Mass Culture Meets Main Street: Opening of Lakeland’s Polk Theatre

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MASS CULTURE MEETS MAIN STREET:
THE OPENING OF LAKELAND’S
POLK THEATRE
by Stephen E. Branch

An outgrowth of the expansionist goals of the American film industry and the related movie palace construction surge during the 1920s, Lakeland’s Polk Theatre serves as an example of how mass cultural developments were manifested in one, small central Florida town. Part of the phenomenon hailed by many as architectural evidence of rising popular tastes, yet derided by others as an over-blown tribute to “middle-class seriousness and bourgeois beauty,” Lakeland’s movie palace offers valuable insights into national, regional, and local cultural history. In many respects, the Polk Theatre stands as a reminder of the meeting of mass culture and main street.

Any exploration of the direct link between the expansionist studio system and the Polk Theatre must also incorporate a consideration of the state and local setting into which the Polk was introduced. Much like the American film industry, the state of Florida and the city of Lakeland were confronted with new social and cultural challenges during the 1920s. Perhaps the first truly modern decade in Florida’s history, the 1920s ushered in a period of unprecedented growth and change. Hailed as the “metropolis of Imperial Polk County,” Lakeland was both literally and figuratively a central, representative city during the turbulent twenties.

The 1920s featured a faith in the material growth of the nation. This, combined with Florida’s natural allure, caused much of the state to seemingly mushroom overnight. “Tin can tourists” suddenly streamed into the state. Real estate speculation was rampant and furious. In the Tampa Bay area, men such as D. P. “Doc” Davis parlayed their vision and salesmanship into millions of dollars of profit. Indeed, on the west coast, the newly opened Gandy Bridge symbolized the era of prosperity and development that had engulfed the region. On Florida’s Gold Coast the land boom was even more explosive. Between 1921 and 1925 the payroll of the city of Miami grew 2,449 per cent. The assessed value of property in the city jumped 560 per cent in that same time span. The value of issued building permits skyrocketed from $4.48 million to $58.65 million.

Writing of this dynamic growth during 1920s, historians Raymond Arsenault and Gary R. Mormino have pronounced the decade a “great watershed for Florida’s cities.” And though central Florida’s towns experienced less spectacular growth during the boom than many of the state’s coastal cities, they still participated in the economic upsurge. In Winter Haven, new boom-oriented structures, such as the Haven Hotel and the Lake Region Country Club, were built. Also among Winter Haven companies hoping to cash in on the real estate bonanza was the Haven-Villa Bond and Mortgage Company. Formed in 1926, the company proudly listed its loan reserves at $1.5 million. The same year, the half-million-dollar Hotel Plant opened in Plant City, Lakeland’s neighbor to the west. With more than one hundred rooms, the huge project was viewed as another example of what local newspapers proclaimed “convincing testimony on the utter soundness of Florida.” It “prove[d] conditions in the state are good and that the future of Florida is assured.”

Sounding similarly sanguine, local civic leaders throughout central Florida trumpeted their communities’ eagerness to participate in the state’s exceptional growth.
The same was true of Lakeland. After several decades as a small, relatively sleepy southern town, Lakeland had by 1920 surpassed the county seat, Bartow, as Polk County’s most populous city. Moreover, as the twenties progressed, Lakeland lived up to many of its leaders’ expectations and became one of central Florida’s most important municipalities. Fundamental to Lakeland’s expansion and participation in the Florida boom were two significant developments: the city’s increased role as a regional rail center and the county’s enhancement of its road system. Already an important stop on the Seaboard Air Line’s Lake Wales to Tampa route, Lakeland added a second service in 1914, when the Atlantic Coast Line invested nearly half-a-million dollars in its Lakeland yards and facilities. Naturally by the 1920s, as the largest town between Orlando and Tampa, Lakeland was also a prominent stop on the railroads’ passenger runs.7

Despite the continuing importance of rail service, Lakeland’s growth during the 1920s was most indelibly marked by its relationship to the automobile. By 1923, Polk County had invested over $2.5 million in road construction resulting in 340 miles of serviceable thoroughfares. Opening much of the county to development, the expanded road system was soon dotted with motels and trailer parks built to accommodate the steady flow of “tin can tourists.” Similarly, throughout the twenties Lakeland sought ways to finance new street construction programs

