"A CULTURAL CENTER IN AN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNITY:" VALUES, COMMERCE, AND AUDIENCE FOR EARLY FILM EXHIBITION IN STILLWATER, OKLAHOMA

By

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PREFACE

Traditionally, most research has focused on urban moviehouses and metropolitan moviegoers. As Kathryn Fuller has noted, "...in the early 1900s non-urban settlements still predominated. The United States was not yet a fully urban nation; 70 percent of its citizens resided outside the major cities in rural areas and small towns of ten thousand or fewer in population" (x). Although studies of small town film exhibition have increased, there remains a need for case studies such as the one offered here. A majority of the small towns previously researched were well-established communities long before the introduction of movies. Stillwater, Oklahoma, settled in 1889, provides a unique opportunity to chart the growth of film exhibition in this new town in relationship with the equally new film industry.

The history of Stillwater moviehouses supports Fuller's conviction that research limited to cities, such as New York, distorted assessment of the cultural impact of film (xi). As immigrant entrepreneurs opened storefront nickelodeons in low-rent neighborhoods, movies came to be seen by the urban, cultural elite as "low-brow" entertainment for the unwashed. This misconception prevailed although the filmgoing experience outside large cities disproves this. The first movie exhibition in Stillwater, with the exception of itinerant exhibitors, commenced at the Grand Opera House. The first storefront nickelodeon in

Stillwater, opened by volunteer firemen, provided financial support for public safety. Audiences crossed social boundaries, including both more affluent townsfolk and farmers from the surrounding area, as evidenced in moviehouse advertisements in Stillwater's two newspapers; a daily paper targeting city residents and a weekly, filled with farm reports.

Much of my research has relied upon accounts from these two periodicals, *The Stillwater Daily Press* and *The Stillwater Gazette*, from 1925 to 1948. City directories and opening-night souvenir programs from both the Campus and the Leachman theaters provided additional information. Also, I accidentally discovered--and, thankfully, was allowed to use--an unpublished manuscript compiled from company records of Griffith Brothers, the exhibition circuit which controlled most of Stillwater's moviehouses until 1983. *Federal Supplements* outlined the anti-trust case I describe.

I also consulted several secondary sources concerned with Stillwater's history. These sources included articles from *The Payne County Historical Review*, Robert Cunningham's *Stillwater Through the Years*, and Earl Newsom's *Pictorial History of Stillwater.* In researching Hollywood's history I did not limit my reading to current publications. Referring to titles published in the 1930s and 1940s offered an insight into earlier perceptions of the film industry's growth.

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I was extremely fortunate to have access to an unpublished manuscript. Roger Rice had the foresight to retrieve and compile valuable information on the Griffith Brothers and their theater circuit(s). Without the extensive information Mr. Rice provided, it would have been exceedingly difficult to pursue this research.

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INTRODUCTION:

Small Beginnings and Large Dreams

The business of creating movies grew from new technology and the drive to be a successful participant in the American Dream. The early filmmakers in Brooklyn and New Jersey who emigrated to Hollywood hoped to leave their immigrant, mercantile lives back East. Likewise, the men who came to stake a claim on a new life in Oklahoma sought their fortunes in the West. The rapid growth of the entertainment business in Stillwater, Oklahoma, mirrored the equally swift expansion of the motion picture industry on the West Coast.[1] Both studio moguls and prairie entrepreneurs understood market, merchandise, and consumer. The history of movie theaters on Main Street in Stillwater, Oklahoma reflects issues, problems, and growing pains also experienced in Hollywood studios. Although Stillwater exhibitors maintained a strong link with the community, these small-town theaters endured local criticism and political conflicts, at a time when the studios faced national censorship pressures. Local church and civic leaders questioned the affects of moving pictures, resulting in denunciations from the pulpit and heated debate among office-seekers. The Federal government, citing antitrust laws, sought to prosecute both Hollywood studios and Oklahoma theaters.

