

## 2003-04 General Meeting schedule

**September 9** • 9:30 a.m./7:00 p.m.  
Will Rogers Theater

**October 14** • 9:30 a.m./7:00 p.m.  
Will Rogers Theater

**November 11** • 7:00 p.m. only  
Will Rogers Theater

**December 9** • 9:30 a.m./7:00 p.m.  
Blinn House

**January 13** • 7:00 p.m. only  
Will Rogers Theater

**February 10** • 9:30 a.m./7:00 p.m.  
Will Rogers Theater

**March 9** • 9:30 a.m./7:00 p.m.  
Will Rogers Theater

**April 13** • 7:00 p.m. only  
Will Rogers Theater

**May 11** • 7:00 p.m. only  
Oklahoma City Golf & Country Club

## Welcome to the first issue of Link Extra!

Beginning this month, there will be changes in the communication you receive from the Junior League of Oklahoma City. The *League Link* will now be published in October, January, April and July. This newsletter, *Link Extra*, will be published in September, November, December, February, March and May. These changes were made to make the best use of our publication budget and advertising dollars. We welcome your feedback!

# Junior League finds a new home in the Will Rogers Theater

## Will Rogers Theater: The Heartbeat of a Community

BY CARL S. MILAM

When asked to pen a brief history of the Will Rogers Theater I was more than happy to comply. I had the impression that this would be a short and easy task, a simple black-and-white list of names and dates and numbers. What I found to my delight is that the history of the theater is deeply intertwined with the history of Oklahoma City and several of its more prominent residents. The only trepidation that I have is that this task could well become a thesis on the ebb and flow of families and empires.

However, I will attempt to distill it down to a synopsis appropriate for a neighborhood newsletter.

As most local residents are aware, during the 1930's and 1940's the area surrounding Crown Heights and Edgemere were considered the "sticks." During that same period most movie theaters were locked in downtown locations; that was soon to change.

The Griffith Consolidated Theater Chain wanted to take a

risk and locate a theater in a growing suburban area. The chain, which had its headquarters at 11 N. Lee Ave., at that time owned and operated 157 theaters in 48 separate communities. President of the chain, L.C. "Skipper" Griffith, decided "What better place to try their experiment than their home city." The directors chose a site at 43rd and N. Western.

Construction began in 1945 or early 1946. Construction at that time was constrained due to lack of materials because of the war effort. Great pains were made during the opening to highlight the fact that the new theater was not only state of the art but also

did not hamper any "GI construction." The building was truly state of the art for that time. Special efforts were made to enhance the acoustics, there was a 60-ton heat and air system, seating was designed for 1,000 patrons and the novelty of a "cry room" was constructed on the 2nd floor.

The Will Rogers Theme was established throughout the theater. Murals were painted both in the theater as well as the lobby. The theater murals depicted a cowboy roping steers on the east and west walls. The lobby mural was painted by Craig Sheppard, the famous cowboy painter. The 18-foot canvas  
(CONTINUED INSIDE)



The Will Rogers Theater lobby as it appeared at its grand opening in 1946. Photo courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society (1946)

# Will Rogers Theater: Heartbeat of the community

depicts the various stages of Will Rogers' life. Beginning with the Rogers Homestead in Oologah, the mural traces Rogers' life from Vaudeville, time spent in the movies and as an author. The final frame shows Rogers standing with Wiley Post next to the Winnie Mae in Alaska, just prior to their takeoff for their ill-fated flight.

The theater opening occurred on September 18, 1946. The scene was similar to a Hollywood premier. KOCY Radio broadcasted live as cars arrived for the screening. Dignitaries included directors of the Griffith theater chain; the city's Fire Marshall; Mickey McCrae, the building contractor; as well as the Mayor Robert A. Hefner.

The sold-out theater watched the city premier of "Smoky." Appropriately, the film was about a cowboy and his beloved horse. The movie starred Fred MacMurray and Burle Ives. After the movie a program was given extolling the virtues of the new theater. The projection and sound equipment were explained and demonstrated. The Fire Marshall showed the crowd that the theater was virtually fire-proof. And the manager demonstrated the benefits of the "cry room."

