



FOR THE LOVE OF THE NORDIC

A TRUE STORY OF CHASING YOUR DREAMS, REDEFINING FAILURE AND SUCCESS, AND EMBRACING THE ENDURING MAGIC OF MOVIES.

BY JOSEPH BEYER



WHEN I FIRST VISITED

THE NORTHERN OUTPOST OF MARQUETTE, IT WAS OCTOBER AND THE INLAND FORESTS OF THE HIAWATHA WERE SHOWING OFF PEAK COLORS ACROSS MILES AND MILES OF DRAMATIC LANDSCAPES. I WAS FASCINATED: AUTHENTIC AND LAID-BACK HOSPITALITY, HARDY AND WELCOMING INHABITANTS, A HISTORY YOU COULD SEE AND FEEL EVERYWHERE.

I HAD COME WITH NO EXPECTATIONS AT THE INVITATION OF FRIENDS TO EXPERIENCE THE FRESH COAST FILM FESTIVAL, A WEEKEND GATHERING IN THE HEART OF DOWNTOWN MADE UP OF COMMUNITY VIBES THAT CELEBRATE ALL THINGS OUTDOORSY AND ADVENTUROUS. THE FEST IS MADE UP ALMOST ENTIRELY OF DOCUMENTARIES THAT CONNECT TO THE UNIQUE CULTURE OF THE REGION AND FEATURES SCREENINGS WITH LOCAL CRAFT BEER ALLOWED AND ENCOURAGED. I BECAME AN INSTANT FAN.

THAT WAS ALMOST FIVE YEARS AGO. NOW I'M COMPLETELY IMMERSSED AND OVERWHELMED BY MY OWN DOCUMENTARY PROJECT THAT BEGAN THERE UNEXPECTEDLY — AND SET MY LIFE ON A CREATIVE ADVENTURE I NEVER SAW COMING.

FOR ME, IT WAS a black-and-white photograph taken at night that started it all. The facade had been imagined with an obvious flare for design and a certain bravado that seemed modern even now, some 88 years after it had been built. The light from within glowed through the metal and glass Streamline Moderne-style doors leading to the ticket booth and concession counter inside. Then there's the marquee itself, sculpted and gorgeous and inspired ... and that name: The Nordic.

To the Anishinaabe first peoples, the Marquette region was known as *Gichi-namebini-zibiing* for the name of the mouth of the Big Sucker River. But after the discovery of the rich iron mining potential in the region in the 1840's, it later became known as "Queen City"—a marketing campaign designed as a magnet for industry, commerce and culture.

Modern founding father Peter White and others were determined to tame Marquette with ships, railroads, architecture and all the amenities of civilization at the turn of the century, and they succeeded quickly: building up vaudeville, symphonies, operas, traveling shows and then

suddenly three small nickelodeon theaters within blocks of each other, each showing single-reel movies three times a day with Kinetoscope projectors to a regional population of only around 11,500 people within city limits.

It's at this precise moment in 1914 that the truest story of The Nordic actually begins. That's when, in this new spirit of enterprising times, a small group of wealthy and powerful young men eager to make their mark on the world came together to form a motion picture exhibition company that would change the face of downtown Marquette for the next 100 years.

Delft Theatres Inc. was founded by a marquee mafia of characters with names like Morgan W. Jopling, Hugh "Doc" Gallup and Lawrence J. Jacobs. Delft would eventually grow to a mini empire of arthouse theaters, drive-ins and affiliates across the U.P. Using a combination of resources and connections, Delft had easy financing for their ambitions and support from the most powerful people and banks in town.

The chain grew as the movie business grew, and by 1926 they had recently renovated their flagship location in Marquette into a 1,200-seat vaudeville and motion picture house that rivaled any in the world—proven by a frenzied mob that broke in through the windows on opening night and had to be restrained. The Delft Marquette was the center of entertainment in the "norther" country and stood as the largest screen in Michigan for its time.

The film business was so successful (even during and maybe because of the Great Depression) that in 1935 Delft announced construction of a new and distinctly modern theater to meet demand. It would be located directly across the street from the existing one, with a complementary marquee designed to cater to new tastes. There would now be two distinguished arthouses in the heart of Marquette.

From this moment of conception, The Nordic was created to stand out as a fresh technological wonder ushering in the modern era of cinema. Destined to be, actually. And the unknown architect tapped from New York City to design it was the perfect rebellious spirit for the job.



Caption here:
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MICHAEL MEREDITH HARE was a young man of privilege when he departed Yale School of Architecture for the avant-garde ideas of Paris. Upon returning, he immediately challenged his professors and was eventually given an ultimatum: conform to our ideas or be expelled. In a moment of panic, Hare sent a plea to Frank Lloyd Wright, who replies by encouraging him to quit and join him:

"My dear Hare, I suppose the Taliesen fellowship exists for independent eager spirits like yours. I need not enlarge upon the contempt in which I hold what Yale, in the name of the Beaux Arts, does to the young man in architecture."