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7 Photograph from *Yesterday’s Lakeland* by Hampton Dunn.
within the city limits. In point of fact, the building of paved roads and the broadened accessibility of the automobile opened much of Florida during the 1920s. Henry Ford’s great emancipator – the Model T – permanently transformed Florida travel into a mass phenomenon associated with middle-class mobility and personal freedom. For Lakeland, this meant that Polk’s largest town was within two hours’ driving distance of all county points.8

An increasingly popular destination of choice, Lakeland rode the crest – and eventual collapse – of Florida’s economic wave during the 1920s. During, the 1923-24 season alone, in excess of 20,000 tourists visited Lakeland. Moreover, between 1920 and 1924 the city’s population increased from 7,062 to more that 16,500 permanent residents. By decade’s end Lakeland was the state’s second most populous inland city – trailing only Orlando. To accommodate this growth, city officials – as early as 1924 – attempted to effectively manage Lakeland’s boom-town status. The inclusive city limits were extended from four miles to thirty square miles. Bonds totaling several million dollars were issued for road paving, hospitals, fire and police protection, new municipal buildings, sewage disposal, and other public improvements.9

Even when the first signs of economic downturn began to surface in late 1925, Lakeland continued its public and private expansion programs at a rapid clip. The new home to Florida Southern College, the Cleveland Indians' spring training camp, and Polk County’s first “skyscraper” (the Lakeland Terrace Hotel), at mid-decade Lakeland appeared well positioned for a still brighter economic future.10 On the same day in 1926 that the Lakeland Star-Telegram heralded the opening of downtown’s ten-story Marble Arcade building, the local Chamber of Commerce listed a “plan of accomplishments” for the year that included national advertising, industrial expansion, another railroad, an Interlake canal system, better street lighting, street widening, and city beautification.11 Clearly, even when accounting for the chamber’s self-interested motives behind such a “wish list,” it is evident that most Lakelanders did not anticipate the economic difficulties that lay ahead.

Tales of Florida’s seemingly inevitable bust have long served as recycled, cautionary, economic parables. And certainly, the heady days of wild speculation and exponential growth were short lived. Land fraud, shortages of adequate housing, and in many areas still underdeveloped transportation services all contributed to Florida’s downward economic spiral. It was not long before the northern press began to leak word that Florida no longer offered what the brochures promised. Hence, a state economy heavily dependent upon image was severely damaged when that amorphous commodity was tarnished. By the end of 1926, the boom had collapsed. Property values plummeted. Banks stood on shaky ground. Housing starts took a precipitous dive. In Lakeland, for example, new home construction dropped by nearly forty per cent between 1925 and 1926.12

Across the state, cities fell into debt. Moreover, these problems were compounded by a series of natural disasters that occurred in the late 1920s. Two hurricanes (one in September 1926 and the other in September 1928) killed a combined total of over 2,000 people and caused millions of dollars in property damage along the state’s south Atlantic coast area. In addition, in 1929 the Mediterranean fruit fly was discovered in a citrus grove near Orlando; within a year citrus production dropped by approximately forty per cent.13
And yet, while clearly affected by the state’s economic woes, Lakeland’s downturn was less pronounced than that experienced in other – particularly South Florida – cities. Phosphate and citrus provided a base which, though fissured, still offered ongoing economic support. Nor did the graying economic climate signal the cessation of all significant construction in Lakeland. Rather, it served as a retardant for several of the city’s more ambitious undertakings. For example, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America’s national home for retired and disabled members did not open until 1928 five years after construction began. Analogously, one of the city’s most important public structures, the Civic Center by Lake Mirror, was begun during the boom but was not completed until July 1928. Across the lake and rising majestically near its western shore, the Lake Mirror Promenade was completed the same year. Longer still was the time it took to complete the New Florida Hotel. Construction on the imposing building began during the boom, but its completion was delayed until 1935! As for the Polk Theatre, it too suffered setbacks as a result of economic pressures. For although construction on the theatre began in November 1926, and was completed in the spring of 1927, the theatre remained closed until December 1928.¹⁴

The history of motion picture exhibition in Lakeland, however, began a full fifteen years before construction started on the Polk. Billed as “The Pioneer Picture House in Lakeland,” the
Edisonia Theatre showed silent films as early as 1911. By 1914, the Edisonia was replaced by three, competing downtown movie houses – the Majestic Theatre, the Auditorium Theatre, and the Palms Theatre. Over the course of the next decade-and-a-half, though marked by various openings and closings, Lakeland’s motion picture theatres remained an important part of the city's business district.