The theater opened well and continued to prosper. Sadly, soon after the opening, Skipper Griffith suffered a stroke and became incapacitated. He was succeeded as company president by Henry S. Griffing. During Griffing's leadership, the chain prospered and took many interesting twists. Some of Griffing's endeavors included a

partial ownership in KWTV as well as a revolutionary experiment in cable television in Bartlesville in 1957. Amazingly the chain developed a "telemovie" studio that took first-run movies and delivered them to subscriber homes via "cable." The venture turned out to be ahead of its time and eventually was met with disinterest and failed. Imagine, Oklahoma could have been the birthplace of pay-per-view television. In fact the first successful commercial application took place in 1972 by a small company called HBO.

Griffing was undaunted and continued to experiment with early television and cinema. He was materially involved in civic activities and was instrumental in the formation of Casady School. Griffing and his family were tragically killed in a plane crash in Pennsylvania in 1960.

During that same time, the Will Rogers Theater went through its own twist and turns. The theater thrived during the 50's, 60's and initially during the 70's. The 70's witnessed the onset of the multiple-screen theaters in the suburbs. Slowly, single-screen theaters began to drop from the landscape. The "Will" as it became to be known, suffered the same fate. Eventually it became a second-run house and was known in the late 70's and early 80's as the home of the Rocky Horror Picture Show. The last showing of "Rocky" was in June 1983. The usual cast of characters showed, some wearing costumes, others there to preach about the evils of the movie. The

final street theater scene was indicative of the end of an era.

The Griffith Theater Chain had been previously sold; the real estate, however, was still owned by Griffith Realty Company. Paul Liebmann, a Griffith descendent, was the president of the realty company and he had new plans for the property. In 1984 he applied to rezone the property for club and restaurant use. The application created some local controversy and the city council rejected the application. Liebmann, undaunted, appealed the ruling all the way to the Oklahoma Supreme Court. Eventually, the city acquiesced and the rezoning took place.

During the same period the Oklahoma economy continued to slump and Liebmann and his son lost interest in the venture and decided to sell.

In 1990 Robert and Helen Sullivan purchased and renovated the theater and transformed the old theater into a special events center. The seats were removed, the floor was leveled and the adjacent retail space was turned into a catering kitchen. Great care was taken in maintaining the historical character of the theater. The cowboy murals were repainted and new glass and neon carried through the western motif.

The renovated center held its first event on August 28 which was the site of Burns Hargis' watch party in his run for governor. The Sullivans continued to manage the property until 1992 when a lease was negotiated with Michel and

Alain Buthion of La Baguette Bakery.

The Buthions renovated the retail space and developed Cuisine 43, a French and American bistro. The space again became a gathering spot for the local community. The catering kitchen was incorporated into the restaurant operations and many special events were held during the following years.

In 1995, there was an ill-fated attempt to transform the theater into a night club. The space was subleased and some renovations took place. "The Club" was opened in early 1996 and quickly became insolvent. The theater was used sporadically until 1997 when the Buthions transferred operations to Sushi Neko. Management consisted of myself, my wife Anita and our business partner Fred Langford. People may remember Fred as the manager of Leslie's Painted Desert.

As many of you know Sushi Neko has become a success in no small part because of the loyalty of our neighbors. Because of that loyalty, we had the confidence to purchase the Will Rogers Center and the property on the opposite side of Western. We took over day-to-day management of the theater and have remodeled both the event center and the lobby.

So far one of the best aspects of inhabiting the theater is time spent hearing all of the stories. We've heard tales of skipping school to watch a movie – only to look back as the lights came up and see the principal one row back with a wide smile. We've also



SEPTEMBER 2003

**LINK EXTRA VISION**

To inform members and increase awareness of Junior League of Oklahoma City projects and events

**FOCUS AREAS**

Arts education, child literacy and early childhood development

**Editor** Jill Greene

**Assistant Editor** Courtney Tardey

**Business Manager** Linda Hadley

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**HEADQUARTERS**

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**COMMUNITY PROJECTS**

Boys and Girls Clubs of Oklahoma County

- Arts and crafts
- Citizens Caring for Children
- Back to School
- Pauline Mayer Shelter Birthday Parties
- Community Arts
- Done in a Day
- Central Oklahoma Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Infant Crisis Services
- Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
- Oklahoma Safe Kids Coalition
- Regional Food Bank of Oklahoma Kids Cafe
- School for Healthy Lifestyles
- YMCA Sailing
- Youth Services of Oklahoma County
- Kids' Place
- Camp Kids' Place
- Greeter/Storyteller
- Partners in Education
- Teen Outreach Program

**FUND-RAISERS**

- Financial Development
  - Mistletoe Market
  - Remarkable Shop
- 3208 N. May • Oklahoma City, OK 73102  
(405) 236-5078

## Mission

The Junior League of Oklahoma City, Inc., is an organization of women committed to promoting voluntarism, developing the potential of women and to improving the community through effective action and leadership of trained volunteers. Its purpose is exclusively educational and charitable.

