

The following is transcribed from an article that appeared in the *Barrington Courier-Review* September 22, 1983

‘My Thoughts were on a dream of a theater’

(Editor’s note: the late Wright Catlow contributed to Barrington during his 82 years. However he will probably be best remembered for building Barrington’s beautiful theater. Here from the Barrington Historical Society are Catlow’s own words on how he managed to scrape up the resources for the project)

By **WRIGHT CATLOW**

In September of 1926 the saga of my dream began to unfold. I was a partner in my brother John’s gravel business and my job was to help the workers and look after the six trucks we had. There were two products the pit delivered – crushed stone and sand for concrete construction work and gravel used for the county roads. When an order came in for material for concrete work I had to load that by hand if the bins were full of road gravel. My ambition in the back of my mind was to someday build a theatre for Barrington. While driving a truck I never thought of the load I was carrying, but mainly my thought were on the dream of the theatre that somehow would materialize someday.

One day while I was loading gravel, a Cadillac, Chauffeur-driven, a very short man wearing heavy thick glasses stepped out of it and walked up to me and said “I’m looking for Mr. Catlow” and I asked “Which one?” to which he answered “the one who wants to build a theatre in Barrington.” I told him I was that Mr. Catlow and he asked “When are you going to build it?” I answered “I have no present plans but for several years I have dreamed of the kind of theatre I wanted to build in Barrington.” I further told him that when I graduated from High School my [---missing text here---] street. Our conversation ended with this but he handed me a business card to indicate that he was a money broker, or in other words he sought out people who would need to borrow money for a business venture and then turned this information over to a bank. I received his card in my greasy hand and stuck it in my pocket. This card was to become extremely important to me although at the time I did not know it.

About six months after this, there was an announcement in *The Barrington Review* that someone had the location and was going to build a theatre in Barrington. The location was where the old Atkins Hotel stood (where now the Donald Schroeder Real Estate office is). Needless to say I was broken hearted because I felt there was no place in the world where I wanted my theatre but in Barrington, and I experienced a sadness I could not describe. A period of time passed and nothing developed on the announced theatre. At this time I was managing the old Catlow auditorium which my father had built.

One evening a rather distinguished looking gentleman came into the auditorium. He introduced himself and he was Mr. William Betts, an architect, and it turns out he was the architect for the announced theatre and had drawn plans for it. As this theatre had fallen through he wanted to know if I would be interested in seeing these plans as he felt they were exceptional and could be used on any building site, and they were also his dream of how a theatre should look. At this time I owned no property nor did I know where I could purchase property on Main street. I [---missing text here---] we decided I should go ahead with my project.

I approached Mrs. Morehouse who lived across the street from our home and offered her

\$12,000 for her house and lot. She refused, which turned out to be her mistake as she lost it later to taxes. Then I approached Mrs. Emma Richardson who sold me the lot where the theatre is located for \$15,000. I only had \$12,000 so I was short \$3,000 before I started to build. Betts and Holcomb, the two architects, revamped their plans to conform to this lot. Not too [---missing text here---] the first of September, 1926. My brother had excavating equipment and did all the digging, that is for the foundation and basement. He furnished all the sand and gravel for this, so we got this far without outside money. Now came the first big purchase of 600,000 common brick for the auditorium, and also needed was money for the labor of the bricklayers. Shurtleff Lumber Company extended credit for the purchase of roof lumber and timbers, expecting to be paid on the first of the following month. About this time my brother's supply of money ran low and I had to obtain a loan to go on with the building. I went to Chicago to see a banker I knew as he lived in Barrington but he refused to lend me what I needed. I visited both banks in Barrington but they, too, refused. Now I recalled the little man who had visited me at the gravel pit, and I wondered where I had put his card. I found it in a dresser drawer with the grease marks still on it. He was located on Milwaukee Avenue in a three story walk-up building which was dusty and dirty. I walked into his office and asked to see Mr. Robbins. His secretary was his sister-in-law. When he heard my voice he called "Send him in." When he saw me he said, "Well, Mr. Catlow—are you going to build that theatre?" I said, "The roof is already on the auditorium" and he inquired "Have you got a loan?" When I said "No" he nearly fell off his chair laughing. He said to me next "You must have a d— good credit."

At this point I was in dire need of money immediately. I saw Mr. Robbins on Thursday or Friday and the very next [---missing text here---] with the Board of The Ridgeway State Bank. They held a meeting in our old homestead. Mr. Robbins told me "If I come out smiling—you've got the loan." About an hour and a half later they came out, and he was smiling. They handed me a checkbook and told me to start writing checks. The amount they loaned me at this time was \$50,000, and they did not ask me for waivers of liens or receipted bills—a far cry from the way loan companies proceed today! This happened the latter part of December and by now subcontractors had started their work, such as electricians, plumbers and heating engineers. Times were not easy for anybody that year and those men all needed money to finance their projects, so between bricks, lumber, cement and labor the money was being used up fast. I had to go back to the bank and ask for another \$25,000. They gave it to me.

In January, before the deep freeze set in, we finished the framework and brickwork for the stores and the three apartments. Work proceeded on the inside of the theatre and also on the interior of the stores and apartments; but one sad incident occurred when one of the workmen who was on the beams high in the ceiling stepped into air and fell to the ground where mounds of dirt lay. He was shaken up severely and broke a leg, but I was greatly relieved that it was not worse. Incidentally, I tried my best to employ only local contractors and help. Sass did the heating and plumbing and Scott did the wiring. Good carpenters were very hard to find in Barrington—we found only one—Ed Rieke.

By now my attention had to turn to equipping the theatre with such things as a pipe organ, seats, booth equipment and stage scenery, etc., and also an electric sign for the front of the theatre. These items would add up to more than \$50,000. Again, I didn't have much money to negotiate for these things. I managed to work out a deal whereby the seats were installed with no money

down, and a Kimball Pipe Organ valued at \$18,000 was put into operation for \$2,000. I traded in old movie machines for new booth equipment without any down payment. Stage scenery and other innovations were purchased with small payments. All of these items were placed on monthly payment contracts which were to haunt me when the depression began and they all ran from four to five years.

Winter weather had set in and we were working on the interior of the theatre. It seemed to me that now the whole operation had slowed down, because finishing of the auditorium, the rest rooms and the lobby was time consuming. The concrete floor was not yet set in and all heating was done by salamanders. Those laying the concrete floor brought in surveying instruments to conform the contours for the seats to be accommodated. Work on the stores and apartments proceeded rapidly enabling me to move into one of the apartments in early May and also allowing the two store renters to go into operation before the theatre opened. Mick & Schwartz opened a tailor shop and men's clothing store, and two women opened an ice cream and lunchroom at the same time. In May the installation of the three manual Kimball Organ, one of the largest and finest in the Chicago area, was begun. It took the full time before opening day to tune the organ and have all phases of it playing. Everyone connected with the final phases of the theatre's opening were working together to finish on the announced day—May 28.

