The Life of The Lensic

“I made all my money here and I wanted to give the people something to show my appreciation.” – Nathan Salmon on building the Lensic Theater

Cart Peddler to Real Estate Magnate

Nathan Salmon, born Na’aman Soleiman in Biskinta, Syria, July 1866, arrived in New York at age 21. Two months later he journeyed westward to Durango, Colorado. For three years he traveled the roads of southern Colorado, selling goods from a wagon. In New Orleans, on his way back to Europe, he met his bride-to-be. Returning to Durango, they were stranded by a snowstorm in Santa Fe. Down to his last 25 cents, Salmon pawned his watch to wire a friend for a loan and, with that help, he resumed business as a “cart peddler.” Later in life he recalled how other merchants ridiculed him as “the man with the wagon store.” He prospered and soon bought a dry goods store on San Francisco Street in 1894. Family lore has it that the down payment came from his winnings in a pool game.

With a keen eye for land value, the enterprising Salmon bought property throughout Santa Fe and Albuquerque. By the time of his death in 1941, he ranked among the wealthiest men of New Mexico. Among his contributions to the state’s development, Nathan became known as a builder of theaters. Beginning in 1911, he had opened and closed several small theaters before drawing plans for a lavish movie palace – to be the most splendid theater in the southwest. In defiance of the unrelenting financial devastation of the Great Depression, Salmon, along with his son-in-law, E. John Greer, announced on March 27, 1930, plans for such a place. The ‘Spanish style’ theater boasted the latest projection and sound equipment – and would offer live performance and talkies to Santa Fe’s 11,000 residents.

Salmon envisioned every comfort: men’s and women’s lounges on the mezzanine level, spacious dressing rooms beneath the stage and, in the house, 100 leather upholstered deluxe rocking seats – later coveted by theatergoers and available at a premium. West of the theater, he proposed offices with an upstairs dance hall – “one of the finest dancing pavilions in the southwest,” conveniently accessible from the theater’s mezzanine. After the show, movie patrons could proceed to the ballroom for dancing, pausing along the way for refreshments at a roof garden. Gentlemen might relax in the exclusive men’s club facing San Francisco Street, while ladies played bridge in any of several private rooms. Those arriving by motor car would find a brightly lit parking lot for 250 cars behind the theater. Valet parking attendants would be instructed not to accept tips.

A Boller Extravaganza

For what he would call the “wonder theater of the southwest,” Salmon went to the best theater designers of the day. He contracted Boller Brothers of Los Angeles and Kansas City, who had been building picture palaces throughout the United States since 1900 (and
would continue to do so into the 1950s). The firm had just recently created Albuquerque’s KiMo Theatre, distinctive for its Pueblo Deco style.

The project moved swiftly. Architects convened in April, blueprints were ready by July, and ground was broken on September 26, 1930. That same day, Salmon offered a $25 prize for an appropriate name – preferably Spanish, or one incorporating the initials of his grandchildren. The winning combination came from Mrs. P.J. Smithwick, whose acronym not only combined the desired initials (for Lila, Elias John, Nathan, Sara, Mary Irene and Charles,) but also suggested the “lens” of the projector machine and the scenic splendor of the interior.

By the end of November, a specially inscribed marble cornerstone had arrived. It read: “Dedicated to the People of Santa Fe by Nathan Salmon and E. John Greer.” It still remains at the base of the wall near the theater’s entry.

**Summer Time**

Santa Fe, June 1931 – Watermelon was 3¢ a pound, 27¢ for two-dozen oranges. The Merchants Plate Lunch cost 40¢ and a lady’s silk dress $2.98. Also in Santa Fe: the longest heat wave since 1924. Advance advertisements for the Lensic’s Grand Opening tempted audiences with an evening “cooled by modern refrigeration.” Despite the heat, Mr. Salmon encouraged gentlemen to wear tuxedos for the occasion.

On June 24, 1931, the Lensic Theater celebrated its Grand Opening. As the evening’s program promised, it was “the most elaborate stage presentation ever brought into the state.” Headlining were Chet Grass and his Frontier Knights Orchestra, followed by the
“five foot two with eyes of blue” Miss Mae Delle in a series of “snappy dances.” Then came the dignitaries’ speeches. Judge Reed Holloman introduced the Governor, the Mayor, a Senator and a Congressman. All congratulated Colonel Salmon for his courage in building such a lavish and perfectly equipped theater, “in a time of world-wide depression, providing employment to needy ones.” Mrs. Smithwick, who named the theater, took a bow for her contribution.


His dream completed, Salmon delighted in the occasion, and in greeting guests. He took pride in compliments about the luxurious appointments, especially the ‘atmospherics’ – clouds and twinkling lights in the blue sky ceiling to give the illusion of being under a night sky, surrounded by mountains.

**Heydays**

Soon the Lensic became a hub of Santa Fe social life. Movies proved to be the great tonic of the Depression years and the war years that followed. The marquee changed four times a week – three shows daily with ticket prices from 25¢ to 75¢.
Vaudeville revues added zest to the screen dramas, musicals, and thrillers. Before long, stars from the silver screen began stepping onto the Lensic’s stage. Claudette Colbert created a sensation when she arrived for a celebrity premiere of *Cleopatra*. Young Judy Garland captivated the audience with “Zing Went the Strings of My Heart” from her 1938 movie, *Listen Darling*. Rudy Vallee crooned, and “The King of the Cowboys” Roy Rogers came. The Lensic was a logical venue to premiere *Santa Fe Trail* in 1940. More than 60,000 fans flocked to see Errol Flynn, Ronald Reagan and Olivia de Haviland inaugurate the occasion.
As early as 1937, the Lensic beckoned classical artists. Noted musicians Gregor Piatigorsky, Alexander Kipnis, Rudolf Firkusny, Risë Stevens, Bidú Sayão and Yehudi performed under the auspices of the Santa Fe Community Concert Association. Ballet dancers and Martha Graham’s modern dancers demonstrated their talents, and the Trapp Family Singers sang at the Lensic long before *The Sound of Music*.

