



**Eskin Theater (Center Cinema) - 192 South Central Avenue - 1937.**

**FURS! FURS!**



The season is open in full swing. We want to buy all we can obtain of this season's crop.

Bring your furs to us and we will guarantee you the biggest market price. Bring them in or if you can't come to town, telephone us. Phone 367W.

**Jacob Eskin**  
Richland Center, Wis

The Eskin Theater (now Center Cinema) is an important, well-preserved example of the early twentieth century utilitarian commercial building in Richland Center. Built in 1937 by Prairie du Chien contractor, Clarence Steiner, it is among the best preserved of the commercial vernacular buildings constructed in the early twentieth century. Designed by Boscobel architect Joe Durant in the Commercial Style, the theater exhibits the simple brick surfaces that are typical of the early modern commercial buildings.

Although erected after Richland Center's second business expansion of 1910 to the 1920s, The Eskin Theater represents a distinct change in community entertainment from live performances by predominately



local or regional talent as opposed to more nationally known figures via the big screen of a state-of-the-art movie theater.

The motion picture industry grew rapidly in the 1930s. By 1933, Jacob Eskin owned nine movie theaters in Richland Center, Black River Falls, Elroy, Boscobel, Dodgeville, Viroqua and Milwaukee. In 1953, Jacob Eskin, president of the Eskin Theater Management Co., Milwaukee, acquired The Al Ringling Theater located in Baraboo, "America's Prettiest Playhouse" since 1915, and its sister theater, the Juliar, from Henry E. Ringling. Purchase price for the theaters was announced at more than \$150,000. The Al Ringling Theater, when it was completed in 1915, had cost \$100,000. In 1957, Eskin sold the chain of theaters to The Marcus Company.

With a hearty handshake and cordial welcome we greet you, good friends of Richland Center, in our hope that the hours you spend with us will be pleasant ones. May this beautiful theatre, erected in a wonderful city for your everlasting enjoyment, find you within its walls often . . . delighting in the magic of its entertainment . . . reveling in the enchantment of modern and luxurious appointments. Ours is a mission of making people happy. What a pleasure to be so engaged!

### *The Eskin Theatre*

When planning the opening of the Eskin Theater, Jake Eskin commissioned the *Richland Democrat* to design and print a suitable program, one that would be an appreciated souvenir.

In an article in the *Richland Democrat*, Jake Eskin described his vision of what his modern theater would look like in 1937: "As one walks through the doors there is a lobby with a ticket booth. In the projection booth is the newest type of Western Electronic microphone sound equipment; the first to be used in this locality. It will give the audience the opportunity to hear real voices of the movie stars for the first time, instead of reproductions of voices and sounds on the film soundtrack. The new technology is the most discussed topic in motion picture circles in the last ten years. Between the ticket booth and auditorium is a spacious foyer. To the right is a stairway that leads down to a lounge and restrooms. The restrooms are equipped with the most modern sanitary fixtures. The auditorium walls and ceiling are covered with acoustic tiles cut in various shapes and are shades of brown and

tan. The lighting is modernistic chrome features. The carpet harmonizes with the velour covering of the seats. At the front of the house is a Walker sound screen. It sits on the stage that is large enough for vaudeville acts. Electronic Signs, Inc. of Milwaukee designed and erected the marquee, box office, structural glass building front, electric lighting fixtures and metal poster panels."

Jake Eskin was literally an example of the making of a "rags to riches" American business man. He and his wife Sarah, both Russian Jews, came to America in 1914. They got their start in Milwaukee as rag and junk dealers, advanced to a dealer in furs and then owned a neighborhood grocery store on North Main Street in Richland Center. They then purchased the Orpheum Theater in 1923, also located on North Main Street; and then purchased another theater in town, the Richland as well as theaters in other southwestern Wisconsin communities for a total of nine.

The Eskin Theater opened on March 4, 1937, and on March 29 a divorce which involved a \$100,000 property settlement was granted to Mrs. Sarah J. Eskin from Jacob Eskin, Richland Center, owner of a chain of nine theaters in Wisconsin. The divorce, granted on the grounds of cruelty, ended the Eskins 28 years of married life which began humbly in Milwaukee and ended in affluence.

Sarah J. Eskin continued to operate the Eskin and Richland Theaters, which she received in the divorce settlement, and a drive-in theater she started east of Richland Center on Highway 14. She passed away at the age of 70 on June 4, 1953, after 25 years in the theater business in Richland Center.

After the divorce from his first wife Sarah, Jake Eskin married Dorothy M. Groves. She was born on Nov. 19, 1915, in Richland Center, the daughter of John and Verna (Dray) Groves. Dorothy Groves was married to Jake Eskin in

1946 and he died in 1963; she then married Bernard Tupper in 1969 and he died in 1970; she then married James Smith in 1975 and he died in 2001. Dorothy M. Groves Smith, age 93, of Richland Center passed away on Thursday, April 16, 2009, at the Richland Hospital following a brief illness.



**The Eskin Theater in 1937 - 192 South Central Avenue. Richland County History Room photo.**

Richland Center had been recognized as an outstanding moving picture center. Patrons from a wide area regularly attended movies here evidenced by the city supporting three theaters; the Orpheum, the Richland and the Eskin Theater.



The Elite Café Building, in the photo on the left, housed the Richland Theater within a block from the new Eskin Theater on South Central Avenue. The Orpheum, shown in background on the right, was located near the intersection of East Mill and North Main Streets.

**Richland County History Room photos.**





On Sept. 24, 1951, Sarah Eskin acquired land east of Richland Center to be used as a drive-in theater. She was not able to purchase the land outright, but was granted a lifetime lease on 20 acres. The deed stated that the premises were to be used for a drive-in theater, provided that when such time the land ceased to be used for this purpose the title would revert to the grantor, his heirs, or assigns.

The Hi-Way 14 Outdoor Theater opened on May 6, 1952. It is now known as Starlite 14. The Starlite has upgraded, using FM radio for sound but the speaker posts are still intact to help cars park in the appropriate spots. The Starlite 14 Drive-In Theater is a county treasure; one of only 11 that remain in Wisconsin and the last one in the southwestern part of the state. At one time in the 1950s there were 79 drive-in theaters in Wisconsin.