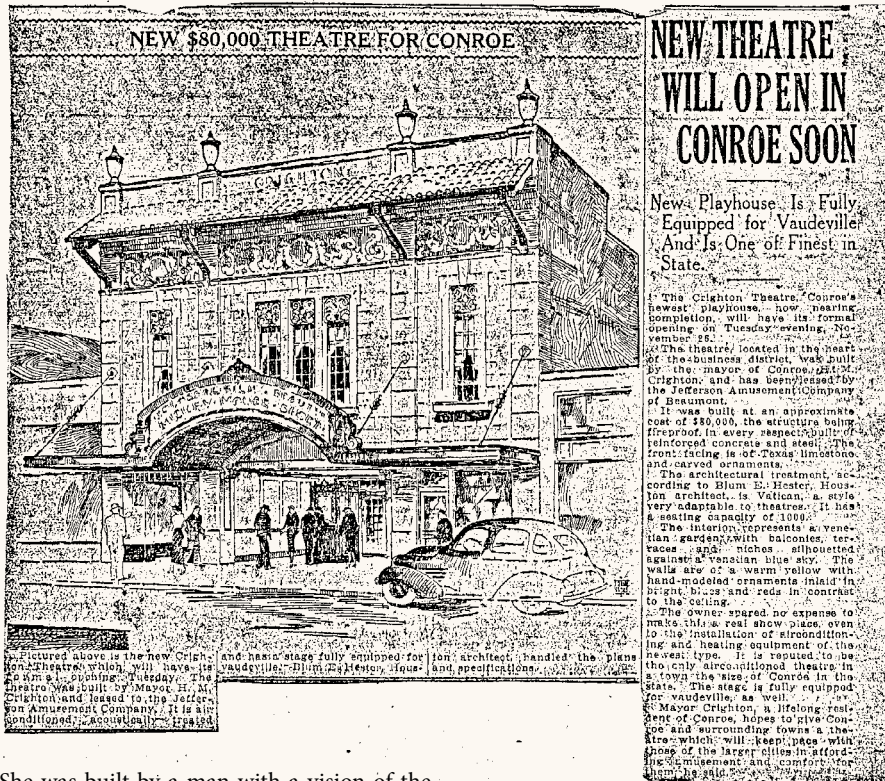


STAGE RIGHT

Asks Community to “Share Your Story” of the Crighton Theatre

By: Carolyn Corsano Wong



Hallie Crighton Guthrie and Frank Guthrie

with a deep blue sky complete with twinkling stars. For comfort, the Crighton boasted the only fully electric refrigerated air cooling system for miles around. The mechanic remnants of this massive system remain in the basement under the lobby. Outlets for the air ducts were cleverly hidden behind large carved plaster medallions. The building itself was described in its day as “practically fireproof” since it was constructed of reinforced concrete, structural steel and masonry. According to Conroe Courier articles of the day, “no expense was spared in the construction in order to give the

She was built by a man with a vision of the future and a desire to give something back to the town that had given him so much. She has seen the town around her change from dirt roads to paved streets; from boom to bust and back again. She has hosted luminaries and nervous young couples on their first date. She sat empty and neglected until a new generation of civic leaders lovingly restored her to her former glory. She welcomed generations of families to come play on her stage, stand in her wings and provide live theatre to the delight of friends and neighbors. Recently, she’s been the object of controversy regarding her master, her purpose and her destiny. Through it all she has remained the Crown Jewel of Montgomery County. She is the Crighton Theatre and she wants you to tell her story so that future generations will know her and want to preserve her.

