

**SPRINGFIELD'S
MOVIE HOUSE
HISTORY**

**ACT 1: THE
EARLY DAYS**

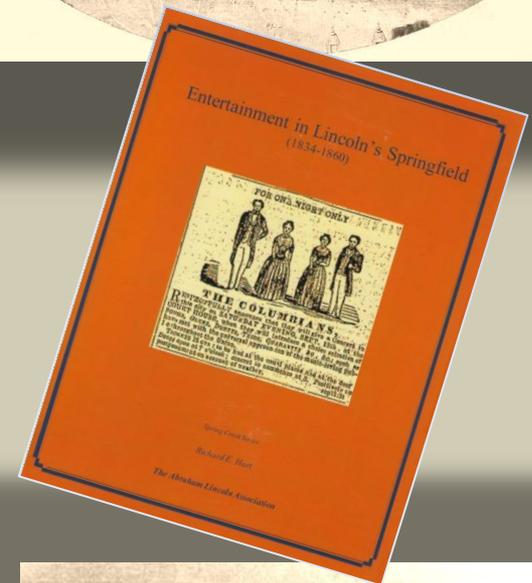
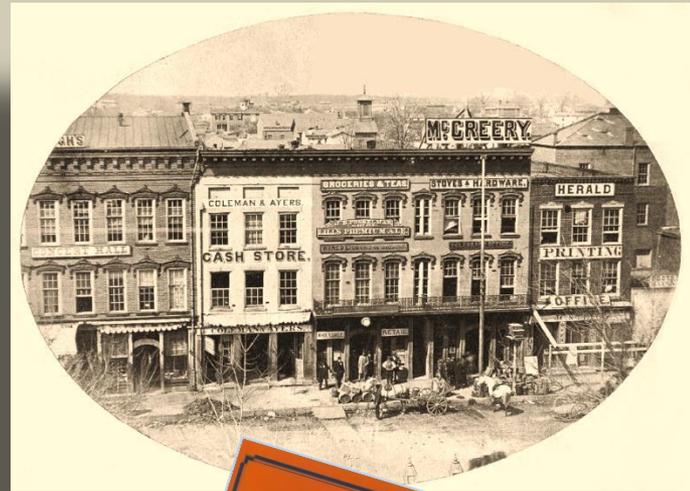
IN THE BEGINNING...

Springfield has always been an entertainment town. Even in its earliest days as the state capital, unpaved, trash-filled muddy streets, even hogs roaming across the public square were no barriers to the growth of an entertainment industry that would rise and decline with changes in technology and public taste.



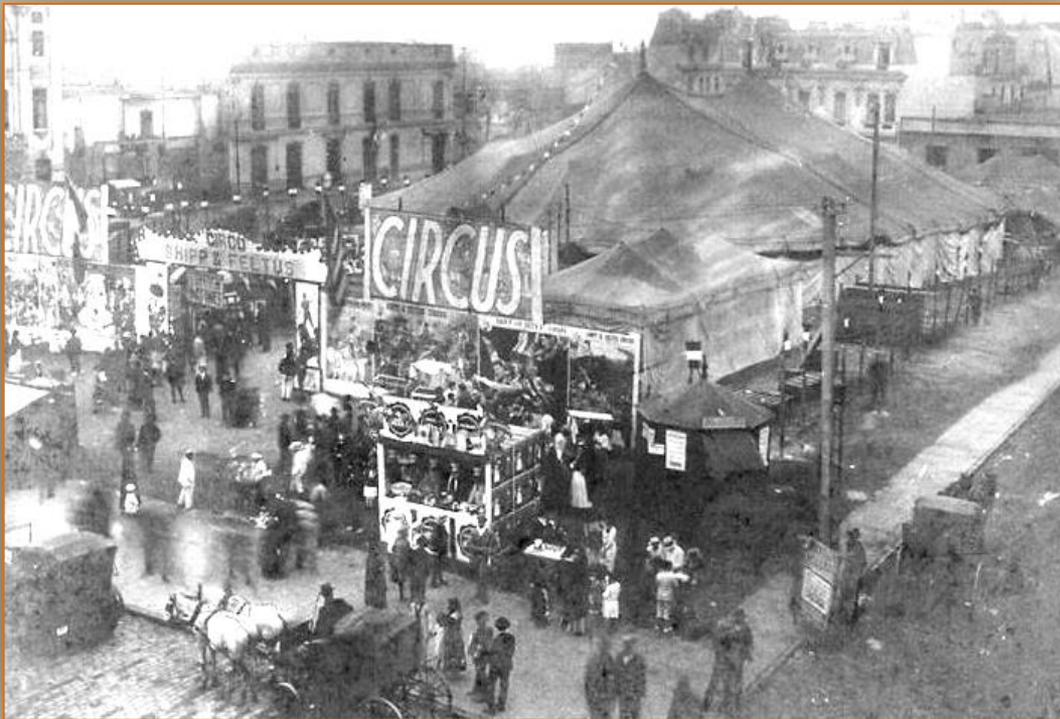
Historian Richard Hart, in his 2017 book, *"Entertainment in Lincoln's Springfield, 1834-1860,"* termed public entertainment "a good barometer" of how early residents used their free time.

The coming of the railroad in the 1850s spawned construction of privately owned halls around or near the public square such as Cooks Hall (1858), the Concert Hall (1856), Masonic Hall (1854), Chatterton's (1852), Clinton Hall (1853), and Gray's Saloon (1851). When Metropolitan Hall opened in 1855, with 2,100 seats, it was the largest amusement hall in the state of Illinois.



ENTERTAINMENT VENUES EXPAND

By the late 1800s, Springfield's public and private entertainment venues offered a choice of circuses, lectures, and musical presentations and by the early 1900s, nickelodeons provided short silent movies and newsreels along with vaudeville acts.



SPRINGFIELD'S location and prestige as the center of state government attracted nationally known lecturers but it was the scandalous Lola Montez, a dancer, actress and one-time mistress of the King of Bavaria, whose performance packed Metropolitan Hall in 1860.

SPRINGFIELD A NATURAL THEATER STOP

The business of live entertainment was changing too, becoming more organized with the creation of national and regional booking companies whose vaudeville performers fed theaters and movie houses along specific circuits. Springfield was a well-suited mid-way destination, sitting between Chicago, St. Louis, and New Orleans.

Springfield's reputation as a key stop on the vaudeville circuit continued into the mid-1900s. Noted the *Illinois State Register* in 1921:

"Springfield holds high rank as an amusement center. To theatrical and motion picture producers, it is known as a Key City, a Class A town in which the success or failure of a piece will have considerable influence on other communities.

Every big production playing in Chicago is certain to play in Springfield, often ahead of the town by the lake, even New York City."



**SPRINGFIELD'S
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**ACT 2:
NICKELODEONS**

THE NICKELODEON ERA BEGINS

By the 1890s, inventors in Europe and the United States were on the verge of creating a new industry, first by developing cameras to capture movement on film and by 1895, creating equipment to project moving images on a screen.

In 1905, the nation's first stand-alone movie theater (at right) named the Nickelodeon (which would later be used to describe all such operations), opened in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania storefront. On opening day, the 96-seat theater drew 450 customers who paid a nickel to watch a short silent film. The next day, 1,500 passed through its doors.