As the 1920s progressed and the film industry solidified its position within American mass culture, Lakelanders, like residents of countless other cities and towns, increasingly looked to the movies as their first choice for entertainment. When considering the then small town of Lakeland, one need only consult contemporary newspapers to gain an appreciation of the cultural prominence afforded motion pictures. During the mid-twenties, the Lakeland Evening Ledger not only ran daily box advertisements for local theatres, but also devoted a full Sunday page to articles on upcoming film attractions, movie star gossip, and other industry news. The local paper offered frequently detailed, always enthusiastic, plot summaries of new movies. Transparent in its promotional tone and liberal in its dispersal of critical praise, the Lakeland press touted movie-going as something just short of a civic duty. People were actively encouraged to patronize local theatres. For instance, when “reviewing” the Tom Mix silent vehicle, “The Canyon of Light,” the Ledger characteristically gushed: “Hard boiled critics who have seen previews of the latest Mix thriller say it contains some of the most daring and spectacular riding shown, together with scenes of wild beauty in the Yellowstone Park sequences that are a delight to the eye. Suspense, too, of a superlative kind with a real story packed with romance will make ‘The Canyon of Light’ a picture that is sure to enthuse any audience.” When it came to movie-going, all Lakeland lacked was a theatre worthy of its infatuation with motion pictures.

The Polk Theatre officially opened its doors to an eagerly awaiting public on December 22, 1928. With great civic pride the Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram proclaimed the new facility “the finest in the world for a city the size of Lakeland.” Indeed, the Polk was an impressive addition to Lakeland’s downtown business district. Technically a thoroughly modern theatre, the Polk – while far less ostentatious than many other late twenties movie palaces – also offered the requisite amount of whimsy and romanticism associated with the movie palace phenomenon. A seemingly flawless embodiment of function and fantasy, the theatre at the corner of Lemon Street and South Florida Avenue was set for a two-decade engagement as the leading light on Lakeland's entertainment scene.

Looking back at the Polk Theatre’s opening day provides a particularly revealing glimpse into the cultural significance that the movie palace possessed for Americans during this time period. The hometown press reported that 2,000 of the 2,200 tickets available for the one o’clock matinee were sold within one hour of the box office’s noon opening. Another movie theatre, the Strand was temporarily closed due to the Polk’s opening day draw. And prior to the evening screening, there were pre-show parties thrown across town. Moreover, once the patrons arrived at the Polk, they walked through a front lobby filled with “many beautiful flower bouquets,” sent to the management from local merchants and prominent citizens. The film that first day was “On Trial,” advertised as “a Warner Brothers’ all-talking special ... declared the outstanding achievement of the world's greatest dramatic era.” However, it was not the now forgotten film
that ultimately was of importance – it was Polk Theatre. Former Polk projectionist, Arthur Bowden, remembered the excitement that greeted the opening:

I had worked at the Palace and the Rex theatres before I moved over to Polk. It was the showplace of the county. It was for the whole county, and people drove from all over the county to see it. The Polk was the place to go in those days. You have to remember that in those days we didn't have T.V., and even radio was pretty new. The Polk was an important place.\(^{21}\)

Bowden’s reminiscence supports contemporary accounts in the Ledger which summarized the Polk’s first week of operation as a “grand success in every way.”\(^{22}\)

“Grand” was an appropriate adjective for many aspects of the Polk Theatre. Although a local businessman, John E. Melton, conceived and developed the idea, the two people most responsible for the primary design and physical completion of the Polk were architect James E. Casale and builder George A. Miller. Both based in Tampa at the time of construction, Casale and Miller joined in a collaborative effort that historically ranks high among all of central Florida’s architectural projects during the 1920s.

