

## Narrative Description

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### Summary Paragraph

The Fiske Theatre (1950), a two-story, single-screen brick theater, is located on East Main Street in the small historic downtown of Oak Grove, Louisiana, the seat of West Carroll Parish. Situated in the middle of a block, it shares party walls with two early-twentieth-century commercial brick buildings and was one of the last structures to be erected on Main Street. The Fiske is a rare example of post-war, holdover Streamline Moderne style, with a parabolic marquee, dynamic vertical neon sign, multiple angles and curves, and horizontal “speed lines” as design motifs. It featured several state-of-the-art amenities, including a cry room and seat-side hearing aids, and, like virtually all of the era’s theaters, it was also built with a segregated balcony. The primary construction materials are brick, stucco, concrete, glass, and aluminum. The parapet roof is flat. Besides a brief stint as a live music venue, the Fiske has remained in use as a movie theater since its construction. The exterior is virtually unchanged from its original appearance (see Figure 1), although some changes have been made to the theater’s interior. Nevertheless, the Fiske retains a clear majority of its defining characteristics and would no doubt be recognizable to a person of the period. Therefore, the Fiske Theatre remains eligible for nomination to the National Register.

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### Narrative Description

The south-facing Fiske Theatre sits flush with East Main Street’s concrete sidewalk and sits across the street from the c. 1917 West Carroll Parish Courthouse. The theater’s parabolic marquee and vertical sheet metal and neon sign dominate its façade, which retains nearly all of its original features and materials. The marquee has a cantilevered concrete base with a white stucco soffit and riveted red sheet metal trim that borders backlit, white pigmented glass panels. A handful of these panels have been replaced with Plexiglas. Stainless steel letter bars hold slotted red and black plastic lettering in place. The marquee is finished with corrugated aluminum trim, a green strip of neon, and stucco horizontal red and white stripes at its terminating points. Attached to the soffit are lines of straight and circular fluorescent tube lights, which have been replaced and modified over the years.

The large vertical Fiske sign ascends up the building face from an asymmetrical point of the marquee and curves over the parapet roof. Clad in sheets of red sheet metal that match the marquee trim, the sign is cut at a slight diagonal on its outer edge, which is lined with a gray metal tube that conceals the wiring for the yellow neon chasing lights and extends beyond the top of the sign to emphasize its verticality. FISKE is spelled out in yellow sheet-metal streamlined capital letters lined with red and white neon. Mimicking the sign’s upward thrust on the opposite side of the façade is white scalloped cast-in-place reinforced concrete that wraps the southwest corner and rises above the parapet roof. It then stretches toward the sign and curves back in a sweeping motion as it reaches both side elevations. The rectangular portion of the façade between the scalloped concrete cladding and sign is filled with a textured yellow brick veneer trimmed in red stucco. The depth created by the concrete cladding’s thickness adds dimension to this flat expanse. The yellow brick veneer continues on the east side of the sign and wraps the southeast corner, which is finished with four red stucco quoins.

The exterior wall below the marquee is white stucco with edges clad in white sheet metal panels. It begins flush with the upper half of the building at the westernmost edge, and then curves into an approximately five-foot recess that continues to the east corner. The curve, which accommodates a formerly employees-only interior staircase leading to the mezzanine level, leads the eye to the theater’s main entrance, which is set into the recess along with the box office and former door to the segregated entrance. The main entrance is composed of three pairs of aluminum plate-glass double doors replaced in-kind in 2011. The semi-circular box office, which separates the main and segregated entrances and sits nearly in line with the theater’s sign, is attached to the façade, and accessed from the interior through a three-foot trap door. A trapezoidal glass box with chicken-wire textured glass ceiling and a polished, corrugated aluminum base, the box office features two ticket windows and its original Automatic ticket machine. The ticket window on the east side served the segregated entrance, a wood door with three stacked circular cut-outs that led directly to the mezzanine level’s segregated

balcony via a separate interior segregated staircase. An identical door on the façade's west side, on the far side of the curved wall, leads directly into the first-floor manager's office from the street. The ticket window on the west side of the box office served the theater's main entrance. Above the doors and box office is a row of nine decorative ribbed silver and red aluminum square panels. Attached to the façade's curve is an original convex movie poster display case bordered in ribbed aluminum; two black metal replacement cases are found to its left, and a second original aluminum case is located on the eastern wall facing the former segregated box office ticket window. The foundation is trimmed in square red terra cotta tiles, portions of which have been replaced with scored concrete. The concrete at the main entrance is clad in a new dark red floral carpet runner. The sidewalk from floral runner to curb is painted red. The sides of the building are structural exposed red brick with no openings. The rear elevation has two simple metal exit doors on the first floor and two louvered vented openings on the upper floor and is the same structural exposed red brick as seen on the side elevations. There are also air conditioning units located along the rear elevation. The roof is flat with an approximately four-and-a-half-foot brick parapet capped in glazed terra cotta tiles.

