

Yester-Year Yearnings: Nostalgic Americana

THE LAST PICTURE SHOW

It was once a favorite pastime for everyone in town

Anyone who drove down most Main Streets during the 1930s-1950s would likely find a neighborhood movie house with blinking bulbs and neon lights on its marquee. These social hubs, where rich and poor alike rubbed shoulders often stayed open seven nights a week and were owned by locals. Some seated a few hundred, while others boasted an upper balcony, just like the downtown palaces. During the Great Depression and during World War II, they collected scrap and sold war bonds. The cost of admission wouldn't buy a bagel or cup of coffee today.

A medium-sized city could have more than a dozen neighborhood theaters with frequently changed showings. They had semi-exotic names like the Palace, Cameo, Globe, and Riviera. All showed second runs of films that first played downtown.

They called our local theater The Mermaid. To be sure, it was a far cry from Loew's State Theater downtown with its palatial Indo-Persian-Chinese architecture. The Mermaid lacked marble stairs, a Tiffany chandelier, and uniformed ushers with flashlights—but it did offer a modest foyer with a box office flanked by colorful posters of coming attractions. Of course, posters also filled the outside glass cases. Many were colorful lithographs. Some now command fabulous prices at auction, such as *The Black Cat* (1934), \$286,800; *The Mummy* (1932), \$435,500; and *Dracula* (1931), (\$502,000).

People packed The Mermaid on weekends and most other nights. Lights dimmed around 6:30 P.M., which caused filmgoers to applaud and start devouring a box of Good & Plenty licorice or Chuckles jelly candy, washed down with soda pop. Matinees on

Saturday were also a huge attraction.

The show opened with coming attractions, a cartoon, a cliff-hanger serial or Three Stooges comedy, and the latest newsreel. Comic book characters like Batman, The Phantom, and The Green Hornet made great action heroes in the serials. Two films followed—a low budget B movie and then the feature attraction from one of the big studios: MGM, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros. or RKO Radio Pictures. A frequent feature attraction was a Western with stars such as Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, or the iconic Hopalong Cassidy with their famous horses.

The lights went up around 10:30 P.M. and people walked home beneath street-lamps or stopped at an ice cream parlor for a sundae or milk shake and listened to the jukebox. Worrying about crime at these late hours was virtually unknown.

Neighborhood movie houses fizzled during the 1960s. Many were boarded up, gutted, or turned into bowling alleys, churches, or thrift shops. Even first-run houses downtown closed with the shift to shopping malls and shoe box size multiplexes that were cheaper to run with a greater variety of films, as the money-mongering mentality took hold.

TV, cable and videocassettes finished off the survivors.

The death spiral of the neighborhood theater was hastened by the types of movies increasingly being shown, which were unappealing or anathema to normal American mores and tastes. R-Rated, X-Rated, and unwholesome films proliferated. Off-color language, violence, sexual innuendo, base and morally repulsive themes, and inconclusive, ambivalent or unsatisfying endings with the “good-guys” not coming out on top began to dominate movie fare, signaling a propitious overall decline in interest in going to the movies. Even the normally wholesome and creative Walt Disney movies were going downhill.

When the neighborhood theatres closed, many mom-and-pop shops

did likewise—thus ending an era of American small town life that was naturally communal, since alien and disruptive elements were absent.

As a character in the movie, “The Last Picture Show” says: “Won’t be much to do in town with the picture show closed”.

The refrains of the late Joe South’s tune, “Don’t it make you wanna go home?” reverberate in my mind.”

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