For architect Casale, the Polk Theatre building represented the professional apex of his brief Florida career. Born in Villarosa, Italy, in 1890, Casale immigrated with his family to the United States in 1900. Later studying architecture at Cooper Union College and Columbia University, he eventually found his professional way to Tampa, where in 1925 he opened an office in the newly constructed Tampa Theatre and Office Building. Although the Polk edifice stands as the only significant Florida building attributable to Casale, his brief stay and relationship with Melton, the Famous Players-Lasky Company, and the theatre project ultimately served him well. After returning to New York in 1928, Casale established himself as a leading architect and eventually worked on several high profile “adaptive use projects,” including the Villard House (originally designed by McKim, Mead & White in 1883) and the city mansions of Joseph Pulitzer and Kermit Roosevelt.\(^{23}\)

For George Miller, however, the Polk Theatre was but one of dozens of large-scale construction projects associated with his Tampa-based business. Aside from building the theatre and office complex in which Casale rented professional space, the Philadelphia-born Miller oversaw construction of such diverse Tampa projects as the downtown Maas Brothers department store, Floridian Hotel, and ten-story Citrus Exchange building. In Pinellas County, Miller built St. Petersburg’s Vinoy Park and Bellaire’s Belleview Hotel. He also supervised the construction of over twenty S & H Kress stores, ranging from those located in such Florida cities as Tampa, Orlando, and Daytona Beach to Kress projects in Billings, Montana, and Spokane, Washington. In Polk County, along with his Lakeland theatre and neighboring Marble Arcade building, Miller’s professional legacy remains best preserved in the work he oversaw at Lake Wales’ exclusive Mountain Lake residential/resort community.\(^{24}\)

As noted in Joyce M. Davis’s study, *Lakeland’s Unique Architectural Heritage*, the brick exterior of the Polk Theatre closely follows the Palladian form common in Renaissance inspired theatre design. Presenting a modest, yet stately outward appearance, such theatres deceptively encase the “fantasy world” interior elements of the structure. Rising in a two-tiered fashion to four stories and measuring 142 by 120 feet, the Polk Theatre building is fronted (facing east) by
a two-story facade with cast concrete embellishments that frame its red brick walls. Housing store fronts, offices, and the Polk’s main entrance, these two levels feature a graceful Palladian window suspended above the theatre’s entry portal, and they are also accented by arches over other windows and doors, as well as ornamental pilasters and rosettes. Adding emphasis to the “classical horizontal axis” of this business-like facade block is a prominent, contrasting concrete cornice that visually stabilized the building’s South Florida Avenue frontage.25

Rising somewhat ominously behind the two-story commercial block is the four-story, brick-covered shell that houses the main theatre portion of the building. Topped by a flat roof framed by a thin concrete cornice, the exposed exterior walls of the auditorium section are symmetrically divided (with the exception of the unadorned north wall) into vertical bays, which are denoted by segmental columns. Also helping to offset the horizontal emphasis of the lower, commercial level, are rectangular brick panels that mark each vertical bay section.26 Nevertheless, this towering, theatre portion of Casale’s building constitutes a rather austere backdrop when compared to the quietly elegant design features employed on the store front and office levels.

Of course, the central feature of this downtown structure was the Polk Theatre and its Italian Renaissance inspired interior. Originally, when entering the theatre portion of the building,
patrons were greeted by an outer lobby decorated with murals featuring pastoral garden scenes, fountains, and exotic birds. There was a free-standing box-office (kiosk) which sat on a marble base that support carved, wooden panels rising up to a copper roof. Bronze light fixtures lined the walls. The gently sloping (upward) outer lobby ended at two sets of large, wooden doors. The first set led to an elaborately decorated inner lobby; the pair on the left, however, directed patrons past the long, waist-high partition wall that separated the inner lobby from the main seating area.27

Once inside the main auditorium, patrons were engulfed by the full effect of Casale’s reverie inducing design. Indeed, Casale, the Italian-born immigrant, had re-created a Mediterranean village in the heart of central Florida. Flanked by Italianate walls distinguished by niches, sconces, and faux balconies and windows, the patron’s eye was aesthetically drawn toward the stage and the full-scale Italian Renaissance “townhouse” setting that dominated the Polk’s interior. The Venetian-style walls that surrounded the stage were adorned with balconies, rounded dual “windows,” highly embellished cornices, arched niches, frescoes of flora and fauna, and a red tile “roof” that completed the fantasy scene.

