

Nickelodeons were plentiful in Watsonville

By BETTY LEWIS

LET'S GO TO THE MOVIES . . .

—The moving pictures came to Watsonville 75 years ago and the talkies, 50 years ago.

"Among all the businesses of the country, moving pictures rank second in revenue. Among all the education plants of the country, moving picture theatres are to be counted, and their influence measured. Schools and churches have installed machines, and the business, as good as it is, is growing. It behooves parents and teachers to know what lessons the films are teaching, lessons that reach old and young. Are they lessons in kindness or cruelty? Lessons in peace or violence? Is their humor good humor or mean jokes and horseplay? Eternal vigilance is the price of safety . . ."

—Evening Pajaronian, July 22, 1915

They could almost have been talking about television, but this was an earlier era. Hailed as the newest "novelty" on the American scene, these silent dramas of fact and fancy flickered on the screen in the small and cozy movie houses. These first films were short, one reelers with sub-titles being flashed on the screen between scenes. Also on the program was a vaudeville skit and the ever-present piano player.

The Watsonville Opera House, at 23 East Third (Beach) Street, became known as the Unique Theatre in 1904 — five acts of vaudeville and moving pictures for 20¢ admission or 10¢ if you sat in the "peanut" gallery. In 1907, the name was changed back to the Watsonville Opera House and, this same year, John Kershman, well-known as a circus ring director throughout California, opened a "palace of amusement" at 320 Main Street.

"The Nickelodian, the new electric automatic vaudeville theatre, located at 320 Main Street, opens today and will be continued every day in the week from this date on permanently. During the past year over 150 of these new 5-cent theatres have been opened and are successfully operated . . ."

—Evening Pajaronian, March 23, 1907

In order for Kershman to stay above-board in the theatre business, 6,000 admissions at five cents a head were necessary each month and, since this could not be maintained, he had to close down the Nickelodeon in May and return to the circus world as a trainer of dogs and ponies.

A man by the name of Sumner Burton came to town in September of 1907 to try his hand at the motion picture business. He was considered one of the most successful managers in the state, having worked with a number of movie houses in southern California. Burton signed a lease agreement with Sol Hildreth for the use of space in the Hildreth Block which was occupied by the Rendezvous Billiard Parlor. After being vacated, the room was fitted as a movie house and named the La Petite Theatre. On the opening night, Oct. 5, 1907, people thronged to the new theatre and "scores" were turned away as the overflow from the three performances extended almost to the center of Main Street.

Price of admission to the La Petite was 10 cents for adults and 5 cents for children under 10 years of age. The program consisted of such goodies as: "A Struggle For Life" — A thrilling story of hair-breadth escapes and exciting

action; "Buying a Ladder," — a strong comedy subject full of laughs from start to finish. The price of admission also included illustrated songs sung by Mr. Fred Rodone.

In January of 1908, Mrs. James Piratsky, whose husband "Jim" was editor of the Evening Pajaronian, bought out Burton's lease and immediately made improvements to the theatre such as a "neat little stage," additional seating and a new lighting system. When the doors swung open to the public on Jan. 14; included in the price of a ticket were such dramas as: "The Clockmaker's Secret," a tragic story of an old clockmaker who made a compact with the Evil One in order to win the competition for making a clock for his native town, and a comedy, "The Sailor's Practical Joke," touted as "one great big roar from its start." What made these short movies even more appealing was that Jim Piratsky was often on hand to provide the narration and sound effects as he stood along-side the screen. He gathered quite a following with his clever and imaginative performances, and it was said that the drummers would try and schedule their stops in Watsonville when Piratsky was appearing at the theatre, making those silents come alive.

But, in December of 1909, the La Petite closed down when Mrs. Piratsky and Mr. Hildreth could not come to terms on a new lease agreement. The movie house opened under a new name, as the Lyric Theatre, and under new management in January of 1910. On the program were three reels of moving pictures, a double act of vaudeville and illustrated songs — still for only 10 cents! By 1912, admission was up to 15 cents per person and, included in the price of admission was a one-act play, "To Kill a Man," a comedy, "His Little Sister," and Harry James with his latest songs.

