

# THE THEATERS OF ARKANSAS CITY

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## Introduction

This paper will focus on some of the historical aspects of the old Arkansas City theaters, roughly in the chronological order of their operation. After an overview of the different theaters including the circumstances of their existence, later sections of the paper will focus on some of the key events that occurred in some of the theaters and the people involved in making those events happen.

## Overview

By the early 20th century, Arkansas City had gained a reputation as “a good amusement center” and “one of the best theatre-going towns in Kansas”. Town leaders showed their support for the theater in the late 1880s when they formed a company to finance an elegant, three-story opera house.

The town boosters, known as the Fifth Avenue Ring, noted that Ark City's previous opera house, Highland Hall, had become inadequate in terms of seating capacity “to meet the demands of the amusement-loving people of our progressive city”.

The new opera house was to be built on the southwest corner of Fifth Avenue and B Street, where the Arkansas City Recreation Center now stands. It had a seating capacity of 1,850, more than double the seating capacity of Highland Hall.

The three-story opera house was constructed of native stone and represented an investment of \$70,000. It opened in 1888.

Live theater attendance began to fade early in the 20th century as audiences turned more to moving pictures for entertainment. Nickelodeons started to appear nationwide starting in 1905 and flourished until 1915.

Of course the advent of movies didn't mean the end of live theater. The opera house continued to offer plays, musicals, operas, operettas, band and orchestra performances, minstrel shows, vaudeville and other stage acts during the first several decades of the twentieth century. However, the number of live performances dwindled.

Around the turn of the century, the opera house started to be called, alternately, the Fifth Avenue Theatre. For a year or so at the midpoint of the first decade of the 1900s, it was called Ranney's Fifth Avenue Theatre because it was the property of W.R. “Roy” Ranney. Also around that time, moving pictures were included as part of its programs.

C. Bonn, general manager, announced in a 1910 newspaper advertisement that the Fifth Avenue Theatre would be run “on a Co-Operative Plan.” It would open “as a