The majority of changes to the Fiske Theatre, which were primarily cosmetic changes, were made to the building's interior. Despite these minor changes, a good amount of original fabric remains and more importantly, the layout is unchanged. The layout is typical of a one-screen theater, with the auditorium space situated on a direct line from the main entrance and secondary spaces, such as office, concession stand, storage, and restrooms, located to the right and left. Interior wooden door trim and baseboards are intact and share a simple, modified Moderne speed lines motif. Original directional signage affixed to the ceiling remains throughout the building; the signs' polished corrugated aluminum bases and etched, backlit clear glass panels mirror exterior design elements. The theater's ventilation system has been modernized, but the original vents and mechanisms, including the thermostats on a wall outside of the manager's office, are extant.

The main lobby's concrete floor is padded and finished in floral carpeting that matches the exterior runner and replaced the original Maharam Fabric Corporation floral carpeting, which can still be seen on the floor of a supply closet adjacent to the ground-floor men's restroom. The plaster walls retain the original color scheme of tan walls and white ceiling, according to the 1950-51 *Theatre Catalog* (see Figure 2). The lobby slopes upward to the concession stand at right and the cry room and auditorium directly ahead. To the left is the interior entrance to the manager's office. Adjacent to the office is the stairwell that leads to the mezzanine. The stairwell was once used by theater personnel only, but now serves as general access to the balcony's seating. One original aluminum display case and three replacement wood cases designed to mimic the aluminum finish hang flush on the lobby's walls.

The small concession stand has lost its original tufted fabric back wall, which is now clad in vertical wood panels, as well as its original counter top and refreshment equipment (although the popcorn machine remains in storage). The stand's right-hand side opening, which opens into the vestibule of the segregated staircase entrance and once served segregated patrons, is now used as storage. Its three dedicated rectangular ceiling light fixtures have been replaced, although the new ones are affixed in the same manner as the old to an original corrugated-aluminum-trimmed dropped plaster panel that gently curves out from the ceiling. The current counter's curve is a modern addition (see Figure 2). Adjacent to the concession stand is a water fountain nook with original rounded-edge mint-green porcelain fixture, its base decorated with speed lines; next to it is a closet that provided trap-door access to the outdoor box office.

At left, a convex lobby wall leads from the manager's office to the men's restroom and conceals a mechanical room. The men's restroom retains its green and black tile and urinals. On the opposite end of the lobby is the powder room, which serves as an antechamber for the ladies' restroom and still features the parquet dressing table with one of two original red leatherette swivel stools. The ladies' restroom, like the men's, still has its original light blue tile. The manager's office sits one step below the lobby and remains largely unchanged. At the right-hand wall opposite the exterior entrance are two built-in closets with original door trim. The staircase next to the office creates a sloped ceiling inside the office near its exterior entrance. At the base of the slope is a small wood door that leads beneath the stairs to storage space where the

theater's original safe is still located. The floors are carpeted, and the plaster walls painted blue. Framed movie posters line the wall behind the manager's desk, where Mr. Fiske had originally hung autographed photographs of movie stars.

The cry room, a popular mid-century theater feature for mothers and their young children, is located at the rear of the lobby in direct line with the main entrance. It is accessed at center through a black metal pneumatic door and still seats one row of eight, although the chairs are recent replacements that match those in the main auditorium. The upper half of the room's walls are clad in rectangular acoustic panels that also match the main auditorium, all of which have been painted black by the current operator. They were originally a matte natural color, examples of which can be found in the mezzanine-level poster room. The chairs face the main auditorium's screen, which can be seen through two double-glass picture windows trimmed to match the theater's interior doors and baseboards. New mounted speakers replaced the originals, which allowed cry room patrons to hear the film.

The main auditorium has had the most updates, all cosmetic, but it remains the same size and layout as it was originally. Its two entrances flank the cry room and open onto two aisles, which have been re-covered in new carpeting that matches the lobby. The aisles' track lighting is also new. The polished concrete floor slopes gently downward and the walls are subtle concave curves that lead one's eye to the proscenium, where the modern screen is larger and more rectangular than its predecessor and has been moved forward about ten feet. The wooden stage below the screen is original and still possesses its five metal rectangular vents. A new deeper wooden stage, added by the last operators of the theater for live performances, is located directly in front of the original stage, but is roughly half the height of the original stage and clearly distinguishable. The new black polyester proscenium drapery replaced the original red, silver and blue fabric. The two doors flanking the stage lead to a storage space behind the screen and to the basement and rear exit doors.

