## History student compiles book on Wichita Orpheum

By MEGAN PAULY news @thesunflower.com

Unless you're a patron of the arts, you might not know that Wichita is home to the first atmospheric theater—characterized by a sky-like ceiling—in the United States.

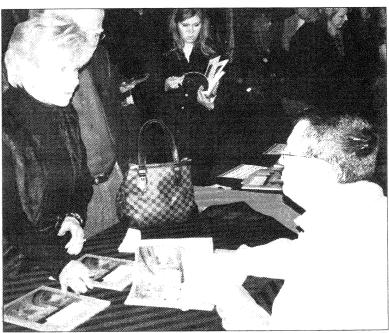
During the days of vaudeville, more than 17,000 acts—including Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald and Houdini—graced the stage of The Orpheum Theatre in Downtown Wichita.

These are facts found in Wichita State history student Keith Wondra's new book, "From the Land of Andalusia to the Wheat Fields of Kansas."

The title captures a main element of the atmospheric architecture: an illusion of a foreign setting such as Andalusia. Austrian architect John Eberson designed the theater in 1922.

"The name of the book comes from a headline in the 1922 Wichita Eagle," Wondra said. "It was basically saying, from the hands of Andalusia to the wheat fields of Kansas, The Orpheum Theatre in Wichita, Kansas is opening up. I just changed hands to lands because I thought it sounded better."

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Courtesy photo

Keith Wondra, a senior in history at Wichita State signs copies of his new book, "From the Land of Andalusia to the Wheat Fields of Kansas." The signing was held last Friday at the Orpheum Theatre.

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The goal, as quoted by Eberson in Wondra's book, was to give the illusion of "a magnificent

amphitheatre under a glorious moonlit sky ...

an Italian garden, a Persian court, a Spanish patio, or a mystic Egyp-

tian temple year ...where friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds drifted. Wondra signed books at a reception in The Orpheum on Friday

night. A long-time Orpheum volunteer, Wondra wrote the book after a suggestion from Mary Eves, past president

of The Orpheum. "He and I were in the box office one night, and

we were looking at some

historic pictures," Eves said. "I said, 'you know, I have always wanted to have a written and picture

history of the theatre, I think it would just be so special.' He said, 'I can do that.' I said, 'You can?' And he said, 'Well, yeah.'

And I said, 'Well, let's do "And that's how it got

started. So we set about gathering some of the pictures and doing the research, and together, we developed this book. He

did the heavy lifting." Wondra didn't anticipate his volunteer experience would lead to the publication of a book. "I knew volunteer

experience would help me out in the future, but not in writing a book," Wondra said. "I think writing the book will help

out in the future of anything else I do." Wondra attributes

much of his success to WSU professors such as Jay Price. "If it wasn't for being a student at WSU, I wouldn't have had the chance to write the book," Wondra said. "My

Orpheum was kind of a

through after that."

in the 1960s.

Local historian and

"I'm glad he did it. If it

Theatre, seats at The Orpheum in 1960 were red leather. Wondra consulted classes—and the teachings I've gotten here-

have really helped out. "I've always been a big fan of history. I took a couple classes at WSU that ingrained me into Wichita history. The

thing I just went to for a concert, thought it would be a cool place to volunteer, had some time, so basically, everything fell

publisher Patrick J. O'Conner, whose article was cited in Wondra's book, recognized The Orpheum as a destination

turns people on to The Orpheum, that's good," O'Conner said. In contrast to the red velvet seats at the Warren computer and trying to

various sources, including an article from a 1960 issue of The Wichita Eagle, which stated that a

poor cooling system and warm summer weather combined to cause patrons' sweat to soak into the red leather seats, coating clothes in red, like "Indian war paint." It wasn't the research Wondra-minded. As a history major, Wondra is

accustomed to writing papers, and said he didn't mind the research. The book began as a

paper Wondra wrote for The Wichita Historical his Introduction to Museum, Watermark Historical Research & Books, Eighth Day Books Writing class, which he and The Orpheum expanded upon during \* Theatre. the book-writing process.

"It was a tedious process," Wondra said. "A figure out what went wrong. It's a self-published book—basically. whenever someone wants it, they will hit click, pay

for it and Amazon will print it off. "It's done through CreateSpace. You do all the work, and then they see if it's OK and send it off. If it's good enough, they'll publish it. You

lot of yelling at the

to put all the pictures in it and did the layout of the book. Wondra's book can be purchased from Amazon.com, Cowtown,

order proofs, and you tell

them what's wrong and

everything. I designed it

Copies cost \$25.

Wondra has also asked

tioned the possible release of an updated edition in 11 years for the 100th anniversary of the theater. "I am so excited that history has been captured, because it has a way of

the WSU Bookstore to

sell the books. He men-

iust disappearing," Eves said. "When I first got started in the theater, I wasn't so aware of how important capturing that history is as I am today. "Some of the people who were involved in the early days aren't here anymore, so it's incumbent on those of us who do remember—and have

access to some of that information—to make sure it's either safely

stored at the Special

gone, it's gone."

documented in some form. We just can't let a thing slip through our fingers, because once it's

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