Once upon a time, there was a beautiful Princess who each evening, graciously opened the doors of her palace for all to enjoy. And they came, the young and old, the commoners and the royalty, and most of all, the dreamers. There at the palace, they were inspired by stories of far away places. It was a magical place of drama, and comedy, and fantasy. Then one day the Princess suffered misfortune, and all who had once befriended her, turned away from her. The doors of the palace were closed and the Princess became a recluse and finally a distant memory. Many years passed, each year measured by the sediments of neglect. The once glittering and festive palace was now silent and empty and forlorn.

This is a Route 66 story, a true story, about the Princess of Tucumcari. You say that you have not heard this story of the Princess? There is a reason for that.

A lot of Route 66 travelers follow the route through the small towns and larger cities of America along its 2200 mile length from Illinois to California experiencing what is known as the Main Street of America. For many of the towns along Route 66, the route does take you down the historic main streets bringing back memories of another time. But wait, strictly following the route will sometimes result in bypassing an historic main street, a main street that you may not even know is there! Such is the case in Tucumcari.

Tucumcari is located at a crossroads, the crossing of historic
Highway 66 and historic Highway 54. Highway 54 links El Paso to Chicago through the Midwest. Like Highway 66, Highway 54 is another historic highway bypassed by the Interstate system. Today, across from the convention center in Tucumcari, is the divergence of 54 and 66 which allows you the choice of taking one of two historic highways to Chicago along very different routes. The main street of Tucumcari happens to be part of Highway 54 and is located a few blocks north of old 66. Journey to the old downtown of Tucumcari and you’ll find the Princess.

The Princess theater was built in 1917 and was originally known as the H-H theater, taking its initials after the businessmen who built it, Arch Hurley and Gene Hawkins. Mr. Hurley assumed sole ownership of the theater and in 1921 renamed the theater the Princess. Mr. Hurley reinvested and remodeled the theater in order to elevate it to be in the league of the finest theaters in the southwest. Tucumcari was reintroduced to the new Princess on October 5, 1937 with a screening of the comedy Vogues of 38, a movie that went on to receive three Academy Award nominations including Best Art Direction, Best Music, and Best Song.

The new Princess was indeed impressive. The exterior was high deco, in sharp contrast with Tucumcari’s cowboy western heritage. The exterior featured a polished stone tile facade with vertical deco lines accented in black, orange and coral. Over the box office gleamed a brightly lit marquee announcing the Hollywood hit that would be playing that evening. Art deco details abounded inside with stylish furnishings, elegant light fixtures, boldly patterned carpeting, sculpted hand rails, and a soaring stairway to the balcony, a stairway glamorous enough to be graced by Greta Garbo.

In 1943, the beautiful movie palace burned, the elegant interior entirely gutted. Mr. Hurley, starting only with the surviving exterior shell, built an even more impressive theater, updated to seat more than 800 movie fans. The Princess was the centerpiece of downtown Tucumcari until 1962, when yet another fire ravished the roof of the building. The theater was closed and boarded up.

Several years ago, myself and photographer Mike Callens,
were fortunate to join Doug Powers, then Community Development Director, and Bruce Nutt, then Tucumcari Museum Director, to tour of the old Princess, now owned by the City of Tucumcari. As we opened the padlock on the front door, Bruce sighed, "It's been more than 40 years since I've been inside this theater."

The theater was very dark but we had brought in lighting to illuminate the interior. The front lobby area had suffered water damage as a result of the leaking roof. Doug pointed to a gaping hole in the floor that dropped down into a basement crawl space and recalled a previous visit to the vacant theater. "That is where I fell through the floor catching myself with my armpits. It was totally dark. I scared myself." Doug noted that the city recently spent $50,000 to seal the roof to prevent further water damage.

We proceeded into the ground floor of the theater. A few rows of seats were lying on their sides at the front of the theater while the center of the auditorium floor had been cleared, and against the east wall, were stacked several more rows of seats. The stage was rather plain and did not feature an ornamented proscenium framing the stage as found in many other classic theaters. On the west wing of the stage, an array of stage lights were stacked against the west wall. The ceiling above the main floor looked solid and intact. At the center of the ceiling was the metal framework that once supported a large jeweled chandelier. In the northwest corner of the auditorium, lying on the floor, we found the large multi-tiered crystal chandelier, at least six feet in diameter, with thousands of individual crystals strung together in an intricate latticework.

We climbed the still sturdy wooden staircase to the balcony, which like the auditorium floor, was cleared except for a few rows of chairs stacked against the rear wall. Looking down on the auditorium and towards the stage, it was clear to me that this theater was very much restorable. I have visited several other classic theater restoration projects around the country and this theater was in better condition than several I have seen that are now under restoration or have completed restoration. Mike looked down from the balcony and reminisced, "I used to buy a big fat pickle for a nickel at the concession stand and I was tempted many times to toss my pickle over the rail and pickle bomb some unsuspecting guy below."

As we left the theater, I looked back at the exterior of the Princess and I wondered out loud, "The brightly lit marquee was still here in 1962 when the theater closed. Somebody should know where it is." Doug responded, "I've heard it..."
might be stored in one of the empty buildings here downtown, but I don’t know for sure.”

The City of Tucumcari has a vision for downtown revival and the vision includes restoration of the theater. I have seen similar projects in other cities result in a rebirth of downtown activity anchored by a classic theater. Perhaps there will come a day when the people of Tucumcari will join together to rebuild the palace and welcome their Princess back home.

Thanks to Debra Ann Whittington, Tucumcari historian, for historical information on the Princess. Vintage photos courtesy of the James Crocker Collection, Tucumcari. Contemporary photos courtesy of Mike Callens. This article, originally published by American Road magazine, was adapted and expanded by the original author for Route 66 New Mexico Magazine.

Above Right: View from the balcony towards the stage.

Center Right: Seats towards the front of the stage.

Bottom Right: The Fallen chandelier.