Center Theater” (where “Centerbowl” is today.) Lenhart installed “the loges” – not a balcony, but the back 3 auditorium rows (50 seats) of deluxe, red velvet seats on a slightly elevated, carpeted riser. They were much more comfortable than the regular seats and demanded a higher price. It was Lenhart who changed the name of the movie house to “Center Theatre.”



**Al Hagen**

Center Theatre, as Valley Theatre before it, offered affordable entertainment and remained very popular. The auditorium saw weeknight movie showings, matinees, double features on the weekends, and always a midnight showing after Prom. It served also for live programs such as musical groups, burlesque shows, the crowning of Fair queens, and widely-remembered hypnotist and magic shows.

Donn Moyer worked closely with Al Hagen from 1948 to 1954. He remembers “a bare bones operation, but better than the way they showed movies at the co-op with one projector (16 mm, not 35 mm like in the theater.) That meant at the end of every reel the overhead lights came on while they changed reels.” He recalls the folding seats as being (probably) military surplus, made of wood, metal framed, and thinly padded. (*Donn’s tale of an early Christmas kids’ matinee gone awry was published in our Christmas letter.*)

In the 1960s, Center Theatre was owned by Steve (Skip) Fletcher who also owned the Kambe Theater in Soldotna. By 1967, Jack and Virginia Martin leased the theater and operated it as a family, off and on, until 1977. By then, the theatre was tired and hardly profitable. The Martins focused on their newly built “Airport 1 Theater” in Wasilla. In 1978, Palmer’s little theater closed its doors for good.

Plans were already in effect for the space. The theater floor was leveled. At entrance level, there is no sign of its former life. But if you venture to the basement, you’ll find the ceiling still slopes downward supported by cement pillars. There’s still storage, but the restrooms are gone, as is the jail. It’s still pretty darned dark and spooky down there.

*Photo and data from The Matanuska Valley Record, February 1952, pg. 4; and The Alaska Record, August, 1953, pg. 5.*

"I remember Trigger, Roy Rogers' horse, making an appearance at the theater. I don't know if Roy Rogers was there – I was too focused on Trigger being able to count by stomping his hooves to notice..." ~ Kathy Laing



"The city insisted Mr. Hagen charge a penny tax on every 25¢ ticket. He wanted to charge the kids just 24¢ - the extra 1¢ would pay the sales tax and it would still cost only 25¢ to get it. The city said, "No, there is no tax on 24¢. I think he finally decided to change the cost to 29¢ plus an extra penny for the city, making it 30¢ to see a show." ~ Louise Bidondo

(Photo from 1961 Polaris)

Judith Condict Williams worked the concession stand in the early 60s. "I recall showing a "Lassie" movie one Saturday matinee to a packed theater of elementary children. Just before intermission, Lassie appeared to die. Kids came streaming out of the teater crying that Lassie was dead and started for the front doors. (Sandy and) I had to go round the kids up and herd them back into the theater. Rod (the manager) yelled to the foyer filled with crying kids, "Kids! Look! Lassie is alive!" The kids rushed back into the theater bypassing the concessions."

"I remember I could go to a movie every 2 weeks. My allowance was 25¢. It cost me 35¢ for the matinee and 15¢ for a pack of flicks. Flicks were little chocolate discs, kind of like a Hershey's Kiss but flatter and they came in a cardboard tube with a little wooden-shoed Dutchman on the wrapper." ~ PeterAnn Stenberg

"Al Hagen was a pretty good guy. If you didn't have money for the movie, he'd let you in for free. The Palmer jail was downstairs along with the restrooms. When anyone needed to take care of business, they would check to see if anyone was being held in custody that they might know, including a parent or two." ~ Willie Boggs



Barb Lentz Thomas (and date?) 1961 Polaris

MOVIE GUIDE HANG ME UP			
CENTER Theatre			
PALMER, ALASKA			
MONDAY TO SATURDAY 10:00 - 12:00			
Sun. - Mon. Dec. 28-29 <b>PETER SELLERS</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Tue. - Wed. Dec. 30-31 <b>DEADLY AFFAIR</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Thur.-Fri.-Sat. Jan. 1-3-5 <b>LOWER THE ROVER</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Sun. - Mon. Jan. 4 - 5 <b>THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"
Tue. - Wed. Jan. 6-7 <b>THEY CAME TO ROB LAS VEGAS</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Thur-Fri-Sat Jan 8 - 9-10 <b>THEY CAME TO ROB LAS VEGAS</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Sat. Matinee Jan 10 <b>THEY CAME TO ROB LAS VEGAS</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"	Sun. - Mon. Jan. 11-12 <b>THEY CAME TO ROB LAS VEGAS</b> The perfect crime "I LOVE YOU, ALICE B. TOHLERS"
Tue. - Wed. Jan. 13 - 14 <b>Charade</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Thur-Fri-Sat Jan 15-17 <b>Charade</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Sun. - Mon. Jan. 18-19 <b>Charade</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Tue. - Wed. Jan. 20-21 <b>Charade</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant
Thur-Fri-Sat Jan 22-24 <b>THE SHORES OF THE FISHERMAN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Sun. - Mon. Jan. 25-26 <b>THE SHORES OF THE FISHERMAN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Tue. - Wed. Jan. 27-28 <b>THE SHORES OF THE FISHERMAN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Thur-Fri-Sat Jan 29-31 <b>THE SHORES OF THE FISHERMAN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant
Sunday January 31 <b>SNOW QUEEN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Sun-Mon-Tue Feb. 1-2-3 <b>SNOW QUEEN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	Wed. - Thur. - Fri. - Sat. Febr. 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 <b>SNOW QUEEN</b> Audrey Hepburn Cary Grant	

