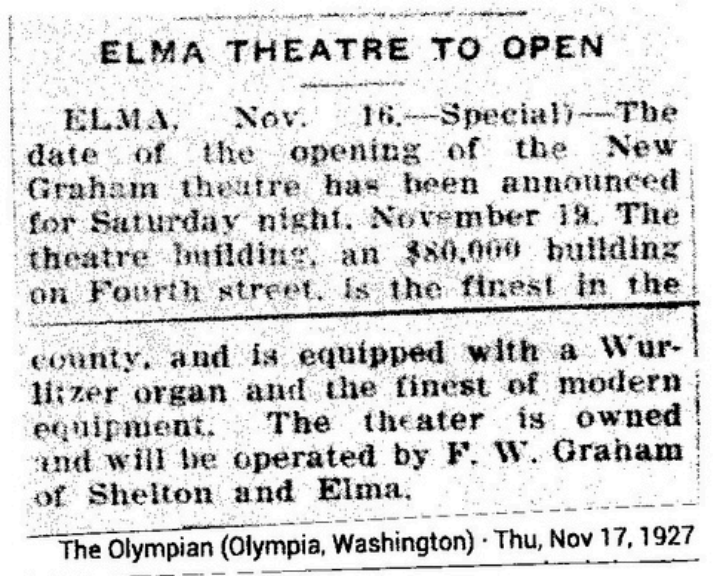


The Final Curtain: Remembering Elma's Graham Theatre

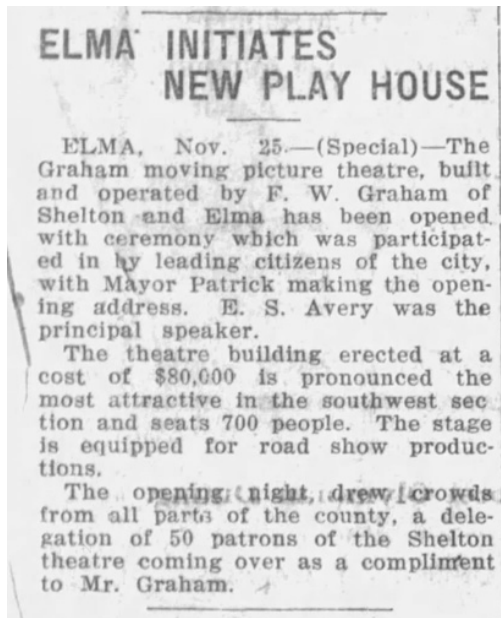
By Janie Thorne Anderson, Chehalis Valley Historical Society

When the Graham Theatre opened its doors on November 25, 1927, Main Street in Elma sparkled with excitement. Announced a week earlier in The Olympian on November 17, 1927, as “a modern playhouse to serve the Chehalis Valley,” the new theatre was the pride of its namesake and builder, Frank Graham. Designed in a Spanish-Revival style, the building featured stucco walls, arched windows, and an illuminated marquee that quickly became the heart of downtown.



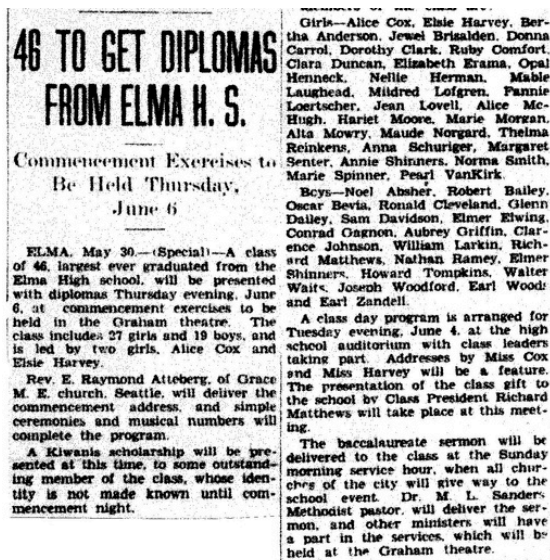
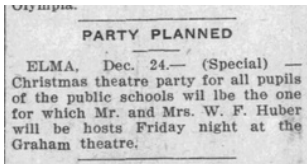
Opening Night

On that first Friday evening, the crowd packed the seats for a gala program of vaudeville acts and motion pictures. The Daily Olympian reported that the celebration included music by the Elma High School orchestra and selections played on the brand-new Wurlitzer 2-manual, 6-rank “Style D Special” Theatre Organ (Opus #1720). Graham personally greeted the audience, thanking the community for supporting his dream of bringing modern entertainment to Elma. The theatre was hailed as “one of the finest amusement houses in Southwest Washington.”



