

A Brief History of Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia's Headquarters ... A community destination since 1912

Gerrish Street, Windsor, NS



The W.A. Stephens Department Store (photo: The Chronicle Herald ~ circa 1950s)

Launched in 1912 and rising from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1897, the oldest continuing family business in Windsor operated for 75 years. The department store was founded by the late W.A. Stephens, and had its first premises in the Riley Block (later Card's Grocery Store) before relocating to Livingston's Restaurant at the corner of Grey Street. These quarters were expanded to include new premises at 132 Gerrish Street in 1919. Following the first owner's death in

1951, the company was incorporated as W.A. Stephens Ltd. By 1969 the business comprised three sections, and was a beacon for shoppers seeking clothing, accessories, furs and household goods. Family members, under the guidance of the late Walter Bertram Stephens, operated the popular emporium until Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia moved from its first headquarters in neighboring Wolfville to take ownership of the complex in September 1987.



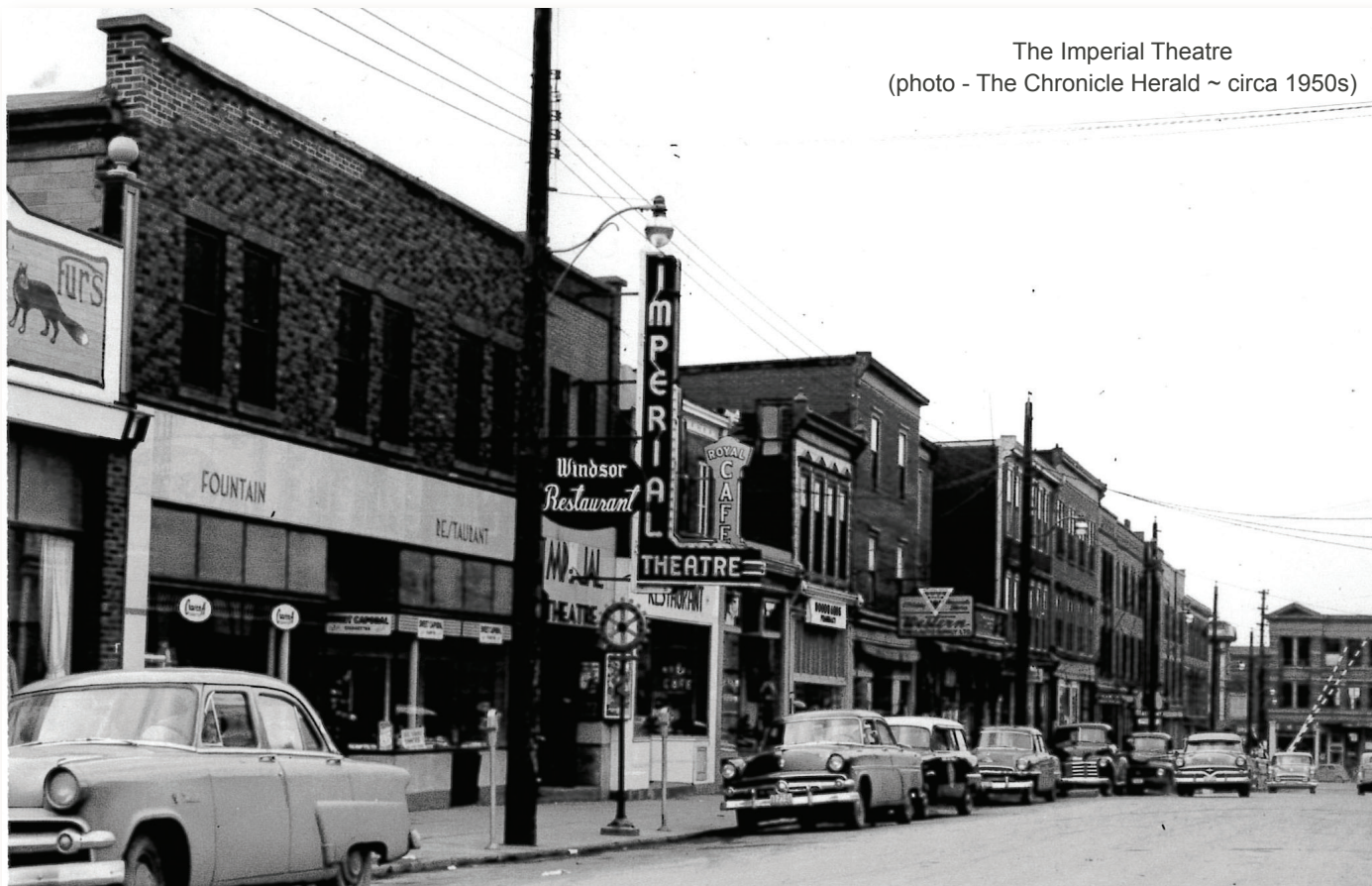
Leaders at home ~ Ambassadors abroad

Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia's unique adaptations of children's literature have delighted more than 5.5 million young people in 19 countries on 4 continents. The company performs annually for more than 300,000 spectators, and ranks among North America's most active touring organizations. Closer to home, Mermaid maintains a strong local and regional presence through teaching, mentoring and presenting activities.



