

Jamie Healey's  
interview with  
Ed Wales

Hi! This is Jamie Healey. I'm interviewing Mr. Ed Wales owner of Ishpeming's "Showplace of The North", The Butler Theater. My interview is mainly based on the history of this popular hangout and will take place on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 1993

me: When and where were you born?

mr. w: Okay, I was born in Detroit, Michigan on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1946

me: What are your parents names?

mr. w: My parents names were Raymond and my mothers name was Kathleen

me: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

mr. w: I have one brother and his name is also Raymond, and in fact he's up visiting right now, he's cross country skiing.

me: Are you married?

Mr. W : Uh, no I'm single

me : What did your parents do for a living?

Mr. W: my dad was employed by Ford Motor Company he worked at the Ford Rouge as a foreman in the iron ore foundry there and my mom<sup>was</sup> a housewife. Of course <sup>that was</sup> back in the days when you could afford to be a housewife and only have one person work, not like today where everybody has to have two jobs

me : Where did you go to school?

Mr. W: my grade school was Allen Park \_\_\_\_\_ Elementary School, then I went to North Junior High School, then Allen Park High School which is a down river suburb of Detroit

me : How old were you when you started working in the theater business?

Mr. W: Well, I started when I was fifteen years old at the Michigan Theater back in 1961. Back then the way theaters worked were the major cities had big downtown theaters, big movie palaces that seated three, four, five thousand people, and then each one of those theaters would get the first run movie and would be the only theater running, you wouldn't have like like twenty theaters running the same movie. So I worked at the Michigan Theater and that seated four thousand, and that's how I first got started as an usher.

me: What types of duties did you perform on your first theater job?

Mr. W: Well, everything from the usual usher duties of crowd control, taking tickets, making sure aisles were kept clear, seating people. Back then if we had what we called a first run road show engagement you would have tickets that

4.

were purchased at the box office with a seat number on them and whether it was balcony almost like a concert today but you had to sit on specific seat and cleaning up and changing marquees and the usual stuff.

me: What stands out most in your mind about your first theater job?

Mr. W: Probably the fact that when you would get a sellout crowd three or four thousand people watching a movie particularly a family movie or a comedy and just listening to the reaction it is just really neat you felt like you were partly responsible for making these people happy, that's one neat thing about exhibition motion picture. You know even when we're here and we get a good audience for Aladdin or Home Alone or something and everybody reacts, you just feel good, you think wow, we're making these people forget their problems for a couple hours.

me: When did you buy the Butler theater?

Mr. W: Well, I moved up here from Detroit in 1977 and I first started working at the old airport drive-in theater that was out by the highway there and at that time I was just managing that and I was just re-locating and then I got offered. The owners of that who run the theaters in Marquette, also new the people who ran the theaters here in Ishpeming and now they were looking for a part time manager, so in the summer of '77 I came up managing the Butler and I also at that time found out it was for sale. So my brother and I bought part interest in '79' and then we bought it totally in 1980.

me: How or why did you choose this career?

Mr. W: (laughs) Well, I'm sure a lot of people say the same thing. I'm not sure why anybody chooses a specific

career. Before I moved up here I was motion picture director at Wayne State University. I used to shoot movies and then I also did television commercials and stuff like that. So I was on the other end of the camera, so to speak, but I've always enjoyed motion pictures and motion picture theaters, especially historic barns like this. So I knew somewhere along the line it would be fun to be involved running a theater. I don't know if it would be fun owning a bunch of them, but running a theater, being able to program it and doing that kind of stuff. I think that's what got me going on that.

me : What do you enjoy most about owning your own theater?

Mr. W: Well, you know again it's one of those that, it's a business unless you're in a major city you're not going to get real rich at owning a movie theater, a lot of people may be deceived when they see long lines, but the studios are

the ones who are making the money, not me, but it's a fun job it's not real hectic. I think the biggest enjoyment I get out of it is you never know what to expect. I mean there could be a movie like we're showing now that we're just doing huge on when it's sub-zero weather when no one should be coming to the show, and you get these little pleasant surprises. or there will be times you're expecting a nobody shows up. So you got this element of surprise you never know what's going going to happen. You know it's all up to the audience and the audience is pretty fickle you know on what they're going to do.

me: When was the Butler theater built?