In 2011, all of the original dark-red Art Moderne seats were removed and replaced with salvaged red velour-upholstered seats from a closed theater in Idaho. Because the replacements are wider than the originals, and the local fire marshal required that seating be up to code, the current operator reorganized the rows to accommodate both the size of the new seating and the configuration of five wheelchair-accessible rows. The theater initially sat 800; it now seats 452, including the balcony. The auditorium's original rectangular acoustic wall tiles and square acoustic ceiling tiles are intact but have all been painted black. The walls below the black wooden chair rail are newly covered in beige carpet for sound proofing purposes. All of the mounted speakers are new. The semi-circular metal wall sconces and inverted triangular back plates are original, but were recently repainted with a non-historic motif. Several new rectangular floral carpet panels are hung above the sconces to increase sound absorption.

The former segregated two-tier balcony at mezzanine level is cantilevered above the cry room. Although the original segregated entrance and stair are still intact, the mezzanine landing is now accessed only by the curved staircase that is located next to the manager's office at the front of the lobby and was formerly limited to employee use. The stairs' original concave plaster wall has been removed to expose a portion of the inner face of the theater's structural brick façade. The stairs open onto a central landing where the theater's original projector is now on display. Like the stairwell, a portion of the landing's wall below the chair rail is now exposed brick. The upper half is clad in acoustic tiles now painted white. Those sections that are not brick are non-historic textured tan plaster. The wall to the right of the balcony entrance is convex, while the wall to its left is flat. The floor is carpeted to match the balcony entrance. The former women's single-stall segregated restroom is at the far end of the landing; the men's is underneath the right-hand side of the balcony. The black and white tiling in both restrooms is original. The letter room, one of two where marquee letters are still stored, is located underneath the left-hand side of the balcony. Its low, sloping ceiling is the exposed underside of the balcony structure; one wall is exposed brick, the others are unfinished horizontal pine planks.

The balcony seating is reached from the mezzanine landing via an inclined carpeted central passage that splits the seating down the center into two tiered sections. The passage, which is clad in pine tongue-and-groove wall paneling and distinguished from the mezzanine landing by a convex-curved carpeted step, leads to the balcony's carpeted center aisle that separates both sections' upper and lower tiers. Each side of the balcony has its own set of pine stairs that generate off

the central aisle and are partially covered with modern carpet runners. The flooring is painted pine. The balcony's front railing features a black pine handrail and textured tan plaster wainscoting that matches the outer sides of the balcony walls and those on the mezzanine landing. The walls above the black pine chair rail are rectangular acoustic tiles painted to match the main auditorium; the sconces and back plates also match. The mounted speakers are new. The seats in the upper tier are original and appear to have been salvaged from the first Fiske Theatre building (c. 1920s), which is located one block away. They are wood-backed with blue leatherette upholstered seats, wood armrests, and a red metal base. The aisle seats retain their circular ribbed red metal light fixtures. The replacement seats in the lower tier match those in the main auditorium.

At the top of both the left- and right-hand balcony stairs, beyond the last row of the top tier, are two doors that lead to a series of three windowless rooms: the poster room, the projection room, and the second letter room with formerly retractable stairs that access the roof. Like the balcony, the poster room's floor is painted pine. The walls are clad in unpainted rectangular acoustic tile, the ceiling in square unpainted acoustic tile. An interior black metal door leads into the projection room, which features square-tile linoleum flooring, pierced white Fiberglass acoustic wall panels, and an aluminum-paneled ceiling. Five metal-lined rectangular wall openings allow the projection equipment to line up with the auditorium's screen. The retired 35mm projector sits next to a new digital machine. The second letter room is accessed through a door at the top of the right-hand balcony stairs. Its floor, ceiling, and one of four walls are unfinished pine. Two walls are exposed brick. The fourth wall is extruded terra cotta block.

Overall, the Fiske Theatre is remarkably intact and possesses a high level of integrity, including design, workmanship, setting, association, feeling, and location. The exterior has significant material integrity, having remained almost entirely unchanged since its construction. As stated in the previous paragraphs, the majority of changes have occurred to the interior of the theater, including the removal of most of the original seating and the modification of the seating arrangement; the replacement and repositioning of the screen; and the removal of original finishes such as carpet, drapery, and wall tufting. The loss of the original seating is regrettable, but was necessary for the building to be reused safely as a theater. However, the other modifications are not egregious enough to detract from the Fiske's historical and architectural significance. The exterior's preserved state, in addition to the retention of many interior defining elements (which include the mezzanine and its seating; cry room; interior detailing such as trim, signage, and curved wall surfaces; projection equipment; restroom designs; and original layout) and its continuous operation as a movie theater combine to give the Fiske Theatre a very high degree of integrity. Its feeling and association integrity would make it immediately recognizable and navigable to a patron from its period of significance (1950-63). Furthermore, its design, workmanship, and material integrity on the exterior reinforce its architectural significance as the only example of Holdover Moderne theater design in West Carroll Parish and the only example of Moderne-style architecture in Oak Grove. Therefore, the Fiske is eligible for the National Register.

