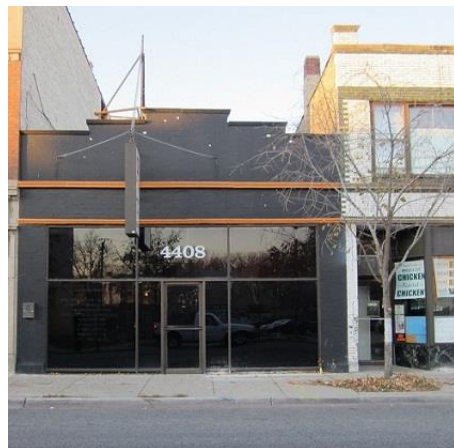


## CHICAGO'S NICKEL THEATER ERA 1904-1917

The first movie exhibition in Chicago occurred in a Loop Vaudeville theater as early as 1895. Vaudeville theaters and summer tent theaters served as the first venues of exhibition for about ten years as motion pictures remained a novelty. In 1903, Edison released *the Great Train Robbery* and the movies changed from a novelty to an entertainment industry. Visionary businessmen across the country, but mostly in the East and North, began to rent stores to exhibit whatever movie they could procure. In Chicago, in late 1903, Aaron Jones leased a store on State Street near the Palmer House hotel and began exhibiting movies. This is believed to be the first venue in Chicago meant for the exhibition of movies. Within a few months there were hundreds of similar theaters throughout Chicago as the nickel theater industry became a rage. The first generation movie theater was nothing more than an existing store with a façade redesigned to appear as a theater.



A picture from a trade ad for a company that constructed new facades on existing storefronts. Notice that five cents is a big aspect of the ornamentation.



One hundred years ago this store on Milwaukee Avenue in the Portage Park community was the Montrose Theater.



One hundred years ago this store on Milwaukee Avenue in the Avondale community was the Enterprise Theater.

The first generation movie theater was rather primitive. At its most callow state it was nothing more than a space with portable chairs and a projector on a table in the center with a piano or phonograph for musical accompaniment to the side. Seating capability rarely exceeded two hundred and was often no more than fifty. It was awkward as an entertainment venue which is understandable as the buildings had been built for product retailing not entertainment presentation. After a couple of years when it became evident that movies were not a passing fad, businessmen, including Aaron Jones, began to build theaters designed to the needs of movie exhibition. These second generation movie theaters had projector booths that protected the audience from distracting projector noise and an occasional explosion. There was usually a small lobby for traffic control and, perhaps, offices on a second floor. Seating capability increased to between two and four hundred. The buildings were built with a clear span so no one suffered an obstructed view and were remarkably similar in configuration because they were built to the maximum size that wood beams allowed. Several hundred of these second generation movie theaters were built throughout Chicago from 1907 to 1914.

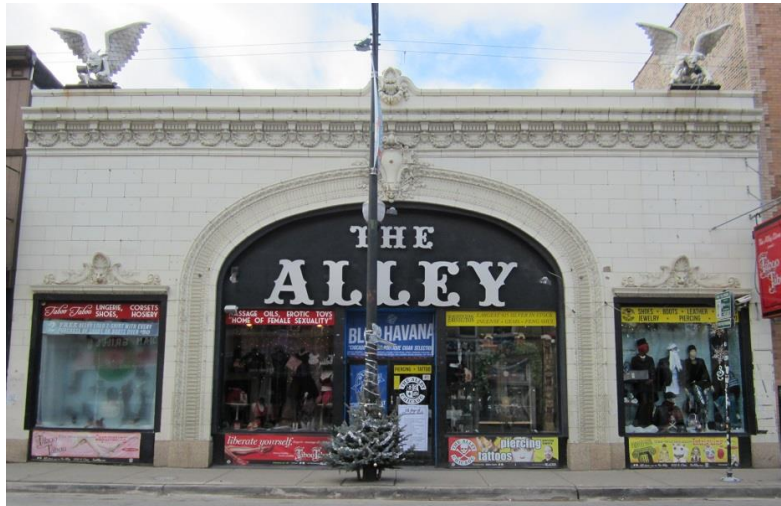


A century ago this was the Famous Theater. Today it

serves as a church. With a clear span interior, old theaters are excellent candidates to be converted into a church.



The Rex Theater on South Racine in Englewood serves today as a church. Few nickel theaters survived the decay and urban renewal that occurred on the South and West sides.

