



The heart of the system "Old Joe" which is a giant electrical motor with two pistons still exists in the sub-basement.

This machine, affectionately named "Old Joe", was the heart of the Paramount Theatre's air conditioning system for many years. It was installed in 1927 for the original opening of the theatre. The Paramount Theatre is widely recognized as the first building west of the Mississippi River to be air conditioned. The machine was originally built as an ice machine for Hubbard Ice in Cedar Rapids and then converted to help supply air conditioning to the theatre.

"Old Joe" is comprised of a giant electric motor which drives two pistons designed to compress CO₂ that make cold air. The compressed CO₂ was run through piping inside of a large chamber near the machine in the basement. Sprayers would distribute water onto the piping, causing the water to freeze directly on the pipes. Large electrical turbines then forced air over the frozen piping, thus cooling the air. The cooled air was then forced through ducts that lead upward through the basement ceiling into the main auditorium. Air was pushed out of a large ceiling medallion onto the audience and then drawn back down into the basement through mushroom shaped vent caps located under the main floor seats, and then recirculated back through the system. Patrons would purchase tickets in the loge to enjoy the cool air. This unit continued to be the primary air conditioner for the theatre until renovations in 2004.

During renovation, the cooling chamber and air turbines were removed, and water pipes were capped. Today's HVAC system still uses the medallion to cool the main auditorium and the mushroom vent caps on the main floor have been replaced by flat circular grates.