—Frank Lloyd Wright, November 8th 1933

The young man with bold ideas (who would later work with the Corbett & MacMurray agency, designers of Radio City Music Hall and other theatrical icons), ultimately turns Mr. Wright down—and instead finished his degree at Columbia University, where he senses modernism is being embraced.

So in 1935 when Delft Theatres Inc. President Morgan W. Jopling tapped his son-in-law to design The Nordic, it was Hare's first commission and he threw everything he had at the project: embracing new theatrical lighting techniques that change the mood in emotional sync with the films, installing a parabolic ceiling and glass wall to perfectly bounce sound for natural stereosonic effects, and adding luxurious interior design with lush fabrics, indulgent smoking and restrooms, and even a mural by his friend and artist Clement Hurd (illustrator of *Goodnight Moon* and other legendary children's books).

Hare worked furiously to use only the most inspiring flourishes, ending with the custom neon marquee manufactured and installed by Electrolite Signs of Milwaukee. As noted in the files, it was personally installed by Mr. B.B. Poblocki, the president of the company.

He, along with dozens of special guests and contractors from around the Midwest, attended the standing-room-only opening night on Easter Sunday, 1936. It was a triumphant debut splashed across multiple pages of *The Mining Journal* with breathless praise.

BERNIE ROSENDAHL GREW UP outside Marquette in Skandia, a kid with a playground in the woods who always looked forward to coming into town. "It was the center of the universe to me," he says of rounding the corner on Washington Street and seeing the two marquees shining, one across from the other.

As a child, Rosendahl was restricted to family movies at The Delft due to no liability but age. Like other teenagers, he dreamed of the day when he could finally set foot in The Nordic and become educated in the R-Rated fare and edgy storytelling from film directors he'd only heard of, like Daman Wayans and Quentin Tarantino.

So when he opened *The Mining Journal* newspaper and saw an ad for the last showing at The Nordic, his dreams were instantly shattered. "I had my whole life planned out in that theater," he remembers. "That's what it's all about, coming back for the holidays and going with your family to the movies together."

On August 11, 1994, his mom dropped him off for the 7 p.m. screening of *Black Beauty*. As he remembers it, he hardly watched the film at all, but simply wondered at the



"That's what it's all about, coming back for the holidays and going with your family to the movies together."

– Bernie Rosendahl

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architecture of a theater he knew would now be closing.

Instinctually, he kept his ticket and popcorn bag as relics, and waited outside under the canopy for his ride home. When his mom arrived, he told her, "I wanted to be the last one out of the theater ... and I was."

After Rosendahl left that night, the struggling single-screen theater that was once the pride and joy of downtown was unceremoniously closed and quickly sold to become a Book World store, an emerging independent chain that would grow to over 45 locations mainly across the Midwest before closing abruptly themselves in the face of the Amazon era.

Almost nothing was saved. The basement powder rooms once showcased in *Architectural Forum* were collapsed and filled, the marquee dismantled and carted to the Marquette County landfill outside town. Book World sealed the second floor off and filled it with insulation to help keep winter heating bills down.

Rosendahl couldn't understand why no one else seemed to care about a place that seemed so obviously special. As he tells friends in home video footage after The Nordic closed, "If I had a million dollars, I'd bring that movie theater back."

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Years later when he picked up a call from his mom in 2017, he finally got his chance—Book World was closing. The building was for sale again.

WHEN I MET ROSENDAHL over the phone, it was 2018 and it became clear his dream to restore The Nordic was singular and focused. He seemed to understand that in order to rebuild the dream factory that a movie theater is, he would need to start by rebuilding the dream. Armed only with his research archive of photos he registered nordictheater.com just weeks after learning the news. Then, using talents as a graphic designer, he shared what he had learned, what he wanted to do and what it would take to make it happen.

While Rosendahl was the perfect person to lead the charge to restore The Nordic, he had also never worked in the exhibition business, never restored a building, and never run a fundraising campaign or nonprofit organization. He was researching and learning in real time, all the while unaware of the





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negotiations with Book World that were possibly already taking place.

The historic 6,900-square-foot building was listed originally at \$549,000—a fair price for the location and market, but a giant price tag for a relatively young man with nothing but an idea. As his quest developed, Rosendahl enlisted any help he could find that would eventually align with his mission to bring back The Nordic, including architects, professors, Realtors and finally key allies in a local arts organization and the downtown development office.

The business realities of running a single-screen operation, along with skyrocketing costs to restore a facade and marquee long forgotten, and then to finally outfit it with the modern technologies needed, began to overwhelm Rosendahl's vision with challenges. By the time negotiations with Book World fell apart almost two years later it's easy to imagine he was frustrated and tired of carrying on with the fight.

