

THE THIRD ANNUAL DOWNTOWN PENSACOLA SPECIAL EDITION

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**Harriet Riley** has worked as an adjunct professor at the University of West Florida, teaching writing classes in the Communication Arts Department. She has just moved to Houston, Texas with her new husband and children where she is doing free-lance writing and public relations projects. Ms. Riley served as director of United Ministries in Pensacola for seven years. She was

very active in civic and church groups in Pensacola and says she misses Pensacola more than any place she's ever lived. She has her Master of Arts degree in communications from the University of Texas and her Bachelor of Arts degree in English and journalism from the University of Mississippi.



**Tiffany Gimbel** is a soon-to-be, two-time graduate with honors from the University of West Florida. In December 2003, she earned her first degree in TV and Film and soon began working for the university's television station as a broadcast specialist. Her love of writing and her distaste for answering telephones as a temp prompted her to pursue an English degree. Working under Mamie Hixon at the University of West Florida Writing

Lab eventually led to a freelance writing opportunity with Ballinger Publishing. You can find her at the movies or at home watching TV on DVD, the new all-American pastime! Feel free to contact her via email: [tiffany.gimbel@gmail.com](mailto:tiffany.gimbel@gmail.com).



**Evon Emerson**, president/CEO of the Pensacola Area Chamber of Commerce, draws on her organizational management background daily. For 16 years, prior to joining the Chamber, she was the founder and president of Emerson Enterprises, Inc., a management-consulting firm specializing in strategic planning, leadership and team development. She currently serves on the University of West Florida Business Advisory Council, and the boards of the

Rehabilitation Foundation of Northwest Florida, United Way of Escambia County, the Autism Society, and Favor House, where she serves as President. She is a founding member of IMPACT 100 of the Pensacola Bay Area and was appointed by Governor Jeb Bush to serve on the Medal of Merit Board for the State of Florida.



**Franklin D. Kimbrough** is the Executive Director of the Pensacola Downtown Improvement Board (DIB) and has over 20 years of experience in leading downtown revitalization efforts, managing Business Improvement Districts, and directing community betterment organizations. Prior to joining the DIB in 2004, he held similar positions in Portland, Oregon; St. Louis, Missouri; Jackson, Mississippi; and Roanoke, Virginia.



**Reginald Shepherd's** five books of poetry, all published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, include *Fata Morgana* (2007); *Otherhood* (2003), a finalist for the 2004 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize; and *Some Are Drowning* (1994), winner of the 1993 Associated Writing Programs' Award in Poetry. He is the editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* (University of Iowa Press, 2004) and of *Lyric Postmodernisms*, to be published by

Counterpath Press in 2008. His essay collection *Orpheus in the Bronx* is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press in 2008.



**Dustin Brady** is a senior studying commercial writing at Pensacola Christian College. He comes from Cleveland, Ohio, and contributes to the Plain Press, a community newspaper near his home, during the summer.