Holiday Cheer and Early Community Events

Within its first month, the Graham hosted a Christmas Party on December 24, 1927, complete with holiday films, local music, and Santa's visit for neighborhood children (Daily Olympian, Dec. 24, 1927). The seventh annual Christmas party hosted by the Elma Aerie of Eagles entertained 700 local children with a movie, a decorated Christmas tree, and Santa Claus. A local minister's concern that Santa Claus was overshadowing the religious significance of Christmas is expressed (The Olympian, Dec. 24, 1929). These gatherings cemented the theatre as a family destination as much as a cinema.



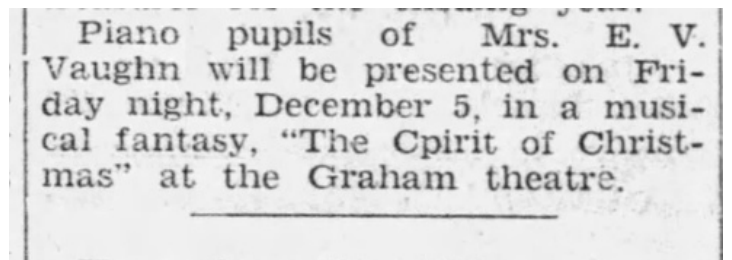
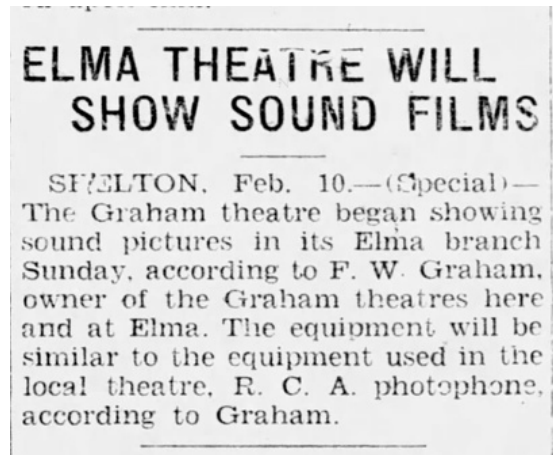
By 1929, the Graham had become the home stage for the Elma High School Class of 1929 Commencement Exercises (Olympian, May 31, 1929), transforming from a picture house to a civic auditorium. School plays and community events filled its calendar, echoing with student voices and hometown pride.

The Dawn of Sound

The Graham Theatre entered a new era on February 10, 1930, when it began showing sound pictures using the RCA Photophone system. The Olympian announced that patrons could now “hear the actors speak as they act,” marking the theatre’s official transition from the silent era.

While the Wurlitzer organ fell silent, its musical spirit lived on in the synchronized voices and orchestral soundtracks that now filled the auditorium.

Later that year, the theatre presented a holiday program titled “The Spirit of Christmas” (Olympian, Dec. 4, 1930), continuing its tradition of bringing the community together through both local performance and the magic of cinema.



Musicians and the Changing Sound of Cinema

The Graham’s adoption of sound technology reflected a nationwide transformation in the entertainment industry. Across the country, professional musicians who once accompanied silent films faced rapid displacement.

Two period newspaper ads capture this moment of change. In The Olympian (March 25, 1930) and The Seattle Star (September 1, 1930), the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) urged the public to support live music and defend the livelihoods of theatre players whose jobs were threatened by the new talking-picture systems.