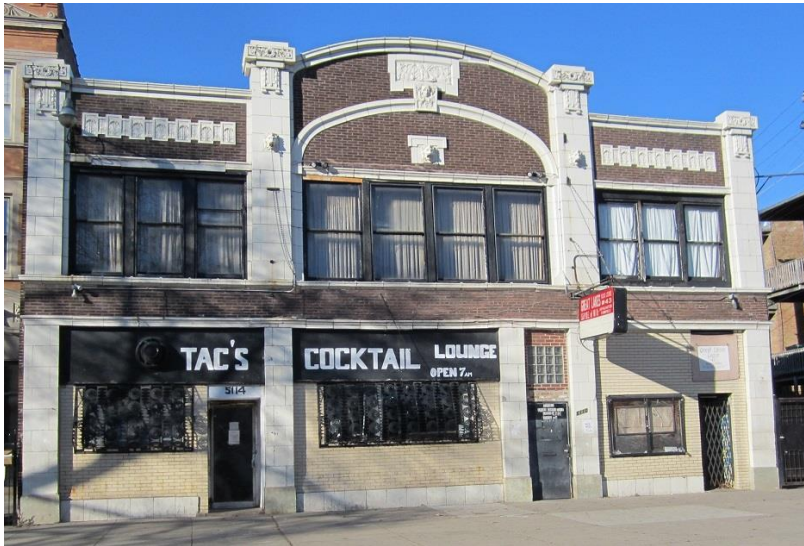


First generation movie theaters were converted stores, second generation theaters built as theaters, if they survived, are often converted into stores. This was the Claremont Theater on North Clark Street in Lakeview.



A hundred years ago, this was the Bell Theater on North Milwaukee in Wicker Park. There were four Bell Theaters, it was an early chain.

Of the hundreds of second generation movie theaters built in Chicago, only a couple of dozen are extant; of these, only a handful are still used for their intended purpose: entertainment presentation.



A hundred years ago, this was the Panorama Theater built by the Ascher Brothers on South Prairie Avenue in the Washington Park community.



A hundred years ago, this was the Blaine Theater on North Sheffield in Lakeview. It is now a stage theater for musical theater.



A hundred years ago, this was the Lincoln Theater on Lincoln Avenue in the Lincoln Park community. It is Lincoln Hall now but was long known as the Three Penny Opera. It has served as an entertainment venue longer than any other second generation movie theater.

In 1914, following the release of *the Birth of a Nation*, the Ascher Brothers, the largest of the early chain exhibitors in Chicago, built the Calo Theater on North Clark Street in the Andersonville community. It was the first of the third generation movie theater known later as “movie palaces” even though many were built as much for live variety shows as movie exhibition. The third generation movie theaters were built between 1917 and 1929. They were meant for the exhibition of long-running “feature” films; and a ticket was more than a nickel. The Calo had a seating capability over 800 which was nearly three times a typical second generation movie theater. The third generation theaters differed from their immediate predecessors in more than just magnitude; most but not all were multi-use real-estate developments. There was a large, ornate theater but also stores and apartments above the stores. Big real-estate developments are the province of big money. The third generation movie theaters were financed by rich investors like William Wrigley and John Hertz and the investment banks while the second generation theaters had been built by small businessmen with a real estate mortgage and their own equity.



The Calo was built a century ago the first of the large movie palaces.



The Calo was more than a theater on a commercial block, it was a real-estate development that took up nearly an entire commercial block.

When a new, large third generation movie theater opened, all the smaller second generation theaters in the surrounding area usually closed. That happened to the Blaine Theater when the larger Music Box opened almost near door. Yet a few survived by avoiding competition by finding a niche such as exhibiting foreign language films or being a second or third run popular priced theater.



The Hub Theater on West Chicago Avenue near the East Village section of West Town was a second generation movie theater that operated into the 1980's as a second run movie theater. Today it awaits a new purpose.



The Alvin Theater just a block and a half east of the Hub Theater lasted into the 1970's by exhibiting Spanish language films. It currently awaits a new purpose.

By the 1980's cable companies began to offer movies for direct home viewing while movie companies started selling movies on tape cassettes which started a retail industry renting movies for home exhibition and dooming the neighborhood second or third run movie theater.

The nickel theater era lasted barely more than a decade and is not now well remembered although it was a major aspect of Chicago cultural history. These theaters are where people watched comedies, cowboys and action adventure serials; the movies of Ben

Turpin, the Keystone Kops, Charlie Chaplin, Bronco Billy, Tom Mix and a young Mary Pickford were consumed in these simple theaters. None of the surviving nickel theaters have been landmarked (the Bell Theater on Milwaukee Avenue is in the Wicker Park district) protected or preserved as have many of the later third generation movie palaces. The extant nickel theater buildings are the survivors of a forgotten era.