Between 1907 and 1908 the number of nickelodeons in the United States doubled to around 8,000. The nickelodeon era lasted just 15 years, it was by the 1920s making way for larger movie theaters and longer films. But in that period, Springfield had at least two dozen nickelodeons.

THEATER PIONEERS GRASPED THE TECHNOLOGY

Many of the early theater owners were relatively young—in their 20s and 30s—but like the modern day computer and social media counterparts, were willing to embrace a new technology. Some became wealthier beyond their imagination.

But only Springfield brothers George (Gus) and Louis Kerasotes and Taylorville's Dominic Frisina would have names etched in theater history, both developing major entertainment chains that operated for decades.

Most other early movie theater owners faded into history including William W. Watts, John Pierik, Cornelius J. Giblin, Adolph Kunz, Joseph Kunz, Fred Whippet, Edward Shipp, Emanuel Wyckoff, Isador Burnstine and his brother, Leo J. Burnstine. The one exception may be Harry T. Loper, whose name is still recognized today, not as a theater pioneer, but rather for his role in the Springfield 1908 Race Riot.



WATTS



FRISINA



GUS KERASOTES (left)



LOPER



SHIPP



A. KUNZ



L. BURNSTINE

KERASOTES: HOW A THEATER EMPIRE BEGAN

In 1890, Gus Kerasotes, at 17 immigrated from Greece to Chicago where he made and sold candies and ice cream. After a disgruntled customer stabbed him, he moved to Springfield in 1899, opening C&K Confectionery, a candy store at 214 South Sixth Street with his partner, Peter Coutrakon.

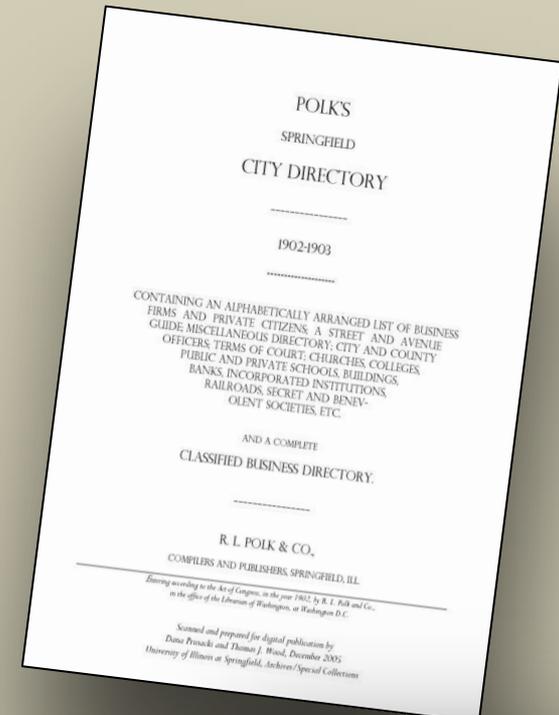
Inspired by the success of a friend in St. Louis, in 1909 Gus and his brother Louis, turned the store into the **ROYAL**, a nickelodeon that proved so popular that they opened a second nickelodeon in 1912 by acquiring the **SAVOY** at 110 South Sixth Street.



AT FIRST, TOUGH TO DEFINE

Not all the early nickelodeons made it into the City of Springfield's annual R. L. Polk city directories which had no category for "nickelodeons" in their annual early 1900s editions. By 1915 they were listed under "Amusements" without differentiating between live theater and others that showed silent movies or some combination thereof.

Some of the "Amusements," with names like the EMPIRE at 442 East Jefferson, the NEW EMPRESS at 1106 South Grand and the GRAND at 509 East Washington, were deleted from the Polk directory by 1923 when the list shrank to 12.



| Amusements, Places of |
|---|
| Amuse-U Theatre, 111 N 6th |
| Capitol Theatre, 613 E Washington |
| Casino Theatre, 621 E Washington |
| Chatterton Opera House, 128 N 6th |
| Co-Operative Amusement & Supply Co, 1-2 Gaiety bldg |
| Empire Theatre, 422 E Jefferson |
| Gaiety Theatre, 509½ E Monroe |
| Grand Theatre The, 509 E Washington |
| Lyric Theatre, 223-225 S 5th |
| Majestic Theatre, 415-421 S 5th |
| New Empress Theatre, 1106 e S Grand av |
| North End Circle Theatre, 831 e N Grand av |
| Princess Theatre, 331 S 5th |
| Royal Theatre, 214 S 6th |
| Savoy Theatre, 106 S 6th |
| Vaudette Theatre, 216-218 S 5th |
| Vogue Theatre, 115 S 5th |

1915 LISTING

SHORT RUN, VANISHED HISTORY FOR MANY EARLY BIRDS

Photos and in some cases, information is scarce for these very early nickelodeons (some with names like the SIXTH, the SEVENTH, and the ADAMS that probably reflected their location). Another was called the STAR, address unknown. (*Newspaper advertisements of the period rarely carried addresses*). The same holds true for the handful of outdoor summer silent movie theaters known as AIR DOMES, most of which went in and out of business quickly. Others may have had a longer life including:

AMUSE-U: 111 North Sixth (at right). Opened in 1913 and closed in 1930 after a fire in the building. It was one of the few nickelodeons that showed only silent movies until the day it shut down.

CASINO: 621 East Washington. Opened in 1908, closed in 1917. Offered a mix of silent movies and vaudeville.

GRAND: 509 East Washington. Opened in 1910 by Joseph and Adolph Kunz, principals of Kunz Bros. Amusement Company housed at the same address. It closed in 1917.

VOGUE: 115 South Fifth Street. Opened by Harris Hickox Jr. in 1914, Closed in 1917.

LINCOLN: (first), East Washington Street. Opened in 1913, closed 1915.

NICKELODEON: 512 East Monroe. Opened 1908, closed 1911.



AIR DOMES: FORERUNNERS TO DRIVE-IN MOVIES

Before the **EMPRESS** opened in 1916 at 1106 South Grand at Eleventh Street (one of the first theaters to be built in a suburban area away from Springfield's Business District), people didn't have far to walk to watch a silent movie, at least when the weather cooperated. The fast growing-area attracted Leo J. Burnstine and his **CAPITOL** theater partner, restaurateur J. W. Shephard, who opened the **FAMILY CIRCLE AIR DOME** at 1323 South Grand from 1917 to 1918.



No photos are believed to exist for the Family Circle Air Dome, but it most likely was similar to this Missouri operation circa 1919 (right). A newspaper ad for one of the Springfield air domes--location unidentified – appeared in the same time period.

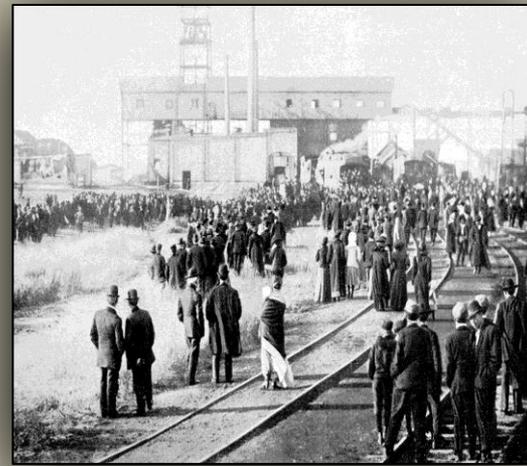


Air Domes - basically outdoor summer movie theaters - were the forerunners of movie drive-ins, except you didn't need a car. The Burnstine-Shepherd operation had seating for 1,000. There were several such long-forgotten open-tent like Air Dome operations in Springfield where patrons could sit on benches and escape the summer heat while being entertained. It's believed fellow theatrical magnate Harry Loper may have owned some of the others here and elsewhere. In the same period Burnstine and Shepherd were running the **FAMILY CIRCLE**, Loper was in New York, negotiating the purchase a chain of Air Dome theaters.

