



817 Main Street, Louisville, Colorado

According to the Boulder County Assessor's website, the property at 817 Main Street is owned by BLT Enterprises LLC and occupies the south 5 feet of Lot 10 & the north 20 feet of Lot 11, Block 5, in Original Louisville. Until the late 1930s, the address for this location was 320 Main.

This building, which is over 100 years old, represents a vibrant and important part of Louisville's history. It served the community as a movie theater (and, at times, a live theater) for nearly seventy years. This long run even extended into the late 1970s, which was a time when most small town movie theaters in the United States had disappeared. This theater (first called the Isis, then the Rex) brought popular movie culture to Louisville. As noted in a 1995 article in the Boulder Daily Camera, "The Rex was a large part of Louisville history because it was one of the central meeting grounds for much of the century." For many decades, it was the only theater in town.

The history of the Rex is also significant for its strong representation of Louisville history and demographics. From 1927 to 1972, members of Louisville's Italian community owned and operated the theater. In addition, a number of its owners were coal miners either prior to or at the same time as their ownership of the theatre.

Following this long history as a movie theater, the building came to have a role as part of Louisville's history as a restaurant town by being the location of a popular Mexican Restaurant, Senor T's, for about thirty years.

The Development of Original Louisville

Online property records for Boulder County show that Louis Nawatny, who platted Original Louisville in 1878 and named it after himself, transferred part of Lot 10 and all of Lot 11 to Charles Weil in 1880.

Due to the fact that this parcel includes parts of lots rather than entire lots and due to the limitations of doing research in the online property records, which do not describe

which part of a divided was being transferred from owner to owner, the earliest section of the chain of ownership could not be completed. It is possible that eventually, research of documents at the Boulder County Recorder's Office itself will be able to fully reveal this chain. Based on the online records, early owners of the property appear to have included such prominent Louisville residents as Joseph Youk, David and/or Jane Carlton, Martin Zurich, and attorney J. Vaughan Sickman.

Whatever the particular identities of the early owners, there is no question that the 800 block of Main Street (then called Second Street) was developed early in Louisville's history. The earliest Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Louisville, for 1893, shows that every lot of the west side of the 800 block of Main Street was already developed with at least one building, all of them dwellings. A dwelling is shown straddling Lots 10 and 11, as 817 Main currently does. It is possible that some part of the early dwelling on Lot 10 and 11 was incorporated into the current building when it was built.

Date of Construction of the Current Building at 817 Main

Two different records from the Boulder County Assessor's Office give the different dates of 1900 and 1910 as the date of construction for the current building.



Photo 1, Louisville Historical Museum, E-M N-5

Also relevant to this inquiry of when the building was constructed is Photo 1, which shows a building in Louisville being built by H.H. Fischer. The granddaughter of this well known local family that was engaged in building construction stated to staff at the Louisville Historical Museum that this photo shows the construction of this building at 817 Main in 1898 and that H.H. Fischer is shown on the far right. However, this

identification of the building in the photo and the separate issue of the date of the photo have not been independently verified. It should be noted that the 1900 Sanborn map for Louisville shows a dwelling that looks identical to the dwelling shown in this location on the 1893 Sanborn map. It is possible that this photo shows the construction of the building, but that it was not in 1898.

The billiard hall that occupied the building before it became a theater is shown on the 1908 Sanborn map.

It can be concluded that the date of construction for this building is circa 1900-1908.

Early History as a Billiard Hall



Photo 2, Louisville Historical Museum E-B N-19

The records at the Louisville Historical Museum for Photo 2 state that it shows the interior of this building at 817 Main when it was a billiard hall. This was stated to be in "1907 or 1908." Mike Wisek, who would later work as a movie projectionist for the Isis and Rex Theatres, is stated to be pictured in this photo. Verification that this photo in fact shows the building at 817 Main was not located.

The 1908 Sanborn fire insurance map for Louisville reveals a billiard hall in the correct location to be this building. It shows as a rectangular building situated right on the street. Unfortunately, the identification of the lot numbers is not accurate on the 1908

Sanborn map (and is inconsistent with the 1893 and 1900 Sanborn maps and with current property descriptions and County records) and should not be relied on for this part of Main Street in terms of the accuracy of the legal description.

Ownership by Otto Todd and Janie Beveridge Todd; Isis Theatre; 1908-1918

Otto and Janie Todd acquired this property in 1908 and owned and operated a business here until 1918. Otto Todd, born in Wisconsin in 1875, was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. He passed away in 1929. Janie Todd, born in Illinois in 1884, had lived in Louisville since her childhood as a member of the Scottish Beveridge family. She passed away in 1965.

Otto Todd is believed to have initially operated a billiard hall in this location. By the time of the census in 1910, however, he was listed as the operator of a moving picture theatre, and by 1911, according to a Louisville directory, he was the proprietor of the "Isis Theatre." Thus, it was Otto Todd who began using the building as a movie theater. Films were projected from the front of the building to a screen at the rear.



