

# UP FRONT



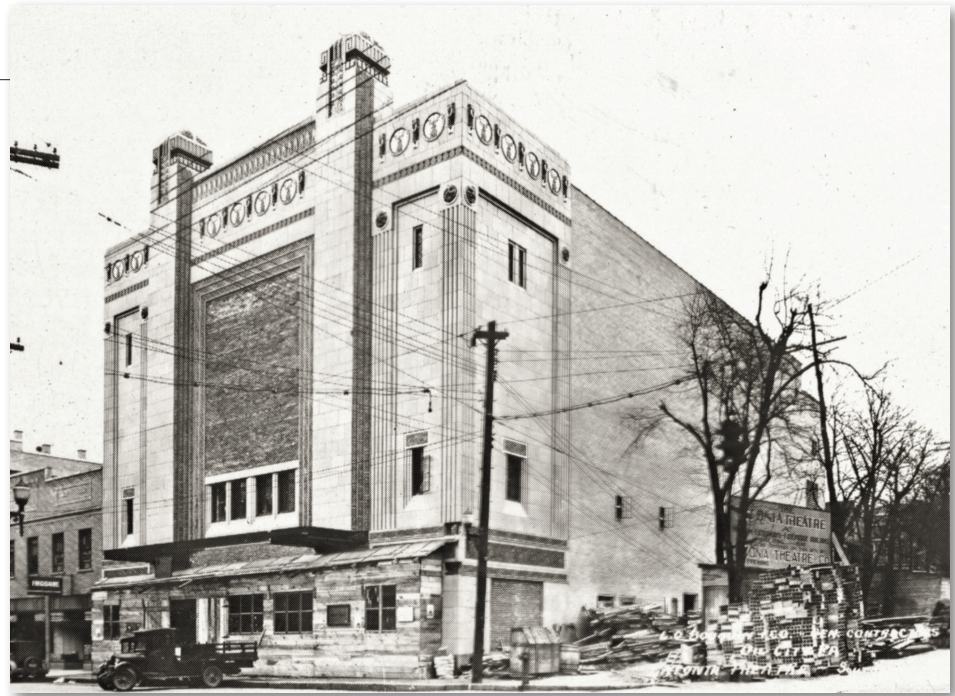
## NORTH BY NORTHWEST

By Kelly Anderson Gregg

### Art Deco Oil City

Nestled amongst low hills and quiet forests, astride the gentle bends of Oil Creek and the Allegheny River, sits Oil City, Venango County. Smaller now, and more careworn than in its heyday, Oil City's arching bridges and curvaceous Queen Anne homes lend themselves to the town's air of a storied past. Standing in contrast to the predominately Victorian grandeur, however, is the bold and beautiful Latonia Theater. An Art Deco delight unparalleled in the region, the Latonia is a striking example of one community's vision of renewal spanning the last century.

Originally part of Pennsylvania's 1796 land grant to Seneca chief Cornplanter, the Oil City area was slow to settle until the boom following Edwin Drake's successful oil well in nearby Titusville in 1859. Then, it was inundated, both literally and figuratively. At its peak, Oil City was the largest town in the county and home to myriad petroleum wells, a flatboating industry connecting Pittsburgh to the Oil Region, and the first oil exchange.<sup>1</sup> Reliance on oil, however, contributed to the city's boom-and-bust cycle economy; lean times were further exacerbated by devastating fires and floods throughout the late 19th century.<sup>2</sup> By the 1920s, Oil City clearly required a creative reinvestment. Seeing this



**The Latonia Theater during construction, late 1920s.**

*The (Oil City) Derrick and News-Herald.*

need, local business leaders pooled their resources and aligned their efforts with state and national initiatives to undertake a wide program of improvements: highways, railroad bridges, a hospital addition, the Oil City National Bank, and a variety of buildings including several theaters.<sup>3</sup> All had the same goal of working "toward a greater Oil City."<sup>4</sup>

