

That Old Movie Magic

By Bonnie Burgess

From Charlie Chaplin waddling across the screen with his derby hat and cane, to the wild gyrations of Elvis Presley, David Forbes has shown them all. David's long career as a movie projectionist and theatre owner, began at age fourteen when he landed a job showing films in the brand new Crocker, Missouri theatre.

It was 1929 and people were singing tunes like, "Tiptoe Through The Tulips" and "I'm Just A Vagabond Lover". A & W Rootbeer made it's appearance and Movietone News was being shown in theatres for the first time.

Crocker citizens were excited about their new show and would soon thrill to silent movies like, "The Kid", starring Chaplin and "The Scarlet Letter" with Lillian Gish.

Without musical accompaniment, the movies would have lost much of their dramatic impact, so a piano was vital to the overall effect.

David remembers a local music teacher who brought the films to life as she played appropriate piano music, while the black and white scenes flickered across the screen.

He looks thoughtful and says, "I can still hear her playing, "In A Little Spanish Town".

The young man learned everything he could about his job and soon fell in love with the movies and the mechanics of showing them.

Recalling the many hardships of keeping his dollar-a-night job, David says, "I lived several miles out of town and many times I had to walk through deep snow to get to Crocker."

Neither snow or rain or scary cemeteries kept him from going back and forth to the theatre—however.

"One Sunday, a friend of mine asked me to go home with him after the matinee", David remembers, "He said he'd get me back in time for the evening show, but it started to rain real hard and his dad wouldn't let him use the car. I was getting worried because I sure didn't want

to lose my job, so I started out walking."

David laughs and continues the story, "It was dark and storming and on the way I had to pass by the Bethany Cemetery. I didn't see any ghosts, but I flew by there in a hurry. I still remember how still it was there. The only sound I could hear was my pounding heart."

He made it back in time to show the evening feature. It was "Check And Double Check", starring Amos and Andy.

Lugging the heavy octagon-shaped reels up the stairs to the projection room was not easy for the slight-framed young man, but his pleasure in the job far outweighed the pain.

Before every show he spliced preview sections, show time and day headings and commercials in proper sequence, then thoroughly cleaned the housings and mirrors of the powerful carbon lights.

Finally, he threaded the reels into a 35 millimeter projector. It was necessary to accomplish this job quickly, as the film often broke in the middle of the show.

"When that happened, the audience would whistle and holler and throw things", David recalls, "so I got real fast at putting that film back together."

"The danger of fire in the projection room was always present", he says, "The projection light was about 700 degrees and when film broke in front of that hot light, it would just explode into flames. The thick, black smoke was very dangerous to breathe."

"Once a fire broke out at the Crocker Theatre", David remembers, "and black smoke started rolling out the windows. It caused great excitement and people fled the place in a hurry."

After a fire, every piece of equipment had to be cleaned, so disappointed fans had to wait until the next day to see, "The Thief Of Bagdad", starring Douglas Fairbanks.

In 1931 unemployment was rising and the owner threatened to close the theatre because attendance was falling. David managed to keep his job by taking a fifty cent cut in his nightly pay.

While he was working at the Crocker show, David got an offer to go on a "road show". This meant traveling all over the country, with a partner, carrying movies with them. They showed films in any facility that would hold a crowd.

"We showed movies in gymnasiums, courthouses and high school auditoriums", he recalls, "Our films were advertised as "100% Talkies". We showed films like, "King Of Jazz" with Paul Whiteman and "Sweet Music", with Rudy Vallee."

David remembers showing a film in the Waynesville, Missouri Courthouse the summer of 1932. It was "Dirigible", starring Jack Holt.

Top box office stars of the day were, Eddie Cantor, Jean Harlow and Clark Gable. Their movies were more apt to be

seen in the big city theatres than in small town movie houses.

"We traveled in a 1932 Ford van", David says, "I guess it wasn't very big, but at the time, I thought it was a huge vehicle."

