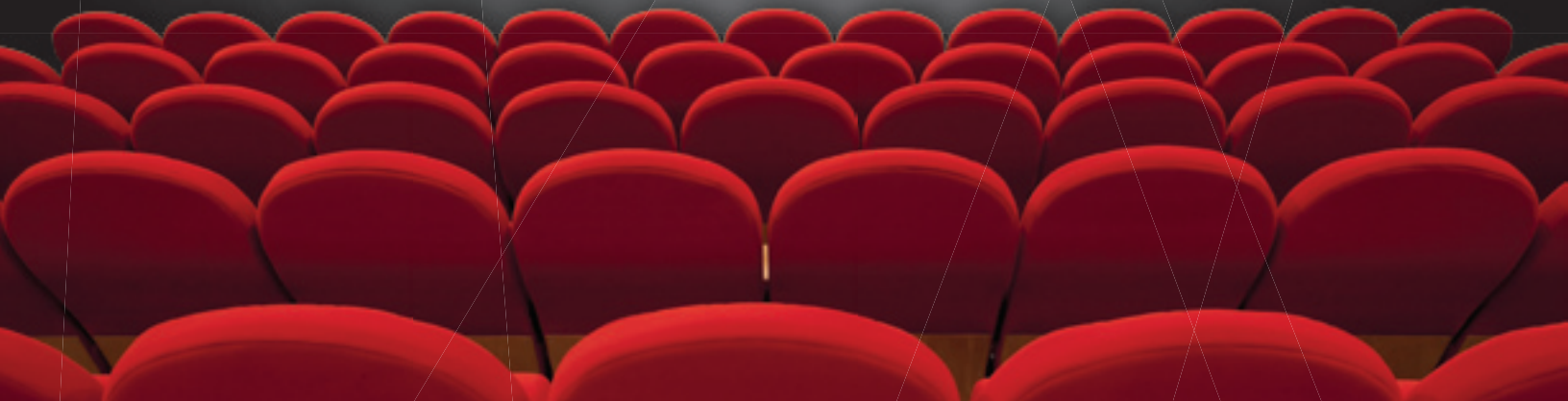




MOVIES
on MAIN
Going Digital





With the movie industry's switch this year from film to digital media, many small-town theaters have not been able to afford the conversion and may end up closing, leaving vacant landmarks in lots of communities. New Mexico has met this issue head on by creating the MainStreet Historic Theater Initiative, the first Main Street program of its kind in the nation.

The program is the brainchild of New Mexico Economic Development Secretary Jon Barela. "As I toured main streets throughout the state," said Barela, "I discovered that many of our historic theaters—which are local treasures—were in serious need of repair. We wanted to do something not only to bring these theaters back to life but to help revitalize traditional areas of commerce as destinations for families to shop, dine, and see a movie."

The Economic Development Department developed a plan to work with municipalities to upgrade and reopen historic theaters as movie venues, as well as centers for other types of performing arts.

The Luna Theater in Clayton, New Mexico, was the first project to take advantage of the Historic Theater Initiative. The department plans to expand the initiative to other historic theaters across the state.



Clayton, New Mexico:

Saving the Luna Theater

[by Elmo Baca]

New Mexico MainStreet Program Associate
Economic Development Department

The 1916 Mission Theater in Clayton, New Mexico, now known as the Luna Theater, has been transformed into an advanced digital cinema through a unique partnership supported by the State of New Mexico's Economic Development Department. A remarkable collaboration of local citizens and leaders, the Clayton MainStreet program, and the state government have pulled off a minor miracle in preserving the vintage theater over the past five years.

The Historic Movie Theaters Initiative of New Mexico is a passion of Jon Barela, Cabinet Secretary for Economic Development. The Economic Development



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The Luna Theater dates from 1916 (opposite page). With its unique fusion of classical and Mission-style architecture, the Luna is the state's best preserved theater from the silent film era (above).

Department's efforts are designed "to keep these theaters from going dark by assisting their conversion to digital media. In so doing we assist in maintaining the economic vitality of the district that spills over to the other businesses downtown."

A tiny prairie town of 3,200 determined residents on the northeastern state line, Clayton welcomes many Texas snowbirds during the winter as they travel to the New Mexico and Colorado mountains for skiing and alpine fun. Long before, Santa Fe Trail wagon caravans rumbled westward near here, and the vast buffalo plains surrounding Clayton have nurtured great herds of cattle. The stately stone Eklund Hotel was built more than 100 years ago across Main Street from the Luna Theater, and together the two landmarks have provided Clayton's hospitality for generations.

The Luna Theater operates today as one of New Mexico's oldest movie houses, and the state's best preserved from the silent movie era. Prosperous merchant and rancher Morris Herzstein built the theater and the adjacent business block in 1916 after a disastrous fire wiped out his headquarter's mercantile store. Built with a unique fusion of classical and Mission-style architectural elements, the Luna's façades survive intact. The generous recessed entry foyer boasts an ornamental ceiling laced in gold paint.

The original Mission Theater and adjacent Dudley Building have housed many businesses over the years, including the "Dust Bowl" cafe in the corner storefront and a basement ballroom that hosted big bands and country crooners in the 1940s and '50s. Some downtowners remember roller skating in the generous basement hall.