Stillwater theaters, owned by the dominant Griffith Brothers circuit, along with studio distribution companies, were specifically targeted in a complaint of April 28, 1939 (FS Vol 68, 181).[2] Defense replies were filed in the summer of 1940, but the case was not to go to trial until May 7, 1945 (FS Vol 94, 749). The

government alleged that from 1934 to 1939 the Griffith circuit had conspired "to unreasonably restrain interstate trade and commerce in motion picture films and to monopolize...the first and second run exhibition of feature pictures and the operation of first and second run theatres in the Griffith towns" (FS Vol. 94, 748). As exhibitors, the Griffith circuit avoided the complicating circumstances of Hollywood film companies which were proved to be both verticallly and horizontally integrated businesses. Unlike the movie studios after the Paramount Decision, the Griffith chain would remain intact. However, just as the number of movie companies dwindled on the coast, the presence of theaters on Main Street in Stillwater declined and disappeared with the advent of television and other leisure pursuits in a society abandoning central city for suburbia. As Kathryn Fuller has observed, 70 percent of the American population in the early 1900s "resided outside the major cities in rural areas and small towns of ten thousand or fewer in population" (x). The story of film exhibition in Stillwater is a story of commercial change repeated throughout America, growing from small beginnings and large dreams to corporate mergers and takeovers.

OUTLAW ORIGINS

The "Boomers," Stillwater's earliest settlers, led by Captain William Lewis Couch, illegally established a town of approximately twenty "houses" in 1884 (Cunningham 24). "Camp Stillwater" was soon besieged by cavalry troops. Unable to defend themselves against threatened artillery attacks, the Boomers retreated back to Kansas under Army escort (Newsom 42). Although located in Indian Territory, Couch was not infringing on land designated for Indian relocation. Approximately two million acres of prairie were known as 'The

Unassigned Lands," following an expedition into the area, headed by Secretary of War Henry Ellsworth, who determined "this was not a proper place to relocate these eastern tribes." Robert Cunningham notes that the Secretary's overreaction to the hardships of the journey and his groundless fear of Indian attack ultimately "opened the door to final and total settlement of all the land once set aside for relocation " (4-6). For Boomers, "unassigned" meant "public domain." Couch encouraged by railroad and other business interests, and supported by Kansas newspapers, shifted his efforts to Washington, bringing the settlement issue to national attention (Newsom 41).

In March of 1889, President Benjamin Harrison announced that the "unassigned lands" would be opened to homesteaders on April 22 (Newsom 42). On that day, Robert Lowry would begin building and promoting Stillwater at the site once briefly inhabited by the Couch party. Lowry wrote a friend the next day, "our campfire tonight is of the charred logs of their cabins" destroyed by the cavalry (Cunningham 24). The contentious beginnings and future uncertainties of a community of three tents, twenty miles from the nearest railroad, rival the best of Hollywood's representations of the pioneer spirit. Lowry's boosterism convinced a Kansas company of the suitability of the site, and the town was surveyed and platted, as a petition circulated for a post office. Even as Stillwater began to take shape, Lowry, realizing that businesses were needed to anchor his city on the plains, had doubts as to its success. Urging a friend, W. A. Swiler, to relocate his general store to Stillwater, Lowry wrote, "If we get the town it will be a county seat, and in the center of as good a farming country as

there is in Oklahoma....Now if you don't want to risk this, let us know at once as we have a good chance to sell" (Cunningham 26). Swiler took the risk, erecting the first store in Stillwater in June of 1889 and "within two months, more than fifty business buildings had been completed" (Newsom 70). In the decades to come, movie theaters would take their place on Main Street and play an important role in the community.

Stillwater maintained steady growth, with the exception of 1893, when "in one minute's time, it lost half its population." With the opening of the Cherokee Strip on September 16, 600 of the town's 1,200 inhabitants staked claims in this new land run (Newsom 154). By that time, Angelinos had seen their land boom go bust. "The land booms of the 'seventies and 'eighties in Southern California were essentially railroad promotions. Elsewhere in the West and Middle West, settlers, to some extent, promoted the railroads, but here the railroads promoted settlement" (McWilliams 125). "Before the end of the craze no one thought of really buying real estate; they bought and sold options—like trading on stock margins....Banks began to get nervous about lending more money on new additions....So the whole thing went over like a row of bricks" (Carr 147). Stillwater founders prohibited speculation on city lots and required occupancy within thirty days, providing stability in the growing business district (Cunningham 14). By 1903, when hayfields purchased from the government had been transformed into the new subdivision of Hollywood, planning had replaced town-site speculation. "Before any lots were sold...streets and highways were platted....The Hollywood Hotel was built," and the promoters General M. H.