**Significant Date(s):** 1950

**Architect:** Bradford W. Stevens

**Criteria:** A, C

### **Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph**

Oak Grove's Fiske Theatre is locally significant in the area of recreation and culture under Criterion A: association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history. Its historical significance stems from its status as the only professional entertainment venue in Oak Grove and its parish, West Carroll, of which Oak Grove is the parish seat. The theater is also of local significance in the area of architecture under Criterion C: design and construction, because it is the only example of an Art Moderne theater in West Carroll Parish and the only example of the style in Oak Grove. The Fiske's period of significance under Criterion A spans 1950, its date of construction, to 1963, the National Register's fifty-year cut-off. Under Criterion C, the period of significance is the theater's 1950 construction date.

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**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

### Criterion C:

The Fiske Theatre (1950) is of local significance in the area of architecture because it is the only example of an Art Moderne movie theater in Louisiana's West Carroll Parish and the only example of the style in Oak Grove, the parish seat. Moreover, the Fiske Theatre is a remarkably intact example of the style that reflects both local and nationwide trends in mid-century theater design. In 1951, it received a national award from a prominent trade publication, *Theatre Catalog*, for its "general modern excellence."<sup>1</sup>

The Fiske Theatre's parabolic marquee, angled vertical sign with streamlined neon lettering, scalloped concrete detailing, ornate semi-circular box office, curved interior and exterior walls, round windows, flat roof with parapet, and contrast-colored horizontal "speed lines" as design motifs all clearly define it as Art Moderne. A product of the machine age and borrowed from aerodynamic industrial design, Art Moderne evokes movement, speed, efficiency, and the optimism of progress. The style permeated theater architecture of the 1930s to replace previous decades' ornate revivalism with a sleeker and more pragmatic aesthetic, signaling that the future had replaced the past as design inspiration. Film and theater technology was progressing rapidly (not least with the invention of "talkies," or sound pictures, in 1927) and Art Moderne, inspired by the similarly rapid-paced aeronautics and automobile industries, was a perfect fit for these modern movie palaces. Louisiana theaters, which were now often managed by regional chain companies, caught wind of the national trend through trade publications and professional organizations. Donald B. Fiske, who took over Oak Grove's first Fiske Theatre in 1928 before building the present structure in 1950, was likely aware of these trends through his involvement in such groups as the Allied Theatre Owners of the Gulf States, of which he was a director.

More specifically, the 1950 Fiske is a representative example of the Holdover Moderne style, which was a combination of the aesthetic of the pre-war Art Moderne style, the material innovations and restraints of World War II, and the mainstreaming of modernist ideology. Holdover Moderne theaters were generally simpler and more modest than their pre-war counterparts, which was the result "not only of substitutions, experimentation, and wartime inventions but also the acceptance of the 'less is more' philosophy of architecture," which dominated architectural design in the decades to follow.<sup>2</sup> Upon the United States' involvement in the war, domestic building construction halted and materials were highly restricted. Those typically used in theater construction—steel, copper, chrome, and wood, for example—were virtually impossible to attain, and in the years after the war there was a backlog of demand that continued to limit their availability.<sup>3</sup> Glass and concrete, however, were two unrestricted, abundant, and affordable materials that became indispensable architectural elements both during and after the war. Their use impacted the appearance of Moderne theaters of the 1940s and 50s, working in tandem with the tenets of the modern movement to inspire simpler lines and bolder forms. In the case of the Fiske, glass and concrete both play an important role on the exterior, particularly in the long row of glass double-doors that introduces light into the lobby and the scalloped reinforced cast-concrete white trim that stretches toward the sky and then continues as a border behind the parapet. Furthermore, the Fiske's classification as a Holdover Moderne theater can be seen in the limitation of all exterior ornament to the façade, a cost-saving measure as well as a product of the theater's location in a small rural town. The detailing of high-style Moderne examples generally extends to all four elevations.<sup>4</sup>

Wartime inventions, such as plastics and polyester fabrics, also impacted theater design, as did the prominence of the automobile. The latter most directly influenced drive-ins and suburban theaters, although the Fiske, which is located on Oak Grove's densely developed, pedestrian-friendly Main Street, was also designed with the car in mind. The marquee swoops outward toward the street rather than sitting flush against the façade, as it did on early twentieth-century theaters, so that its large plastic letters can be read as one speeds toward it. More subtly designed yet a product of the same motivation, the scalloped, concrete trim that borders the Fiske's parapet roof, offsetting its enormous, neon sign, curves back along the theater's side elevations in a fluid motion that can be seen only from the street as one approaches from afar, not from the sidewalk. It is a small but clever detail that is clearly intended for the theater's vehicular patrons. These features—the use of glass and concrete, the limitation of ornament to the facade, and an exterior design that considers the automobile—squarely place the Fiske Theatre as a post-war Holdover Moderne structure.

