

How Curious – What has made the Coleman Theatre Beautiful?

MUSIC: How Curious theme

Karen Norris

Well, you would come in, and I would greet you, and I have you sign our guest book.

Rachel-in-situ

Okay, let me do that now.

FX – Sound of writing

Rachel Hopkin Script

Hello there. This is Rachel Hopkin with KGOU's How Curious dedicated to Oklahoma stories past and present.

Karen Norris

So we are a multi faceted theatre. We are equipped to do so many things. We try to involve all of the community and all of our tourists and we have a lot of European tourists in this summer.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Karen Norris is a docent at the Coleman Theatre Beautiful – to give it its full name. It stands pride of place on the part of Route 66 that runs through Miami, Oklahoma.

Karen Norris

We are equipped to do so many thing. We try to involve all of the community and all of our tourists and we have a lot of European tourists in this summer.

Rachel-in-situ

This is gorgeous.

Karen Norris

It is.

SEGUE

Danny Dillon

I laugh about our role here.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Danny Dillon is the theatre's managing director ...

Danny Dillon

People come in and it's "are we a museum? Are we live theatre?" And I tell people "We're like the *Night at the Museum* movies – you can come in during the day and we are a museum, but at night, everything comes to life and we are a living, active theatre, you know.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The Coleman Theatre Beautiful has been that living active enterprise since it was first built in 1929. Now on the National Register of Historic Places, it's a splendid example of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture on the outside and a wonderfully ornate Louis 15th style rich in red and gold on the inside.

Karen Norris

This is George Coleman on the wall.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Karen is showing me a framed black and white photo of the man in question.

Karen Norris

He's the reason we have our theater here in Miami. And he, in the early 1900s, he and his brother came to relocate their family and to drill for water.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The water thing may have been a ruse to put others off the scent should they uncover anything more valuable.

Karen Norris

The shavings that came up definitely was not liquid. So they brought it to Miami to be assessed. He would have uncovered the largest and richest lead and zinc mine in this area.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Not just this area

Danny Dillon

It was probably the second largest vein of lead and zinc in the world. So this is going into World War I. And both of those elements were things that every country was desiring. Because, of course, the lead for ammunition, the zinc went into the radio operations. So he went from a man who was just an ordinary working class gentleman suddenly found himself making about a million dollars every month.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Oh my goodness.

Danny Dillon

Now, that is an average. We can see there was times he made it in a week. There were times he make a million dollars in a day.

Rachel Hopkin Script

And he evidently wasn't stingy with his new found funds, least of all in the place that he'd made his home.

Danny Dillon

He really was so instrumental in establishing this town. He helped bring in the newspaper. The hospital and the library. He also helped to co-found what is our community college today

SEGUE**Karen Norris**

So after he had done all that, he thought, “well, I haven't got married yet, so I probably should do that.” And so he met and married a very young lady, and she loved theater. So they would travel by rail.

SEGUE**Danny Dillon**

At that time, you could go over, not everybody could afford to do it, but at our depot, you get on the train and take an express train to Kansas City, get there in just a few hours. That was nothing for them to go have an evening out in Kansas City and vaudeville shows and the opera houses, all those things.

SEGUE**Karen Norris**

They became friends of many of the vaudeville and burlesque stars. So he got the idea. He would just see if they'd come here and perform. And they laughed and said, there's no place to perform. His answer was, I guess I'll build it if you come.

SEGUE**Danny Dillon**

And so they signed a contract. Now, he signed for them to bring their show here in less than one year.

Rachel-in-situ

He didn't have long to get the theater done.

Danny Dillon

330 days. The theater was built and opened for a show, yes.

Rachel Hopkin

That's amazing.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The Boller and Boller firm of architects were behind the design and the Rucks-Brandt company carried out the construction.

Danny Dillon

Seated 1,600 people opening, the only air-conditioned building in the county and the very biggest names of vaudeville appearing on the stage.

MUSIC – Mighty Wurlitzer organ

Rachel Hopkin Script

The beautiful brand new theatre came equipped with a Mighty Wurlitzer organ and despite the speed of construction, there was plenty of attention to detail.

Karen Norris

This is plaster cast molding with gold leafing.

Rachel Hopkin Script

This adds decoration all around the auditorium and beyond.

Karen Norris

The pineapples mean welcome and hospitality. And then you're gonna see fruits, nuts, vegetables. And to me, all of this molding is like a substance alive. And then you see cherubs. Right. And then on the exterior, on this side of the building outside, we have the gargoyles and they are the protector of the buildings.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Back inside, Karen herself danced on this very stage as a 5 year old. But what of the big name vaudeville performers?

Danny Dillon

We've got them all recorded, like the Marx brothers. Sally Rand, who was an infamous fan dancer. I'm sure people protested her being here because it was very risqué. She was shut down at the Chicago World's Fair and put in jail because her show was so lewd. It was *strip-tease*. It was a *tease*. No one knew whether she was wearing clothes or not underneath it, and she was so good at what she did. I'm gonna say that she must have been masterful because she was here, it actually was in the 30s when she was here the first time, and she came back again in the 50s. I thought, if a lady is that old and still doing that kind of an act ... tip our hats to her. But anyway so Sally Rand. Blackstone the Magician was here. Of course Will Rogers was here and Tom Mix rode his horse on the stage and his act and all that kind of stuff so at the biggest names we also had some of the smallest entertainers. We found we have records and a hand bill that I saw they passed out "tonight on the Coleman stage" ... course this wouldn't be correct today but ... "30 dancing midgets." So I read about these folks; they were called the Singer's Midgets and it wasn't ... I thought "oh so they sing and there were little people" you know. But no. Mr. Singer was their manager. He went around and formed a troop of little people and he actually helped to supply the talent for the Wizard of Oz, the movie, so I say we had the biggest names and the smallest people, 30 of the Munchkins, danced on our stage one night in the show.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Danny had told me that Mr. Coleman was friends with Bing Crosby, so I wanted to know if he'd ever performed here. Apparently he didn't in a formal capacity.