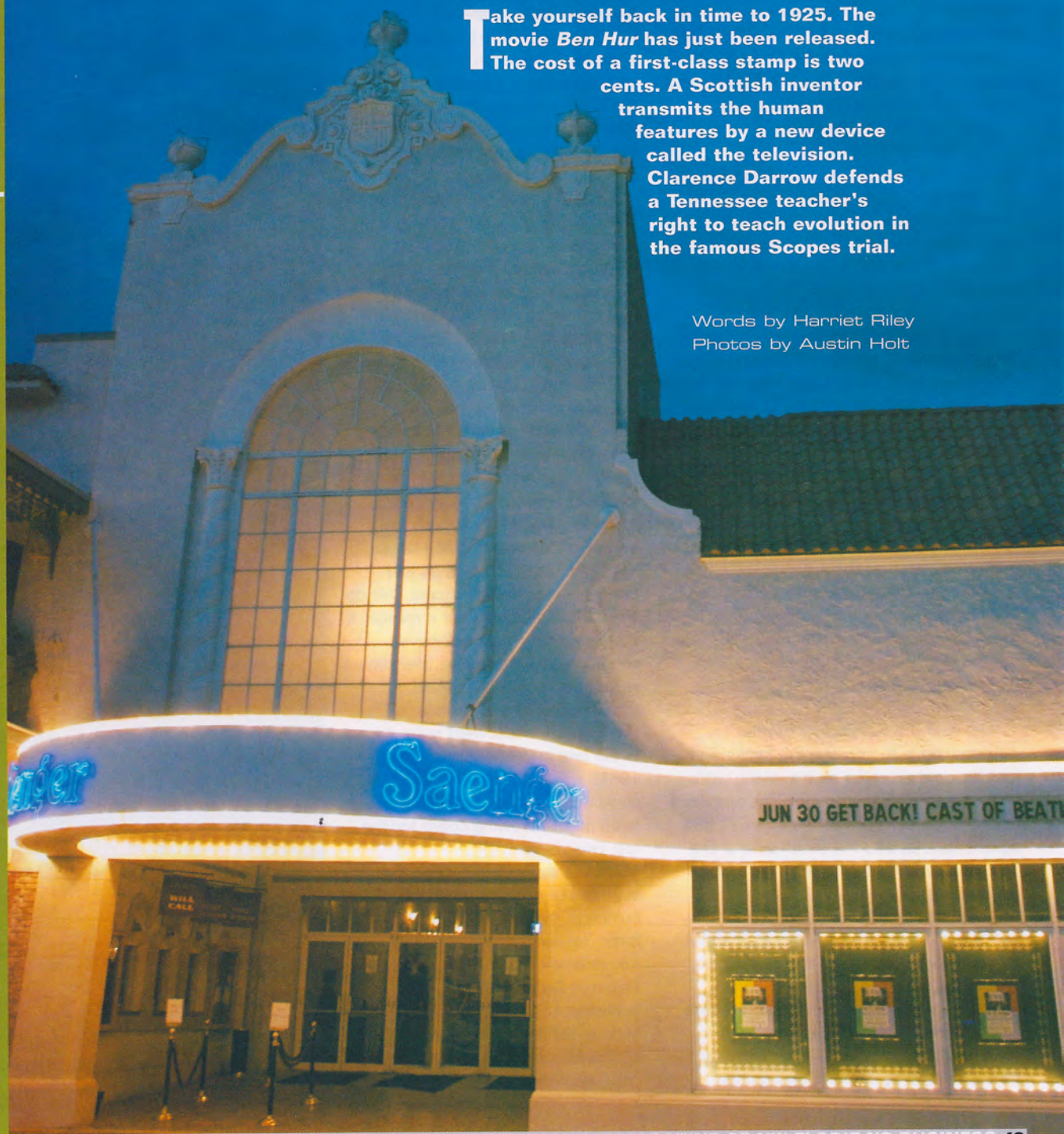
**Deborah Dunlap** lives in the heart of historical Downtown Pensacola with her daughter, Devan. A native of Childersburg, Alabama, Deborah moved to Pensacola in 1982. In 1986 she opened her own publishing company and in 1999, after winning more than a dozen national awards for publishing excellence, Deborah acquired the largest private collection of historic photos of the greater Pensacola area. Now, with more than a dozen pictorial history books in publication, Deborah enjoys the tedious task of archiving the thousands of photographs she has added to her vast collection. Deborah's Historic

Pensacola Photograph books and prints can be found at the Blue Morning Gallery and at Joe Patti Seafood. Deborah can be reached at 850-232-9063.

# The Grand Dame

**T**ake yourself back in time to 1925. The movie *Ben Hur* has just been released. The cost of a first-class stamp is two cents. A Scottish inventor transmits the human features by a new device called the television. Clarence Darrow defends a Tennessee teacher's right to teach evolution in the famous Scopes trial.

Words by Harriet Riley  
Photos by Austin Holt



## The Saenger Theatre

In Pensacola, the U.S. Aeronautical Station on the site of the old Naval Yard is 11-years old and growing. The Daughters of Charity Pensacola (later Sacred Heart) Hospital on 12th Avenue is 10 years old and is the city's only hospital. Families still take boats to Gulf Breeze and Pensacola Beach in the summer because no bridges have been built yet. And on Palafox Avenue, the San Carlos Hotel, Seville Towers and the 10-story American National Bank Building line the bustling, paved street.

Also in 1925, the Saenger Theatre opens on Palafox Street to much fanfare with a showing of Cecil B. DeMille's epic silent film *The Ten Commandments*. Built for \$500,000 on the site of the old Opera House, the renowned architect Emile Weil designed the Spanish Baroque building in a grand style befitting the growing city.

Now in 2007—82 years later—the Grand Dame of Palafox has closed its doors and is awaiting its latest rebirth. Supporters and arts patrons scramble to raise \$15 million for a much-needed makeover to restore the theatre to the opulence of the 1920s and to regain its status as a regional center for the arts and entertainment.

Picture the Saenger Theatre attracting Broadway shows, such as *Phantom of the Opera* and huge productions like Verdi's grand opera *Aida*. This can only happen after a large-scale renovation, which is in the works.

"The renovations will enable the Saenger to put on some of the big shows that currently bypass us for larger venues," general manager Doug Lee said. "The problem is not that the stage is too small, but the area around the stage is too small." Lee has worked for the Saenger since it underwent another renovation in 1981. He started out unloading trucks for performances and worked his way up to general manager in 1994.