Mr. W: It was built in 1915. It opened December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1915, and at the time it opened it was billed as the largest motion picture theater because at that time it was built strictly for motion picture exhibition and it wasn't built for vaudeville or stage. That came later.

It was built strictly for a motion picture theater in 1915. So at that time it was the largest theater north of Milwaukee and it's interesting as a sidelight to note that in 1915 there were only two movie studios, movies weren't really even in existence, there were nickelodeons a little things, but, so the theaters have been around longer than most of the studios.

me: How did it get its name?

Mr. W: Okay, the original owner and builder, his name was Ed Butler, and he at the time was the manager of the Ishpeming Opera House, which was the Ishpeming Theater, and there were also two other theaters in Ishpeming at the time, the Star Theater and I can't remember the other one. There were four theaters two of them were nickelodeons and you had the Ishpeming Opera House and the Butler was built because they wanted to keep Ishpeming as a live entertainment theater for stage shows. So the

manager at that time was Ed Butler and that's how the name came. Interestingly from what I understand the stage manager at the Ishpeming Opera House was Bernard Mc Namara who over the years became owner of the Butler later on, and that's who we ended up buying it from.

me : Who owned the theater first and how many people have owned it over the years?

Mr. W: Okay, Ed Butler he was the first. He built it. Then during the late 20's early 30's, during the Depression, that's when the theaters everywhere ran into problems as all businesses did. So it went dark, I believe, in the early 30's. There was a couple intermediate owners during the 20's, but in the 30's it went dark for about six months and then it reopened as a prize fighting ring, as an indoor miniature golf course, and as a roller rink. All of these things have been in this building in that two or three year period during the Depression. Then when it came out about 1935 or 1936, the Fox Theater

Chain which was now 20<sup>th</sup> century Fox Studio. The Fox Theater Chain out of Wisconsin, purchased it along with several of the theaters in the area and it became part of the Fox Chain. They went in and remodeled and did the basic architecture as it stands on the inside now. That was right through the 40's. Then in the 40's there was several local people who got together and formed a company and they bought the Butler, the Ishpeming, and the Vista in Negaunee and that was know as Jeffrey's Theaters. They were comprised of Bernard Bunzie Malbomara, Paul Bennett, the Rikkans out of Negaunee and probably a couple other people I don't know of. So there has been quite a few owners at that time. After they owned it then it was sold on the interim to Jim Hankala and then my brother and I.

me : Please describe the most interesting and important events that have taken place at the Butler Theater since it opened.

Mr. W: Well, for being a bizarre theater and a little town, it has some pretty interesting history. The fact that it is from what we understand the second oldest operating motion picture theater in the state and one of the oldest in the country. That is pretty neat right off the bat. And of course probably the mainstay is the fact that Anatomy of a Murder had its role premiere here and all the stars Jimmy Stewart, Eve Arden, and George C. Scott and everybody who is famous in Hollywood were all here in Ishpeming and they sat in this theater watching the movie.

We have had other highlights. We are the first ones to put stereo in the U.P. for stereo films, upgrading everything, totally automating it. We have also reinstated a stage policy so periodically we do stage shows. We try to keep on the cutting edge so to speak.

me: In what ways has operating a theater changed over the decades?

mr. w: Quite a bit. Years ago the studios used to own the theaters. You would go to any <sup>town</sup> and you would see a Paramount Theater, Warner Theater, and Fox Theater, all with the studio names. Nowadays they are owned by major chains or independents like us. Probably the biggest change now is the availability in trying to get films. Years ago it used to be a lot easier to get a film and you could program the theater pretty much however you wanted. You could change it every two or three days or you could double up and run two or three films. Now the studios really control the business. You have to run it a minimum of one to three weeks and put a ton of money up front so it has actually gotten a lot harder to book films in the last seven or eight years. The booking part of it in trying to fill the screen with good product has not become as much fun.

me: Over the years, what has the theater been used for besides showing movies?

mr. w: Well, like I said earlier we did the indoor miniature golf course, the roller rink, they also set up a prize fighting ring and used to have boxing matches. It has quite a unique history as far as presentation goes.

me: How has the building itself changed over the years?

mr. w: The inside other than that major change which was cosmetic that the 20<sup>th</sup> century Fox did in the 40's. What they did was make it more of a 30's architecture. It was very victorian before on the inside. The general architecture, itself, the manchell ceiling, the slope, the box seats on the interior has not changed at all. The exterior is one of the reasons it is a historic status building because the exterior is one of a few victorian fronts left on any building untouched as far as theaters go. As you are well aware it looks like a wedding cake when you look outside, real ornate and sort of neat.