These appeals reveal the human side of progress—the bittersweet cost of innovation. For Elma, the transition meant trading the live artistry of local performers for the modern marvel of recorded sound, a shift mirrored in small towns across America. The AFM has been, and remains, the central organization leading the charge to protect musicians’ jobs and secure fair compensation in the face of technological change. A recurring theme in both eras is the argument that human musicianship provides a “soul” or unique creative expression that machines or recorded sound cannot replicate. The AFM’s initial approach was an all-out, public-facing war against “canned” music as a concept. Today’s strategy is more nuanced, focusing on regulation and ensuring Artificial Intelligence (AI) serves as a tool to assist human artists rather than a complete replacement.



Curtain Calls and Commencements

By the 1930s, the Graham—later renamed the Elma Theatre—had become Elma’s year-round venue for both education and entertainment. High school classes continued to perform on its stage well into the next decade. In April 1938, the Daily Olympian reported that the Elma High School Dramatic Club performed *The Patsy* before a packed house, a lively comedy that showcased local talent and the enduring popularity of live theatre.

M'CLEARY SENIORS PRESENT THE PATSY

M'CLEARY, April 23.—(Special)—The Elma high school class of 1938 presented their play, “The Patsy,” directed by Miss Geraldine Bunker, at the Graham theatre in Elma on Thursday night. Honors were captured by Harriet Haskell, McCleary student, with her conception of Patricia (Pasty) Harrington, and Don Valentine of Elma as Tony Anderson.

Lauren Bruner, another of McCleary’s students, colored the role of Francis Patrick O’Flaherty. The rest of the cast included: Evelyn Robinson as Mrs. Harrington; Jimmie Shapley as Bill Harrington; Joe Quinby as Billy Caldwell; Ruby Mae Clemens as Sadie Buchanan; Ralph Boling as “Trip” Busty.

To the great amusement of the many friends attending the play proved to be a delightful, fast moving comedy, well cast and directed, filled to the brim with laughs and romance.

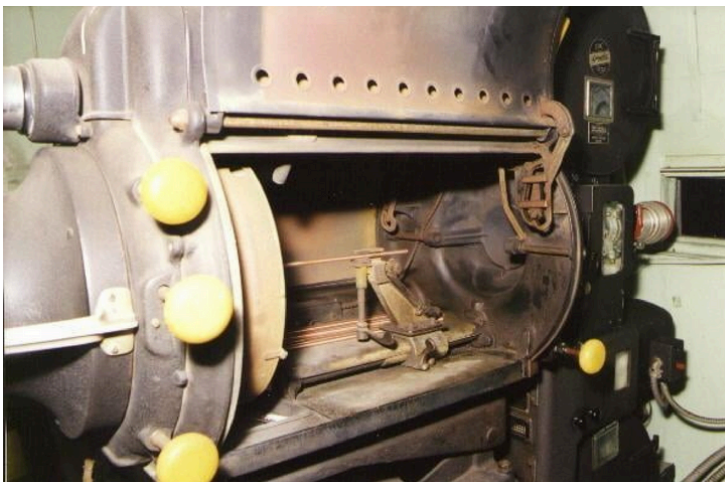
The Daily Olympian (Olympia, Washington) - Sun, Apr 24, 1938

The Silver Screen Years

As the decades passed, the theatre’s focus shifted more fully to motion pictures. For just fifteen cents, families could enjoy newsreels, westerns, serials, and Hollywood’s golden-age features. By the 1950s and 1960s, Saturday matinees and first-run films drew crowds from across Grays Harbor County.