Lee said the top priority of this rejuvenation is to improve the backstage facilities and dressing rooms, along with enhancing audience comfort. The proposed extension to the back of the stage (1,824 square feet) and to the south side of the building (24,544 square feet) will include set storage, improved cast placement space to accommodate up to 200 performers, a covered loading area and a new dressing room suite and meeting space. According to Lee, the dressing rooms will be "places where you wouldn't be embarrassed to bring a star."

In addition, the planned renovations, to be supervised by Turner Construction

Company of Atlanta, will include much needed infrastructure improvements, including overhauling electrical, lighting, heating and air conditioning systems, enlarging the orchestra pit, and adding a portable acoustic shell. All the additions will increase the square footage by 26,368 square feet.

Lee said that improved audience amenities include the installing of more comfortable seats that will be wider by five inches, additional restrooms, and improved handicap accessibility.

Big Broadway shows like *Les Miserables* require a lot of backstage room to unload stages and move sets on and off the stage. A big stage show travels with three eighteen-wheeler trucks that carry the entire show. Lee also said that not having the space to unpack the show increases the labor cost for the Saenger to rent office trailers and build cast space.

"The key is to be competitive along the Gulf Coast. Attracting the best shows requires attracting larger audiences and having the best space." Lee said that the biggest single cost, in operating a regional venue like the Saenger, after paying the talent, is the labor.

"Currently, the labor costs at the Saenger are high because we don't have the facilities to accommodate everything needed to stage a large show," Lee said. "Because the back-stage space is so limited, material gets handled much more here. For instance, moving large sets four times rather than just twice doubles the labor cost. We do call it show *business* for a reason. If there is a more cost-effective solution somewhere else, the shows will go elsewhere," Lee said.

Owned by the city since 1975, the Saenger underwent renovations in the late seventies (re-opening in 1981) and again in 1995. The current proposed renovation has been on the drawing board for the last two years.

"If you are going to be in the business of owning historical buildings, you must realize they need regular maintenance and rejuvenation to stay viable," said Deborah Dunlap, local author, publisher and owner of several historic buildings on Palafox Street.

Dunlap calls the building a "historical icon." Many others in the

city agree. Bobby Ball, artistic director of Ballet Pensacola, said, "Everyone believes the renovation is important to the arts community. The theatre will be so much easier to use and much more comfortable for the audiences."

"And we must stay in tune with the cutting edge of what today's theatre-going public wants and needs," Dunlap said.

But the cost of improving a building



listed on the National Register of Historic Sites is not cheap. Originally estimated to cost \$9 million, the cost of the renovation has gone up to \$15 million. "Since Hurricane Ivan, construction costs have increased 50 to 60 percent," said Bill Greenhut, owner of Greenhut Construction and chairman of Saenger Theatre Capital Campaign Committee.

Funding for the renovation will have to come from many sources, said Sherri Hemminghaus Weeks, president of Friends

of the Saenger, Inc., the non-profit funding arm of the theatre. Six million dollars will come from the city's local-option sales tax, and \$2 million has been promised by the Escambia County Commission.

"The county sees the value to be an estimated 12,000 school children from Escambia County who get their first theatre experience each year at the Saenger," said Weeks.

And the current offerings do attract from a wider area. In the last year, 56

percent of ticket sales came from Escambia County, 28 percent from Santa Rosa, 5 percent from Baldwin County, Alabama, 8 percent from Okaloosa and Walton Counties, and 3 percent from other places, Saenger officials reported.

The Saenger non-profit group is still hoping for federal and state grants and IMPACT100 funding but will have to count on the remaining funding to come from local contributors. Weeks said that their capital campaign has raised \$900,000 so



## Saenger Brothers Made Entertainment History in the Gulf South

In 1911, the first feature film was released when two reels of D. W. Griffith's *Enoch Arden* were screened together. It was no coincidence that also in 1911, the Saenger Brothers, Abe and Julian, operators of a drug store in Shreveport, Louisiana, decided to enter the amusement field. They partnered with a local movie-theatre operator, E.V. Richards, in opening their first Saenger Theatre. They featured vaudeville acts their first year and then began to offer moving pictures exclusively. In 1912-1913, motion pictures moved out of nickelodeons (an early 20th century form of small, neighborhood movie theaters) and into real theatres. The first real movie palaces began to open in 1913. The Saenger brothers were part of the burgeoning movie industry.

