

Colonial Theatre once Colfax mainstay

As with most small town movie houses, the Colonial Theatre in Colfax offered area residents more than a parade of Hollywood legends on the silver screen.

For much of the 20th century, the Colonial, located on the 100 block of West Main Street in downtown Colfax, also hosted stage plays, music concerts, public meetings, holiday gatherings, patriotic remembrances and school activities.

The Colonial Theatre was the undertaking of Colfax businessman A.H. Arnold. Situated 25 miles northeast of Bloomington, the Village of Colfax was of sufficient size and distance from larger communities to support a small theater of its own. Construction began in the summer of 1917, and took—from start to finish—only 90 days. The practical yet attractive masonry facade of Hytex brick and limestone trim (see accompanying photograph) remains mostly unchanged more than a century after the theater's completion.

The 40 by 80 feet auditorium offered an initial seating capacity of 500. The original dark forest green seats came from the A.H. Andrews Co. of Chicago, while interior decorations were handled by Springfield-based G.H. Schanbacher & Son. And in order to show movies, Arnold purchased and saw to the installation of a Motiograph "picture machine."

The theater opened on Monday, Nov. 5, 1917. The inaugural program included a touring Redpath Chautauqua lecture and music by Bloomington's Goforth Orchestra. Tickets were \$1, or the equivalent of more than \$21 today, adjusted for inflation.

Following the grand opening, the Colonial's second and third programs were stage plays. Matinee and evening performances of the Robert Sherman production "A Good for Nothing Husband," described as a "screamingly funny comedy-drama," were held Nov. 10. Goforth's Orchestra returned to provide the music, with tickets priced at 55 and 83 cents. Gaskell and MacVitty's "The Other Man's Wife" followed with an evening performance on Nov. 23.

At the time, a theater in a community such as Colfax made economic sense. Getting to the "big city" of Bloomington for shopping or entertainment was often no easy matter. A 1923 map of Central Illinois, for instance, shows no "hard roads" (that is, those that were paved) reaching Colfax. The only railroad serving the village, the Illinois Central's "Bloomer Line," was often the easiest way to travel to Bloomington or elsewhere.

When the theater opened, Colfax's population was around 970 (today's it's a little more than 1,000). The theater also drew residents from nearby Anchor and Cooksville, two tiny

communities considerably smaller than Colfax. Farmers and others outside these towns also flocked to the Colonial, this at a time when the countryside was considerably more populated than it is today.

Other similarly sized communities had long-operating theaters with rich histories of their own. The Scenic in downtown Lexington, to cite but one example, served as that community's movie house for something like four decades.

As motion pictures became increasingly popular, the Colonial Theatre in Colfax evolved into a true movie house. Even so, live entertainment was often mingled into the silver screen programming. The silent film comedy "Away Goes Prudence" with Billie Burke played at the Colonial Aug. 5, 1920. Prior to the 7:30 and 9:00 p.m. shows, local resident Madeline Mayes entertained moviegoers on the accordion.

During the golden era of radio, musicians from the WLS National Barn Dance show occasionally performed at the Colonial. On May 5, 1928, it was Guy and Kathryn Pulley, "playing banjos, Hawaiian guitars and ukuleles as only a few are able to play them." And the Barn Dance's "Pie Plant Pete" (a.k.a. Claud J. Moyer) appeared in person on April 22, 1931, followed by the "all-talking" western "Fair Warning" with George O'Brien.

The Colonial was often repurposed for hastily organized public meetings. In November 1943, during World War II, the theater hosted one of the War Manpower Commission recruitment drives seeking workers for the massive Aluminum Company of America plant in McCook, Ill. The theater also opened its doors for gatherings and observances, including Armistice Day (now known as Veterans Day), school concerts, graduations, and children's Christmas parties, among other events.

Some longtime Colfax area residents will recall Fred G. Wepler, who owned the Colonial for much of the 1950s and 1960s.

The ubiquity of the automobile in post-World War II America doomed the viability of small town movie houses such as the Colonial, as many Colfax merchants found themselves increasingly unable to compete with the bright lights of Bloomington.

Wepler closed the Colonial in 1968. Soon thereafter, though, donations from local businessmen helped create a youth foundation, which assumed management of the theater on a not-for-profit basis.

By the spring of 1969, movies at the renamed Octavia Theatre ran Saturday and Sunday only, with a 7:15 show time both nights. It was 75 cents for those twelve and older; 50 cents for those

younger. The June 1969 schedule included “Rough Night in Jericho,” a “hard-hitting western” featuring Dean Martin and George Peppard; “The Happiest Millionaire,” a Walt Disney production starring Fred MacMurray and Greer Carson; and the cornball, slapstick comedy “Did You Hear the One About the Traveling Saleslady?” with Phyllis Diller and Bob Denver.

The youth foundation’s Octavia Theatre project lasted a year or two before Eugene Grosse and family purchased the venerable building. A resident of nearby Anchor, Grosse installed a new sound system, replacing the antiquated setup likely dating to the introduction of “talkies” in the early 1930s.

Under Grosse’s management, movies that played at the Colonial (the family restored the old name) included Disney’s “Swiss Family Robinson;” the Barbara Streisand vehicle “Funny Girl;” the classic tearjerker “Love Story” with Ryan O’Neal and Ali MacGraw; and “The Cowboys,” one of John Wayne’s swansong roles and one of a handful of films in which Duke’s character dies on screen.

The date of the Colonial Theatre’s final curtain call is not known, but movies were shown there as late as November 1972. Today, the old theater building serves as a shop for a local welding business.

You can’t catch a movie at the Colonial anymore, but you still can at the Princess Theatre, a 1916 beauty in downtown LeRoy designed by prominent Bloomington architect Arthur L. Pillsbury. Today, the restored Princess, owned and operated by the Michael and Gail Hanafin family, shows recent releases Friday through Sunday.

So head out to the Princess this weekend or next! While you’re there, take a moment to remember the Colonial and all the other small town “popcorn palaces,” most now razed or empty and forlorn, that once brought silver screen magic to the Corn Belt.