Accessible by two ornate staircases rising from the inner lobby area, the mezzanine level lobby was no less stylized. Featuring several twisted columns, delicate cornice and molding work,
awnings, and brass banded terrazzo floor, the mezzanine was further enhanced by red velvet drapes and leaded glass light fixtures.28

All of this interior splendor sat under the watchful eye of the Polk's “dream” ceiling. Painted a deep, royal blue, the ceiling fascinated patrons with its twinkling stars and sunrise/sunset effect. This was accomplished by a special “star machine” that in conjunction with a similar “cloud machine,” delighted theatre-goers who gladly craned their necks in order to obtain a better view of the Polk's elaborate ceiling show.

Simulating a natural setting (open-sky, stars, and cloud effects) and labeled “atmospheric,” this type of movie palace design was developed by architect John Eberson.29 Unlike many earlier movie palaces (perhaps best typified by Thomas Lamb’s designs), such theatres were according to David Naylor, “not so forbiddingly solid and formal, displaying their own playful, fantastic eclecticism, a dreamlike quality appropriate for the world of the movies.”30 In point of fact, the Tampa Theatre, above which J.E. Casale rented office space, has long been held aloft as representing the quintessential Eberson, “atmospheric” style.31 Upon the opening of the Tampa Theatre in October 1926, Eberson discussed the origins of his architectural inspiration:

I have been wintering in Florida for the past several years, and it is from this state that I got the atmospheric idea. I was impressed with the colorful scenes which greeted me at Miami, Palm
Beach, and Tampa, where I say happy, gaily-dressed people living constantly under azure skies and amongst tropical splendor. Visions of Italian gardens, Spanish patios, Persian shrines and French formal garden laws flashed through my mind, and at once I directed my energies to carrying out these ideas.

Undoubtedly, Casale’s stay in Eberson’s “Hispano-Italian” Tampa Theatre building influenced his aesthetic visions for Lakeland’s own “atmospheric” theatre.32

Aside from its many impressive aesthetic features, the Polk also boasted an exceptional array of equipment. The primary state switchboard was state-of-the-art: approximately 500 independent switches operated the strip lights, footlights, balcony floodlights, and the star and cloud machines. The board also was hooked-up to a telephone and page system which allowed its operator to communicate with other areas of the theatre. The 34-by-16 foot movie screen hovered just behind the 36-by-12 orchestra pit. Behind the suspended screen, which could be removed, was a complete “hemp-house” stage rigging system. Unfortunately, the stage area was without one important item -a theatre organ. The Polk was built to accommodate one, but the Florida economic crunch that occurred prior to the theatre's opening halted the plans from being brought to fruition.33

Even the Polk’s chairs and overall seating scheme were touted in the opening-day press coverage as another example of the “scientific standpoint” from which the theatre’s design
emanated. Rhetorically juxtaposing the restlessness of “modern” audiences with those in the days of “Sarah Bernhardt and her ilk,” Lakeland’s newspaper asked: “what play, or what player of today could hold the audience spellbound through the devious windings of a tragedy, if the consciousness of cramped limbs and lack of ordinary creature comfort were ever present?”

The two most impressive technological features of the Polk were, however, the facility’s air-conditioning unit and, of course, the theatre’s capability for sound motion pictures. Offering new-found, cool respite to central Floridians, the Polk’s 100 ton, German-made Air Wash Carrier system was soon put to good use in the hot, humid months that followed the theatre’s winter opening. Although equipped with its own deep well for water, the huge air-conditioning system was reportedly such a drain on the city’s power supply that during its early years of operation it caused downtown lights to dim when switched on. Moreover, since the system was built in an era before the air-conditioning thermostat, the theatre was forced to employ an operator to turn it on and off. For instance, when it was pronounced too cold in the theatre, an usher would have to run down to the basement and inform the operator that it was time to shut the system down.

The introduction of sound motion pictures to Lakeland audiences came just as “talkie” technology was entering a new phase. The Polk Theatre’s opening day film offerings reflected that change. First developed by Western Electric and Warner Brothers in the mid-twenties,
Lakeland’s Polk Theatre in 1930.