## MISTLETOE MARKET SHIFT SCHEDULE

# Sign up for Mistletoe Market shifts

All JLOC active and provisional members are required to work one four-hour Mistletoe Market shift and purchase admission tickets.

Bring your calendars to the September General Meeting. Shift sign-up for date and time only will be during the September General meeting. Your placement advisor will notify you of your assigned area.

### EARLY PLACEMENT

There are a limited number of early placement shifts available. Early placements will be assigned based on special needs. Requests must be submitted before Sept. 15 to: Dana Schwarz, MM Personnel Chair, c/o JLOC, 6300 N. Western, Oklahoma City, OK 73118, or call 405-748-6502.

### Monday, October 6 through Friday, October 10

8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
12:00 to 4:00 p.m.

### Monday, October 13 and Tuesday, October 14

8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

### Wednesday, October 15

7:30 to 11:30 a.m.  
8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.  
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.  
11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
12:00 to 4:00 p.m.  
1:30 to 5:30 p.m.  
3:30 to 7:30 p.m.  
4:00 to 8:00 p.m.

### Thursday, October 16

7:30 to 11:30 a.m.  
8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.  
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.  
10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.  
12:00 to 4:00 p.m.  
12:30 to 4:30 p.m.  
1:30 to 5:30 p.m.  
3:00 to 7:00 p.m.  
4:00 to 8:00 p.m.  
4:30 to 8:30 p.m.  
5:00 to 9:00 p.m.

### Friday, October 17

6:00 to 10:00 a.m.  
7:00 to 11:00 p.m.  
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.  
10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
12:00 to 4:00 p.m.

12:30 to 4:30 p.m.  
12:45 to 4:45 p.m.  
2:00 to 6:00 p.m.  
2:30 to 6:30 p.m.  
4:00 to 8:00 p.m.  
4:30 to 8:30 p.m.

### Saturday, October 18

6:00 to 10:00 a.m.  
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.  
10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.  
12:00 to 4:00 p.m.  
12:30 to 4:30 p.m.  
12:45 to 4:45 p.m.  
2:00 to 4:00 p.m.  
2:30 to 6:30 p.m.  
4:00 to 8:00 p.m.  
4:30 to 8:30 p.m.

### Sunday, October 19

6:00 to 10:00 a.m.  
8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.  
9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.  
10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.  
12:30 to 4:30 p.m.  
1:15 to 5:15 p.m.  
1:30 to 5:30 p.m.  
3:30 to 7:30 p.m.  
5:00 to 9:00 p.m.  
6:00 to 10:00 p.m.

# Blinn House task force seeks answers

A Blinn House Task Force has been formed to complete a needs assessment to answer these questions:

1. **Does the current property meet the needs of the organization?**
2. **If not, could or should the current property be expanded?** This question includes both the building and the parking lot.

3. **If expansion is not the answer is the appropriate direction to buy, build or trade?**
4. **If more space is acquired in some form, could or should we sublet space to other non-profit organizations or would this potentially jeopardize our 501c3 status?**

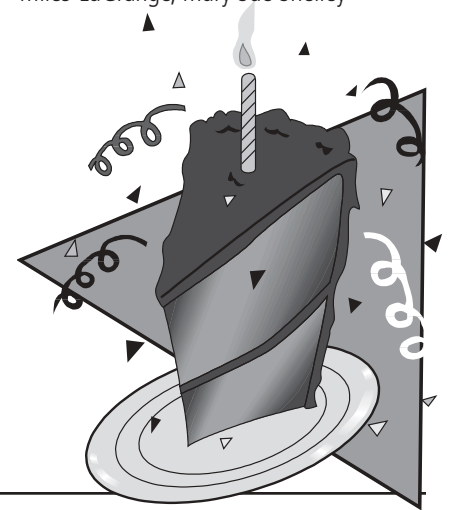
These questions have come up numerous times over the last several years. This task force has been formed to answer these questions and move forward accordingly. This is an open committee; anyone interested may attend. This task force will meet through December and present their findings at the January Formal Board of Directors meeting.