Sherman, Harry Chandler, *Times* publisher, and E. P. Clark earned themselves "a net profit of 60% on their investment" (McWilliams 133). Benjamin B. Hampton credits William Selig, who decided "westerns could be made in the west," as the first moviemaker to discover the advantages of southern California for the growing industry. Beyond the lure of abundant natural sunshine for filming, comfortable temperatures and lowered production costs, "California was a long three thousand miles away from the Edison lawyers....Los Angeles had one advantage that out-weighed all others for the outlaws fleeing from subpoena servers and camera smashers....It was close to the Mexico border" (Hampton 77-79). Although filmmakers were guilty of patent infringements, Hampton's colorful perception of these men scrambling across the border is inaccurate. However law-defiant pioneers did begin both the history of Stillwater and Hollywood.

By 1908, Selig had established the first movie "camp" or studio, and by 1913 "two dozen or more inexpensive picture plants, consisting of open-air stages and board-and-batten dressing rooms and offices were scattered about Los Angeles" (Hampton 111). Thomas Cripps asserts that Carl Laemmle's move to Hollywood in 1919 marked a turning point in moviemaking, transforming "sprawling movie lots...[into]...the ateliers of the new industry" (37). Carey McWilliams describes the early Hollywood filmmakers saying, "Always looking over their shoulders for the process servers, the first motion-picture 'people' did not live in Los Angeles; they merely camped in the community, prepared like Arabs, to fold their tents and steal away in the night." Employees of the movie colony were labeled "unfit to mingle with respectable citizens," and rental units

"carried signs reading: 'No Dogs or Actors Allowed.'" By 1919, zoning restrictions were placed on the industry, limiting studios to seven specific areas (McWilliams 331-32). However, as early as 1915, negative attitudes began to change as the $20,000,000 movie payroll impacted the community. During the years 1916 to 1918, the movie colony further improved its standing in conservative suburban Hollywood with active support in the war effort (McWilliams 332-333). By 1930 a Motion Picture Almanac map locates 23 Hollywood studios contributing to the economy of the area (Schatz 11). In Stillwater, in 1948, the Leachman Theater employed thirty-eight city residents and provided many A & M students with the moneys needed to pursue their education (Leachman Program). Stillwater's history begins with Captain Couch, ready to take on the cavalry, but willing to retreat from impossible odds to fight his battles on another front. This small-town, built on pioneer aspirations, grew to become, as the *Stillwater Daily Press* masthead proudly announced, "A Cultural Center in an Agricultural Community." The industry growth and cultural influence of the outlaw moviemakers who settled in Hollywood has been well chronicled, but the role of movie businesses on Main Street, Stillwater--and on other Main Streets--deserves closer examination. For that reason, Hollywood history will be painted with a broad brush in these pages, while Stillwater will be sketched in finer detail.[3]

BUILDING THE BUSINESS OF ENTERTAINMENT IN STILLWATER

The Grand Opera House

In the beginning, "in official language Stillwater was a city for the first year of its existence, a village the second year, a town the third year, and it remained a town until Governor C. M. Barnes on July 22, 1899, declared and proclaimed

Stillwater a 'city of the first class'" (Chapman 98). A "first class city" in the Statutes of Oklahoma, 1893, required a minimum population of 2,500. Early in the history of the city of Stillwater, the entertainment business became part of the life of the community. Seven years after the Cherokee Strip opened for settlement and just one year after the Santa Fe Railroad arrived in Stillwater, this young community could boast of a magnificent three-story Opera House. Commercial space occupied the first floor with access to the theater through a central entrance and a six foot wide stairway. In a business district of predominately small store fronts, this brick and sandstone building designed to seat 1000, measuring 57 feet wide and 100 feet long, was an impressive accomplishment (Dellinger 3).[4]

Begun in 1900, the Opera House officially opened on July 1, 1901 with the Noble Dramatic Company, Band, and Orchestra performing *The Strategists* at popular prices ranging from ten cents for gallery seats to fifty cents for balcony seating; box seats flanked the stage (Dellinger 1). Stillwater's Grand Opera House drew 4,000 for a Fourth of July celebration the same year it opened, illustrating the economic importance of this structure to downtown merchants. Owned by Louis J. Jardot and James Blouin, the Opera House was often used for events to benefit local churches and schools. As Dellinger points out, the theater's "sole function was to please the public" (6). Gregory A. Waller describes the role of the small-town Opera house as serving "as a medium for...exposure to cosmopolitanism and the *au courant*" (33). A few years in the

future, movie houses would also provide the pleasures of the latest technology, as well as community service in Stillwater.