The Fiske's Holdover Moderne style also reflects the stylistic lag common in Louisiana, where the post-war period saw all at once International Style commercial buildings, abstract modern skyscrapers, and Holdover Moderne theaters.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, no style ends abruptly, according to architectural historians Jonathan and Donna Fricker, and the Moderne style remained a very popular choice for Louisiana theater design through the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the Fiske's architect, Bradford W. Stevens, had recently contributed to the design of two Holdover Moderne theaters in New Orleans: the Joy Theater (1947) and the renovated Joy-Strand (1949, demolished).<sup>7</sup> The Holdover Moderne Carver Theater (1950, NRHP, 1998) in New Orleans was built the same year as the Fiske, and the International Style/Moderne Lincoln Theater in Baton Rouge soon followed (1951-60, NRHP, 2010).

Oak Grove does have a small handful of mid-century modern structures that are contemporaneous yet in direct contrast to the Fiske Theatre. Most notably, Oak Grove High School (c. 1950, 501 W Main St, Oak Grove, LA) and the Little Freezer Restaurant (date unknown, 102 S Horner St, Oak Grove, LA) are examples of Louisiana's "Everyday Modern" style, a catch-all term for modest mid-century buildings that exhibit clean lines, planar surfaces, horizontality, and a lack of ornamentation.<sup>8</sup> Both Oak Grove High School and the Little Freezer are one-story structures slung low to the ground that are punctuated by the simple geometry of rectangular openings and cleanly angled cantilevered overhangs. The Little Freezer exhibits some simple brickwork detailing at its parapet that mimics the building's right angles. The high school is devoid of ornament, its grid of aluminum windows providing the only visual interest on the façade. These buildings are in distinct contrast to the Fiske's curves and circles, its asymmetrical parabolic shapes, its blend of horizontal and vertical lines, and the sense of motion expressed in its bold detailing. Indeed, in comparison to the flat and firmly planted Everyday Modern examples, the vertical and curvaceous Fiske seems poised to take flight.

The theater's exterior is virtually unchanged from its period of significance. The interior retains its layout and a majority of its original features, including its cry room; Moderne lighting fixtures, trim, and signage; acoustic-tile wall cladding; projection booth and equipment; letter rooms; and balcony with much of its original seating. Changes include the replacement and reorganization of the main auditorium's seating, the replacement and repositioning of the screen, and the replacement of all concession stand equipment. The interior was also recently painted. Despite these changes, however, a visitor from the period of significance would immediately recognize the theater, both from the exterior and the interior.

In 1950, the Fiske was chosen for inclusion in the *Theatre Catalog*'s annual publication of the best new theaters in the country.<sup>9</sup> In 1951, the national trade publication bestowed the Fiske with a merit award for its "modern excellence." Donald Bayne Fiske, the theater's owner and operator, published the letter of congratulations he received from the publication in *The West Carroll Gazette*:

This is your official notification that your theatre has been selected, from several hundred constructed and opened during 1950, to receive "The Industry's Seal of Approval" for particular excellence as symbolized by our bronze merit award plaque. First examined by our staff of skilled technical editors for its possible use in the 9th annual (1950-51) edition of the big, 480-page *Theatre Catalogue*, through the co-operation of your company and its architect in furnishing photographs, blueprints, and full data, it later received a complete pictorial presentation in it. From the many fine theatres so presented, 31 roofed theatres (in 22 states, District of Columbia and Canada) and 17 drive-in theatres (in 10 states) have been found to have the general modern excellence to receive the merit award. Receiving this award is national recognition. Congratulations!<sup>10</sup>

Considering its national recognition for its modern design, in addition to its position as the only example of an Art Moderne theater in West Carroll Parish and the only example of Art Moderne architecture in the town of Oak Grove, the Fiske Theatre is eligible for the National Register for its local architectural significance.

## Notes

1. "Fiske," *Theatre Catalog* (1950-51): 62-3.

2. Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring Charles S. Lee* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 91-174.
3. Ibid.
4. Jonathan and Donna Fricker, "Modernism Triumphant: Commercial and Institutional Buildings," February 2010, [http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/historic\\_contexts/modernismtriumphantfinalrevised.pdf](http://www.crt.state.la.us/hp/nationalregister/historic_contexts/modernismtriumphantfinalrevised.pdf).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. "First-run double feature offered," *Times-Picayune*, January 28, 1949; "New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night," *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950.
8. Frickers, "Modernism Triumphant."
9. "Fiske," 62-3.
10. "We Are Appreciative," *The West Carroll Gazette*, October 18, 1951.

### **Criterion A:**

The Fiske Theatre is locally significant in the area of recreation and culture because of its central role as an entertainment venue for the citizens of Oak Grove and West Carroll Parish during its period of significance, 1950 to 1963. It is important to note, however, that the Fiske has continued to serve its community as an entertainment venue without cease since its construction.