Theatres were springing up all over the country as people loved to be entertained and to enter the fascinating world of make-believe. Locally, the Japanese Theatre over in Brooklyn opened in 1910 and, this same year, Mrs. Piratsky took over the management of the Opera House Theatre. Alas, along with this new film entertainment came the "con" game:

"We warn our people against buying any stock in moving picture companies unless they are fully satisfied that the investment is a good one . . . The public carried away by the enormous profits amassed by the pioneers in the moving picture business are likely to regard with favor any chance given to break into the game. Accordingly, we warn our readers against buying any stock in moving pictures, fake stock companies or from swindlers who represent that they will make rich returns from the 'Chain of Theatres.' Leave them severely alone or you will dearly repent your gullibility."

—Evening Pajaronian, Dec. 15, 1914

An example of this could very easily have been "The Dot" a hurriedly renovated small theatre in the Mansion House block. It opened its doors on the night of February 11, 1913 to "large audiences" and then disappeared from sight as far as can be determined. Another theatre that had a relatively short existence in Watsonville was the "New Lyric" which opened its doors on November 30, 1914 in the Brewington Block (now the Kalich Building), 430 Main street. By January of 1916 it had to

close its doors, and the furnishings were sold to the T&D theatre to help pay some of the outstanding debts.

Not all theatres, naturally, were bad investments or doomed for failure. A case in point was the new movie house built in 1915 by the Appleton Investment Company at 18 West Third street. This was the first building to be erected in Watsonville to be used as a movie house. Designed by William Weeks, the new theatre formally opened to the public on the night of July 2, 1915, with a packed house that saw Billie Burke, perform in "Jerry," touted as "the girl an hour ahead of time."

"When the first strains of the pipe organ swept through the building nearly every seat in the house was occupied. The display of the latest modes in gowns and millinery in all parts of the house gave the opening the appearance of a fashion show and added to the occasion . . . From the opening organ number until the falling of the curtain on the last act of the play the audience enjoyed every moment. It was a gala occasion and the patrons of the theatre made the most of their opportunity . . ."

—Evening Pajaronian, July 3, 1915

The theatre had been leased by Turner & Dahnken and was known as the T. & D. Theatre. With the advent of these larger movie houses, the small and cozy little theatres soon closed. The La Petite, renamed the Lyric and the Pippin, passed into oblivion in October of 1915, a few months after the T. & D. had opened. Though the T. & D. was to have a long run, it was not without its problems and the major one developed in the form of a newer and larger movie theatre built on the corner of Main and Maple. The year was 1923; gas was selling for 11 cents a gallon and Prohibition was in full swing. The Zar Saloon stood on that corner next to the Hildreth Building, but, because of

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
1915, CALIFORNIA 95003

Prohibition, the city directory listed the place of business as a "soft drink parlor!" The saloon was moved elsewhere and the lot was cleared and construction began on the new theatre which had been designed by G. Albert Lansburgh. He had been the architect for the Golden Gate Theatre and Loew's Warfield Theatre in San Francisco.

This new movie house was built by the El Pajaro Theatre Company headed by Edward Pfingst; leased by the West Coast Theatre Company and named the California Theatre. It opened on September 19, 1923 with "Steve" a love thrill in three acts starring Eugene O'Brien. General Admission — 27 cents; Loges — 45 cents and children — 10 cents, with a "high-class" vaudeville program offered every Sunday. A month after the auspicious opening of the California Theatre the T. & D. closed down:

"This was what might have been expected. The theatre has been run at a loss of from 25 to 35 dollars a day, since the new California Theatre opened, and it was merely a question of how long the lessees would stand such a loss. . . ."

—Evening Pajaronian, Oct. 22, 1923

In November of 1924 the T. & D. was gutted by fire with a loss of \$50,000 to the Appleton Investment Company. However, repairs were made and, soon, new life was breathed into the theatre when the Markowitz Brothers of San Francisco leased the T. & D. and completely refurbished it as the Appleton Theatre, in deference to its owners. A very handsome souvenir booklet was published for the opening night on October 1, 1925. Listed under staff personnel were usherettes Josephine Jones, Anna Hrepich, Anna Felix, Lavisa Johnstone, Edythe Gianotti, Dorita Raymond and Bonita Raymond. Cecil B. DeMille's production "The Coming of Amos" starring Rod La Rocque, Jetta

Goudal and Noah Beery was the first movie to be shown.

