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## Old movie theater destined to open doors again

By Minnie Jones  
FSH Public Affairs

Reminiscent of Spanish missions of yesteryear the old Fort Sam Houston Main Theater, Building 2270, has sat vacant for several decades. The two-story, white stucco building is hard to miss as you drive down Stanley Road with its five arched entryways, dark brown embellished doorways and its mission-style bell tower.

Constructed in the Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival style that was popular in the south and southwest during the 30s, the 1,104-seat theater was the main movie house on post for over 40 years, showing the latest movies to the post community until it closed some years later after the Evans Theater opened in 1972.



After closing, the former theater was used to host the U.S. Army Soldier Show for several years and then later its mission became holding various training functions for the Fort Sam Houston community, until closing its doors and falling into serious disrepair.

Although many people on Fort Sam Houston remember the old Main Theater, not many remember the theater as well or feel as close to Building 2270 as retired Army Sgt. 1st Class Fred Burton does.

Burton, still spry at 70 years old, is employed at Army Medical Department Television, (AMEDD TV) at Fort Sam Houston as an electronic technician.

Burton grew up on the island nation of the Commonwealth of Dominica, and while tagging along with his childhood friend, Cuthbert who worked at the town's only movie theater he learned how to be a projectionist.

After relocating from his hometown to New York City, Burton was soon drafted into the U.S. Army in 1962 as a field radio mechanic, and was eventually assigned to Fort Sam Houston as a 26T Radio/TV Systems Specialist.

It was not until years later that Burton would come to realize that those lessons in the movie theater back home, would prove to be beneficial to him.

During his assignment here at Fort Sam Houston, Burton, then a staff sergeant, worked as a part-time employee for the Army and Air Force Exchange Service as a projectionist showing the latest movies to moviegoers at both the Main Post and Evans theaters.

In April, Burton got a chance to go back into the old Fort Sam Houston Main Theater to look around and relive some of his fondest memories of living on Fort Sam Houston and manning the projectors in Building 2270.

Even though the theater was worst for wear, its bones were still filled with character, anyone visiting the theater could still see how beautiful it must have been back in the 30's, with its dark wooden staircase leading up to the second floor.

The lobby was spacious as most theater lobbies were during that time, the beams that extended across the ceilings, still have the intricate designs etched on them, which could barely be seen peeping through the layers of dust that had accumulated over the years. Burton walked around at first, silent, taking it all in, and then he began pointing at different objects in the building, but you could tell that he couldn't wait to get up to the old projection area, where he ran the film that took moviegoers to a different place every week.



Interior view of main lobby of the Fort Sam Houston Main Movie Theater in 1935, the year it opened on post.

When he climbed the dimly lit steps to the small room overlooking the theater, the old projection units were gone; they had been replaced with old air conditioning ductwork and other pieces of equipment. Even though the room was dark and dusty, Burton was still eager to point to where the projectors use to be located.

Once Burton got up to the projection booth and looked through the porthole, he said, "This brings back great memories, you see, what I use to do before I started a film, was to look through the porthole to see how excited the crowd was; I use to do this before every movie – this is great."

After more than two decades of lying dormant, the theater is now scheduled for renovation, with a new mission in hand.

### **The Main Post Theatre Renovation Project**

Under the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment, the 14,692 square foot building is scheduled for renovation. The BRAC project involves repairing the existing structure and building a 26,000 square foot addition. This project will support the BRAC realignment of the Family Morale Welfare and Recreation Command, Army Entertainment Division, and provide the future home of the U.S. Army Soldier Show.



Retired Army Sgt. 1st Class Fred Burton looks toward the entryway of the projection booth where he ran the movie projectors in the old Main Post Theater, April 28.

The project will alter the existing movie theater configuration to support theatrical performances and provide space for the Army Entertainment Division theatrical and administrative staff.

The renovation of the existing building will retain many historic characteristics of the interior, such as the lobby, and other areas including preservation of existing frescoes and wall murals.

The project will include replacement of interior mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems; replacement of theater seating, soundproofing and reflective surfaces; replacement of the existing cinematic theater auditorium ceiling with a performance theater ceiling to meet the acoustic and lighting requirements of a performance theater; construction of infrastructure to support theater curtains, sound, and lighting systems; and reconstruction of the stage to incorporate a fly tower and associated rigging, lighting, electrical, fire, and sound systems.

Although the project has not yet been awarded to a construction firm, it is anticipated that work at the site will begin in late 2009. The project is scheduled to be completed by late summer of 2011.