But Book World was in a rush to close 45 separate locations and sell off the assets as soon as possible in the face of an economic wildfire that was happening to independent bookstores everywhere. There was no



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budgeting on the price; without any flexibility, the deal was dead and everyone had to move on.

Each time I returned to Marquette, I saw the red brick building with the For Sale sign still sitting there, and I felt genuine agony for the absence of Rosendahl's vision and still rooted for him to succeed.

So no one was more surprised and delighted than I was to return in 2022 to see the marquee I had only ever experienced in photos lit up again in three-dimensional wonder. And I came to learn it had all happened very precisely, and because of the only person possible who could have been behind it.

WHEN YOU WALK DOWN Washington Street today you won't find the opening night handprints from the cast and crew of the classic *Anatomy of a Murder* in the cement, or the plaque in the sidewalk that commemorated "The Nordic, 1936" as a place of importance in town. There are no more popcorn machines, no more movies to jump into on a whim or sneak into if you were too young.

But what you will see is an almost perfect replica of Hare's design for The Nordic Theater along with his signature rounded marquee ... and if that weren't enough, directly across the street, the restoration of the very

first Delft Theatre.

The Delft was rescued by becoming a bistro and bar in 2012. The Nordic was resurrected as a distillery in 2022. Neither is a theater per se, yet each marquee is still there and holding on to imaginary feelings and shining lights that no one would let fully dim.

Now when you are ushered through the entry way of the former theater, you step into a lobby that's home to The Honorable Distillery's chic bar and tasting room, where mules and gimlets are shaken and poured. Step beyond that into the old auditorium and you'll no longer find rows of seats but instead sparkling stainless steel stills, fermenters and a series of pipes and tubes set on gleaming polished-concrete floors.

Rosendahl still has the text saved on his phone from the day when new own-

Anatomy of a Murder (1959) and of course, *Black Beauty* (1994).

The journey from Rosendahl's idea to his partnership with The Honorable Distillery became the central narrative of *Marqueetown*—the documentary feature I created with my producing partner Jordan Anderson. We hope the film is a love letter not just to the theater itself, but also to the role of cinema as the heartbeat of community and small-town life—and the passion of one hero determined to keep it alive.

Marqueetown will make an appearance at the latest and upcoming Fresh Coast Film Festival in Marquette. Yet when I reached out to invite Rosendahl to the premiere, I already sensed he wouldn't come. After our last conversation on the phone months ago, he admitted to me he may never be able to



ers Anne White and Scott Anderson shared the news they'd be moving forward to use his designs to resurrect the Nordic in look and feel, even though it would never be the cinema he imagined. At that point, it finally seemed possible something would come from so much hard work, and he poured himself into helping by personally sourcing the designers and fabricators and overseeing the details side by side with them.

He has become close friends with White and Anderson during the process, even designing their limited-edition Cinema Series labels that now adorn their bottles in a tribute to famous films of the past that played there: *Red Salute* (1936),

watch the film. He said it would make him too uncomfortable to see it all play out again on screen (and he was always a reluctant participant I coaxed into sharing, only wanting the focus to be on others or better yet the history itself).

We all want to hold on to the best of the past. And where time and space connect in a physical way, like a location or a building or a view, this is how nostalgia and sentiment are marked forever: feelings so strong and mysterious that even remembering them can trigger powerful emotions decades later.

What becomes of them, and how to hold onto them, is up to us ... the audiences of the here and now. ■

FRESHCOASTING IN MARQUETTE

FRESH COAST FILM FESTIVAL

October 19-22, 2023

The first-of-its-kind documentary film festival celebrating the outdoor lifestyle, water-rich environment and resilient spirit of the Great Lakes and Upper Midwest. With screenings alongside outdoor adventures, "freshcoasting" is about embracing the unexpected and connecting as a community of like-minded art and recreation enthusiasts.

MARQUEETOWN

The story of the quest to save The Nordic comes to life via sneak-peek screenings October 21 at the Masonic Lodge and October 22 at Ore Dock Brewing. This documentary feature brings the fascinating history of Delft Theatres to life, featuring dozens of real-life Marquette locations and characters. *Marqueetown* will be touring art house theaters across Michigan and available on video-on-demand this spring.

THE HONORABLE DISTILLERY

With a wild history dating back to Marquette founder Peter White, reinvention is in the bones of the former Nordic Theater. You can see the distillation at play in the background as you sip on craft cocktails inside or outside, in the heart of downtown's new social district.

THE DELFT BISTRO

Adapted from the site of the first Delft Theatre, owners Tom Vear and Jennifer Ray took over in 2012 and have expanded their multi-building complex which includes the Delft Bistro and Bar, the famous Donckers Restaurant and Soda Fountain, along with their latest venture Evergreen Market, a supply store of gifts and highly curated home decor.

Caption here:

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