While not the area's first theater or even its largest, the Latonia set itself apart by capturing Oil City's future-minded spirit.<sup>5</sup> Pittsburgh architectural firm Marks and Kann specifically wanted to use its own take on the newfangled Art Deco style to underscore the vision. Citing the Latonia as "distinctive in its coloring and decoration," Marks and Kann's soaring façade and brightly hued, Mayan-inspired exterior tiling established a unique look while

imbibing the glamor associated with cinemas during their golden age.<sup>6</sup> Inside, the theater was no less impressive: marble, crystal, murals, a faux fireplace, metalwork executed

by Grove City's Wendell August Forge, and a 26-foot-long chandelier, the largest of its kind in the country.<sup>7</sup>

With eerie foreshadowing, however, the Latonia opened on Herbert Hoover's inauguration day in 1929. While a sold-out crowd enjoyed *Sunrise* with Janet



**Latonia Theater interior, featuring gilded peacocks on either side of the stage, c. 1930.**

*The (Oil City) Derrick and News-Herald.*

Gaynor and George O'Brien amidst the theater's splendor, dark clouds gathered on the nation's horizon. As the Great Depression roared through the region, glitzy opening nights at the Latonia were replaced by the theater sponsoring turkey giveaways for the needy.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, financial difficulties led to a takeover by Warner Brothers in 1943.<sup>9</sup>



Exterior of the Latonia Theater, 2021.

Photo by Kelly Anderson Gregg.

Though the studio showed hits like *Casablanca*, hosted greats like Louis Armstrong, and made renovations, the Latonia was in its last days. Warner Brothers was broken up Standard Oil-style via anti-trust legislation, and so, clawing at stability amidst Oil City's boom-bust petroleum economy, the Latonia was closed in favor of a larger competitor in 1959.<sup>10</sup>

The Latonia has lived several lives since then, from a near-demolition, to a furniture showroom, to a candy store. In recent years, owner Roxanne Hitchcock, a historian and rare book dealer, painstakingly stripped away decades of interior changes to reveal the original swirling staircases, beautiful plasterwork, and even a hidden fountain during her restoration efforts. The task is enormous and the work ongoing, but Hitchcock believes "every community has a soft spot for certain buildings," and she isn't alone in her care for the aging structure, nor

in her enthusiasm to see it now used as a ballroom, bookstore, and coffee shop.<sup>11</sup> Objects from the theater can be found across town at the Venango Museum of Art, Science, and Industry, like two five-foot-tall, gilded plaster peacocks that once accented the Wurlitzer organ pipe openings. The Austrian crystals that comprised the peacocks' tail feathers enchanted audiences as they sparkled in time to the organ's vibrations.<sup>12</sup> The museum repaired then regilded the bodies of the peacocks and holds sections of the tail feather crystals in its collection, hoping to mount a small-scale restoration when funding is secured.<sup>13</sup> The passage of almost a century has done little to diminish the community's love of the Latonia and the spirit of revitalization it embodies. 🌟

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On display at the Venango Museum of Art, Science, and Industry is one of the Latonia Theater's gilded peacocks, repaired and regilded in 21K gold.

Venango Museum of Art, Science, and Industry.

<sup>1</sup> Lu Donnelly, et al, "Oil City," in Gabrielle Esperdy and Karen Kingsley, eds., *SAH Archipedia* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2012), at <https://sah-archipedia.org/essays/PA-01-0005-0003-0003>, acc. January 10, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "Big Building 1927 Feature in Oil City," *The Oil City Derrick*, January 2, 1928, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The Latonia derived its name from Oil City's Laytonia neighborhood, christened in honor of Oil City Lumber and Coal Company owners Charles and William Lay.

<sup>6</sup> "Single Word Describes New Theater—Unique," *The Oil City Derrick*, March 4, 1929, p. 8. The entirety of this issue is dedicated to the Latonia's opening.

<sup>7</sup> "Beauty, Comfort, and Color are Combined in Latonia Theater," *The Oil City Derrick*, March 4, 1929, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Advertisement, *The Oil City Derrick*, December 19, 1932, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> "Latonia Will Open March 19," *The Oil City Derrick*, March 11, 1943, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> "Latonia to Close Indefinitely; Drake to be Only Theater in City," *The Oil City Derrick*, December 15, 1959, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Roxanne Hitchcock, interview by author, January 30, 2021, Oil City, Pa.

<sup>12</sup> "Beauty, Comfort, and Color are Combined in Latonia Theater."

<sup>13</sup> Betsy Kellner, Executive Director of the Venango Museum of Art, Science, and Industry, e-mail message to author, January 7, 2021.