

## **Uptown Theatre 120 E. Main Street**

In 1948, two brothers, Jerry and Sherman Silver, and their sister, Helen Meagher Fisher, a young widow with three children, bought the Wings Theatre on Main Street in Grand Prairie and moved to Texas from Minnesota. The brothers, who were already in the Theatre business, were excited about the possibilities in this small but growing Texas town of 13,241. Soon after arrival, the family also leased and ran the Texas Theatre, located a block down and across the street from the Wings. The Wings Theatre, which featured second-run movies, was thought to have been a converted grocery store, with a rickety wooden floor and a segregated balcony for its African American customers. The Texas Theatre, originally built as a movie house, also featured second-run movies.

The Silver family saw a market for first-run movies in Grand Prairie and soon began the design and construction of their third and most ambitious Grand Prairie movie house, the Uptown Theatre. The Uptown opened on March 17, 1950 as a first-run movie Theatre with 1,100 seats and also included a small stage for live performances. It opened as an un-segregated Theatre, years before other Theatres in the area followed suit.

Considered a state-of-the-art Theatre for its time, the Uptown featured a sloped floor in the seating area for optimal viewing of the stage and screen, a glass enclosed “Cry Room” in the back for mothers and babies, spring-loaded seating units that would return to a vertical position when the seat was vacated vs. the stationary seats in most Theatres, and oversized chairs with ample leg room for customers “of size”. A large canvas mural adorned the lobby wall depicting the history of Grand Prairie from its pioneer beginnings to the Dallas skyline as could be seen from downtown Grand Prairie in the 1950’s.

Entertainment over the years included films, kiddy shows, stage shows, minstrel shows, midnight shows for the Ling Temco/Chance Vought late shifts, and personal appearances by celebrities promoting their films. In the 1960’s, battles of the bands and go-go contests replaced stage and minstrel shows.

When first opened, adult tickets were 35 cents and tickets for children cost 12 cents. Because of Mrs. Fisher’s frugality, the Theatre became known for its popular and unique pickle juice snowcones, which recycled the pickle juice left in the jars of giant pickles, and Old Maid popcorn bags of the half-popped kernels left on the bottom of the popper. During the 1950s, parents routinely dropped off their unattended children as young as three years old for Saturday’s kiddy shows. Playing fulltime usher and part-time babysitter at the kiddy shows, Donna Meagher, Mrs. Fisher’s youngest daughter, was ten years old when she started working in the family business. Her older sister, Pat, was 13 and working in the more responsible areas of concessions and box office.

The Silver brothers and their sister owned and operated the Uptown for 15 years until 1965 when the Uptown ownership was transferred to Mrs. Fisher’s daughter, Donna Meagher Easterling, the young usher who by then had become a local attorney. Mrs. Easterling continued to operate the Theatre as a movie house well into the 1990’s. But as

mega-plexes and multi-screened Theatres became the norm, the Uptown eventually relented to the inevitable and closed as a movie Theatre. It was intermittently leased as a church until the City of Grand Prairie purchased the Theatre in 2005 with plans to restore the historic downtown landmark to its former glory, but this time primarily as a live performance arts venue.

The restoration and renovation design was performed by noted San Antonio Architect Killis Almond, FAIA, who has numerous theatrical restoration and renovation works to his credit throughout the country. Interestingly, Mr. Almond grew up in Grand Prairie in the 1950's-60's and had fond memories of his many visits to the Uptown as a young boy. The Uptown Theatre will reopen as a multi-use performing arts center in 2008.