

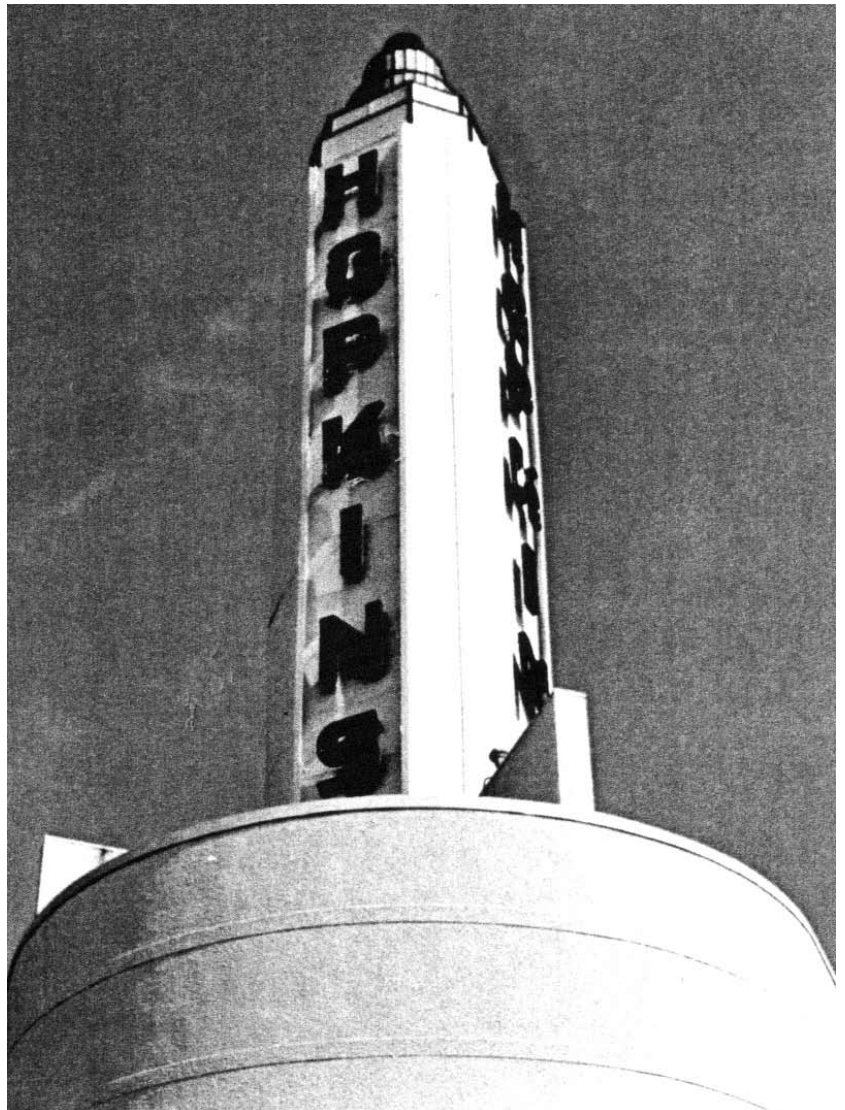
The HOPKINS Theater

Classic Days of a Classic Cinema

Back in the analog age, going to the movies was quite a big deal, particularly before television came in to everyone's homes. In times of depression and world war, the local movie theater provided inexpensive entertainment and a social experience for people in communities big and small. Couples and families could go out on the town without having to dress up or shell out much money. Single people, teens and children as well could go to the movies with friends or by themselves, and for a couple of hours everyone could forget their troubles, and be entertained and thrilled with cinema magic.

By the 1940s practically every town had a movie theater. Back then there was just one screen in one auditorium, not several like the multiplexes of more modern times. Along with the main feature, the presentation included newsreels, cartoons, comedy and adventure shorts, coming attractions and other reels of celluloid entertainment. The theater itself was often an Art Deco showplace with a bright marquee above the main entrance, decked out with lights and neon tubing. The aroma of fresh, hot-buttered popcorn permeated the lobby. After you purchased your ticket at the box office, you could pick up a cup or bag of that glorious movie theater popcorn, which always tasted better than the stuff you popped at home, and there was a candy counter as well, selling varieties of candy and soft drinks. Walking into the main auditorium, you sat down in comfortable seating and felt like royalty. The lights would go down, and the show would start on the giant screen ahead of you.