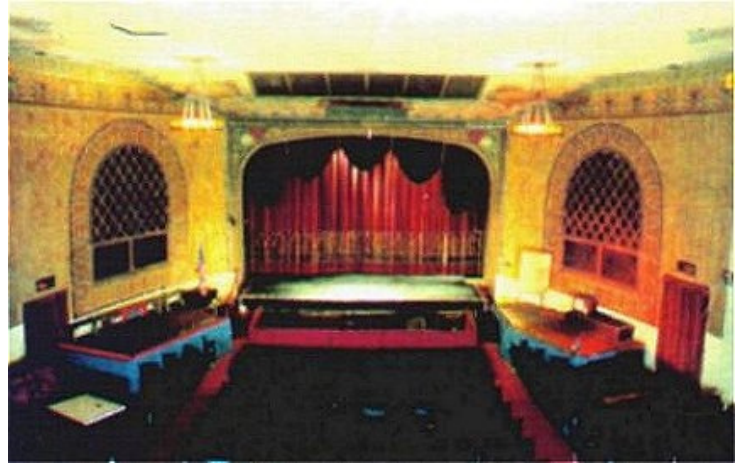
Patrons remember the soft red seats, the hum of the projectors, and the glow of the snack bar that offered popcorn, candy, and sodas. Generations of Elma residents shared laughter, first dates, and cherished evenings under the theatre’s flickering light.



The Hall Years and the Elma Children's Theater

The Graham Theatre's story continued long after its golden age of film. In 1991, the building — by then operating under its later name, the Elma Theatre — was purchased by Kingsley Hall, a dedicated performer and theatre enthusiast.

Before coming to Elma, Hall had spent a decade as an actor with the Auburn Dinner Theater, where he honed his craft and developed a lifelong love for the stage. After acquiring the theatre, he founded the Elma Children's Theater Association, transforming the old movie house into a vibrant hub for youth and community performance.



As artistic director, Kingsley Hall wrote, directed, and produced dozens of family-oriented productions. His most beloved works included *Scrooge*, performed every December, and *Alice in Wonderland*, staged every spring — a pair of traditions that continued for 17 consecutive years.

The theatre also hosted guest artists and regional performers, as reflected in several *Olympian* features from the 1990s:

On November 20, 1992, the Jet Cities Chorus, a barbershop harmony ensemble, performed on the Elma Theatre stage. On August 12, 1994, the Dance Theatre Northwest brought a professional ballet and modern dance performance to Elma. On November 11 and 18–19, 1994, the theatre presented the one-man show *A Fine and Pleasant Misery*, inspired by humorist Patrick McManus (The *Olympian*, Nov. 11, 1994).

by ■ **Jet Cities Chorus** 8 p.m. Saturday at the Elma Theatre, 113 4th St., Elma. \$8. 1-206-482-4810.

■ **Dance Theatre Northwest**, dance performance, 8 p.m. Saturday, Elma Theatre, 113 N. Fourth St., Elma. \$8. (206) 565-7287.

THE HILARIOUS ONE MAN PLAY BY HUMORIST
PATRICK F. MCMANUS

A FINE AND PLEASANT MISERY
Starring Tim Behrens

***"The audience was laughing so hard I thought they might hurt themselves, and that paramedics would need to be called in."
Spokane Spokesman-Review

** "the anecdotes are hilarious."
Seattle Times

** "...a must-see production... many in the audience laughed so hard they cried."
Salt Lake's Deseret News

Sponsored by **IRISH SETTER SHOES**

Friday, November 18 ♦ 8PM
Saturday, November 19 ♦ 8PM
ELMA THEATRE
Elma, Washington

Tickets: Elma Theatre, Rosevears Music Center (Aberdeen), Four Seasons at Carnegie's (Olympia), & at door.
Pat will sign books at Friday's show.



Nearly a decade later, Hall's troupe continued its annual *Scrooge* musical, performed on December 20–21, 2003 (The *Olympian*, Dec. 18, 2003).

■ **"Scrooge,"** 8 p.m. Dec. 20, 3 p.m. Dec. 21, Elma Theatre, 113 Fourth St. E., Elma. Pre-show featuring Connie Bevington and Natalia Colson, 7:30 Dec. 20, 2:30 Dec. 21. 360-482-4810.

These programs show how Hall's leadership made the Elma Theatre a living cultural venue once again, welcoming performers from across Washington and reviving the spirit of community entertainment that had defined the Graham since 1927.

Kingsley Hall passed away in 2012, leaving behind a legacy of imagination, mentorship, and a renewed sense of community spirit that carried the Graham Theatre's story into a new century. (Information about Kingsley Hall was found online from his obituary, published by Whiteside Family Mortuary on August 14, 2012.)

