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Theaters came, went to entertain Middletown residents

Middletown Past
Roger Miller

Not only did the 20th century's technological revolution change the ways people worked and traveled, but also how they were entertained. The motion picture made possible the filming of a great variety of entertainment.

At the beginning of the century, Thomas A. Edison had already developed his kinetoscope, utilizing George Eastman's new flexible film. In 1903, Edison began making films, with his "Great Train Robbery" being the first film Middletonians saw. The late W. D. Vorhis recorded in his diary under an entry of June 8, 1904: "Elmer Clapp and I took in the 'Train Robbery' motion picture. Very good."

So impressed were local citizens that the next year the city's first Nickelodeon opened, named because of its 5-cent admission charge combined with the Greek word for theater. It was located along Third Street (West Central Avenue), and business so good another Nickelodeon began operations a few months later in a storeroom fitted with 22 kitchen chairs at Third and the canal (Verity).

William E. Gordon was Middletown's first movie mogul. In 1903, he built the Broadway Theater at 31 N. Broad for vaudeville. With its small balcony, it seated 450. With the coming of motion pictures, Gordon put up a silver screen and installed a player piano. The Broadway was so successful that he sold it, and in 1909 built the 1,000-seat Gordon Airdrome at Second Street (Manchester) and the canal. In 1913, he converted this building into a skating rink; it was destroyed by fire in 1915. In 1912, Gordon opened a new theater at Third and the canal. This building was remodeled in 1920 and was destroyed by fire in 1940. The Gordon Theater was designed for vaudeville and silent motion pictures, but in 1929, sound equipment was installed.

Besides Gordon, other men had entered the movie business. In 1907, Joe Kessel and John Doerfler opened the 150-seat Dreamland at 17 N. Broad that showed one-reelers at first. The name was changed to the Gem, with its doors finally closing in 1919. In 1908, Dan "Dad" Mohler opened the Princess on Third just west of Broad. He operated in the same location until 1924, when it closed, and Mohler opened another theater in Dayton.

The Eagle Theater opened in 1911, and was operated by Harry Edelman, Joe Sweeny and William Eldridge. In 1917, when Charles Fay took over, it became the Majestic. Years later, George Turlukis and Peter Chakeris ran it as the State until it closed in 1950.

Also on Third Street, the Grand Theater opened in 1915 and operated until the Depression. B. S. Leeds was the manager of the theater. In 1923, Joe Lorenzo opened a

movie house bearing his name. It closed in 1963 to make way for urban redevelopment in the Garfield-York Street area.

With the growth of the East End, two theaters were located in the Bundy Building on Third Street at the railroad. In 1915, C. E. McCune and William Edwards opened the Rex in the east wing. Its name was changed to Columbia, then back to Rex, before becoming the Family Theater. In the west wing of the same building the Bijou opened in 1917 and closed in 1924.

Opened in 1891, the Sorg Opera House was first devoted to live productions but in 1915, it was subleased for weekday silent movies, with C. E. McCune and James Crosley in charge. Here Middletonians saw their first talking picture on Aug. 6, 1929. It was titled "In Old Arizona." In 1947, a remodeled Sorg became the Colonial Theater.

The "talkies", as they were known, were introduced by two important movie tycoons of the time – the brothers Gust and Theodore Chifos. Believing that a new movie house created especially for sound pictures would be best, the Chifos brothers, along with Steve Chakeris and John Demetron, formed a corporation to erect the Strand Theater in 1922. In 1929, it was torn down to make way for a bigger Strand, to be remodeled into the Studio, which closed April 24, 1984.

In 1930, there was the Strand, Sorg, Gordon, State, Lorenzo and Family in operation. On April 5, 1931, the national chain of Paramount Theaters opened a movie palace here. It closed in 1963.

In later years, Earl Cox controlled the Colonial and Studio, and pioneered the opening of the multiscreen Towne East at the site of his Starglow Drive-In. It became the Regal, which is now closed. Cox controlled the Dixie Cruise-In Theater that was sold in 1998. Now all the proprietors are gone and the Danbarry Theater is the only place locals can enjoy a night at the movies.

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