

The story has been around for decades now, but it has never been more true. Once upon a time, in a newsroom in Birmingham, someone once said she only knew two people who had their magic kingdoms: Walt Disney and Cecil Whitmire.

Disney, of course, has spread his far and wide, from California to Florida to Europe and Asia.

Whitmire, on the other hand, has confined his to a block in downtown Birmingham. Whitmire's magic kingdom – on Third Avenue North between 18th and 19th Streets – consists of The Alabama Theatre and the Lyric Theatre across the street, a vaudeville house that will soon be restored to its former glory, if Whitmire has his way.

It all began, though, with the Alabama Theatre, which opened on Dec. 26, 1927 at noon with a showing of "Spotlight," starring Esther Ralston. The grand movie palace – which played host to stage shows and orchestras in its early years -- would become known as "The Showplace of the South," presenting some of the most popular movies over the years, including "Gone With the Wind."

During the 1940s and 1950s, a young boy from Knoxville, Tenn., would go to the theater when he came to visit his father's family in Birmingham.

"The Alabama would babysit me," Whitmire says. "I would go down aisle three, seventh row from the front on the right hand side of the aisle and watch Stanleigh Mallotte play the organ. It was thrilling. I can still remember sitting there hearing the organ motor go on and knowing it was about to play. Even at age seven, my palms would get sweaty because I knew I was about to hear something that would absolutely thrill me to death."

That love for the organ guided Whitmire's early years. He took lessons beginning at age 12 and continued playing while at the University of Tennessee and afterward, even while working fulltime for a wholesale hardware house.

"In those days, you could rent an organist for \$15 for to hours, and I was playing at funeral homes, country clubs, churches and other places just to make some extra money," Whitmire recalls.

At one of those gigs, he was asked to play at the Tennessee Theatre. "I went for one day and stayed for 25 years," Whitmire says.

When he transferred to Birmingham in 1975, Whitmire was devastated to find the Alabama already had a house organist, but a year later, he got the job playing the movie palace's "Mighty Wurlitzer," a Publix 1 Crawford Special.

"The ride from the bottom of the pit to the top of the pit into the spotlight with a big crowd is just terribly exciting," he says. "I don't have to spend my money on cocaine and heroin. I get my high just doing that."

While the Alabama changed hands several times during the 1970s and 1980s, one thing remained constant – Whitmire at the keyboard, playing "Big Bertha," the Mighty Wurlitzer, and delighting audiences.

"I was the only one who knew where all the light switches were and what keys fit what doors," Whitmire says. "They would put new management in, but I stayed. I stayed at the Alabama from 1976 through all the rough-and-tumble years when the public was abandoning the downtown and, of course, the theater.

Eventually, the audiences just weren't there anymore.

The Alabama closed in the Spring of 1981, but Whitmire and the Birmingham Chapter of the American Theater Organ Society were determined to maintain the organ.

“It’s such a fragile instrument, that if we didn’t work on it, it would be junk and would cost hundreds of thousands dollars to get it back,” Whitmire says.

To raise money for the organ’s upkeep, Whitmire would perform two concerts a year, even though the “Showplace of the South” wouldn’t fully open to the public again until 1988.

Returning to Knoxville for 14 months in 1981 and 1982, Whitmire and his wife, Linda, became involved in the restoration of The Tennessee Theatre and Atlanta’s “Save the Fox” campaign.

“During that time, I always thought, if I had *my* theater, here’s what I would do,” he says.

He’d soon get his chance. When the group that owned the Alabama went bankrupt in 1986, Whitmire and the American Theater Organ Society knew they’d have to buy the building to save the beautiful organ inside.

It wasn’t easy.

“We just couldn’t seem to muster any steam,” Whitmire says. “Banks didn’t want to do business with a bunch of organ people because they didn’t think we knew what we were doing.”

Eventually, they approached the bankruptcy court and were given 60 days to raise the \$106,000 in back taxes, insurance and interest needed to take control of the Alabama.

A fund-drive netted \$156,000, and Birmingham Landmarks, Inc. – which Whitmire has headed ever since – bought the Alabama on May 6, 1987.

“I’ll never forget the feeling after I had signed those papers all day,” Whitmire once recalled, his voice breaking ever so slightly. “I came into the theater through the back door, walked across the stage and looked out. It just hit me that we now had the responsibility for the place. I was overcome at that point to realize that a lifelong dream had come true.”

Slowly but surely, Whitmire and about 60 volunteers began building the Alabama into a performing arts center, much to the surprise of many observers.

“When we took this theater over, I don’t know of anybody who really offered us any hope,” Whitmire says. “They said it couldn’t be done. The only thing we knew was that we had the desire to make something out of this old place. We have a saying around here that if you tell somebody it can’t be done, it *will* be done.”

Eventually, groups such as the Birmingham Music Club, the Birmingham Broadway Series and the Alabama Ballet began booking shows at the Alabama, and the theater became another venue for pop, rock and blues concerts coming to town.

By 1992, the theater was so busy that Whitmire quit his hardware job and turned his attention to his dream full time. When he began searching for a general manager for the Alabama, he knew just the man for the job.

“It came to me that this was the job I was looking for for all my life,” Whitmire says. “I had to take a terrible cut in salary, but how many people get the chance to do exactly what they love to do?”

After retiring from the hardware business, Whitmire quickly expanded his Alabama Theatre dream to include the Lyric Theatre, an old vaudeville house across the street from the Alabama Theatre. The Lyric opened in 1914, during vaudeville’s heyday, serving as a live theater, a movie theater and, eventually, an adult movie theater until it closed in 1993.

Since then, Whitmire and his group have been trying to raise the money to renovate it, just as they did with the Alabama a decade ago.

“This house is just like the Majestic in New York,” Whitmire told The Birmingham News. “It was built like a Broadway Theater. When Milton Berle saw it in 1928, he said that he felt like he was in New York.”

For Whitmire, his work at the Alabama Theatre is much more than just a job. It has been a part of his life for nearly six decades, much of that spent with his wife, Linda, who died in 2001.

The Alabama keeps a busy schedule, and more often than not, whether it’s Willie Nelson, the Spin Doctors, a touring theater production or some high-school music program to be performed inside, Whitmire is there, proudly welcoming people into the house that he literally rebuilt.

He’s chronicled the trek in last year’s “The Alabama Theatre: Showplace of the South,” a book written with Jeannie Hanks and chock full of photos and memories of the theater, the organ and its patrons. The book recalls visits from luminaries such as Helen Reddy, Wayne Newton, Lionel Hampton and Lee Meriwether, as well as historical moments from the distant past (a 1934 fire that nearly took the Alabama with it) and the not-so-distant past (Garrison Keillor broadcasting live from the theater in March 1993 despite a blizzard that paralyzed the city).

One seems certain that a decade from now, Whitmire will be doing the same with the Lyric Theatre.