Danny Dillon

But they said it was not uncommon for Bing Crosby to step out on the stage when he was in town and maybe between movies or whatever and kind of, you know, they didn't have TMZ back then, so here's Hollywood Gossip, you know, so he'd tell them a little about what was going on in

that world, and then, they said, usually he would sing a song or something before he left the stage

MUSIC – Bing Crosby – Swinging on a Star

Danny Dillon

Mr. Coleman passed away in 1945. At that time things shifted.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The vaudeville tradition had by then mostly faded away and the Coleman became largely just a movie theatre.

Danny Dillon

Going into the fifties, things had changed. The climate of the country had changed, and this Louis XV interior that was so formal wasn't so popular now, new places were getting built, a flashier, different look, and they started trying to change the look to match that. So things happened. In '46 we could see they changed the carpeting. They started taking off the moldings, the ornate moldings off the wall. In the 50s when the big cable that held up the 2,000 pound chandelier, it started to fray a bit, rather than replace the cable, they took out that chandeliers. And it made it a pretty dark room. Well, these other people who were running it also did not keep a good roof on the building. And so it started to leak. And I mean, it got bad. You could get wet watching a movie, you know. It really it just fell into disrepair by the time in my Growing up here the late 70s my high school years If you would have called it the Coleman theater beautiful, which is its name we would have laughed.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The organ had also been sold off.

ORGAN MUSIC

The Coleman family ended up giving the theatre to the city of MIami. One of the suggestions for its future was to raze it to make way for a car park.

Danny Dillon

But the people in the town then rose up, and they were just like, that theater may look bad, but our memories are holding up those walls. You can't tear down the Coleman.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The people of the city came together as the Friends of the Coleman in an ambitious initiative to renovate and restore the theatre to its former glory.

Danny Dillon

We hauled out six ton of trash.

Rachel-in-situ

Oh my goodness.

Danny Dillon

But in that debris we found things like the moldings that we were able to replicate from so now those moldings you see aren't the original but they are just like the original because we found all that we found the molds for the marquees out front.

Rachel Hopkin Script

Danny and Karen regaled me with stories of the renovation are full of serendipities. Like the original chandelier that was taken down in 1964. It had been deemed lost until it was found in an outbuilding in the former Coleman home around the time the renovation was getting under way in the 90s. Then there were the seats – the originals had been torn out long ago but what to do with the incongruous replacements which were beginning to fall apart themselves.

Danny Dillon

Someone thought to look up and see if the original company were still in business and it was. So we called them thinking well maybe they could find something more close to what we ... and uh, they had our original order and they still make the very same things that, so they could replicate exactly. Of course, now with that we said, “well we may not want exactly. We've had a big thing happen in Miami since 1929. McDonald's came to town and most of us have super-sized.” Is there any way we could make those a little wider? Yeah they could. So they made the chairs all two inches wider. With that, we have fewer seats obviously, but it's a great trade-off.

Rachel Hopkin Script

The Friends of the Coleman were also determined to bring the organ home. Like the chandelier, it first had to be located.

Danny Dillon

One family in particular, the wife really wanted that organ, not just an organ, but that organ. And they looked for it for 10 years. And what had happened, the man who purchased it was sort of a televangelist-type person. So after he went to prison, they had to try to... They had a hard time finding where it had gone. In Tulsa there's a very active organ society and they gave us the name of a man down in Texas who had a reputation with the world of church that he knew so much about them and where a lot of them had gone from their original homes and everything. So we called him, we got his number and called him and asked him if he might know where our organ was. He kinda had a little pause and he said, “well, I'm looking at it.” He had purchased it himself. And the great story is, when he was a young man, he played on a semi-pro baseball team, and they had come to Miami.

Rachel Hopkin Script

He was staying in a hotel that Mr Coleman had been instrumental in establishing. And from there he could hear the Wurlitzer organ in the Coleman Theatre and fell in love.

Danny Dillon

That started his lifelong passion for the World It's Organs. And so when it came for sale and he was able to purchase it, he did. So when they called, told him that there were volunteers who were restoring this theater and he did kind of know the shape that it had become. They'd been looking for the organ. He just basically said “Good luck. Goodbye” and hung up. He just wasn't

going to get involved with that. But we wouldn't leave him alone and that family I told you about, they went to Texas and Burleson, Texas, part of Dallas they brought he and his wife here. When they came in and saw what was happening saw the passion that people had for the project He said, you know that “the organ is the voice of the theater and he said I would love for your theater to get her voice back.”

Rachel Hopkin Script

There was quite a bit of negotiating back and forth, and a whole lot of fund-raising to meet the gentleman's \$100 grand asking price, but eventually ...

Danny Dillon

Got it back, he came in, worked for six months, had to have volunteers of about 30 people showed up every day and got that organ reinstalled. Today, it is the only one of the Wurlitzer Organs that was built in 1928 that is still in the venue that it was built to be in, anywhere left in the world.

Rachel Hopkin Script

And you can hear it there today - the Coleman Theatre Beautiful in the heart of Miami, Oklahoma.

Thanks to Danny Dillon and Karen Norris, as well as Melissa Mercer Berryman for their help with this programme.

How Curious is a KGOU Public Radio production. The Managing Editor is Logan Layden. David Graey composed our theme music and I'm Rachel Hopkin.

As ever, if you have an idea for a future episode, we'd love to hear about it so please drop us a line at curious@kgou.org.