SHORT-LIVED GEM HAD UNUSUAL FARE

The **GEM**, at 520 East Monroe, was opened in 1908 by Fred Whippet, who leased the building. It was forced to close in 1910 after the building's owner announced he would be remodeling it and leasing it to a piano company.

While it was in operation, the **GEM** had some unusual nickelodeon offerings: children's matinees and news-related films, including one on the 1909 Cherry, Illinois coal mine disaster (*top right*) narrated by Giaimo Pigati, one of a handful of survivors of a fire that took the lives of 259 Illinois miners. It also ran another early silent movie newsreel, this one produced by American explorer Dr. Fred Cook, who used the new medium to boost his claim that in 1908 he had beaten Robert Peary to the North Pole by a year. (*bottom right*)



WHO'S ON FIRST? ORPHEUM, GAIETY

One of the earliest if not the first nickelodeon in Springfield may have been the **ORPHEUM** (no relation to the lavish new Orpheum movie house that would debut here in 1927).

Opened in 1907 by former Chicago theater managers William Walter Watts and his wife Emily, the nickelodeon was housed in a small theater on South Sixth Street across from the Leland Hotel (*below, right*) in space vacated by the **GAIETY**, a popular vaudeville house that since 1903 had been operated by Frank C. Smith and George S. Burton who built a new, larger **GAIETY** at 509 East Monroe.

The Watts, unable to avoid fall-out from the Panic of 1907 - the first world-wide financial crisis of the 20th Century - closed the **ORPHEUM** after six months, leasing the site to a St. Louis film company. Watts stored the nickelodeon's equipment here before moving to Jacksonville to manage another nickelodeon.



WATTS BUILDS AN EARLY THEATER EMPIRE

Within two years Watts and his wife would be back after hearing from his son-in-law about the success of nickelodeons in Springfield, like the one the Kerasotes brothers were having with the ROYAL at 214 S. Sixth Street.

Watts' daughter and her husband, Harry Thornton, were a popular vaudeville song and dance team. Hired to perform at a downtown vaudeville house, Thornton dashed across the street between acts to count the number of customers going into nearby nickelodeons. Impressed by what he saw, he contacted his in-laws and urged them to come back to Springfield because *"there was big money in nickel picture shows."*

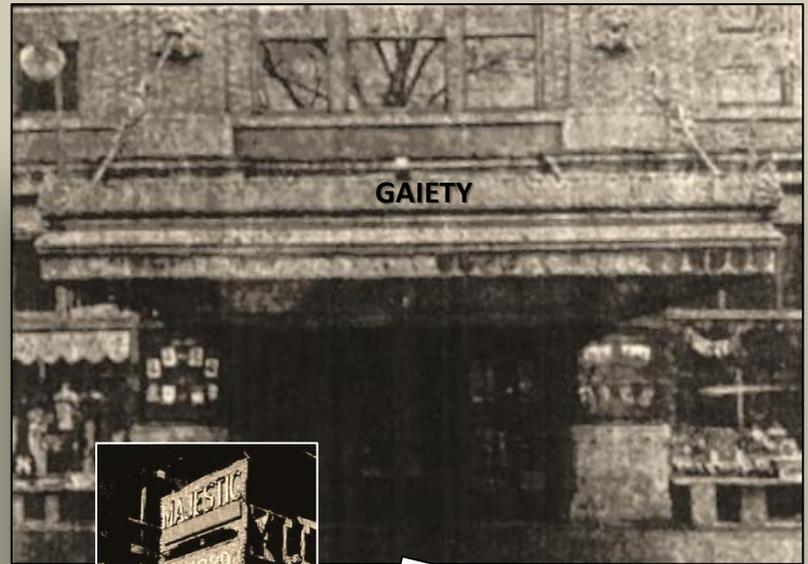
Returning to Springfield, Watts found that during his absence, three storefront nickelodeons had sprung up, each with sawdust floors, folding chairs and sheets for screens. Thornton loaned Watts \$500 to get the ORPHEUM's movie equipment out of storage, buy 165 chairs and rent a room on 218 South Fifth Street for a 165-seat new theater they named the VAUDETTE. It opened it eight days before the 1908 Springfield Race Riot.



BUYING, BUILDING...AND SELLING

The VAUDETTE reopened two weeks after the Race Riot and made enough money for Watts to open a second theater, the SAVOY in 1912 at 106 South Sixth, and in 1913 to buy the new GAIETY at 511 East Monroe for \$15,000 from Frank C. Smith and George S. Burton.

Watts also bought and modernized the PRINCESS at 329 South Fifth, leasing another theater, the MAJESTIC at 415-21 South Fifth until the modernization work was completed. [The MAJESTIC itself would eventually go through several name and ownership changes].



Barrymore in a duel in *The Seats of the Mighty*.



POST 1908 RACE RIOT, FOR LOPER A NEW DIRECTION

The **VAUDETTE** wasn't the only nickelodeon to go dark during the 1908 Race Riot. A private nickelodeon that wealthy businessman Harry T. Loper may have operated for patrons of his popular dining spot at 223-25 South Fifth was most-likely destroyed by the 1908 Race Riot. It signaled the end of Loper as a café owner, but opened a new career for him in the movie theater business.

The mob wanted to lynch two Black men housed in the county jail, one falsely accused of raping a white woman, the other falsely accused of killing a white man. Sheriff Charles Werner asked Loper - who owned one of the few automobiles in Springfield - to drive the men to the McLean County jail in Bloomington. He agreed. When the mob was distracted with a false fire alarm at the jail, the prisoners slipped into Loper's car for the 65-mile trip. Hours later, when the mob learned what Loper had done, they marched to his restaurant, overturned and set fire to his car, looted and then fed the bonfire with the café's tables, chairs and other equipment. The flames reached as high as the third floor of the building.



**SPRINGFIELD'S
MOVIE HOUSE
HISTORY**

**ACT 3:
TRANSITIONING**

THEATERS CHANGE HANDS, CHANGE NAMES...

Even though Watts became a wealthy man, his interest in operating theaters waned after the death of his wife in 1924. By 1928, he had leased or sold off all his theaters. He died in an auto accident in 1937.

The Kerasotes brothers bought both the **GAIETY** (which they renamed the **SENATE** in 1929) and the **SAVOY**. Frisina bought the **PRINCESS** in 1929 and renamed it the **FOX**. The 200-seat **SAVOY** was the last of the old time movie palaces to flourish on the square. By 1935, its offerings were down to a brief mention squeezed on one line between the Kerasotes ads for its larger theaters. It closed that year and was replaced by a sandwich shop.

The **SENATE** was remodeled in 1947, twin-screened in 1978 and closed in 1983, the last full-run theater in downtown Springfield. It was demolished in April 1983 to make way for construction of the Lincoln Square Apartments.



...AND TRY TO ADJUST TO A NEW ERA

The halcyon day of nickelodeons in Springfield was brief for some theater owners, prolonged for others here willing to quickly adapt to the fledgling movie industry's rapid technological changes like sound, color, even film distribution systems that emerged in the years that followed the Nickelodeon Era.