Oak Grove became the dominant town of rural West Carroll Parish shortly after the Missouri Pacific Railroad constructed a line through the parish in 1908. It became the parish seat in 1915, and soon its small Main Street grew to include a new courthouse, along with general stores, drug stores, a theater, cafes, and two banks to make it a shopping and entertainment destination.<sup>1</sup> The first Fiske Theatre on Main Street was a small, nondescript building that still stands but has lost all trace of its original use. It was owned and operated from 1928 until 1950 by prominent businessman and politician Donald Bayne Fiske, who also constructed the present Fiske Theatre.

The establishment of the new Fiske Theatre was one of Donald B. Fiske's later commercial endeavors, one in a long list of contributions to the town of Oak Grove and greater West Carroll Parish, his adopted home. His involvement in the region, both business and political, stretched back for decades. A native of Indiana, he had moved from California to Oak Grove as a young man to assist in the operation of his maternal grandfather's lumber business. After selling that business in 1926, he transitioned into the motion picture industry, starting as manager for the town's then-movie house and quickly buying out the owner a few years later to establish the first Fiske Theatre.<sup>2</sup> There, Fiske showed Oak Grove's first sound picture, or "talkie," in 1930.<sup>3</sup> A modest, simply furnished early-twentieth-century brick building, with a small lobby and hard-backed wooden seats, it was in operation through World War II and still stands today as a candle store.<sup>4</sup> After the war, when construction and material restrictions were lifted and the country was back on its feet, Fiske bought an empty Main Street lot one block down from his old theater to construct a new one - a slick, state-of-the-art house that would serve not just Oak Grove, but several neighboring parishes, including nearby Arkansas's southeastern border counties. He was equipped to do so because in the years following his first theater purchase as a young entrepreneur, his status and means had grown considerably. By the time he had purchased the land for the new theater, he had been in show business successfully for twenty-two years; served on the town council for several years; opened and operated the Lake Drive-In and The Fiske Lake Theatre in Lake Providence, Louisiana; erected and operated the Fiske Cotton Gin Co. and the Fiske Compress and Warehouse; sat on the board of directors of the Bank of Oak Grove; directed the Allied Theatre Owners of the Gulf States; served as president of the local Lions Club, and vice-president of the Louisiana Delta Council; and had been elected the first Republican mayor of Oak Grove in 1946, an office he held for fifteen years.<sup>5</sup>

Fiske wanted his new two-story brick theater to be on the cutting edge of technology and design: central air conditioning, a modern sound system and the latest in projection equipment, self-lifting cushioned seats, acoustic paneling and padded carpeting for optimum sound quality, a cry room for mothers and their children that sat eight, six seat-side hearing aids for the impaired, and an Art Moderne façade that was visible from an automobile several blocks away were just some of its stand-out features. It sat eight hundred people. The week before opening night, Fiske described his vision to *The West Carroll Gazette*. "I am proud," he said, "to be able to open a modern up-to-date theatre for the theatre-going public of the area. As always the policy of my motion picture enterprise will be the 'Best in Entertainment for the Entire Family.'"<sup>6</sup> An advertisement in the March 30, 1950 edition of the *Gazette* illustrates this

marriage of modernity and family fun with a schoolgirl pointing to the proclamation that “The Theatre-Going Public of West Carroll Is Soon to Have One of the Most Modern and Complete Theatres in the State!”<sup>7</sup>

To make it a reality, Fiske hired Bradford W. Stevens, a New Orleans-based designer and theater equipment purveyor, to serve as project architect. Stevens had recently remodeled the Joy-Strand Theater on Baronne Street in New Orleans and appears to have been part of the design team of the Joy Theater (1947) on Canal Street, although no conclusive documentation of his involvement has been located.<sup>8</sup> The similarities between the Joy and the Fiske are undeniable, particularly in façade design, color scheme, and the incorporation of cry rooms. President of Theatre Display Service, Stevens does not appear to have advertised himself as an architect, but he did know theaters. With a background as a commercial artist, he made what appears to be a natural transition into architectural design.<sup>9</sup> He can be connected to at least two other theaters in addition to the Fiske and the Joy-Strand: Bastrop’s Rose Drive-In (1950) and a Joy Drive-In in Texarkana, Texas (1952).<sup>10</sup> Stevens was billed as architect as well as decorator for the Fiske project, for which his company also supplied the concession stands, neon sign, attraction boards, and box office and ladies’ powder room equipment.<sup>11</sup> The contractor was A. T. Owens, who was based in nearby Rayville, Louisiana, where he had recently completed construction of a Joy Theater.<sup>12</sup>