In honor of her 75th birthday, STAGE RIGHT of Texas, the new non-profit theatre company now performing at the Crighton, will prepare a living history of the Crighton Theatre. We are in the process of collecting stories (via print and interviews), pictures and memories of the theatre to be recorded on a commemorative DVD and booklet. Profits from the sale of the history set will be placed in an

endowment fund for much needed renovation expenses. It’s been awhile since the Grand Dame has had a facelift and she needs attention. Our goal is to begin the project this year and have the history set on sale at the start of our 2010-2011 Season. 2010 will mark the 75th anniversary of the Crighton opening. Beginning with our production of Vaudeville (Finally) Comes to the Crighton, which kicks off our 2009-2010 Season, we celebrate the 75th anniversary of her beginnings. It’s quite a story.

In 1934 then mayor Harry M. Crighton began construction on what he hoped would be “one of the fanciest [theaters] west of the Mississippi.” Conroe architect Blum E. Hester designed the theatre in the Italian-Romanesque style. Crighton wanted room for both movies and Vaudeville entertainment so he requested 40’ of fly space above the stage so scenery could be quickly and easily changed. According to Crighton, “safety, comfort and beauty” were the guiding principles in all aspects of design and construction of the \$80,000 theatre. The interior of the theatre was reminiscent of a Venetian garden complete with balconies, terraces, niches, frescos all capped overhead



people of Montgomery County an amusement center second to none in this section of the state."

After a year of construction, a Courier headline heralded the opening in 1935: "Crighton Theatre Opens Tuesday Nov. 26 at 6 pm." After paying 25 cents for adults and 15 cents for kids at the circular ticket booth in what is now the front part of the lobby, patrons walked on the beautiful tiled floor to "park their cares" in the "leather upholstered highly polished hardwood spring air cushioned chairs." That first night they were entertained by 11 yr. old dancer and master of ceremonies J.W. Marning, students of the Abel School of Dance, selected shorts and the newly released "Stars Over Broadway" starring Pat O'Brian. It was a night to remember, as were many spent at the Crighton.

Another such memorable night was the grand re-opening of the Crighton after her restoration in 1979. For decades the Crighton remained the place to see movies, shorts and newsreels. Lifelong Conroe resident Edith Clanton remembers going to the Crighton during WWII to see how we were doing. "It was a very scary time" she recalled and the Crighton was there to keep everyone informed and entertained during those uncertain times. Life as a movie house continued for years with Vaudeville never playing on the Crighton stage. In 1967 the theatre was closed at the request of the Crighton family due to their disapproval of the quality of movies played in the theatre bearing the Crighton name. The theatre sat empty and neglected. Water filled the orchestra pit, rodent and pigeon droppings were everywhere. The once enchanting blue sky with twinkling stars had fallen and was beyond repair. Luckily, the Crighton was seen by some civic leaders as a potential home for the Little Theatre of Conroe, who had recently formed and were then performing in the old Hunt Plumbing building. In 1976 Hallie Crighton Guthrie, the only child of Harry Crighton, generously donated the theatre to the citizens of Montgomery County for use by non-profit arts groups and to be administered by the newly formed Montgomery County Foundation for the Performing Arts. Spearheading the efforts to restore the Crighton was foundation member Rigby Owen Jr. Not only in charge of construction but fundraising as well, Mr. Owen managed to raise over \$500,000 needed for the renovations (all from private monetary and in-kind donations and none of it city funds). After nearly two years of planning, fundraising, careful refurbishment and as Dick Martin remembers, "many days of shoveling pigeon poop" the stage was once again set for a glorious opening.

One night wasn't enough to celebrate the grand re-opening of the Crighton. It was a week long celebration which began Jan. 25, 1979. The lovely theatre was filled to the brim with locals and dignitaries including members of the Crighton family. All enjoyed the glori-

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ous music provided by the Houston Symphony and Conroe native bass-baritone soloist Leslie Guinn. The celebration continued all week with performances by Ballet in the Woods, the Conroe Chorale, the Greater Houston Community Orchestra Society and the Tidelanders Barbershop Chorus. Celebrations were capped off with the first performance of The Little Theatre of Conroe in their new home; "The Last Meeting of the

Knights of the White Magnolia." It was a celebration to remember.