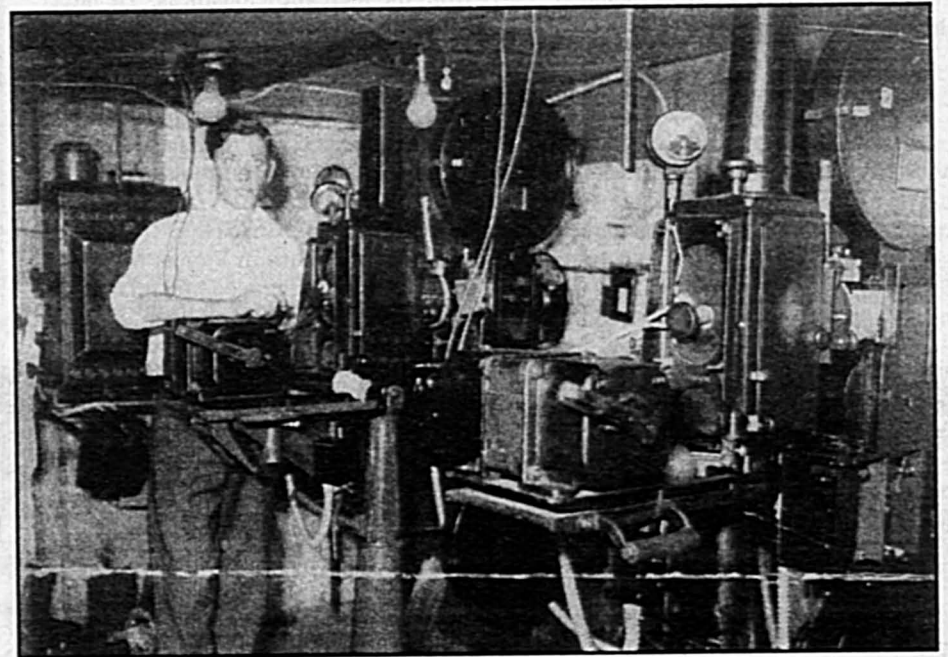
They carried a roll-up, nine by twelve, "silver" screen and all the projectors, lenses and other equipment in the van. After each showing, everything had to be dismantled, cleaned and packed

opened the Crocker Drive-In Theatre.

He was really in his element now and enjoyed every minute of putting in the big projectors and operating them himself.

David remembers the movies he thought were the best ever made, including, "How The West Was Won", "The Ten Commandments" and "Gone With The Wind."

"One of the biggest crowds we ever had at the drive-in was when we showed,



up for the next stop.

The Van Buren, Missouri showing almost turned into a disaster, when fire swept through the projection room.

"We were in the middle of the show, when the film burst into flame so fast, we never did know exactly what happened", David says, "but I got some pretty bad burns out of that one. Fortunately, the owner of the building was a doctor, so he fixed me up."

The thirties brought hard times for many people and movies provided a pleasant diversion for the ones who could scrape together enough money to attend them. Shirley Temple was charming her way into movie-loving America's heart, along with dancing-Fred Astaire and folksy wit, Will Rogers.

In 1933, David went to St. Louis and worked at the Longwood Theatre on Broadway for awhile. He didn't like the city very much, especially after he went up to the projection room one evening and found that the projector had been stolen.

"I'm sure someone stole it to sell", he says, "People were desperate for money and some would do anything to get it."

Over the years David worked in theatres in New Mexico, Illinois, Nebraska and California, finally coming back to Crocker, where he married his girlfriend, Ruth.

In 1953 he made the decision to fulfill a lifetime dream of owning his own theatre. He built a screen tower and a concession stand, installed equipment and

"Jail House Rock", starring Elvis Presley", he recalls— "The young man selling tickets was overwhelmed with all the people coming in. I sent him some help, but we still had to turn several cars away."

"Gone With The Wind" also produced a big crowd, but the all-time best seller was, "Smoky And The Bandit".

Problems at the drive-in were relatively minor, according to David.

Most trouble involved rowdy kids throwing the speakers and shooting off firecrackers.

Sometimes a couple would have a fight while watching a show, leaving the grounds in a cloud of dust.

"I've seen cars pull out across that highway without even slowing down", David says, "I always worried someone would have a bad wreck, but they never did."

David Forbes knows everything there is to know about running a movie theatre from the inside out.

"I think a nice drive-in would still pay off, even with all the other entertainment around today", he says, "There's just nothing else quite like a drive-in on a balmy summer evening."

A few drive-in's remain across the country and David often hears from his friend in Cuba, Missouri, who has operated one there for several years.

Talking to David you get the feeling that he would like to step back into the projection room once again and send those magical images across the screen for all of us to enjoy, as we lose ourselves in some one else's troubles and joy.

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