Photo 3, 817 Main circa 1915, Louisville Historical Museum E-N N-8

Photo 3 shows the front of this building, most likely at the time that it was owned and operated by the Todds. A poster for the 1915 film *Anna Karenina* is being displayed in this photo.

Ownership by Walter Dugan and by James Carper; Beginning of Rex Theatre, 1918-1927

Walter Dugan purchased this property in 1918. By 1920, he was operating it under the name of the Rex Theatre.



Photo 4, Rex Theatre c. 1919, Louisville Historical Museum E-B N-9

Photo 4 shows the facade of the building from circa 1919, based on the poster for the 1919 film *Gambling in Souls* that is being displayed at the left rear. Dugan, the owner, and Mike Wisek, the projectionist, are pictured in this photo, according to the Museum's records.



Photo 5, Main Street scene c. 1919, Louisville Historical Museum E-C N-12

Photo 5 shows the Rex Theatre on the left. This photo shows a poster that is also shown in Photo 4, and so is also believed to have been taken in around 1919.

From 1920 to 1927, the building was owned by James Carper, who is also listed in directories for that period as the manager of the Rex.

According to an account printed in the August 1994 issue of the *Louisville Historian* and entitled "Movie Theaters in Our Town," live piano music for silent movies was performed in the theater in the 1920s, some of it performed by Mary Ferrari Franchini.

Ownership by Santino Biella and Continued Operation of Rex Theatre, 1927-1945

In 1927, Santino Biella purchased this property and continued the operation of the Rex Theatre with his wife, Mary Zarini Biella. They owned and operated it until 1945.

Santino Biella was born in Italy in c. 1885. He was a coal miner prior to owning the Rex Theatre. He passed away in 1957. Mary Zarini Biella was born in Louisville in 1894 of Italian parents and died in 1966. The couple lived with their children in the 800 block of La Farge Avenue, almost directly west of the theater that they operated. (This was also the block where Mary had grown up.)

Santino, or Sandy, ran the business side and Mary sold tickets. According to the 1994 *Louisville Historian* article, which was assembled and edited by Sandy and Mary Biella's niece, Eileen Schmidt, "Shortly after Sandy and Mary Biella became owners of the Rex, the movie industry was booming and the Rex became a first-run facility. This meant that the movies were shown in Louisville at the same time they were being viewed in Denver and other larger cities. This was very important because people didn't have the means

of traveling to the larger cities just to see a movie.” The Biellas acquired a player piano that used punched paper rolls. Hazel Zarini Harris, Vito Romans, and others performed the role of operating the player piano.

The article goes on: “Mr. Biella offered part-time jobs, such as dusting the seats, sweeping the front lobby, sweeping the theater, and other work necessary to maintain the building to the young people of the community.” The motion pictures were remembered as changing three times a week: “One movie was shown on Sunday and Monday, one on Tuesday and Wednesday, no movies on Thursday, and a different one on Friday and Saturday.” Biella also instituted a Saturday matinee.

A Louisville resident from this time period recalls going to movies at the Rex Theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. He remembers a central aisle and the fact that the early sound system was not consistent for all areas of seating. He also recalls Sandy Biella trying to get noisy children to stay quiet during the movie showings.

Charles and Christine Zarini’s candy store (now gone) right next to the Rex Theatre to the north was a convenient spot for audience members to buy candy before the show. Charles Zarini was the brother of Mary Zarini Biella and brother-in-law to Sandy Biella. Later, the Biellas started their own concession stand at the Rex.

Photos 6, 7, 8, and 9 show Main Street with the Rex Theatre included. The photos are believed to date from the 1920s.