Nickelodeons and some early movie houses went in and out of business quickly. As watching films became popular, others were forced to adapt, like the CHATTERTON OPERA HOUSE (1879-1924), which added movies to its live presentations as did its competitor, the MAJESTIC, which opened in 1907 for live performances but added films in the 1920s and by the mid-1930s was renamed the ROXY and turned into a movie house.

CHATTERTON
LAST THREE DAYS
DAILY MATINEE, 2:30 P. M. NIGHTS, 8:15
D. W. GRIFFITH PRESENTS
"ORPHANS OF THE STORM"
Adapted From
'The Two Orphans'
By Arrangement With Kate Claxton
With Lillian and Dorothy Gish
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA OF 20
BARGAIN MATINEE . . . 30c-50c
NIGHTS 30c-55c-75c
Prices

Wed.-Thurs. Nights, only Sept. 20-21
SPECIAL STATE FAIR WEEK ATTRACTION
"FOR GODNESS SAKE"
Direct from an all summer run at the Carlock Theatre, Chicago.
—WITH—
John E. Young
Lorraine Sherwood
Arthur Lipson
Edna May
Leslie Jones
William Eville
Jesse Block
Francene Dunlop
WITH A CHORUS OF CHARM AND DISTINCTION
EVERYBODY'S LAUGHING AND SINGING THIS TUNE
Credit for week ends to Sep 21, 22, 23
PRICES: Evening—50c—\$1.00—\$1.50—\$2.00 Seats on sale Monday
FRIDAY-SATURDAY, SEPT. 22-23
NEIL O'BRIEN'S Minstrels

AS TALKIES SWEEP IN LOPER, FRISINA TAKE CENTER STAGE...

By 1909, Loper was operating a nickelodeon called the **LYRIC** at 223-225 South Fifth, in the same building that once housed his cafe. In 1919, he bought the building that housed the **VAUDETTE** at 218 South Fifth from Watts who then moved his **VAUDETTE** into Loper's old theater. (The two theaters were on opposite sides of Fifth Street but not directly across from each other.)

Loper hired Helmle & Helmle, prominent Springfield architects, to design and build an entirely new theater on the former **VAUDETTE** site at 218 South Fifth. It opened as the new **LYRIC** theater in 1920. It had the city's first large movie screen, the first Wurlitzer theater organ and showed the first talkies.

In 1927, Loper sold the **LYRIC** to Dominic Frisina who renamed it the **TIVOLI**. The building that eventually housed the **VAUDETTE** at 223-225 South Fifth was demolished in 1929 to make way for the construction of a W.T. Grant store. It closed in 1965. The **TIVOLI** closed in 1954.



The **VAUDETTE** was replaced by a W.T. Grant store in 1929. The store closed its doors in 1965.

...AND KERASOTES TURNS UP THE HEAT

In the next decade, the Kerasotes family would buy up or build a string of theaters here, including in the **STRAND** at 100 Sixth Street in 1921 and expand across the Midwest and then nationally. By the 1980s, Kerasotes had become the ninth largest movie chain in the nation.



THE 900-seat **STRAND** had a \$25,000 "Mighty Wurlitzer" organ that could produce the sound of horses hooves and steamboat whistles. Aware that silent pictures were on their way out, it was the first theater in Springfield to be fitted with a synchronized sound system for the "talkies" that would quickly dominate the movie business. Both the nearby **SAVOY** and **STRAND** sites were demolished in 1967 for a bank.

TARGETING AUDIENCES: THE PALACE...

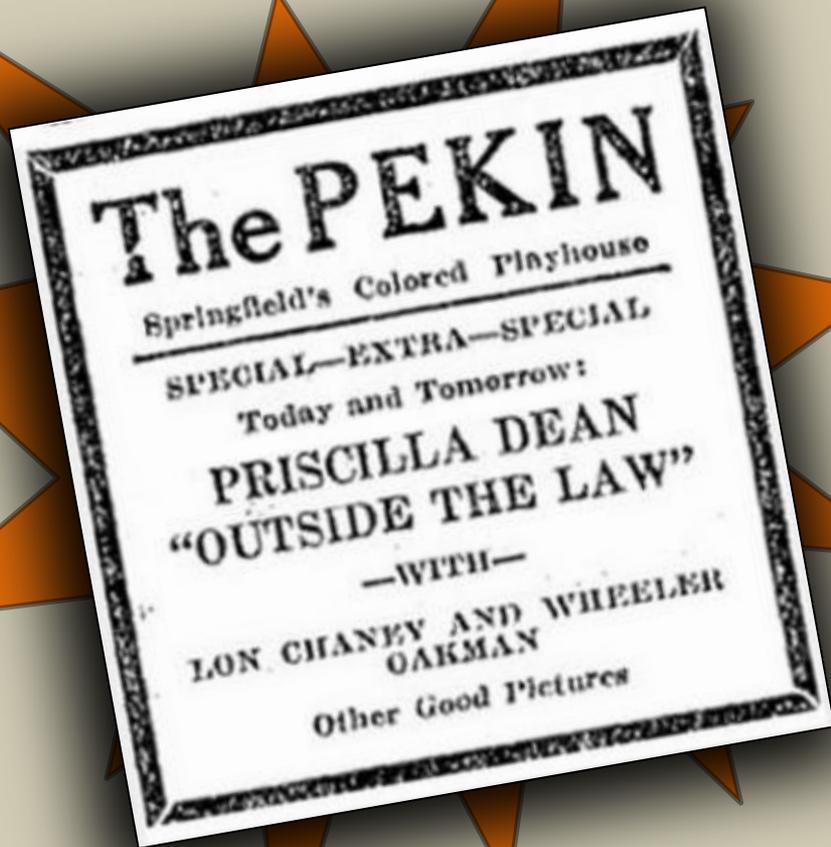
The **PALACE**, 1836 South Fifteen Street. Opened in 1915, closed in 1927. Emanuel Wojkofka (Americanized to Wycoff), an immigrant coal miner, opened a small theater that fast became a social outlet for Springfield's burgeoning German-speaking enclave.

One historically important movie at the Palace was "The Town That Forgot God," an expensive (for the era) production whose special effects put it \$50,000 over budget (\$2.5 million today).

After Wycoff's death in 1925, the theater continued for a short time under another owner, but closed in 1927. One of the last films at the Palace was "The Flying Horseman," a silent western with Buck Jones. Today the building houses a church.