Harold Engler owned one of the classic 1940s era cinemas, the Hopkins Theater, located on the corner of Fifth and Excelsior Avenues in Hopkins, Minnesota, a suburb just west of Minneapolis. In its heyday the Hopkins was the biggest suburban theater in the state and much of the Midwest. When it first opened in 1941 it seated 1,200 and had amenities that included staggered seating, so no one would be seated directly in front of someone else, love seats at the end of every other row, a spacious balcony, a state-of-the-art sound system, an acoustic board ceiling, air conditioning in the summer (when almost no homes and few



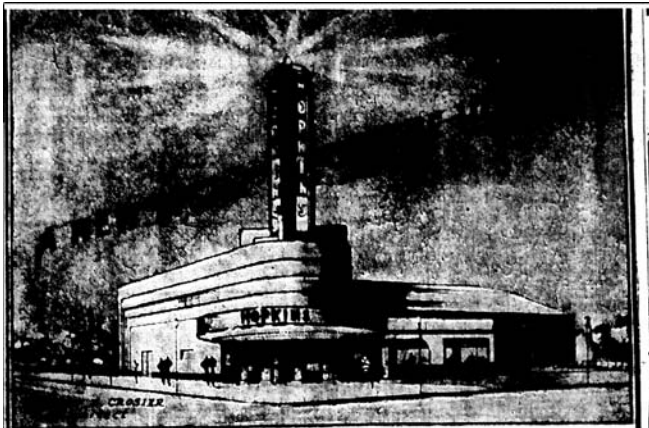
businesses had it), smoking loges and a smart, ultra-modern design. The city of Hopkins was known as the “Raspberry Capital of the World” and the color scheme of the theater reflected that. The theater itself was topped with a 40-foot eight-sided metal tower displaying over 5,000 feet of neon, with the word HOPKINS spelled out vertically on four alternating sides, which lit up at night and could be seen from blocks away. It served as an unofficial gateway to the city, letting you know exactly where you were.

In early 2008, I got to sit down with Mr. Engler at his kitchen table, looking over photographs, newspaper articles and scrapbooks of mementos saved from the theater’s 44-year history, while the man whose family owned it from beginning to end told me the story of one classic American cinema.

The Hopkins Theater opened with great fanfare on the evening of Saturday, August 20, 1941. The mayor of Hopkins and the city councilmen were there along with some special guests, while the Hopkins municipal band played in the lobby. People came from all over to see the new, modern theater. The movie shown that night was, appropriately, “Sis Hopkins,” a comedy starring Judy Canova, Bob Crosby and Jerry Colonna.

Harold vividly remembers opening night. He was only 11 years old, but he had a job there from the very beginning. “On opening night, [theater manager] Gordy Greene took me downtown and got me a red bellhop uniform. You know, ‘Call for Phillip Morris’ [referring to an advertising icon from the era that featured a midget named Johnny in a bellhop uniform]. He says, ‘You’re going to be my shadow on opening night.’ My job was to follow him around. I was his shadow. Dorothy Lewis was there as a celebrity guest. She was a skating star at the Nicollet Hotel [in downtown Minneapolis]. We had the mayor and all the dignitaries there. Dorothy Lewis came out on stage, and my job was to stand on the sidelines, [then] bring out two-dozen roses and hand them to her. I got two bucks that night.”

The grand cinema showcase was built by Abraham and Louis Engler, Harold Engler’s father and uncle respectively. The Engler brothers were pioneers in the theater business, with Abraham managing theaters in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area before the First World War. When Abraham was drafted in 1917, he asked his brother to manage the theaters in his absence. After the war, the Engler Brothers looked for a theater they could own, which lead them to the town of Hopkins, then considered “out in the boondocks,” where they purchased a small movie house and vaudeville theater called the Royal Theatre, located on Eighth and Excelsior avenues, in about 1927. Movies were silent then, but as soon as the



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