1927 saw the Appleton Theatre "re-opened", again, after being thoroughly renovated. New maroon-colored velour draperies hung throughout, and new stage scenery included thirty new drops as settings for the vaudeville acts. Present at the "grand opening" were the children of "Our Gang" comedies who presented a take-off on "Uncle Tom's Cabin." This same year, "The Jazz Singer," with Al Jolson, made its debut as a "talkie" but it contained only partially spoken dialogue with some subtitles still being used. In January of 1929, the people of Watsonville saw their first all-talking movie at the California Theatre — "Melody of Love" starring Walter Pidgeon. The advertisements read:

"Human emotion expressed in dramatic dialogue — the wonder of wonders — talking pictures — hear and see it on the screen — the performance of every member of the unusual cast will delight you — all the characters speak their lines."

—The Pajaronian, January 1929

The theatre was packed to the rafters as people, for the first time, heard the voices of their favorite movie stars — and some, turned out to be a distinct disappointment! As to that first "talkie" Ralph Salazar, then a reporter for the Pajaronian, noted:

"This reviewer will not raise hosannas in favor of the talkies, nor will he slash the critters to pieces. Each person can best decide how good or bad are talking pictures. . . ."

—The Pajaronian, Jan. 1929

But, despite the drawbacks and mediocre films, people flocked to the movies — those palaces of amusement where you could forget your cares, and

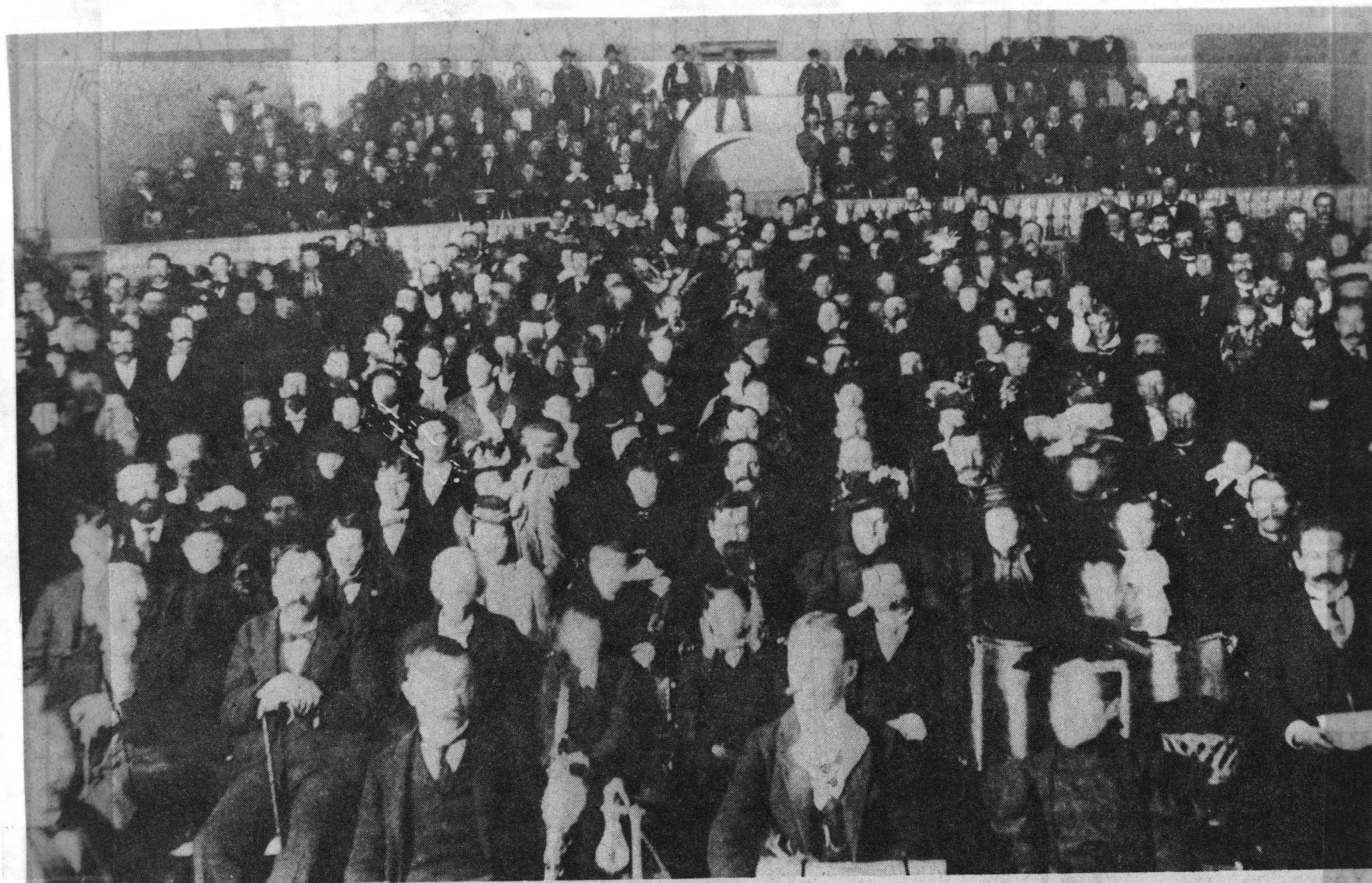
the depression, and be enveloped by the thrilling chase, the "screamingly" funny comedy or the "edge-of-your-seat" drama on the silver screen.

