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Tennessee Theatre History Takes Center Stage on Knox Narratives

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — The last 13 months have been historically arduous for the Tennessee Theatre in Downtown Knoxville.

"We are in the business of gathering large groups of people indoors," said Becky Hancock, executive director of the non-profit Historic Tennessee Theatre Foundation. "Our revenue dropped by 95 percent compared to a normal operating year."

Hancock put things in historical perspective during an in-depth discussion with Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs. In the latest episode of Knox Narratives, Hancock shared some of the many remarkable moments that made the Tennessee Theatre Knoxville's "grand entertainment palace" since 1928.

"The Tennessee started primarily as a movie theater. It did very well through the depression in the 1930s and the war years in the 1940s. It was a way for people to come in and forget about their troubles. These beautiful theaters were designed to look like palaces," said Hancock.

As a large 1,600-seat theater with only one movie screen, the Tennessee Theatre's economic model grew unsustainable in the 1970s. The venue closed in 1977. It found a personal savior when broadcast executive James Dick bought the venue in 1982. Hancock said he "operated the theater for 15 years and never made a dime, but he loved the theater and knew it was important to preserve it."

In the mid-1990s, Dick helped form the Historic Tennessee Theatre Foundation and transferred ownership to the non-profit group. The non-profit business model allowed leadership to raise more than \$25 million to completely renovate, restore and expand the venue for its grand reopening in 2005.

Hancock and Mayor Jacobs discussed the interesting history of the theater's vertical Tennessee sign on Gay Street. She also let mayor test his musical skills on the Tennessee Theatre's original organ, the "Mighty Wurlitzer."

Hancock said with vaccination numbers continuing to rise, she expects full-house concerts and events to resume during the final three months of 2021. In the meantime, the Tennessee Theatre continues to ask the public for support. The venue continues to sell gifts and solicit donations on its website.

You can watch the full 11-minute Knox Narratives episode on YouTube and on Facebook.