The only major real big change has obviously been in the lobby. When all theaters were built there was no such things as concessions. The concessions did not exist in movie theaters, not until television came in. When television came in then the audience dwindled then the theater owners had to figure out how to get audience back or at least make more money. That is when popcorn and all this other stuff started going in. So really, the 40's is when that all happened. In fact the concession stand in most old theaters like this one was a coat room and a coat check so people would come in and check their coats and go in the auditorium.

Generally speaking, the concession area which is constantly being upgraded that type of stuff and the projection booth. Physically it is the same but technically for much more advanced. With the new stereo, the new screens, the new light sources, everything so all equipment is high tech, all computerized.

me: Why has the theater been successful all these years?

Mr. W: It is a combination of things. I don't know if I would call it real successful but we are making ends meet and trying any way. I would say because we have a unique area. The area has lost a lot of population in the Ishpeming area since the 50's. From what I understand in the 50's the population of Ishpeming and Negaunee was well over 20,000 people. Now it is about 14,000 - 15,000. I think the reason we have been successful is we have been able to find out what the audience wants. We know there is a big demand for family films right now and the fact that the area is pretty loyal when it comes to local businesses. If you give a little better service and offer them something they can get elsewhere, they will stay in the area. I think those are some reasons why we have been so successful.

me: Has the theater gone through any financially tough times? If so, when and why?

Mr.: W : The movie industry about every 10 years has its ups and downs. It is very unpredictable. It is only as profitable as the product. From what I understand, during the 60's and early 70's all the theaters were just on the ropes. It wasn't until probably the major turnaround event in motion picture exhibition was Starwars. That was the first movie to start bringing large numbers of people back and then Hollywood finally got wise and started offering more family stuff. Most recently we had rough times during the last iron ore shut down. Anytime that happens it effects everyone. You have to scramble a little bit and offer more specials and try to make up the difference. Every business has their up and downs. It's like if we had a Home Alone every week we would not have to worry.

me: please explain the process of selecting and ordering movies to show at the theater?

Mr. W: Years ago when the studios owned the theaters the studio made the film and the film went back to them. They would play it and then make it available to other theaters. Nowadays, we have a booking agent. We are in districts and are out of the Milwaukee district and our booking agent is a buyer and he represents the theaters in the U.P. and they try to go in and work the best deals they can. We rent the films, that's how we get them. You pay a percentage of the box office toward the rent. It depends how hot the film is. For example the movie Aladdin was huge and we paid a huge bill on that because Disney wanted top dollar. So it is up to our booker to be able to try to work the best rates. We don't always have our choice in getting a film. The studio still dictates where the prints go. The smaller areas of the U.P. are still at their mercy. You can get a film if you want to literally thousands and they will get you a film. Nobody is that dumb because

if a movie is bad you would be out of business. It is best to wait and see.

me: What changes have you made in the Butler since you bought it?

mr. w: Just about everything. We did the major restoration to get it back into its historic status. But in the process bringing it into at least the 20<sup>th</sup> century we like to refer to it. Automated projection, a new screen, a stereo system and constantly upgrading that, automating the ticket booth, changing concessions, doing seating on the main floor and putting money into a stage for stage shows.

me: In as much detail as possible, please describe the main duties of owning and operating a theater.

mr. w: Basically I call our bookers and we talk about what kind of film we want on a Friday or on a holiday or a couple of months down the line. He works the deals for us.

and tells us what we have. I then place the advertising, get the theater ready for it as far as making sure the place is kept clean. I do the hiring and payrolls, the box office reports. I make sure the bills are paid and overseeing maintenance work. Sometime I do that or else contract out depending what it is. You become a jack of all trade literally. You basically do everything. If a fuse blows or a pipe breaks you take it upon yourself to fix it.

me: Does this job require any special training? If so, please describe what type of training is necessary.

mr. w: It is a unique type of business. I don't know if it requires a specific type of training other than getting a degree in management or business because you do need to know how to do the books. It is a type of business you sort of run from a gut reaction. For example, a decision as to the type of film the people want to see. That is a tough call because you never know what

you are going to see. After 17 years of experience there are times when I still don't know what I am doing because you never know what the audience is going to do. You don't know what they want to see or what they like. However, I remember two years ago when I asked my booker to book Home Alone for a few weeks and six weeks later we were still packing them in. I knew at the time it would sell well in the area.