"When I worked there, they stored stuff in the basement. OMG! It was so scary down there! The ceiling sloped down and it was dark and creepy. One night I was working the counter and happened to look up the stairs to the projection room. There was a movie film snaking down. Francine had missed the take-up reel. We had to roll the entire reel by hand. Argh." ~ Bernice Yerbic

"Before they "cleaned out" the basement for storage, potatoes were stored there. Dorothy Saxton had her office on one side of the entrance and Mrs. Hagen had her "antique" shop on the other." ~ Katie Rousey



Photo courtesy of Cathy (Martin) Sexton. Between dark photo quality in the 1959 Frontiersman's 'Grand Opening' article, and an absolute dearth of photos found otherwise, this is the best I can provide! If anyone owns clearer photos of either the VALLEY or CENTER Theatre, it would be greatly appreciated. Please email to [blhecker@mtaonline.net](mailto:blhecker@mtaonline.net).

# Dan Renshaw Ponders "What If...?"

January speaker Dan Renshaw, owner of the Gold Cord Mine and second generation miner, explored events between the 1840s until 1912 that molded Alaska as we know it. In particular, if the 1912 presidential election results had been different, would Palmer exist? Would Anchorage?

Renshaw likened events in history to a bucket of water. As it's carried forward, some water sloshes to the front, some to the back. Splashes to the front represent the benefits that come from the event (lives improved, riches earned, explorations accomplished.) Spills to the rear symbolize the negatives (hopes, lives and savings lost, ventures ruined, dreams and relationships crumbled, etc.)

The discovery of gold – beginning in the east and sweeping west to the tremendous Gold Rush in California, then north to Alaska – impacted not only the bank accounts of many, but served to dramatically enrich the federal treasury.

Alaska was still a federal project. In 1897 Congress organized to receive proposals for construction of an Alaskan railroad. Fifty applications were received, few were built.



Photo courtesy Sheri Hamming.

The **Copper River and Northwestern Railway** was built to haul copper ore from the Kennecott Mines (the world's richest concentration of copper) to the naturally sheltered seaport of Cordova. Nearly 200 miles of tracks were laid around glaciers, across canyons, through deep snow and avalanche areas.

Financing was sought through connections with J.P. Morgan and the Guggenheim Brothers who already held many investments in Alaska's fledgling industries. Political battles arose immediately between conservationists and those having a financial interest in the copper.

Soon World War I would loom on the horizon. It was a "steam war" and the Navy demanded massive stores of coal for their steam ships. The **Alaska Central Railroad** aimed to open the corridor between the seaport of Seward to the interior city of

Fairbanks; importantly, it would access the Matanuska coal mines of Wishbone Hill and Chickaloon.

William McKinley was elected president in 1897. After his vice-president died in office, the party chose the brash young governor of New Jersey, Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt, to complete the VP's term.

With McKinley assassinated six months into his second term, Roosevelt was propelled into the presidential seat. He pushed to level economic extremes, to break up trusts and syndicates. A difficult road lay ahead for anything called a "syndicate."

In 1908, Roosevelt endorsed his good friend and cabinet member, William Taft, for the party nomination. Taft won both the nomination and the subsequent election. Assured that Taft would continue to be his political lackey, Roosevelt left on a yearlong African safari.

Taft's decisions would dismay Roosevelt and eventually ruin their friendship. Roosevelt, incensed, returned and challenged Taft for the 1912 nomination. Taft narrowly prevailed, but the party was split. Woodrow Wilson, an unknown, took the election.

While still in office, Taft formed a commission to study Alaska's railroads in order to return with a recommendation for bestowing government support. However, they returned too late for their nod to the Copper River and Northwestern Railway to matter.

The J.P. Morgan/ Guggenheim proposal for their railroad to be purchased by a federal grant didn't fit into Wilson's philosophy. Wilson sent out a new commission charged with bringing home new counsel. They chose the **Alaska Central Railroad**.

The Copper River Railroad became a liability; bridges went unfinished, the railway unmaintained. When the last train of Kennecott ore was taken out in 1938, the railway was literally falling apart behind it.

Renshaw returned to his initial teaser: *What if, in the 1912 election, Taft (as predicted) had won? What if Roosevelt had kept his ego in check?* **The Copper River and Northwestern Railway** would have become Alaska's major rail corridor. Cordova would likely be the metropolis. FDR's 'New Deal' agricultural experiment likely would have gone to Kenny Lake or Copper Center. With no economic incentive to develop Cook Inlet - no Anchorage. Palmer might still be a crossroads of Dena'ina and Ahtna Athabaskans, with a smattering of miners and settlers. The "slosh forward" of the 1912 election triggered innumerable benefits along the **Alaska Central Railroad corridor**. One man's ego in 1912 had a very dramatic effect in determining Alaska as we know it.

**Our guest speaker February 19<sup>th</sup> will be Mr. Lynn Follett, President of the Wasilla-Knik Historical Society. He will address building Valley-wide cooperative projects and finding your niche in history. Palmer Library, 7 p.m. Refreshments. Door Prizes.**