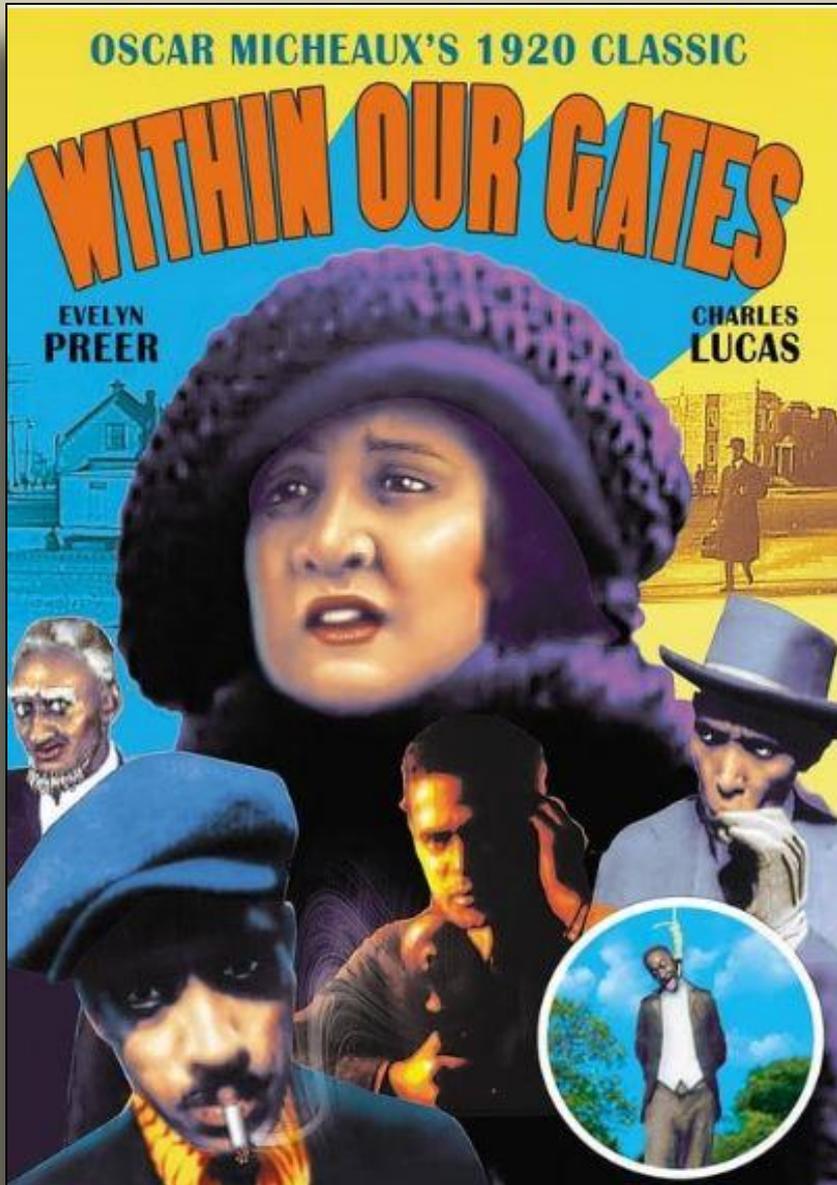
...AND THE PEKIN



The PEKIN, at 815-11 East Washington Street, opened 1914 and operated as a theater through 1928. In segregated Springfield, the 500-seat movie house drew a racially mixed audience.

Located in the heart of Springfield's Black shopping and entertainment district, an advertisement in the local newspaper made no suggestion that the theater wanted to appeal mainly to Black Americans.

But, in what may have been understood as code, it emphasized that *"the management will ... guarantee the best of treatment, and will appreciate the patronage of one and all."* In subsequent newspaper advertisements, it called itself *"Springfield's Colored Playhouse."*



The PEKIN often showed films with white casts like *Outside the Law* with Priscilla Dean and Lon Chaney because that's what was available, but it also screened Black-oriented movies that other Springfield houses probably wouldn't have considered like Oscar Micheaux's 1920 classic, *Within Our Gates*.

The theater was managed for many years by James S. Mason, a Black former Springfield Fire Department captain and city police detective. It operated as a movie theater until 1928.



SPRINGFIELD'S MOVIE HOUSE HISTORY

ACT 4:
FADING ERA

CHATTERTON SEEKS SIGNIFICANCE...

The Chatterton Opera House, which made it into the early 1920s before closing and being disassembled piece-by-piece in the decades that followed, was the successor to Rudolph's Opera House, built for \$160,000 in 1866 on the southeast corner of Sixth Street and Jefferson. Like most of its early counterparts, Robert Rudolph's theater occupied a second-story room over a store, albeit a sumptuously decorated one with a stage flanked by elaborately carved boxes and a balcony suspended by iron rods from the ceiling. To enter, patrons had to climb a narrow stairway from Jefferson Street.

Heavily in debt when Rudolph died in 1868, it was taken over by banker Jacob Bunn Sr., one of Rudolph's major creditors. Almost completely destroyed by fire in 1876, it was rebuilt and three years later sold to Springfield jeweler George Chatterton, whose son George Jr. oversaw its transformation into a theater designed to be the finest in the Midwest.



Fashionable spring audiences and celebrities ignored the Chatterton's less than elegant façade and that it was surrounded by saloons



...AND BOWS TO REALITY BY 1924

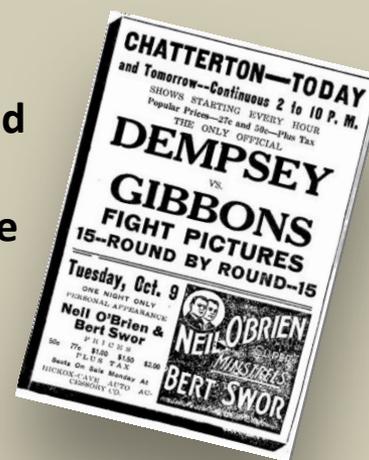
When it opened in 1879 as CHATTERTON'S OPERA HOUSE, it boasted a seating capacity of 1,300, was heated by steam and lighted by electricity and was considered the most elegant in Illinois outside of Chicago. Performers in its first decade reflected a *Who's Who* of the American stage. But time and technology was not on the theater's side.

By the early 1900s, the Chatterton had become a victim of the rising costs of quality road shows and rising expectations among audiences excited by motion pictures. Although it continued to offer live performances before closing in May, 1924, silent movies were included in its offerings.

The five-story back section for backdrops was razed the following November. An auto parts store filled the front section, then later a saloon. In 1941, Lincoln Cab remodeled the Sixth Street side for its office and used the rear for passenger pick-up and a repair shop. What remained of the CHATTERTON was demolished in 1968 to make way for a municipal parking lot between Sixth and Seventh Streets.



Films of sporting events were on the bill when the Chatterton added movies. For one controversial 1919 silent movie with moral overtones, the Chatterton segregated its audience by sex.

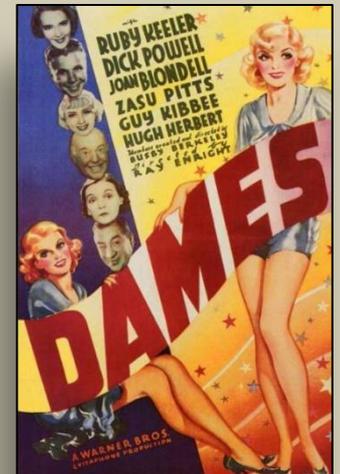


AND THE MAJESTIC TRANSITIONS TO THE ROXY...

The **MAJESTIC**, at 417 South Fifth, was built in 1907 to compete with the Chatterton Opera House for large scale stage shows. Springfield jeweler and real estate developer John Pierik and his brother-in-law, C.J. Johnson, who owned the site, spent \$90,000 on the theater, which had several hundred more seats than its competitor, effectively making it the largest theater in Springfield in terms of usable square footage.

Although the **MAJESTIC** opened as an independent theater, it became part of the Orpheum Vaudeville circuit, bringing regional and national performers to Springfield in the era before the larger Orpheum Theater opened in 1927.