Changes were still being made in the local movie houses. The California Theatre became the Fox Theatre in 1931 as the Fox West Coast Theatre chain took over the management as they did the Appleton Theatre in 1935 when it became the State Theatre. In June of 1948, the State Theatre, under the management of Robert Lara, started showing a Spanish-speaking film every Tuesday night for the convenience of the Spanish speaking residents of the Pajaro Valley. In 1966, the old T. & D., Appleton, and, finally, the State Theatre was purchased by the Charles Ford Company and converted into a warehouse.

There were other theatres in Watsonville such as the Pajaro Theatre at 255 Main Street which opened in 1925 and was to become known as the "flea house!" The Centre Theatre was built in 1948 and the Starlite Drive-In was built in 1949. At one time there was a Japanese Theatre on Bridge Street, near Union, in the school building.

Up until World War II as many as 90 million people went to the movies each week in the United States. Television arrived on the scene and people stayed home to watch their favorite situation comedy or old-time movie causing a decline in attendance at the local movie houses.

Gone are those carefree and glorious days when one could take his favorite girl to the movies for 10 or 15 cents, buy a bag of popcorn for a nickel, then settle back in the seat and watch such greats as Rin Tin Tin in "Where the North Begins" or the 14th episode of "The Reckoning of the Clutching Hand" — those were the "good old days!"



This is how the opera house looked when packed to the rafters. No date is given for the photo.

— Photos courtesy Pajaro Valley Historical Assn.

OPENING ANNOUNCEMENT

NEW T. & D. THEATRE

WATSONVILLE **Friday JULY 2**
ONE NIGHT ONLY

Charles Frohman Presents

The Biggest
Success
of the
Season!

as "The Girl
An Hour Ahead
of Time"

in Her Greatest
Comedy Success

"Jerry"

By Catherine Chisholm Cushing

As Played by Miss Billie Burke at the
Lyceum Theatre, New York, direct from
The Columbia Theatre, San Francisco

PRICES—Gallery 50c, Balcony \$1, Dress Circle \$1.50
Orchestra, \$2, Select Loges \$2.50

Advance Seat Sale Starts Saturday, June 26th.
at the Model Drug Store and City Drug Store.

THEATRE BOX OFFICE PHONE 15.

MISS BILLIE BURKE

Theatres opened all the time — here's the
announcement for a 1915 opening.



Front of the Lyric Theatre, located in the Kalich building, circa 1915.
The three men are, from left, Bill Rapp, Bill Englehardt and Sid Smith.