Mermaid Headquarters ~2018

The Imperial Theatre
(photo - The Chronicle Herald ~ circa 1950s)



Historical tidbits ...

“When the rebuilt theatre opened in the ‘thirties with its gleaming adjoining restaurant, Bustin’s was the most modern and glamorous entertainment centre in prewar Hants County. At the age of eleven, twelve and thirteen, armed with a dime, I went to Bustin’s cinema almost every Saturday afternoon to thrill to the roar of the MGM lion and to watch cowboy movies such as Tom Mix and Buck Jones. Sometimes they had scary ones as well – Charlie Chan or The Wax Museum – which gave me nightmares. On week nights there was first-run adult fare”.

... Donald MacKay, *Author and Social Historian*



The Windsor Concert Society at the
Imperial Theatre ~ 1943

“HIT THE ICE: Abbott and Costello ~This is the best Abbott and Costello we have played in this house as yet. Good comedy, singing and skating. My patrons ate this picture up. Business excellent. Played Monday. Tuesday, Nov. 22, 23.

~J. H. Bustin, *Imperial Theatre, Windsor, N. S.*
... Excerpt from *Motion Picture Herald*,
Dec. 13, 1943 ~ *Chicago IL*



A vibrant community asset since 1914 . . .

The Imperial Theatre was built by John H. 'Jack' Bustin in 1914, along with a restaurant and upstairs dining room. The Blue Room was Windsor's most elegant hall, and used for special entertainments and banquets. Jack Bustin took over the movie business from the former Glassey Theatre (a cinema located across the street), and offered matinee and evening movies as well as live performances. Special serials were featured on Saturdays, which kept folks eagerly returning for the next installment. Admission in the 'thirties was ten cents and went up during the 'forties one cent at a time.

In 1931 the Imperial Theatre was seriously damaged by fire. It was refurbished, using newly-developed large hollow clay bricks for walls, and dressed with decorative brick and fireproof fiber board. During the next two decades, in addition to film, the Imperial Theatre offered plays, concerts and traveling musical shows. The Rotary Club raised funds through annual musical revues, and the community flocked to hear Country and Western 'greats' including Hank Snow, Wilf Carter, Kitty Wells and Smiley Bates. The Windsor Concert Party variety shows entertained troops stationed nearby as well as local residents, and then took their show on the road to military bases in the region. In 1947 the Theatre was sold to the B & L cinema chain (Bernstein and Lieberman) of Saint John. NB, the pioneering company who introduced "talkies" to movie-going audiences 1920s and expanded to operate more than twenty theatres in the Maritimes.



On stage at the Imperial ~ undated

In 1986 the building was purchased by Dr. Garth and Lauren Vaughan, who promoted both live entertainment and movie screenings. Theatre performances were staged by local schools as well as by Mermaid Theatre and a variety of touring music groups. The Vaughans retired in 1998. Subsequent owners, The Production Schoolhouse, presented successful music events between 2000-2002 before terminating their operations. Mermaid Theatre acquired the facility in 2003, and began the extensive restorations and upgrades that have resulted in the MIPAC renaissance.

Unique in the Province, MIPAC's Family Fare lineup provides a showcase for Mermaid's acclaimed productions as well as other notable family audiences companies. Equally popular are MIPAC's wide-ranging offerings of theatre, dance and music, with the latter showcasing emerging and recognized practitioners of traditional, contemporary, jazz, folk and classical repertory, and artists engaged through Music Nova Scotia's "Bringin' it Home" Program. Since launching its series in 2007, celebrated entertainers including Bruce Cockburn, George Canyon, Johnny Reid, David Myles, Matt Anderson, Joe Sealy, Stan Carew and the Magpies, Joel Plaskett, the Irish Rovers, Jill Barber, Don Ross and Old Man Luedeke have all graced the stage. In addition, MIPAC regularly hosts community celebrations, such as the 250th anniversary of the Hants County Exhibition. The venue's volunteer roster of trained ushers includes seniors, high school students and fans from diverse backgrounds.



W.A. Stephens advertisement