THE LUNA THEATER
UNION COUNTY'S HISTORIC MOVIE THEATER

ESTABLISHED 1916 MARQUEE ADDED 1935
LISTED ON THE STATE & NATIONAL HISTORIC
REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES



MAGICAL MOMENTS

Before the Great Depression, the Mission Theater flourished and provided the magic of movies in Clayton, including memorable Christmas matinee shows offered free to children, during which Santa Claus would appear and give small presents to the crowd. Hard times in the 1930s led to the creation of a remarkable cooperative booking and management company called Gibraltar Enterprises, composed of about 35 small town theaters in New Mexico, Colorado, Nebraska, and Utah.

Gibraltar owner T.F. Murphy bought the Mission Theater in 1935. He installed a new sound system, heating, leather seats, and a neon marquee bearing a winking moon, and renamed the cinema complex the Luna Theater. In 2009 the town and Clayton MainStreet restored the iconic marquee, which remains one of New Mexico's most beloved street signs.

Murphy also upgraded the auditorium with art deco light fixtures which still glow in soft red and blue auras. The grand 1935 reopening featured Shirley Temple's *The Little Colonel*, and many were turned away from the sellout shows. Local girls competed for free movie passes by writing essays about the theater.

The Luna enjoyed a long and successful run under Gibraltar management until it was finally sold to Roy Dean and Nancy Leighton in 1984. Roy Dean took a job at the Luna as a film projectionist to help make ends meet for their ranching business, but soon the theater's mystique wooed the couple, and they opened for business on January 1, 1984 with the hit film, *Ghostbusters*.

"We had 14 straight sellouts with *Ghostbusters*, and we thought we were going to be able to restore everything in the Luna," Nancy Leighton chuckles, "but of course that didn't happen."

The couple gave the Luna their blood, sweat, tears, money and a whole lot more for nearly 30 years, offering Hollywood's finest films on weekends, but they struggled with a leaky roof and outdated heating system, the bane of many rural movie houses.

TEAMWORK TRIUMPHS

The community of Clayton meanwhile was struggling against the growing tides of the declining cattle business, kids moving to bigger cities, global economics, and the challenges of surviving on the hardscrabble prairies of America's heartland. By 2006, Clayton joined New Mexico MainStreet and created a volunteer-driven program to revitalize the downtown business district. In less than a decade, the group has completed a streetscape improvement project on Walnut Street and revived the Luna Theater as its crowning achievements.

The Town of Clayton became a development partner in the Luna Theater project in 2009 by purchasing the theater from the Leightons with the assistance of a New Mexico MainStreet capital outlay grant.

Revival of the Luna Theater is one of Clayton MainStreet's crowning achievements.

"We really were skeptical about what we were getting into with the Luna," says Clayton Mayor Jack Chosvick, "but everyone involved has worked together as a team to make it a big success. It's been a blessing for our town."

Once the town acquired the Luna Theater complex, the community responded with thousands of hours of volunteer support. National Honor Society students from the high school worked the concessions stand for free. The Geo Group, which operates a



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The gold stage curtain (below) is one of the unique features retained during the restoration of the Luna Theater, a project that took thousands of hours of volunteer support (left).



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New Mexico Economic Development Department

New Mexico Secretary for Economic Development Jon Barela (center) cuts the ribbon for the grand reopening of the Luna Theater, along with Clayton MainStreet Board President Shirley Carter (right) and former owners of the Luna, Roy Dean and Nancy Leighton (far right).

lower security adult detention facility near Clayton, donated many inmate work crews to clean floors and realign auditorium seating to modern comfort standards. Tons of trash was removed from the basements. Union County donated a used, but still effective, boiler to the theater from its courthouse.

THE THRILL OF 3D

The State of New Mexico also provided additional capital outlay funding for essential upgrades. The final \$100,000 state grant for the digital equipment and sound surround system was completed in May. In total, the state has contributed \$630,000 to the Luna Theater project, and now the theater boasts

a projection system second to none.

In the former “Dust Bowl” cafe storefront on the corner, Art Griñe operates a classic barber shop. Art worked as a projectionist at Albuquerque’s Regal 24 cinema center and decided to move his family back to their hometown about 10 years ago. When the digital conversion project first was mentioned last year, he researched equipment and companies to determine the best fit for the Luna.

In May, Sonic Equipment Company of Iola, Kansas, installed the Luna’s system, which includes 3D capability and 7.1 sound surround (with sound effects from speakers mounted at the rear of the auditorium).

Several community residents were trained in digital projection, computer server operation, and internet delivery and monitoring.

Enjoying a 3D movie in the Luna is a bit surreal but also thrilling. The adventure begins by winking back at the friendly moon on the marquee, entering the theater through the classical foyer, buying some popcorn at the concession stand, and entering the cool, dark auditorium. Adjust the glasses that will transport you to a galaxy far, far, away, and the picture appears with such clarity and depth that you forget you are in an old nickelodeon theater on the New Mexico prairie.

Elmo Baca is a Program Associate with the New Mexico MainStreet program specializing in Cultural and Heritage Projects. Elmo is a former director of New Mexico MainStreet, former New Mexico Historic Preservation Officer, and a former Main Street manager in Gallup and Espanola, New Mexico. Elmo also served as an Advisor to the National Trust for Historic Preservation from New Mexico.

For information on the Historic Theater Initiative, contact Rich Williams, director of the New Mexico MainStreet program, at 505-827-0168 or rich.williams@state.nm.us.



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The Luna Theater's winking moon marquee, which was restored by the town and Clayton MainStreet in 2009, is one of New Mexico's most beloved signs.