**Changing Times**

Through the 1950s the Lensic thrived, but as the city grew, other entertainment options became available. With the advent of drive-in movie theaters, television, multiplex theaters and home videos, the Lensic lost its allure. Glamour would return with the annual Santa Fe Film Festival – drawing through the early 1980s the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Duvall, Sam Peckinpah, Lillian Gish, Ginger Rogers, Ray Bolger and Gene Kelly. Perhaps the Lensic’s last hurrah came in 1988 with the premier of Robert Redford’s *The Milagro Beanfield War*.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the Lensic remained primarily as a first-run movie house. Live performance, from groups such as Santa Fe Pro Musica and for Santa Fe Cares *Live at the Lensic* AIDS benefit, took place only on occasion. The technical requirements of modern performance continued to surpass those offered by the old Lensic. In the 1990s, while managed by United Artists, the theater stopped hosting live events and in 1999, closed its doors altogether.

**A Dream Revived**

Bill and Nancy Zeckendorf, members of a distinguished real estate family in New York, who had moved to Santa Fe, were among the first to understand the potential of The Lensic as a performing arts theater. Determined to provide the city with such a venue, they returned to Salmon’s vision of a dramatic showplace.

Working with eight Santa Fe performing arts groups, the city government, and business leaders, Nancy raised $9 million, recruited a respected board of directors, and incorporated the theater as a nonprofit. The new Lensic Performing Arts Center was designed to expand the possibilities of the venue for all uses. It would be a catalyst for the growth of Santa Fe’s existing companies and the emergence of new artists, art forms and audiences for generations to come.

In December 2000, The Lensic was recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as an official project of Save America’s Treasures. Soon after, renovation and restoration of the theater began.
The Lensic Performing Arts Center represents a unique balance between the old and the new: a state-of-the-art performing space representing the cutting-edge of theater technology, framed by the restored grandeur of a 1930s movie palace. Using original architectural renderings, photographs and news clippings, architects were able to peer into the past and – with the restoration team of Conrad Schmitt Studios – bring Nathan Salmon’s Lensic Theater back to life.

Elegant Entry

A replica of the original marquee greets arriving theater goers, leading them into the lobby – an extravaganza of rich red, green, and gold ornamentation. Decorative arches set into either wall of the outer lobby were discovered only after renovations began, and now remain. Beyond, two original chandeliers glitter anew – illuminating the inner lobby ceiling and restored murals originally painted by Edward Arnold. The center chandelier is cast silver: a treasure from New York’s famed Roxy Theater. Two new concession bars and a box office complement the elegant entry.

Within the theater, the “atmospheric” effect of the Lensic’s elaborate decoration is recalled. Even before taking their seats, the audience is swept into another world. Once seated, the audience will discover modifications made to ensure perfect sightlines to the stage from all directions.
**Backstage Drama**

The Lensic stage area was increased to a depth of 40 feet. Below it, a large space was created to facilitate room for trap doors, as well as for dressing rooms and storage. The fly space was also enlarged – raised to accommodate scenery and curtains, which can now be lifted completely out of the audience’s line of sight.

These modifications required a step critical to the renovation plan – removal of the Lensic’s back wall. Removing the old brick proved to be a tricky and arduous task. By hand, and brick by brick, the construction team of Klinger Constructors dismantled the wall over the course of several weeks. While the wall came down, special bracing was used to prevent collapse. Then came major structural changes: 80 foot steel beams were raised to support the existing structure and accommodate the increased height. From there, a framework of steel and concrete was erected to extend the theater back towards Palace Avenue.

**Sound Investments**

Modifications to the stage have also allowed for a largely increased orchestra pit, able to accommodate 40 musicians. It can be covered to extend the stage or the auditorium and is designed so that a lift may be installed to raise and lower the orchestra platform. Onstage, an orchestra shell adjusts to create ideal conditions for a recitalist or symphony orchestra.

In creating any multi-use facility, acoustical concerns present an interesting challenge. Symphony music needs a reverberation time of 2 seconds. Vocal music and speech require only 1.1 seconds. Dancers need to have silent footfall. The Lensic needed a sound solution. The innovative Acoustical Control System (ACS) proved to be the answer. Developed in the Netherlands, ACS employs electronic signal processors and
microphones embedded in the walls to create different acoustic qualities for different performance mediums. At the touch of a button, ACS provides perfect acoustics in every situation.

A New Dawn for The Lensic

The Lensic Performing Arts Center celebrated its grand opening in April 2001. A week-long celebration was held with thousands flocking to performances by local performers and world-renowned artists – officially re-dedicating the restored and rejuvenated Lensic to the people of Santa Fe. Now a non-profit, it honors its place in the heart of this community by giving back in multiple, imaginative ways.

The Lensic Performing Arts Center now holds over 250 events each year, including The Lensic’s original Presentations, Community Sponsorship, Education Programs, and a host of other concerts and events from local to international. At the core of this broad cultural spectrum is The Lensic’s dedication to the local performing arts community and the people of Santa Fe.