When Vaudeville theaters began to show movies on a full-time basis in the mid-1920s, the **MAJESTIC** became a movie house although it still brought in occasional stage talent. Vaudeville was on the wane, however; its stars filmed their acts for one-time pay-offs that inadvertently helped speed Vaudeville's demise in the 1930s. The **MAJESTIC's** Giblein died in 1914, Pierik in 1920 and in the next decade the theater would be sold to the Frisina Amusement Company which not only renamed it the **ROXY**, but also transitioned it into a modern movie house. Before the changeover, the last movie to screen at the **MAJESTIC** was *Dames*.

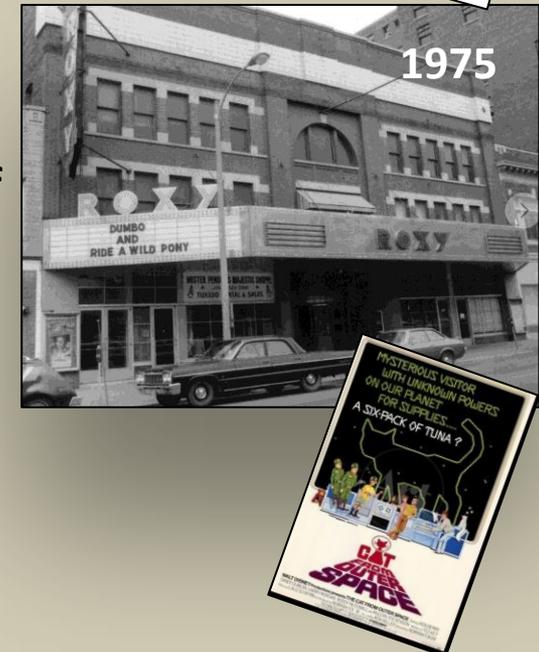


...AND GETS A NEW LOOK, TWICE

In 1935, the Frisina Amusement Company, which had bought the **MAJESTIC** for \$68,000, gutted the theater, adding new seats and lighting, a “cooling system” (air conditioning) and a gleaming Art Deco marquee outside.

The interior of the **ROXY** was overhauled again in 1950, decorated in a nautical theme harkening back to the atmospheric movie palaces of the golden age of Hollywood. The remodeled theater opened November 22, 1950 with *West Point Story*.

The **ROXY** continued to be a first-run movie house into the 1960s but by the early 1970s became a niche exhibitor for children’s films and family-oriented shows. It frequently screened reruns of Disney classics as well as showing first-run G-rated pictures, like *Pete’s Dragon* in 1977. It closed its doors for good in September 1978. The final movie to show there was Disney’s *The Cat from Outer Space*, double-billed with *Winnie the Pooh*. The building was demolished in April 1979 to accommodate construction of a state court complex that was never built.



HERE COMES HOLLYWOOD: PRINCESS TO LINCOLN TO FOX LINCOLN TO LINCOLN

Frisina Amusements picked up the PRINCESS from Watts in 1928 and within two weeks had totally remodeled the former nickelodeon, installing then state-of-the-art motion picture and sound equipment and renaming it the LINCOLN.

In 1929, Fox Theater Company offered Frisina \$600,000 for 14 of his Illinois film houses including the LINCOLN (which it renamed the FOX LINCOLN), the TIVOLI and the VAUDETTE.

Within three years, the three theaters would pass into the hands of the Skouras Brothers which took control of 500 Fox movie houses. By 1971, the LINCOLN was owned by California-based Mann Theaters. Frisina, meanwhile, continued to grow and by the 1950s, owned 60 theaters in Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri).

In 1939, the LINCOLN hosted the world premiere of Young Mr. Lincoln, complete with movie stars and a Hollywood style premiere, something that in 2012 some Springfieldians hoped would be repeated here with the world premiere of Steve Spielberg's Lincoln. It wasn't. That honor went to Hollywood's famous Grauman's Chinese Theater

The LINCOLN continued to operate through the remaining decades. It closed and was razed in 1976, replaced by a parking lot.

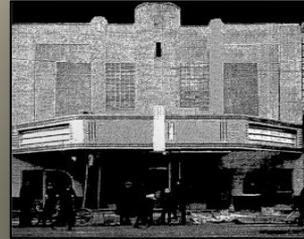


CAPITOL TO STATE TO CINEMA ART TO PARKING LOT

The **CAPITOL** at 613 East Washington was a vaudeville “picture” theater housed in a three-story building purchased in 1908 by Isadore Burnstine and his partner, restaurant owner Joseph W. Shephard. The theater was managed by Isadore Burnstine's brother, Leo A. Burnstine, who would later become the proprietor, buy the adjacent building for \$40,000 and expand it before going on to open other theaters and become a business associate of future fellow theater impresario, Dominic Frisina.

In 1937 Frisina bought and then razed the theater and an adjacent building to open the **STATE**, a modern, air-conditioned 1,200-seat movie house. Its unique facade was composed of structural glass, terra cotta and steel edged in gold, with a marquee of 1,000 feet of neon tubing and 2,000 light bulbs surmounted by a huge electric sign.

The **STATE** closed in the 1950s, the theater staying empty until the 1971 when its new out-of-state owner renamed it the **CINEMA ART**, turning it into what became a controversial 600-seat showcase for x-rated adult movies and a rock-concert venue and home to an adjacent adult book store. It was razed in 1986. Today it's a parking lot.



PANTHEON: A POPULAR NORTH-END MOVIE HOUSE

The first **PANTHEON**, a 150-seat movie theater at 815 North Grand that opened on January 1, 1926, was built by confectioners Theodore Gray and Charles Coutrakon. (Coutrakon was partners with ex-candy-maker Gus Kerasotes when he first opened C&K's Confectionery which would eventually be transformed into the first Kerasotes nickelodeon, the **ROYAL**).

In 1936, the Kerasotes Brothers took over operation of the theater, keeping the **PANTHEON** name, but totally remodeling it from sidewalk to screen and increasing the seating capacity to 700. Coutrakon operated an ice cream shop next door. The movie house closed in 1964.



EMPRESS GETS NEW LIFE AS THE SOUTH TOWN

Leo J. Burnstine and his CAPITOL theater partner, restaurateur J. W. Shephard, leased a building at 1106 South Grand in 1915 to open the EMPRESS, a 500-seat movie house. Helen Burnstine, Leo Burnstine's niece, managed the EMPRESS.

In 1924, Burnstine bought the building from Springfieldian Edward Shipp, an internationally known circus owner. Aware there could be competition for audiences from the newly invented, fast growing home radio market, in 1925, Burnstine added and heavily advertised that the EMPRESS would provide radio broadcasts every night at 8 p.m. in addition to its regular offerings.

In 1937, the EMPRESS was sold to the Frisina Amusement Company. It closed for a year for an Art-Deco overhaul that besides the new décor, included installation of new flooring, seating, and air conditioning. Frisina renamed it the SOUTH TOWN. When it reopened in 1938, Leo Burnstine was the manager. The theater closed in 1959 but got new life in 1981 when it became the home of the Walch Studio of Stained Glass. Recognizing its architectural significance, in 2007 the City of Springfield provided money to restore the theater facade and marquee.