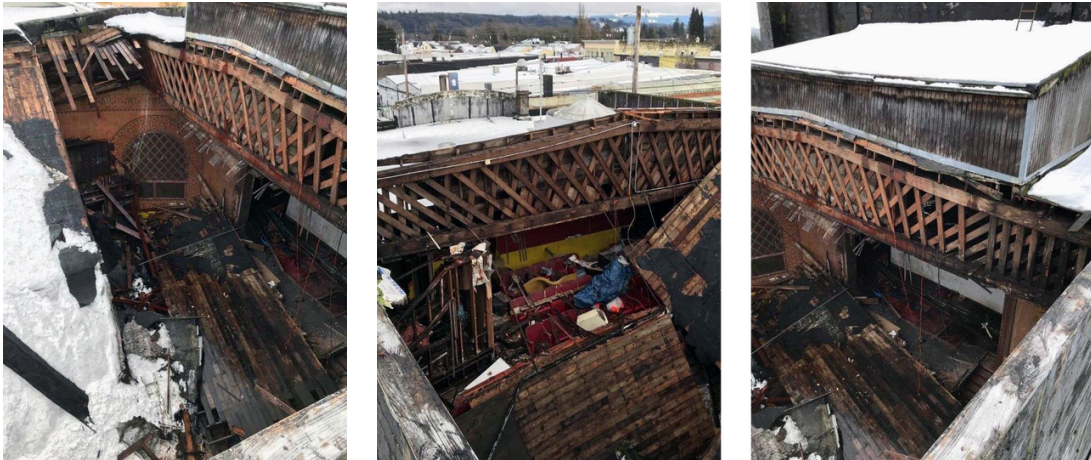
A New Name and a Final Vision

According to *The Vidette*, the theatre's name officially changed from the Graham Theatre to the Elma Theatre, and later to the Elma Performing Arts Center, sometime around its closure in 2013 and reopening under that new name. The rebranding appears to have taken place by or before 2017, when the property was sold to Edna Porter, who expressed plans to restore it as a venue for live events.



A Decline in the Spotlight

By the late 2010s, age and neglect caught up with the building. In February 2019, the roof of the theater collapsed under the weight of snow, leaving the building exposed to the elements and in a state of significant structural deterioration. The 1927 building had been vacant since 2013, and despite hopes for preservation, the collapse was severe enough to require the city to block off the adjacent alleyway to brace the structure. Ownership of the building transferred again in 2021 to the City of Elma, which now plans to demolish the structure due to ongoing safety concerns and structural instability. Though each chapter reflected Elma's enduring love for the performing arts, the challenges of restoration ultimately proved too great.



The Final Curtain

The Graham Theatre is slated for demolition beginning on November 10, 2025, nearly ninety-eight years after its opening night. For decades, it served as Elma's cultural heart — a stage, a cinema, a classroom, and a gathering place for the entire valley.

“From the glow of its marquee to the echo of applause inside, the Graham Theatre gave Elma a stage for dreams.”



These photos of the Graham/Elma Theatre were taken November 9, 2025, the day before the scheduled demolition.

The Wurlitzer Lives On

This photograph, taken around 1928, shows the original Wurlitzer 2-manual, 6-rank 'Style D Special' theatre organ (Opus #1720) installed at the Graham Theatre in Elma, Washington. Shipped from the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company's factory in North Tonawanda, New York, the organ arrived in November 1927. Positioned directly below the stage, the console provided live accompaniment for silent films and stage productions during the theatre's earliest years. In 1933, the theatre's Wurlitzer organ was moved to the First Christian Church in Vancouver, Washington, where it accompanied hymns and services for many years. Its current whereabouts are unknown, but its sound remains a treasured part of Washington's theatre organ heritage.



A Legacy Remembered

Thanks to the Chehalis Valley Historical Society, the Graham Theatre's story—preserved through programs, clippings, and photographs—continues to illuminate Elma's cultural history. Even as the building's final curtain falls, the laughter, music, and memories of nearly a century still echo through the valley.