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## Feature Story 1

### *The Gem of A Historic Town*

Running her small fingertips along the rusty orange and maroon brick. It felt like rough yet sturdy sandpaper. The slight breeze was enough to cool her down from the humid summer night. She stands on her tippy toes to try and see the people ahead of them in line, but they still didn't seem to be moving. She looks up at her mother and sees her smiling and looking around for people she knew.

Seeing familiar faces happened every day in this little town. The little girl's eyes wandered around for something to quench her boredom. She looked at the bikes in the store window next door, and the soothing Kinnickinnic river flowing around the corner. The warm light of the marquee lit the tops of the heads around her. She felt a small pull on her arm as her mother starts pulling her along. The smell of popcorn and feelings of instant excitement hit her as she happily walked into the local movie theater, The Falls Theatre.

After being built in 1927, The Falls Theatre consisted of leather seats, one screen, and 10-25 cents to see the first movie premiered, *Painting the Town*. Since then, the theater has upgraded, but remains a historical foundation.

From 1927-1972 the theater was sold to different owners who added something new and special such as, a concession stands and a neon sign. When Stan McCulloch bought the theater, he brought with a nostalgia and love for his community.

Angela Bond, 49, born and raised in River Falls now works at city hall and is closer than ever to her community. She remembers, "As the oldest cousin, I remember taking my siblings and cousins to the theatre one afternoon. The owner, Stan McCulloch, did not charge our bigger group full admission out of kindness."

McCulloch continued the legacy of an inexpensive movie experience, with ticket prices \$6.14 for adults. This influenced others around the area to visit the Falls Theatre and spread the word. In 2002, McCulloch passed away.

Today, the theatre is still run by his daughter and her family. The community outwardly shows their appreciation for the theatre and the McCullochs for keeping a gem in the town of River Falls.

During the pandemic, the theatre continued to bring the community together safely as they had a drive by popcorn sale each week. With the theatre being in the center of downtown River Falls, the traffic was always backed up on nights they sold popcorn.

Natalie Simpson, 21, born and raised in River Falls said, "Growing up in a community that shared the love for the theatre it felt like such a unifying space that really brought the community together."

As Simpson begins her career in education, she recalls a special memory one humid summer night. "It felt good to know that you could head to the theatre and see someone you know and to enjoy the experience of seeing a good movie with other members of the community." Simpson said.

Veteran's Park situated next to the theatre attracts the community with a small cobblestone park, that leads from the main street to the Kinni river. The sounds of the rushing, trickling river as a young and old couples walk hand in hand over the small wooden bridge into the square. Children climbing the beige stone rocks as the local jazz hums.

Friday nights Veteran's Park holds music in the park where local bands and performers come to bring some beautiful noise to summer nights. A family walks past the park in pursuit to the Falls theatre. The parents holding the hands of their young child in between them. Screamed giggles engulf the sidewalk as the parents swing the child by lifting her small arms.

In a town like River Falls, the local businesses strive to support one another however they can.

Simpson said, "They advertise for local businesses before the movie starts, which is a great way to keep the community feel alive."

From the city official standpoint, Bond describes the Falls Theatre to be "a staple of the River Falls community and has been a draw for the downtown business communities."

The newest addition of the Falls Theatre included another small theater next to the original in 2018. With the original, the red curtains and warm lights mimicking a vintage Gatsby feel, whereas the new theatre incorporated an updated look that felt like a home theater. With now three generations of the McCulloch family keeping the theater alive and bringing it into its 97<sup>th</sup> year, the community has hope they will continue.

"They kept the spark alive by adding a new screen and keeping the \$3 movie on Tuesdays tradition," Simpson said.

In a town that is family and friends focused, a historic building like this that has held many wonderful memories for generations.

"As a kid it was a fun thing to do, and we could see every movie that came out because of the low cost to attend," Bond said. "But as an adult I appreciate it more because of the fondness of seeing movies as a kid and I could provide the same experience and memories for my own kids."