Photograph from *Yesterday’s Lakeland* by Hampton Dunn.
Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc process, was installed in the Polk Theatre. The first successfully mass-produced “talkie” system, Vitaphone effectively established sound motion picture exhibition in the United States. However, film/disc synchronization problems often plagued the Vitaphone process, and the film industry began to explore new technology even as Vitaphone was hailed as the latest in motion picture entertainment. Along with the ever-present disc system threat that “a screw might jump a groove,” Vitaphone sound exhibition was a highly labor intensive affair. Recalling that in those early years four projectionists were often required to effectively handle the multi-reel/disc Vitaphone system, Arthur Bowden noted, “At first, sound was recorded on discs, and the reels would run only ten minutes. I remember all one reel had was Al Jolson singing ‘Sonny Boy.’ Eventually sound-on-film came in and we were cut down to one man per shift.”

Although Warner Brothers had temporarily gained an advantage through its ties to Vitaphone, the other major Hollywood studios quickly joined the sound revolution. Led by William Fox’s studio, the film industry soon moved on and embraced the sound-on-film process known as Movietone. Reportedly paying New York’s Case Research Laboratories one million dollars for patent rights, Fox’s Movietone system was initially employed in newsreels produced to accompany feature sound films using Vitaphone. Unlike Vitaphone, the recording of Movietone sound films utilized a microphone system that was mobile and did not require studio bound equipment. Indeed, Movietone was well suited to the newsreel production that marked sound-on-film’s ascendancy. The process’s first major triumph occurred in 1927, when only one day after the historic event, a Movietone newsreel thrilled the crowds at New York City’s Roxy with sound footage of Charles Lindbergh’s Long Island takeoff for his trans-Atlantic flight. And while the complete industry transition to sound-on-film (in feature films) took a few years, Vitaphone was ultimately a short-lived phenomenon.

Similarly, the Polk’s opening day program highlighted the technological flux that marked the film industry during the late 1920s. Not fully sensing the coming changing-of-the-guard in sound motion picture techniques, the Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram reported that the town’s new movie palace was thoroughly modern, boasting “both Vitaphone and the more recent Movietone.” Nevertheless, though the feature “On Trial” was prominently billed as “a full Vitaphone program,” the newspaper conceded that Movietone offered “a premiere . . . everyone is waiting to witness.”

The industry’s move to sound motion pictures was particularly important for America’s recently constructed movie palaces. In Movie-Made America, Robert Sklar contends that “the talkies provided in an instant the solution to the crisis of the picture palace.” Stressing economic ramifications, Sklar maintains that movie-goers “who had disdained the average first-run silents flocked to see any kind of talking film, even at jacked-up prices.” This was especially true in the ornate palaces scattered across the country. Analogously, industry historian Douglas Gomery stresses that the American cinema’s conversion to sound was “not only rapid, but also smooth, orderly, and extremely profitable.” This transition ensured “maximum profits and growth for . . . Hollywood monopolists.”

In Lakeland, the opening of the Polk and the coming of sound pictures perhaps took on deeper, certainly more localized resonance. Not only was mass culture’s most effective medium regally
showcased in a facility worthy of a much larger city, but the presence, and finally, the opening of that facility in late twenties’ Lakeland took on symbolic proportions. Commenting on the opening of such a movie palace in Polk County, the *Tampa Tribune* proclaimed the theatre a “big city achievement” that “will act upon the community as an invigorating tonic, doing much to eliminate the pessimism and lethargy of post-boom depression.”

For those who longed to believe in make-believe, the Polk’s light never shown brighter than it did in its early years. For whether it presented films, travelling stage acts, or hometown contests and pageants, the Polk effectively symbolized the town’s ties to both mass culture and its specific, localized identity within that culture. The entertainment center for thousands of central Floridians, the Polk Theatre maintained its status through the upcoming years of national depression and world war.

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2 *Lakeland Ledger*, November 28, 1926, p. 3.

3 Charlton W. Tebeau and Ruby Leach Carson, *Florida: From Indian Trail to Space Age* (Delray Beach, Fla.: The Southern Publishing Company, 1965), 57-59.


6 *Lakeland Evening Ledger*, November 11, 1926, p. 4.


10 See Dunn, *Yesterday’s Lakeland*, 46; and Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 6.

11 *Lakeland Star-Telegram*, April 18, 1926, p. 3.