The grand opening of the Fiske Theatre was front-page news in the parish’s newspaper, *The West Carroll Gazette*. Indeed, the April 13 edition announcing the upcoming opening was dedicated entirely to the event, with pages of congratulations from prominent businesses in town and others who contributed to the Fiske’s construction.<sup>13</sup> It also included a history of film entertainment in Oak Grove and a biography of Donald Fiske, who had been elected mayor of Oak Grove in 1946. In it, Fiske explains his vision: “I am proud to be able to open a modern up-to-date theatre for the theatre-going public of the area. As always the policy of my motion picture enterprise will be the ‘Best in Entertainment for the Entire Family.’”<sup>14</sup> His theater featured all of the latest projection and concession equipment and theater amenities, including seat-side hearing aids and a cry room for mothers and their young children. The aluminum plate-glass doors were officially opened to capacity crowds on April 17, 1950. The theater’s construction and grand opening were again front-page news in *The West Carroll Gazette*, which described the building as “air-conditioned, modernistic throughout and affording every improvement in equipment, furnishings and safety devices.”<sup>15</sup> It was unlike any other building on Main Street, with a massive flashing neon sign and blazing parabolic marquee that shined so brightly pilots soon marked the site as a landmark on their way to nearby Monroe.<sup>3</sup> Opening-night attendees crossed the bouquet-filled lobby, their footsteps silenced by floral “carpet with padding of heavy sponge rubber,” passed the “most modern concession stand that could be obtained,” where complimentary sodas were being offered for the occasion, and entered the cavernous yet comfortable theater, where they were treated first to a series of shorts, including a Disney cartoon and a musical number, followed by the feature presentation, “Jolson Sings Again.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the latest trends in technology and design, the Fiske also included a feature typical of many mid-century theaters, particularly in the South: a segregated balcony for African-American patrons. Indeed, Jim Crow laws impacted several elements of the Fiske’s design. The curved, polished-aluminum and glass outdoor box office, for instance, was built with two ticket windows, one of which was near a designated side door that bypassed the main lobby. Beyond the door was a small vestibule with a separate concession stand counter. At the top of the stairs were two single-stall bathrooms. The balcony was lined with rows of the hard-backed seats allegedly held over from the first Fiske.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after opening, the Fiske Theatre was nationally recognized for its design and amenities. It was featured in the *Theatre Catalog*’s 1950-51 annual edition as one of the country’s better theaters built during those two years.<sup>18</sup> The article included interior and exterior photos of the theatre shortly after it was built, a floor plan, specifications, and a comprehensive list of contractors and other service providers. Soon after, the well-established trade publication presented Donald B. Fiske with a Merit Award that served as “International Recognition As One of the Most Modern and Well Appointed of all Current Theatres.”<sup>19</sup> Touted as “the highest honor accorded by the motion picture theatre industry,” the award was presented to Mr. Fiske in person on the theater’s stage in October 1951. Fiske printed an announcement in *The West Carroll Gazette* in which he quoted from the magazine’s letter of congratulations:

First examined by our staff of skilled technical editors for its possible use in the 9th annual (1950-51) edition of the big, 480-page *Theatre Catalogue*, through the co-operation of your company and its architect in furnishing photographs, blueprints, and full data, it later received a complete pictorial presentation in it. From the many fine theatres so presented, 31 roofed theatres (in 22 states, District of Columbia and Canada) and 17 drive-in theatres (in 10 states) have been found to have the general modern excellence to receive the merit award.<sup>20</sup>



Over the next two decades, the theater cemented itself as a central hub for entertainment, community engagement, and social exchange. Several residents who grew up in the 1950s and 60s recall that it was the only source of public entertainment in Oak Grove, and that teenagers from miles away would hitchhike to the Fiske on weekend nights to see and be seen. Lynda Watts Brown, who spent much of her childhood at the theater in the 1950s where her father was the projectionist, explains: “You have to understand that West Carroll Parish is a poor parish, farmers. But the whole parish took pride in [the Fiske]. On the weekends, Epps all the way up to Pioneer, all the way down here, they walked, hitchhiked to come watch the movie. So it’s more than Oak Grove. It was the whole parish.”<sup>21</sup> Oak Grove historian Thelma Downing Pulley, who wrote *A History of Oak Grove Louisiana and West Carroll Parish—1492-1957* in 1976, offers her own telling description of life in the 1950s:

Recreation is furnished by fishing, hunting, Junior League Baseball, West Carroll Parish Fair (opened Oct. 14), City Park facilities, Civic and Church and School supervised recreation and entertainment, and the Fiske Theatre in Oak Grove, one of the newest and most modern in North La., provides many hours of entertainment.<sup>22</sup>

Many high schoolers worked their first jobs as ushers, ticket girls, popcorn girls, or doormen. John Wayne Bradley, before graduating from Oak Grove High School in 1957, took tickets as well as changed the marquee letters to announce new showings.<sup>23</sup> Several locals met their husbands and wives at a Fiske movie. The five daughters of longtime projectionist Bennie Watts grew up and worked in the theater; Lynda Watts Brown remembers making ice cream sandwiches behind the screen to sell at the concession/ stand, eating one for every ten she made.<sup>24</sup> On weekends, parents could safely leave their children at the theater all afternoon, and teenagers were sure to behave themselves under the watchful eyes of Ms. Mildred Castleman, the theater manager.

