

Block 16, Lot 2 of the Original Plat of Three Forks, MT

In January 1910, architect Fred F. Willson returned to his hometown of Bozeman after working for other firms in Helena, New York City, and Butte as well as spending about two years in France, Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom. From 1910 to his death in 1956 Willson had his hand in at least 330 architectural projects in the region. Many are now on the National Registry of Historic Places, including; Gallatin County Courthouse, Gallatin County Jail (now the Gallatin History Museum), Hotel Baxter, Club Moderne in Anaconda, the old Barrett Hospital in Dillon, and Eagle's Store in West Yellowstone.

Willson worked his craft in Three Forks too. Here, his architectural projects include a hotel for the Three Forks Land Co. (Sacajawea Hotel), a ranch house for B. S. Adams, the Methodist Episcopal Church, a frame store building for Mr. George Weeks, and a moving picture theater commissioned by Ralph Wells. This bit of enlightenment came to me when Richard Brown visited the Headwaters Heritage Museum a few Saturdays ago. Brown has been studying Willson for a number of years and came in looking for these Three Forks buildings.

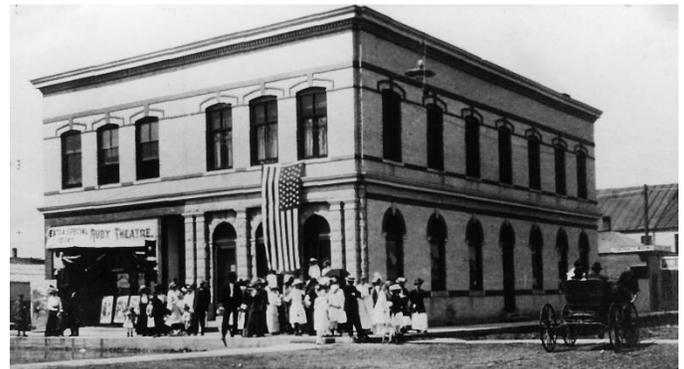
The one that stumped us both was the Wells Building. Since it was a theater, I thought it could be the current Ruby Theater or the Henslee Auditorium, but it was neither. A day later, I realized that the Wells Building, which now houses the Plaza Bar, first operated as the Ruby Theater for about four years. Mr. Brown confirmed that and sent me photos of the architectural designs that can be found in MSU Library.

Let's travel back in time and get a bit more history. Just two years after the first sale of lots, Three Forks' Main Street was thriving. Although most of the buildings were wood frame, the First National Bank (now the Masonic Temple) and the Three Valleys Bank (now the Headwaters Heritage Museum) were built of brick, a building material that conveys an aura of permanence and solid integrity.

By 1910, the growing population of Three Forks had prompted the opening of a variety of mercantiles and taverns, and there was a race to provide entertainment and venues for larger social gatherings. Brown's Hall, Russell Hall and Gillingham's Pool Hall were the largest venues at that time but barely adequate for larger crowds.

Brown's hall was being renovated to become the Cozy Theater, but it probably did not have the tiered seating of a "true theater." And the Henslee Auditorium would not be built until 1912.

In late 1911 Ralph Wells commissioned Bozeman architect Fred Willson to design a theater to be built on Block 16, Lot 2, next door to the Three Valley Bank building. The design incorporated the same second-story facade as the bank building (possibly to give the new building an aura of permanence) with a traditional theatre ground-floor façade. The upper floor would have apartments with front and rear access. By April 1912 Willson had the designs ready and the Ruby Theater was informally opened on August 22, 1912.



1915 photo of the Three Valleys Bank and the Ruby Theater. Courtesy of the Headwaters Heritage Museum