14 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 6-7; Polk County Landmarks, “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet,” Polk Theatre Collection, Lakeland.
15 The Evening Telegram, November 2, 1911, p. 5; Lakeland Evening Telegram, September 22, 1914, p. 5.

16 Lakeland Star-Telegram, April 25, 1926, p. 8; Lakeland Evening Ledger, November 21, 1926, p. 13, and February 27, 1927, p. 5-B.

17 Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram, December 21, 1928, p. 8-B.


19 Ibid., December 28, 1928, p. 3.

20 Ibid., December 21, 1928, p. 8-B.

21 Interview with Arthur Bowden, Lakeland, Florida, October 23, 1989, p. 3.

22 Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram, December 28, 1928, p. 3.


24 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 9; Tampa Times October 12, 1929, p. 8-B; Tampa Tribune, October 10, 1926, p. 10-C.

25 Joyce M. Davis, Lakeland’s Unique Architectural Heritage (Lakeland: Polk Museum of Art, 1987), 17, 18, mimeographed reprint, Special Collections Lakeland Public Library, Lakeland; Polk County Landmarks, “Heavenly Daze,” 6, Polk Theatre Collection. “Heavenly Daze” was the title of the program distributed at the Polk’s reopening celebration.

26 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1, 2; interview with Tisha Sheldon, vice president of Polk Theatre, October 23, 1989 (in possession of the author). The Johnston and Bennett study of the Polk goes into considerable architectural detail regarding both the exterior and interior of the theatre. Their work has been very helpful in the compilation of this article.

27 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1, 2; “Heavenly Daze,” 6; Polk County Landmarks, “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet” (mimeographed), Polk Theatre Collection. Much of the original outer lobby of the Polk was altered as the decades passed to achieve a more “modern” appearance. Recent efforts to restore the theatre have uncovered several long forgotten pastel murals that once distinguished the main entrance.

28 Johnston and Bennett, “Historical Summary,” 1-3; “Heavenly Daze,” 6, 7; “Polk Theatre Fact Sheet;” Davis, Lakeland’s Heritage, 18; interview with Tisha Sheldon. One recurrent motif found throughout the theatre is that of the “Venetian rose.” Perhaps Casale’s decorative theme was employed as a nostalgic homage to his birthplace, Villarosa, Italy.


30 Naylor, “Ticket to the World of Movies,” 34.

31 Naylor, Movie Theaters, 100; Joseph M. Valerio and Daniel Friedman, Movie Palaces: Renaissance and Reuse (New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories Division, Academy for Educational Development, 1982), 79-81. When discussing the Tampa Theatre, Valerio and Friedman refer to it as “one of the only two atmospherics in the state.” Undoubtedly citing Eberson’s well-know Olympia (now the Gusman Center) in Miami as the other, the authors overlook Lakeland’s Polk.
C. Eberson said that his design for the Tampa was “not of the mission style found in California, nor the jazz architecture used in Miami.” It was “of the true Hispano-Italian style – that which came into vogue during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, lovers of art, who invited Italian architects, sculptors and painters to participate in some of the architectural wonders built during this period. Thus the effects of the Italian Renaissance were introduced into Spain and had a very wonderful, softening and refining effect on the comparatively speaking crude and coarse Spanish motif.” Ibid.

In the late 1980s, as part of an on-going restoration process, the Polk acquired a Robert-Morton Company pipe organ that had been placed in a Canton, Ohio, movie palace in the late twenties. In contemporary press reports that 2,000 tickets were sold for the opening day's afternoon show are probably misleading. However, there may have been a “standing-room” policy in effect due to the heavy local interest in the theatre's sound motion picture premiere.

Polk Theatre Fact Sheet; The Ledger, September 12, 1984, p. 3-C; Interview with Tisha Sheldon; Raymond Arsenault, “The End of the Long Hot Summer: The Air Conditioner and Southern Culture,” Journal of Southern History 50 (November 1984), 597-628. Ledger history columnist Martha F. Sawyer reported that the Polk was one of only six air-conditioned theatres in Florida during the late 1920s.

Interview with Arthus Bowden.


Interview with Arthur Bowden.


Lakeland Evening Ledger and Star-Telegram, December 21, 1928, p. 2.


Hall, Best Seats, 17.