The matinees, serials, and feature-length films that drew crowds across several parish lines connected them to mainstream Hollywood at a time when few people owned televisions and movies were major events; “Ben-Hur,” the re-release of “Gone with the Wind” (which appalled the Fiske audience with its now-famous swear word), “The Ten Commandments,” and Elvis’s films, which filled the auditorium with teen screams and sobs, were just some of the big-ticket pictures that patrons came to see again and again. Beyond the silver screen, the Fiske also served the community as a meeting place for such organizations as the Louisiana Sweet Potato Association and the Louisiana Yam Group.<sup>25</sup>

The Fiske Theatre made a significant impact on the quality of life of West Carroll Parish citizens, providing a link to mainstream American culture and a venue for community building throughout its many years of operation. It played a central role in providing a recreational and cultural space for the entire town and parish, serving as the sole professional entertainment venue for the citizens of Oak Grove and West Carroll Parish during its period of significance, 1950 to 1963. For these reasons, the Fiske should be considered for inclusion on the National Register.

## Notes

1. Thelma Downing Pulley, *History of Oak Grove Louisiana and West Carroll parish – 1492-1957 (The First Completely Documented History)* (Oak Grove, Louisiana: 1976), 29.
2. “New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night,” *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950.
3. Ibid.
4. Email correspondence with John Wayne Bradley, former Oak Grove resident, April 27, 2013.
5. “New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night,” *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950; “Fiske to erect bonded cotton warehouse here,” *The West Carroll Gazette*, November 17, 1938; “Donald B. Fiske, Oak Grove’s Mayor, has enjoyed 32-year success here,” *The West Carroll Gazette*, 1949, month/day unknown; “Mr. Donald Bayne Fiske Sr. [obituary],” *The West Carroll Gazette*, February 3, 1988.
6. “New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night,” *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950.
7. Advertisement, *The West Carroll Gazette*, March 30, 1950, page 8.
8. For information about the Joy-Strand Theater remodel, see “First-run double feature offered,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 28, 1949. The Joy Theater (1947) was designed by Favrot & Reed, a New Orleans architecture firm now known as MathesBrierre. The original 1946 construction drawings in the MathesBrierre archives do not include any indication that Bradford W. Stevens was involved in the project; the *West Carroll Gazette* article about the Fiske Theatre opening (April 13, 1950, p. 6), which names Stevens as the Joy architect, is the only currently known evidence of his involvement. It is interesting to note that the original Joy drawings include a crossed-out horizontal design for the

theater's sign that does not match what was eventually constructed. Perhaps Stevens was called in as a design consultant to redesign it, since signage was one of his theater display company's specialties. However, this scenario is simply conjecture at this stage.

9. Theater Display Service advertisement, *The Times-Picayune*, April 5, 1947. The 1940 Census lists Louisiana-born Bradford W. Stevens, age 26, as a "commercial artist" living in New Orleans on Foucher Street with his wife, 23-year-old Clara Stevens. He had completed four years of high school. By 1949, according to Polk's New Orleans City Directory, they had moved to 224 Beverly Drive in Metairie. They divorced in 1955 ("Decisions," *The Times-Picayune*, March 17, 1955).

10. "'Persistence of Vision': Bastrop cinema from the Princess to the Rose Drive-In," March 13, 2010, [bastropenterprise.com](http://www.bastropenterprise.com), <http://www.bastropenterprise.com/article/20100313/NEWS/303139999#art-tit>; "Possibility of a Screen Tower Entrance: Unique Plan of the Joy Drive-In Has Much Value and Suggests Some New Features in Future Design," *Theatre Catalog* (1952): 188.

11. "New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night," *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950, page 5.

12. Ibid.

13. "New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night," *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950.

14. Ibid.

15. Conversation with current theater operator Adam Holland, April 13, 2013.

16. "New Fiske Theatre opens here Monday night," *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950; "Opening of Our New Theatre in Oak Grove," *The West Carroll Gazette*, April 13, 1950.

17. Conversation with Adam Holland, April 13, 2013

18. "Fiske." *Theatre Catalog* (1950-51): 62-3.

19. "We Are Appreciative," *The West Carroll Gazette*, October 18, 1951.

20. Ibid.

21. Interview, Linda Watts Brown, April 13, 2013.

22. Pulley, 28.

23. Email correspondence with John Wayne Bradley, former Oak Grove resident, April 27, 2013.

24. Letter from Linda Watts Brown, March 20, 2013.

25. "Passman to talk at LSPA Meet," *The Times-Picayune*, December 3, 1967; "La. Yam Group Meeting Slated in Oak Grove," *State-Times Advocate*, January 5, 1968.