RADIO CONCERT
At the **Empress Theatre**
Every Evening, Starting At 8 o'clock
—Using the Famous—
Thompson Neutrodyne
—SOLD IN SPRINGFIELD BY—
R. L. BERRY, 511 North Side Square



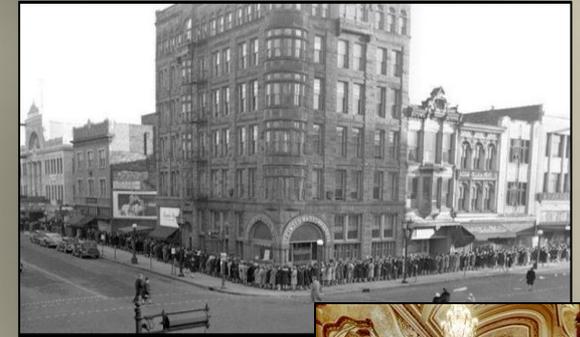
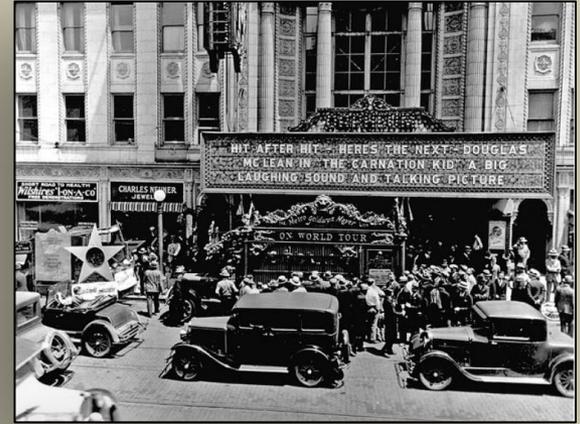
A MOVIE HOUSE ON A GRAND SCALE: THE ORPHEUM

Nothing before or since matched the size and scope of the **ORPHEUM**, the jewel in the crown of a sprawling entertainment complex that rose on North Fifth Street in 1927.

Lavishly decorated in Art Deco style, it seated 2,750, making it the largest theater in Illinois south of Chicago.

Built for \$2 million (about \$31.9 million today - a staggering amount for the area and era) it also included a ballroom, a 12-lane bowling alley, billiard rooms and a cafe, 18 stores and offices.

In the years that followed, the **ORPHEUM** provided local audiences with a parade of nationally known entertainers, stage productions, and blockbuster movies. Guy Lombardo, Lawrence Welk, Duke Ellington, George Burns, Edgar Bergen, Cab Calloway and John Barrymore were among the many nationally known performers who appeared there during its glory years. It added 3-D movies, Cinemascope, and stereophonic sound in the 1950s.



CROWDS lined up to get into the Orpheum.



THE ORPHEUM ENDS ITS 28-YEAR RUN

Construction of the **ORPHEUM** was initially financed by a group of seven local businessmen who put up \$125,000 to assemble the 10 pieces of real estate needed to give the complex frontage on Fifth and Jefferson.

The group - retailers Adolph Kunz, Louis Roberts, Charles Robinson, Stuart Broadwell, Julius Myers, F.S. Shuster, and banker Carl Luers - purchased the parcels for \$375,000 and retained Great States Theater to raise \$1.1 million to underwrite its construction. Documents show the working name for the new show house was to be the **LINCOLN SQUARE THEATER**.



Frisina Amusement Company managed the **ORPHEUM** from 1958 until it closed. It was razed to make way for a drive-in bank and parking lot in August, 1965.

THE LAST PICTURE SHOW: THE ESQUIRE

The **ESQUIRE** was the last modern movie theater to be built in Springfield before World War II, before drive-ins, television, film rental stores, HBO, Netflix and innumerable copycats in the ensuing decades that would radically alter how, where and when people watched movies.

The story of the **ESQUIRE**, a Kerasotes property, goes back to its early planning and also speaks to the long the relationship that existed between the then two largest local competing theater chains - Kerasotes and Frisina. In 1937, both companies almost simultaneously announced plans to build theaters within a few yards of each other at the intersection of MacArthur and South Grand. The Frisina theater, planned for 904-908 South Grand West and with a \$175,000 construction price tag, was to be named the **WILL ROGERS** and would rise on the west side of the street. The 900-seat theater would be part of a complex of two stores and five second-story apartments.

The Kerasotes site, at 1324 MacArthur, was to have four stores and an office suite above the theater and had a



\$150,000 pricetag. After some discussion, Frisina and Kerasotes agreed to drop plans to build the **WILL ROGERS** instead partnering on the **ESQUIRE**, its ownership incorporated as the Frisina Kerasotes Circuit. The **ESQUIRE** opened in December 1937, was remodeled several decades later, closed in 2004 and later demolished in 2016, a victim of the forces that changed the industry.

SPRINGFIELD'S
MOVIE HOUSE
HISTORY

ACT 5: POST WAR
CHANGES

1950s BRINGS LOCAL THEATERS NEW CHALLENGE, MORE FOLLOW

Whether it was owning a Springfield nickelodeon or a string of them, a single movie house or chain, operating these entertainment venues has never been easy.

It is and always has been a business driven by the dynamics of technological advances and shaped by global politics, financial and social upheavals, changing public tastes and competition from new mediums.

By the 1950s, movie house owners here - like their counterparts elsewhere - were being already being impacted by the introduction and rapid growth of television.

In the ensuing decades right up to today, the business has had to contend with a parade of inventions and technological breakthroughs that made possible the introduction of such competitive consumer options as cable television, HBO, national video rental chains like Blockbuster and Springfield-based Family Video, home recorders, DVDs, premium movie channels like Netflix, HBO Max, Disney and the plethora of other entertainment options now available to movie theater customers.



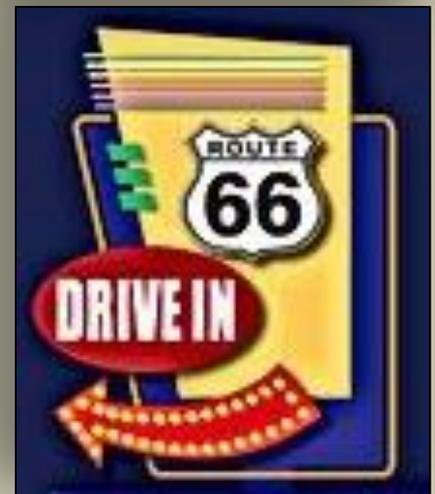
DRIVE-INS DEBUT, DISAPPEAR...AND MAKE A NOSTALGIC RETURN

By the late 1940s and through the 1950s and 1960s, a court-ordered anti-trust decision breaking up movie studio owned theater chains and film distribution coupled with post-war growth of suburbs and competition from television, forced theater owners to reshape their operations.

In Springfield, it brought back a modern form of the early 1900's Air-Dome: the family-friendly drive-in, this time sitting in the comfort of your car instead of a wooden bench.

Although seasonable in nature, the drive-ins especially appealed to families with small children, but not all of the four drive-ins that opened here starting in the 1960s had staying power.

Only one exists today, the ROUTE 66 DRIVE-IN at Knights Action Park on Recreation Drive, a nostalgic recreation of the twin-screen GREEN MEADOWS DRIVE-IN operated by Mid America Theaters that occupied part of the site from 1978 to 1980 and was restored and reopened by the Knight family in 2020.