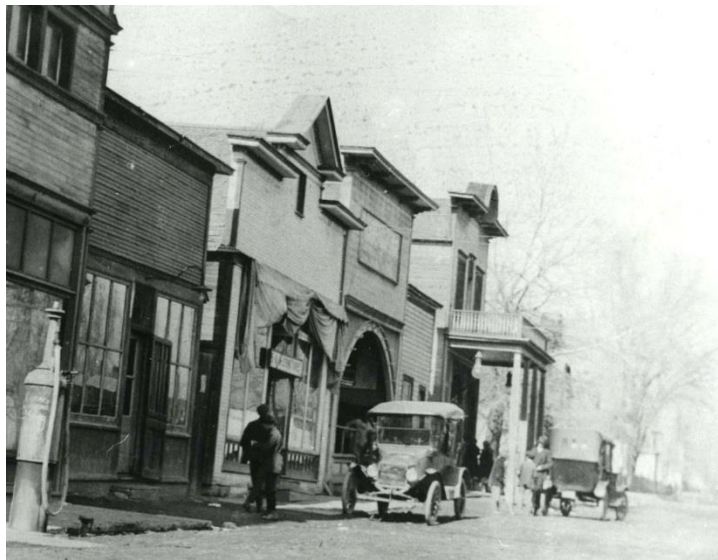


Photo 6, Main Street, Louisville Historical Museum E-B N-10

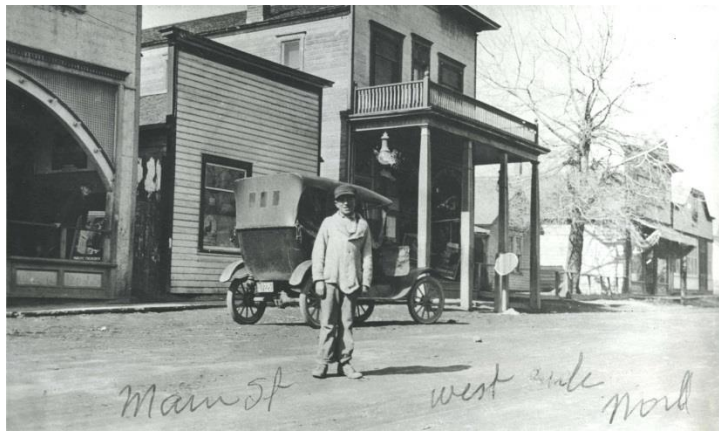


Photo 7, Main Street, Louisville Historical Museum E-C N-6



Photo 8, Louisville Historical Museum 90-11-05C



Photo 9, Main Street, Louisville Historical Museum 2000.005.001

A colorfully painted canvas curtain (Photo 10) from the Rex Theatre that was enjoyed by Rex Theatre and Senor T's customers until Senor T's closed in 2008 dates from the early ownership of the theatre by Santino Biella. The canvas is strongly believed to have been created in the period of the late 1920s, during the silent movie era, and it displays advertising for twenty-two different downtown Louisville businesses that operated at the time. (The Zarini candy store next door was one of the businesses advertised on the curtain.)



Photo 10, Rex Theatre movie curtain, Louisville Historical Museum

As the 1994 *Louisville Historian* article notes, “[The Rex] also hosted other forms of entertainment such as plays presented by a group of local amateur actors, talent shows, [and] baby contests ...” One of these plays from circa 1927-1930 is pictured in Photo 11. The painted canvas curtain can be seen at the top of the photo, and player piano rolls can be seen on the stage. It is likely that the piano sat just out of the picture below the stage.



Photo 11, Louisville Historical Museum 2003.009.001

Ownership of the Rex Theatre by Carmen and Ann Romano, 1945-1972

Carmen Romano was a projectionist at the Rex Theatre during the ownership of Sandy Biella, and he and his wife, Ann, ended up owning and operating it beginning in 1945. During the day, he worked as a coal miner in area coal mines and even became a mine superintendent.

Carmen Romano was born in Italy in 1906 and moved to the Louisville area in 1922. He died in 1993. Ann DiFrancia Romano was born in Superior in 1907. She passed away in 1999.

Carmen's skills as a mechanic, electrician, and plumber were useful in the business. A narrative about Carmen Romano written by his brother, Lewis, stated that Carmen made the marquee and "he was always on the ladder changing the billboard for coming new shows." Records at the Museum indicate that the Romanos also improved the building by installing restrooms. Carmen and Ann would drive to Denver every week to pick up a new film. They also are remembered for their efforts to quiet noisy young people in the audience.

Photos 12 and 13 show the Rex Theatre in the 1940s.



Photo 12, Louisville Historical Museum 2009.017

Photo 12, from 1946, shows that the building still had the large “Rex” sign at the top, but the marquee had been built.



Photo 13, Boulder County Assessor photograph of 817 Main, 1948

Photo 13, from the 1948 Boulder County Assessor’s card, shows the building at a similar time.

Later, the “Rex” letters were removed from the top of the facade.



Photo 14, Louisville Historical Museum

Photo 14 shows the building in 1957.



Photo 15, Louisville Historical Museum

Photo 15 shows the Rex Theatre to the left in 1965.

Ownership by Daryl and Beth Decker, 1972-77

The last operators of the Rex Theatre were Daryl and Beth Decker. They continued the practice of showing family oriented films at the Rex. According to the 1994 *Louisville*

Historian article, the price of admission under the Deckers' ownership was 50 to 75 cents.

Senor T's Restaurant and Ownership by Ted and Carolyn Manzanares, 1977-2008

Carolyn and Ted Manzanares established Senor T's Restaurant in 1972 on the east side of the 700 block of Main Street. In 1978, they opened the restaurant at 817 Main. The restaurant served such Mexican food dishes as burritos, quesadillas, chimichangas, tamales, and chile rellenos. Prior to opening, they made some alterations to the building.



Photo 16, Louisville Historical Museum

Photo 16 shows the building in 1979, after Senor T's Restaurant began to occupy this location.

In an interesting twist, Carolyn Manzanares is a member of the Mangus family whose clothing store was advertised at the top of the Rex Theatre movie curtain.

Following the closing of the Rex Theatre, two seats and the Rex ticket stand for customers to deposit their tickets in were donated to the Louisville Historical Museum. In 2010, Ted and Carolyn Manzanares donated the Rex Theatre movie curtain along with sconces and a clock that were used in the theater.

The preceding research is based on a review of relevant and available online County property records, census records, oral history interviews, Louisville directories, and Louisville Historical Museum maps, files, obituary records, and historical photographs from the collection of the Louisville Historical Museum.