

Juveniles Run Wild On Friday Nights

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# Teen-Age Rowdyism Poses Major Problem To Theaters

(Editor's Note: This is the first of a two part series on the growing problem of adolescent and teen-age rowdyism in Santa Cruz movie theatres.)

By Ron Miller

The elderly lady had always enjoyed watching Spencer Tracy movies and so she went to the theatre that Friday night to see his new picture. It was her first trip to the movies in two years.

Less than an hour later she left, her mind made up to stay away from now on. Why?

No special reason. She was only struck in the side by a sack of ice thrown from the balcony. Just two firecrackers exploded in the aisles that night. The yelling and screaming shouldn't have bothered her.

But somehow it did.

She isn't alone.

Much of the adult business for local movie houses has been lost during the past year due to a seemingly endless wave of teen-age rowdyism on weekends. It has reached epidemic proportions.

A few weeks ago, teen pranksters fumbled behind the curtains of the Rio theatre and discovered a live microphone. They mouthed a few fourletter words over the public address system while the movie was in progress, then scampered helter-skelter over seats to hide from the irate manager.

A week later, an employee of the Del Mar theatre chased a trio of vandals through the aisles while perturbed patrons looked on. One of the offenders was hobbling as fast as he could on a pair of crutches. It had the flavor of a Mack Sennett comedy.

But nobody was laughing.

City police reports tell of a teen-age custer at the Rio

theatre who grabbed a purse from a woman's lap and escaped through the lobby. Yet another teen-ager had to be evicted from the Capitola theatre by officers when the staff couldn't handle him.

But the rowdyism problem is not just a matter of incidents. Youngsters gather in the aisles and chatter as if they were standing on the sidewalk outside. Others toss garbage, roll empty soft drink cans under the seats. The effect is an incessant pandemonium.

"The latest kick is starting fires in the aisles," reports George Atton, district manager for the Golden State theatre chain, which includes the Del Mar and Rio theatres.

Scores of complaints to theatre personnel and police officers indicate the public is finally discovering how serious the situation is locally. It is a desperate problem in Santa Cruz, but certainly not unique to this community.

About six years ago, the show business weekly "Variety" began to report a growing wave of theatre rowdyism in the metropolitan areas of the nation. The contagion coincided with a rash of rock and roll films, however, and many trade observers dismissed the problem as a "temporary phenomenon."

But the flood of rock and roll pictures has long since subsided while the rowdyism lingers on. It is now reaching the small communities of the U.S.

Ours is one of those communities.

While the rowdyism situation may be a phenomenon, it seems to be far from temporary. Local theatre attendance—especially on weekends—has continued to increase while the age of the patrons has decreased. Side by side with this change in the composi-

tion of the audience has come a major shift in the moviegoing atmosphere.

"You used to see a husband and wife taking their children to the show every Friday night," Atton says. "Now you can count the families that go to movies together on the fingers of one hand."

Why. The product theatres are selling is one answer.

While the overall quality of American picture making is higher than ever before, most current movies are either slanted toward the juvenile element or the so-called "adult" market.

The familiar "family" pictures have decreased in number rapidly since television began to affect the moviegoing habit around 1949. At present, they have nearly ceased to exist. The type of film that drew the family audience years ago is now reincarnated as the weekly television series.

But this electronic metamorphosis hasn't kept teen-agers at home in the cheery confines of the family circle. Instead, the modern youth wants to get away from the home on weekends and meet with his social group.

The most logical place is the movie house.

Theatreman Atton tells about the two youngsters who came up him last week shortly after the main feature started and demanded their money back.

"What's the matter?" Atton asked. "Is there something wrong with the movie?"

"That's not it," answered the youths. "None of the other kids are here tonight. There must be something coming off somewhere."

Juvenile Officer Sue Curtis of the city police department thinks this teen-age "herd" instinct accounts for much of the vandalism and general rowdyism during the

"What's the use of tossing a cherry bomb if the rest of the gang doesn't see what a brave guy you are?" remarks Officer Curtis.

Atton firmly believes this "theatre sub-culture" among adolescents and teens is the result of parental indifference toward the social habits of their offspring. He also sees the trend toward institutionalization as a contributing factor.

"Many parents are turning their kids over to the theatre when they want to go somewhere," Atton says. "They figure it's the theatre's responsibility to babysit from then on."

Atton tells about the 12-year-old he saw coming to the same show for five nights running. The child wasn't misbehaving, but Atton wanted to know why he was at the theatre every night of the week. He asked the child why he didn't go home.

"I can't go home," the child said, bursting into tears. "My mother and father went to San Jose tonight and won't be back until midnight."

Atton checked and found the child was telling the truth. He called the parents and told them not to leave the child at the theatre like that again. The next night he saw the same parents stop their car a few doors down from the theatre and let the child out.

"What do you do with a case like that?" Atton asks.

But the real problem in the movie houses comes from the adolescents and early teens who arrive in groups and strive for each other's attention by creating disturbances.

"It's no longer just a theatre problem," Atton says. "It's a social dilemma the whole community must face."

(Tomorrow: Who's to blame and what can be done?)

Ask Em

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