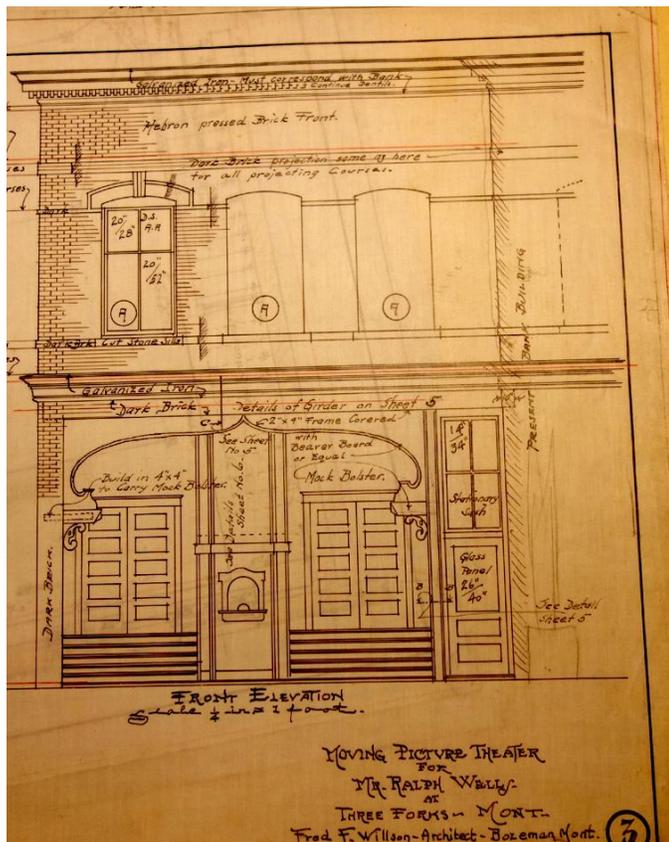
By 1915 the patrons of the Ruby Theater outgrew the facility and the new owner, Edward Waddell decided to build a larger theatre (the current Ruby Theater and the Three Forks Bible Church), which was completed in 1916.

Between 1916 and 1937 the history of the building is a bit murky. A 1917 photo of Main Street taken from atop the Adams Building looking down the street toward the new Ruby Theater shows the old Ruby Theater with a glass façade and a red cross sign in the window. The building could have been the headquarters of the newly formed Three Forks Auxiliary for the Red Cross, which was raising funds for the American Red Cross during World War I. One of the rooms upstairs served as the Masonic Lodge between 1912 and about 1916-1917.

A 1937 photo taken from the same spot shows that the building has Harry's Cocktail Lounge, run by Harry Salki. The late Arnold Wade told me that Harry ran a speakeasy out of the upstairs during Prohibition, although this does not fit the Salki family history timeline. From what I have gathered, the Salki family lived in Three Forks from 1915 to 1934, moved to Butte for a year and came back to Three Forks in 1935. Shortly after that,

Harry opened his cocktail lounge, which was later named the Plaza Bar. Harry died in 1940 and his wife, Lottie, ran the bar for another three years. Between 1943 and today there have been a number of owners and operators, including Heinie Elbert, Ted Murphy, Orin Selby, Gordon Peck, and the Scheifler family. The Plaza is now operated by Sheri Langehough.

The Headwaters Heritage Museum has several items in its collection related to the Plaza Bar, including a show case donated by Herb and Marie Scheifler (former owners of the Plaza). The Bellach family, Boots and Ruth Myers and Gail Clark have all donated Plaza related items to the collection. And now, we can add these images of the architect drawings to the collection.



Front Elevation of the "Moving Picture Theater" drawings by Fred Willson Courtesy of the MSU Library via Richard Brown

The front elevation of the architect drawings shows a ticket booth in the center with two sets of double doors on either side, with the glass panel door to the upstairs on the right front of the building. The rear elevation shows four doors, a coal door on the right, a basement door on the left, the rear door built at stage level and stairs traversing up from north to south to the upstairs door.

The stage at the back of the building was about fifteen feet wide and about two and a half feet off ground floor, but with a two-foot deep orchestra pit in front of the stage. The museum has no photos of the interior, but let your

imagination fill in the atmosphere at the Ruby's inaugural performance on August 29, 1912: *Uncle Josh Perkins*, a "rural comedy drama" in four acts. I would like to have been there.

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About the author: Patrick Finnegan has been writing about local history since 2002 after discovering the world of family genealogy. Patrick has been a member of and Treasurer for the Three Forks Area Historical Society for over 15 years. He has published two books, including *Taylor Made: Gallatin County's First Census*. His monthly column, *The Archivist's Logbook* is published in *The Lewis and Clark Journal*, a free newspaper delivered to Three Forks area residents.