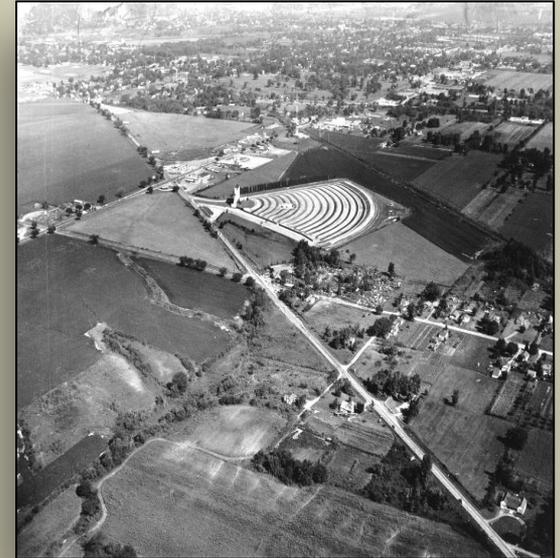
BUT SOME WILL ALWAYS HAVE A PLACE IN SPRINGFIELD'S HISTORY

The **SPRINGFIELD DRIVE-IN** was the first of its kind in Springfield, built and operated in 1947 by the Springfield Drive-In Theater Corporation owned by Waukegan attorney Joseph Sikes.

In 1951 It instituted a million dollar federal anti-trust suit against all the leading motion picture producers and distributors and the owners of some local theaters including Kerasotes and Frisina, claiming they had a monopoly on all first run films shown in Springfield. The outcome is unknown, but the following year, 1952, Frisina Amusements bought the **SPRINGFIELD DRIVE-IN**. It closed in 1983.

In those early days, Frisina and Kerasotes sometimes operated in tandem in placing ads that jointly promoted their individual drive-in theaters and events. (Kerasotes opened the original **ROUTE 66 DRIVE-IN** on Sixth Street near Stevenson Drive in 1952. (It closed in 1976 and was razed in 1987 to make way for construction of the Days Inn).

After Dominic Frisina died in 1967, his daughter, Rose Marie Frisina Bell, became president of Frisina Enterprise Theaters. It ran afoul of city officials and was fined \$300 over complaints the x-rated adult movies on its screen could be seen from the street. In 1981, Frisina Enterprise Theaters was sold to Kansas based Mid-American Theaters which would later be bought by AMC Entertainment Holdings, the company that would eventually buy up the Kerasotes theaters here.

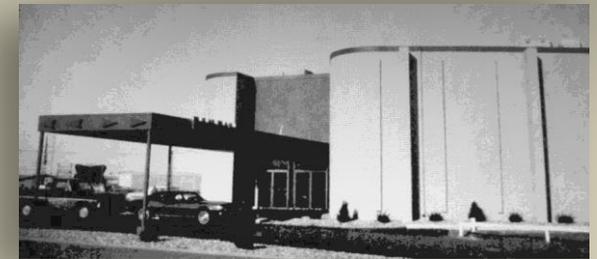
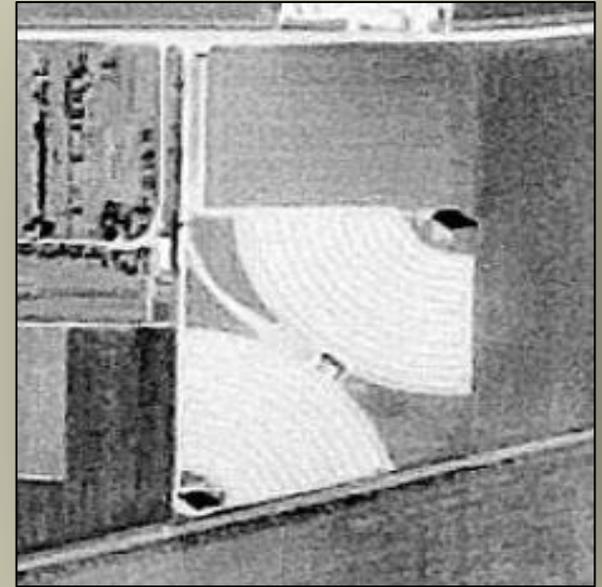


LAST DRIVE-IN MAKES WAY FOR THE MULTIPLEX

Reflecting Springfield's westward growth, Kerasotes also operated a second drive-in, this one on Wabash Avenue on the site near where a new Kerasotes multiplex eventually would rise. The **KERASOTES TWIN DRIVE-IN** (right) opened in March 1973 and closed in 1984.

When Kerasotes moved toward multiplexes, it looked both west and east, either building or buying up brick-and-mortar theaters.

Frisina Amusements was less aggressive here, opening just one free-standing theater in 1967 at 3220 Lake Plaza Drive that was initially named the **CINEMA THEATER** and later renamed the **FRISINA THEATER**. In 1980, the property was sold to a Nevada-based adult entertainment chain, the largest in the world, and like several of its other operations, renamed the Déjà Vu.



KERASOTES DOMINATES FIELD, THEN SELLS ITS HOLDINGS TO AMC

By 1988, Kerasotes had purchased the five-screen WHITE OAKS MALL MULTIPLEX from General Cinema and also announced plans to build a 16-screen theater on the former Twin Drive-in site. That theater, SHOW PLACE 12, opened in 1997 (and was sold to AMC in 2010 and renamed the AMC CLASSIC SPRINGFIELD 12).



Ironically in 2012, AMC (American Multi-Cinema) itself was gobbled up by the global Dalian Wanda Group, a Beijing-based private Chinese conglomerate.

WHITE OAKS multiplex closed in 2008 and for a time housed a church.



BY THE 1990S, MOST SPRINGFIELD MOVIE HOUSES ENDED THEIR RUN

In the decades that saw the city's most rapid growth, Kerasotes proved to be the long-term winner, at some point owning every movie house in town. Its PARKWAY POINT 8 on Lindbergh Drive (which opened in 1992) closed in 2021 and was converted into a marijuana distribution center.

The eight-screen CAPITOL CITY SHOWCASE in 1984, now the AMC SPRINGFIELD 8 (still operational) eventually overshadowed the nearby CAPITAL CITY CINEMA in the Capital City Shopping Center at that opened in 1973 and closed in 1995.

National General Theater's FOX TOWN AND COUNTRY at 2445 MacArthur Boulevard opened in 1967. It was sold in the early 80's to Kerasotes which turned it into a twin-screen theater. It closed and was demolished in 1998 to make way for retail stores.



LET'S GO TO THE MOVIES? ONLY TIME HAS THAT ANSWER

On March 18, 2020, AMC announced it would temporarily close all of its theaters because of the Covid-19 Pandemic in compliance with federal guidance against any gathering of over ten people. AMC expected the shutdown to last six to twelve weeks. Its two theaters here reopened five months later on January 29, 2021, with cashless concessions, enhanced sanitizing and safety measures and the ability to book private showings for up to 20 people.

At the same time, AMC announced they would no longer carry films from film studios wanting to release films via premium video on-demand simultaneously with theatrical releases, a footnote in the battle theaters and theater chains here and around the country are waging to bring back audiences.

That story has yet to be written.



**SPRINGFIELD'S
MOVIE HOUSE
HISTORY
SCREEN CREDITS**

**SANGAMON COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**POWER POINT
PRESENTATION
January, 18, 2022**



POWER POINT DESIGN, COMPOSITION, AND PRODUCTION: Vicky Whitaker.

RESEARCH, NARRATIVE, EDITING, REVIEW: Vicky Whitaker, Stephanie Martin, Mike Kienzler, Curtis Mann, Cinda Klickna, Ruth Slottag, Roger Whitaker.

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