What stories of the Crighton do you remember? We at STAGE RIGHT are new to the Crighton; we have a short history there. We are humbled by the awesome history of the space we are allowed to perform in. We too deeply respect all those that have graced the stage before us and especially those that stepped up to the awesome task of saving the

Crighton 30 years ago. If it wasn't for them, 234 N. Main would now most likely be a parking lot. The Crighton holds a special place in the hearts of many. We appreciate that and want to record these memories before they are lost forever. We hope you will consider shar-



Crighton Theatre before facade refurbishment



Mezzanine



Lobby chandelier



Lobby ceiling art



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ing your stories with us. To do so, please send information to history@crighton-theatre.com or carolyn.wong@stage-right.org, or call 281-363-1567 to set up an interview.

If you are new to the area, and have no history with the Crighton, we hope you will come visit her. We currently have a lovely family comedy playing on her stage: Cheaper by the Dozen. Performances are July 31 - August 16th Friday & Saturday nights at 8 pm and two Sunday matinees on Aug. 9 & 16 at 2 pm. Following that we will launch our 2009-2010 season with singing, dancing, comedy and specialty acts in Vaudeville (Finally) Comes to the Crighton which will run Sept. 11 - 27. For more information on our season visit our websites www.stage-right.org or <http://resources.stage-right.org>. To see what all groups performing at the Crighton are doing visit our new website: www.crighton-theatre.com. To purchase tickets and to obtain season tickets, please call the Crighton Theatre box office 936-441-SHOW (7469). We hope to see you at the Crighton!

STAGE RIGHT wishes to thank and acknowledge the contributions of the Montgomery County Heritage Museum research department, especially Gertie Spencer and Sally Copely for providing pictures and a treasure trove of information about the Crighton. We also thank Dick Martin, Edith Clanton and Cynthia Devlin for sharing their memories. ♦

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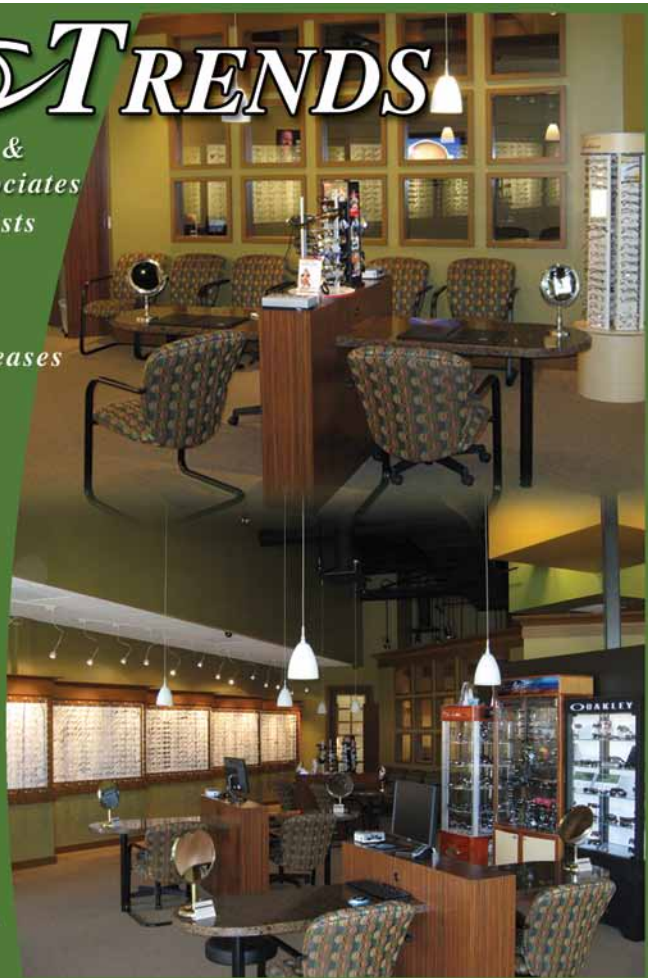
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For more information:
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