



<http://www.bakersfield.com/columnist/money/stevenson/story/5657591p-5675460c.html>

Fox to celebrate its 75th year with gala fund-raiser

Posted: Saturday October 29th, 2005, 6:30 PM

Last Updated: Saturday October 29th, 2005, 6:30 PM

JB Selvidge, partner in Buttonwillow Land and Cattle Co., will be putting his best boot forward Saturday evening as the Fox Theater Foundation stages its Black Tie Gala at the 75-year-old Fox, 20th and H streets. He is one of the two foundation board members who were on the board when the then-dormant theater was purchased from its Los Angeles owners in 1994.

As a farmer whose usual dress is casual, he said during this interview he hadn't decided yet if he would rent a tux for the gala. The event is a fund-raiser to help continue to upgrade the theater.

JB Selvidge's roots are deep in two eras of California history, agriculture and Hollywood. His father, Eldon J. "Skip" Selvidge, was a projectionist in the silent movie houses of Los Angeles in the early 1930s and later worked at 20th Century Fox Studios.

His mother was Frances F. Tracy, a member of the Tracy Ranch family of Buttonwillow, who went to UCLA.

While a UCLA student, she met Skip Selvidge at "one swinging evening" at the Coconut Grove Ballroom.

They were married in 1937. Their first child, JB, was born in 1941 and spent his early years in the Hollywood Hills.

In 1999 he was quoted in a biographical article written by Paris Byington for the Fox Newsletter: "He recalls fond memories of the Fox Lot on Pico Boulevard, one of the most unforgettable being a day in 1958 when he had lunch at a table near celebrities Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood."

Selvidge didn't follow his father's career. In 1966, he earned a degree in mechanical engineering from

Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and went to work for Peterbilt Motors near San Francisco as a truck designer. Later he returned to Kern County to join the Tracy family ranch, Buttonwillow Land and Cattle Co.

Then he met Cathy Butler, president of the DBA (Downtown Business and Property Owners Association), which launched the "Save the Fox" campaign.

Businessman Ed Moss began negotiating the purchase of the Fox with the Los Angeles Martinez family, reaching a price of \$500,000, including a \$100,000 down payment. A hurry-up grass-roots campaign to raise the money saw hundreds of people give from \$5 up. The fund reached \$90,000 and the city capped the campaign with \$10,000.

Also, a hurry-up board of directors was needed and Butler recruited Selvidge. He remembers that escrow closed at 10 a.m. June 29, 1994, and "the Fox was ours."

The board gathered for a quick organizational meeting. Jeff Johnson, director of the Small Business Development Center, was chosen president and Selvidge became director of restorations. Scott Fieber, the only other continuous director from the beginning board, now is director of theater operations, which includes being involved in theater improvement. Moss and Butler were the other members of that board.

The door to the Fox was locked with a padlock and chain. The only key was held by Sandy Sowers, who operated a used book store in the shop adjacent to the box office. JB immediately had a half-dozen keys made and restoration was under way. First chore: vacuuming the sea of pigeon feathers from the lobby carpet.

In its dormant stage, the Fox had become a refuge for transients, with accompanying trash, damage and some vandalism. One of Selvidge's early heroes, David Reed, who, he says, was present almost daily from the time the chain was unlocked, picked up plaster and also guided tours.

There were looters in addition to transients who found a way inside, stealing every piece of copper wire they could find. Lowell Milton of Instant Electric "was a tremendous help," Selvidge said. The volunteer not only did the rewiring but furnished most of the material at cost. Several other electrical companies also have aided the restoration.

Jim Black, general contractor, who remembered attending the Fox while growing up, received one of the first set of keys Selvidge handed out. He was interviewed for this column in 1996 after he became foundation president. He played down the hours he and his crews did, instead citing numerous contributions, several of which were also cited by Selvidge for the current column.

One of these was Walt Koch of Walt's Diesel. He is also a clock expert. Koch was able to retrieve the missing parts and return the tower clock to working condition. Others contributed money and talent to clean and repaint the clock faces and the tower.

When the Fox Foundation took over in 1994, one of the first priorities was restoration of the projection booth. Don Marshall, who began a career at the Fox in the 1940s as an assistant projectionist and was there when it closed as a commercial theater in 1979, volunteered. Fortunately, the booth had escaped the intruders, but it needed to be brought up to modern standards. The old projectors operated with large film spools, but now modern stuff is on DVDs. The old equipment still exists but mostly as museum pieces. What loomed as a \$20,000 item, Marshall and his grandson provided for about \$1,200 in costs.

Selvidge recites other restorations that have been made with community support. Starting about six weeks ago theater-goers have been able to sit in comfort after the installation of a Turbocor compressed air conditioning system. The system cost \$210,000. It was one of the key items on the Fox "wish list." Fieber said it was made possible by a "tremendous" discount from Hillcrest AC and the knowledge that energy costs would be cut in half.

An earlier major item was replacement of the stage curtains.

One of the next goals is reupholstering the theater's 1,540 seats.

Selvidge says that those folks mentioned above are but a few of the hundreds who have provided funds, materials and labor to keep the dream alive. The theater has involved CSUB and Bakersfield College. The current board chairman is James T. Whitehead Jr., a retired Air Force major general, who also is chairman of the board of the Minter Field Air Museum.

The Fox Theater was opened on Christmas 1930 as a gala local event. The feature was "Just Imagine" starring Maureen O'Sullivan and El Brendel. On Christmas 2005 the Fox Foundation will show the same film at a party which will also include the cutting of a 75th anniversary cake.

The theater was closed for repairs after the 1952 earthquake but reopened on May 1, 1953. It closed as a first-run theater in 1979. It reopened briefly in 1982 as a live-stage venue catering to country-western performers. The last star performer was Tammy Wynette.

The Fox is available for special showings, conventions, films and stage productions. The Fox does not book performances or films but leases the facilities to promoters and organizations. One of the next performances features the Moscow Ballet Tuesday.

Selvidge points out that the Fox occupies a niche in entertainment venues. Only the Rabobank Arena, Theater & Convention Center offers more seating, but it's too large and expensive for a lot of users. Harvey Auditorium and the major theater group facilities are smaller.

The Nov. 5 Diamond Jubilee Black Tie Gala is a fund-raiser for the foundation. The cost is \$135 per couple and \$75 for a single. There will be hors d'oeuvres and cocktails. Entertainment will be provided by the Sultans of Swing. Reservation forms are available at the Fox office, 2001 H St.