As the movie business exploded, the company grew, and they formed the first Saenger chain of theatres with venues in Texarkana, Monroe and Alexandria and thus formed the first chain of Saenger Theatres. A few years later the Saenger Company took over the Fichtenberg enterprises of New Orleans, which included houses in Vicksburg, Houston, and Pensacola. Over the years prior to 1937, the company moved its headquarters to New Orleans and opened theatres in 12 Southern states with a total of 320 theatres at one time.

The Pensacola Saenger opened in 1925 after 13 months of constructing the Spanish Baroque building. The grand rococo style of the interior featured a Robert Morton theatre organ installed in 1927. This venue attracted Vaudeville acts and other road shows from the other Saenger theatres in New Orleans, Biloxi, Mobile, and Hattiesburg to name a few. Most of the theatres put up movie screens and began showing newsreels and full-length movies with great success by the 1930s.

Renowned architect Emile Weil of New Orleans designed three of the five Deep South Saenger movie palace buildings. Of the Gulf Coast Saengers, several remain. The Hattiesburg Saenger has been renovated and operates as a local entertainment center, and the Mobile Saenger has also undergone recent improvements and attracts excellent performing artists. The Biloxi Saenger survived Hurricane Katrina and is back in operation. However, the New Orleans Saenger, by far the largest of the four along the Gulf Coast originally seating 4,000, has not re-opened due to severe water damage during Hurricane Katrina.

The Saenger brothers had a vision that is still alive today, and the Grand Dame of Palafox is being revived for a long future in the entertainment world.

## The Saenger Theatre continued

far from the private sector. She hopes they will raise a lot more through the efforts of local arts organizations, such as the Pensacola Symphony, the Pensacola Opera, Ballet Pensacola and the Pensacola Children's Chorus. They also plan to sell the original theatre seats, sell sponsorships for the new seats, and put on a fundraising telethon to solicit additional support from the community.

Supporters of the Saenger say the payback in the years ahead will be enormous. With theatergoers from the region, an improved Saenger will draw even more visitors to the city and the Downtown area. Visitors who eat, drink, shop, and even spend the night in the city, said Dunlap, will add to the economic impact.

But economic impact is difficult to measure according to the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic

Development at the University of West Florida. Experts there said, "The real overall value of the theatre is very difficult to capture in standard economic impact measurements because a lot of the value to the community is related to how people end up using the theatre along with the experiences, enjoyment, and memories people get out of having such a facility available."

"Quality acts will fill those 1,600 seats with people visiting our Downtown area," Dunlap explained.

And quality acts are the goal. "Doug Lee and his staff have done an awesome job of working with what they have," said Dunlap. "But we could do so much better."

"We had to wait for scaled-down versions of Broadway shows like *Cats*, *Riverdance* and *Miss Saigon* before they could play in Pensacola. The



improvements will allow us to have a better chance to get the shows while they are still fresh," Kathy Summerlin, Saenger marketing and event services manager explained.

"For example, the *Cats* performance that we just recently had is nicknamed kittens, because it's not the full show. It's been scaled down for smaller theatres. Also when David Copperfield comes, he has to leave many of his tricks and illusions in the semi trucks because the stage is too small for the components of the illusion."

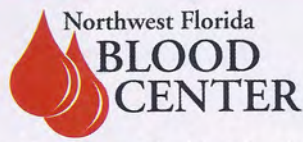
The Saenger Theatre was an economic boast to a growing port city when it opened in 1925 to host a variety of vaudeville-type shows, Stage plays and silent-screen classics. The Saenger was the first all-electric building in Pensacola, according to Summerlin. In fact, she explained that electricity was so new that the owners had gas installed in case electricity was just a fad. When the vaudeville days ended, the theatre became a Downtown movie house until the aging building shut its doors in 1975.

The Friends of the Saenger was formed in the late 1970s to help the Saenger re-open its doors as Pensacola's home for the performing arts. And the building has more than exceeded expectations as it hosted local arts organizations, civic groups and performers, and everything from local ballet recitals to church concerts to world class performers like Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Itzhak Perlman, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Twyla Thorpe and Harry Connick, Jr.

Pensacola resident Bill Yarborough said that his father saw his first movie at the Saenger in 1930 when he was five years old. He told the story his Dad told him about "seeing a train coming at him on the screen—being his first movie and being only five—he thought he was about to get run over, and he ran screaming at the top of his lungs out into the lobby."

"It still brings a smile to my face every time we walk into that lobby to think of my dad and all the experiences he had there," Yarborough says. He has since created his own memories of the Saenger by seeing his daughter's first dance recital there and enjoying acts, such as Bobby Blue Bland, Johnny Lang and George Carlin perform on stage.

Yarborough and many others hope to continue to create memories at the Saenger for many more years to come, when the vision of the local arts community is realized and its doors reopen. ☀



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