# Happy Birthday!

## SEPTEMBER

- 1 Cindy Crittenden, Sandy Ellis, Mandy Godfrey, Wiley S. Hugos, Sandy Meyers
- 2 Kevyn Colburn, Andrea Cummins, Sonja Fowler, Sally Limber, Kay Salyer
- 3 Nancy Berry, Pat Gallagher, Christy Johnson, Jennifer Ryan, Paula Stover
- 4 Kristen Adkins, Tara Bradley, Susan cook, Debbi Dudley, Joanne Edwards, Lee Ann Kuhlman, Shirley Pool, Jeanne Smith
- 5 Dianne Beffort, Beverly Fulcher, Jo Jackson, Kathryn Johnson, Glennie Jones, Gladys London, Linda Martin, Kaycee Nolting
- 6 Valerie Oakley
- 7 Debbie Berney, Mari An Pratt, Sherry Sage, Libby Steakley
- 8 Harrylou Egolf, Debbie McCown, Margaret Maxey Reynolds, Rose Salomon
- 9 Linda Crabtree, Ann Hayes, Mildred Richard, Vicki Richards, Judy Turner, Phyllis Wheeler
- 10 Mary Margaret Cashman, Ann Trost, Heather Wall
- 11 Leni Burrow, Carol Joullian, Lisa Price
- 12 Kris Frakfurt, Kim Hill
- 13 Katie Blaik, Cindy Heatly, Stacy Klepper
- 14 Angela Coyle, Jamie Davis, Jessamy Long
- 15 Holly Bock, Brooke Cohn, Lezlie Goad, Barbara Hollingsworth, Debbie Nevard, Kathryn Powell, Sharilyn Young
- 16 Karen Dahlgren, Kanela Huff, Mary Vaughn Smiser
- 17 Sally Stringer
- 18 DeDe Benham, Jeanie Butts, Melba Frazier, Marsha Funk, Carol Hampton, Elyse Hull, Nancy Law, Piper Link, Margi Smith, Norma Taggart
- 19 LeAnn Leinhard, Susie Murphy, Leslie Nelson, Jan Robinson, Cara Smith, Heather Sullivan, Elizabeth Tyrrell
- 20 Kathryn Davis, Patty Tague, Becky Whitlock
- 21 Linda Elliott, Shelly Freeman, Barbara McCain, Carol Sander, Rebecca Schimandle
- 22 Deniece Ditzler, Nancy Dodson, Ann-Clore Duncan, Carlin Lehr, Leslie Lynn, Cindy Sturm, Phoebe Trent
- 23 Dee Harris
- 24 Sarah Brawley, Sue Homsey, Carole Sue Muller, Rhonda Noah, Jennifer Pearl, Mary Price, Susan Sigmon, Ann Trudgeon
- 25 Alishia Mayfield
- 26 Harriet Weirich, Coca Zahn
- 27 Janyce Coffeen, Lillian Cox, Emily Dinwiddie, Joann Harvey, Laura Johnson, Janelle Mooney, Brooke Murphy
- 28 Laura Bollenbach, Beverly Kanaly, Laura Kriegel, Sarah Vermillion, Leanne Waddell
- 29 Claire Kennedy, Carla Toutellotte
- 30 Dee Ann Fox, Anne Henderson, Vicki Miles-LaGrange, Mary Sue Shelley



**The Junior League of Oklahoma City**

6300 N. Western • Oklahoma City, OK 73118

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been apprised of several humorous stories regarding the cry room. Most cannot be completely repeated.

Obviously the "Will" has been an integral part of the neighborhood and the surrounding community. It is our sincere hope that the theater will once again become a gathering spot. From the Event Center to the new coffee shop, Will's (the name, with thanks to David Fleishaker) to Sushi Neko and Musashi's. Hopefully each of these businesses, as well as other surrounding businesses and neighborhoods, will continue to prosper.

And hopefully, L.C. "Skipper" Griffin is looking upon what he created and is smiling. Thanks to our Crown Heights Neighbors for their support.