Each audience and each area is different so it is important to know the area adjust to the area you are in

me: What is the most rewarding part of your career?

mr. w: I think the most rewarding part is seeing this theater reach its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. There are very few businesses in this country that hit 75 years old and now we are working on 80. That is not heard of in the movie business. Keeping an institution in this town alive that the people and families trust know we are here and not a fly by night.

me: What is the challenging or difficult part of your job?

Mr. W: Dealing with the studios. Trying to get a film, being able to say, we are going to open Aladdin and Disney says that you can't get a print of that because they are all taken. The arguing and trying to work with the studios. You are at their mercy it is never consistent.

me: Do any other family members work at the theater?

Mr. W: No, my brother is an engineer for Ford down in Detroit so I am the only family member.

me: Please describe what you look for in your employees.

Mr. W: We try to hire sophmores in high school because it is usually a persons first job that they get. It is not a difficult but a good learning experience because you have to deal

with a large number of the public at once. You built a lot of confidence real quick and good for basic math skills. We try to have someone who gets good grades in school and shows they care about themselves which includes good appearance, dress and shows fortitude. It is an easy going job because once the curtain goes up you basically take it easy for 1 1/2 hours until the next show.

me: Could you please describe some interesting or humorous events that happened during this career?

Mr. W: One was a stage show we did for the Humane Society a few years ago. The theater was packed and I have a wolf malmute mix dog that was about 150 pounds. We brought him out and Steve Asplund the local newscaster was the master of ceremony. My dog decided to lay down on the stage and yawn and didn't howl but the audience sure did. Just a few weeks ago with the computerized projection, half way through the show the curtain decided to close. It thought the movie was over and it shut the curtain without us knowing.

me: At any time did you feel like changing careers?  
Why or why not?

Mr. W: At first I wanted to be a motion picture director but then I decided against it. As long as this business stays fun I will be here. As soon as it becomes not fun I may want to change. I fore see being here for a long time. We have a few things up our sleeves we want to try and various types of programming and stage shows.

me: What are your biggest responsibilities on the job?

Mr. W: main thing is the quality of presentation. The people come in and they are paying their hard earned bucks at the box office to escape. They may have had a hard day at work, a bad day at school or at home and movies are probably still the ultimate escape for anybody. You come to get away from your problems and so when they come we want to make sure everything goes well. Generally speaking, that is the most challenging because

there is so much competition in the entertainment business today. Not only just movies but television and other activities. Everyone only has an x number of minutes in a day so you have to make sure they got their money's worth.

me: Have you received any special awards or were you recognized in any way for your job performance?

me.w: Personally, I don't think I have gotten any personally but the theater has been recognized several times in the local community, of course, because of its historic status and because of our upgrading and restoring. It has also been recognized in architectural circles. It was recognized by the Michigan Society of Architects for the facade of the building still being in tack and made some major exhibits and tours and things like that. The building itself has received many awards.

me: What are your favorite hobbies or leisure activities? Do you have any stories about them?

Mr. W: Snowmobiling, hiking, camping, boating and exploring. I like being in the woods a lot. Then again, I love the movie theater, big city type things such as concerts and Broadway shows. Generally speaking, I like photography and also playing the organ.

me: What direction would you like to see the Butler go in the future?

Mr. W: I don't know. The movie industry is changing so fast. The next four or five years is going to be a humdinger. I would like to if feasible, be able to keep the theater as intact as possible representing the era of motion pictures that really made it great. I would like to periodically try bringing in some good historical films and classical films. Last year we brought in *Singing In the Rain*, the *Glen Miller* story and *The Sound of Music*. Some of the great classical films that people rent on video but have never seen it in a theater on a big screen. If we could do that like once a month and form a series that would be something I would like to achieve. People pick up the paper and they say they would like to see a

movie and say I wonder what they are doing at the Butler, knowing it is going to be totally alternative. That is something I would like to try to do in the future.

me: In closing, do you have anything else you would like to add?

Mr. W: Good interview the way it was set up. As far as the motion picture exhibition business this theater pretty much represents everything the way it stands today but it is unique because again of the neat history involved with this particular building and its location in town.

me: Thank you!