

Let's Go to the Movies, by Alan Rumrill

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the entertainment industry. Business restrictions caused entertainment venues to close to the public, many employees to lose jobs in the industry, and untold millions of dollars to be lost in the process. The movie business was one of the hardest hit segments of the entertainment industry. The close proximity of seating in indoor theaters resulted in quick closures of those facilities in an attempt to slow the spread of the pandemic.

Some theaters have closed permanently as a result of the lost revenue and others are struggling to survive, even after New Hampshire and other states allowed them to reopen. This is the result of public fear of gathering in crowds and the fact that there are fewer new releases to be shown because studios had to curtail filming during the outbreak.

One of the most common weekend activities for teenagers growing up in Cheshire County in the mid to late 20th century was “going to the movies.” For residents across the country during 2020 that was not possible. The Monadnock Region faced a similar situation during the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918-1920.



Majestic Theatre on Church Street in Keene

The Spanish Flu arrived in Keene from Massachusetts in September of 1918 and quickly spread throughout the city and into neighboring towns. On September 20 the Keene board of health issued an order closing stores, churches, schools, and entertainment venues – including movie theaters. There were two “moving picture” houses in Keene at that time, the Majestic and the Scenic, both operated by Charles Baldwin. Theater owners relied on ticket sales for their livelihood and the order to close undoubtedly caused a serious loss of income for Baldwin.

During the peak of the outbreak in October dozens of people became ill daily in the city and on some days several individuals died. Despite those frightening figures, the number of infections fell dramatically in late October. Consequently, the ban was lifted at the beginning of November and businesses managed to resume operations. However, the board of health urged those with flu symptoms to isolate themselves, avoid all public places, use handkerchiefs to cover coughs or sneezes, and to “avoid spitting.”



Majestic Theatre interior

Although the first wave of influenza swept through the region quickly before dissipating, it returned to the city about 15 months later. Businesses were required to close once again and Baldwin suffered a second loss of income at his theaters. When he was allowed to reopen on February 16, 1920 he placed an advertisement for his Scenic Theatre in the Keene Evening Sentinel. It read as follows:

“We will open today and while it is rather difficult in this business to get just what you want at a minute’s notice we expect to be able to show today Margarita Fisher in “FAIR

ENOUGH.” N.B. The title of this picture has no connection with the situation at the present time.”

Baldwin apparently felt that he was not being treated “fair enough” by the board of health as he had been forced to close his doors for the second time in just over one year’s time. Perhaps he felt that the title of his second feature fit the “situation” more accurately. It was “Episode No. 6 of Bound and Gagged.”

In 1918 and 1920 there were no drive-in movie theaters in the region, or anywhere in the world. The first drive-in opened in Camden, New Jersey in 1933. America was beginning its love affair with the automobile, but it was the advent of the in-car speaker in the 1940s that caused the number of drive-in theaters to increase dramatically. By 1958 there were more than 4000 drive-ins in the United States, including theaters in Keene, Milford, and the Northfield Drive-In located at the Hinsdale, New Hampshire/Northfield, Massachusetts town line. New Hampshire was the home of numerous other drive-ins as well.

Going to the drive-in became a popular family activity. Movie-goers paid admission by the car-load and children could wear their pajamas to the movies, and then drop off to sleep without being noticed. And watching movies was not the only activity that took place there as evidenced by the numerous fogged-up car windows in the parking area.

The drive-in theater boom was short-lived, however, as movie viewing habits changed. The new large indoor theaters with several screens attracted more viewers - and more income. The proliferation of television sets also cut into theater



Scenic Theatre

attendance and drive-ins found themselves struggling to survive with shrinking profit margins. Owners often found that the land where the theater was located was more valuable than the business itself; many theaters were sold to be used for more profitable development. As a result, there are only about 325 drive-in theaters left in the country today, less than 10% of the number that operated 60 years ago.

Drive-ins have thrived during the current pandemic, however, in direct contrast to the affect the coronavirus has had on indoor theaters. The drive-in format allows for ease of social distancing; movie-goers can watch the films from the safety of their own cars and do not have to interact with others in the audience. Due to this automatic social distancing, these theaters have also been used for other events, from live concerts and dance recitals to high school graduations.

The region's movie theaters have been affected either positively or negatively by the pandemic, depending on their format. Indoor theaters, where it is difficult to socially distance, have felt the loss of business and income, even after they were allowed to reopen at the beginning of July. The owners of the Peterborough Community Theatre lamented the fact that so few people came through their doors that it was costing them more money to be open than to remain closed. In contrast, the region's two remaining drive-in theaters, Milford and Northfield, have had active seasons.

Keene's last surviving early 20th century movie house, the Colonial on Main Street, will survive the current pandemic just as Charles Baldwin's Majestic and Scenic Theatres survived the Spanish Flu outbreak. The Colonial announced that it would remain closed for the entire season. This was a strategic and economic decision that will allow the Colonial to complete some planned renovations. Not only will the renovations be completed twice as fast as originally planned, but the theater will not have to contend with an extended period of low attendance resulting from the pandemic.

Hopefully by the summer of 2021 the region's teens, and other movie fans, will once again be exclaiming "let's go to the movies," perhaps in even greater numbers due to pent up demand and the availability of long awaited new releases.