The youth and size of this territorial town did not limit the quality of entertainments presented at the Opera House. Dellinger reports, "whatever was popular in New York or Boston or Kansas City found its way to Stillwater" (7). From touring companies performing Shakespeare to the Gus Sun American Minstrels group, "said to have been the largest of its kind in the United States," area residents were offered a variety of dramas, musicals and lectures (Dellinger 10). The formation of the Oklahoma Circuit provided the incentive to draw national touring companies to the dusty streets of Stillwater (street paving was not begun until 1910). This group booking arrangement included Jardot, J. M. Brooks of the Brooks Theatre in Guthrie and the Delaney Theatre in Perry (Dellinger 5). Similarly, movie theaters in Stillwater would benefit from a strong booking circuit, so strong that antitrust suits would be initiated in the 1930s.

Robert Cunningham reports that "the first moving picture was shown in the Opera House in 1907" (208). With waning interest in stage entertainment and the growing enthusiasm for moving pictures Jardot, Tom Hoyt and C. H. Berry formed a new company and re-named the Opera House, the Hollywood. This transformation may have occurred around 1913 based on Ralph Pearson's recollections of public reluctance to climb stairs to the balcony in the flickering light from the movie screen (33). In 1919 the building was leased to J. W. Whipple and C. W. Wakefield and then named the Isis Theatre (Dellinger 11).

(At some point this leasing arrangement must have been terminated as the Stillwater Directory of 1926 lists the Hollywood once again.)

Pearson recalls his first personal experience at the movies in 1904, viewing *A Trip to the Moon* shown in a street-carnival tent. He indicates however that "some movie films [were] shown in Stillwater in the 1890s" by transient shows (31). Frederick Jackson Turner noted that the census of 1890 marked the end of the frontier (185). As quickly as the West was settled, movie men followed with cinematic images of "The West," such as the 1906 *Great Train Robbery*. Both Cunningham and Pearson speak of the first movie house being established by the volunteer fire department to purchase needed equipment including the acquisition in 1901 of a horse-drawn fire wagon, replacing the department's man-powered wagon (First National Bank 12). Pearson locates the theater, known to him as "the fire-boys," in the 900 block of Main Street. Across the street an open-air theater provided plank seating and technical problems "when the full-moon shone on the screen, and made the show rather dim" (32). These "airdomes" lowered overhead costs for itinerant exhibitors, and provided more comfort for the patrons in the years before air-conditioning. Kathryn H. Fuller notes that trade journal suggestions for nickelodeon exhibitors during the summer months included white slipcovered seating with decorative arctic scenes, as well as "spraying perfume...to quell body odors." It was also suggested that only comedies be screened "in the hope that the audience would laugh and forget the heat (63)."

Pearson also speaks of an early "talkie" presented at the Opera House in 1914 in the form of a "photo-drama of creation" sponsored by his bible class. Describing this screening, he writes, "While the synchronization of sound and scene had not been perfected at that time, there was an attempt to match the pastor's introduction gestures with a recorded voice, and through the skill of the operators, was very successful in causing some of those present to declare that the reel had become real." He continues to say that a hand-painted short subject "was a harbinger of technicolor" (33). This free entertainment provided many rural families with their first night at the movies. As in countless towns throughout America, Stillwater residents could point with pride to their Grand Opera House as evidence that their community was a well-established cultural center.

The Main Street Theater District

Stillwater Directories chronicle the growth of a Main Street theater district. The 1910 directory includes the Alamo at 914 Main and the Pastime Theatre at 612 Main, as well as the Grand Opera House on East Ninth between Main and Lewis. The Camera opened at 719 Main in 1913 in the first brick building in Stillwater, formerly housing the Youst Saloon. The 1922 directory adds the Garden (716 Main) to its list of theaters. A *Stillwater Gazette* article indicates the Garden was formerly the Alamo, moving to the 700 block of main, directly across from the Camera (July 27, 1945).[5] The Garden would later become the Abbott Theater, then the Mecca and eventually the Crest. By the time the Aggie and Leachman theaters were built on Main Street, the Fireboys and the Pastime were defunct. A 1945 *Gazette* article reports the failure of these theaters was

affected by their location, implying the 700 block of Main Street to be the hub of the business district (July 27). Naming a movie theater was no simple task, and equally as important as site selection, as Kathryn H. Fuller illustrates: "owners attempted to cement ties with their local communities by choosing names that created images of the movie theater as a friendly, familiar gathering place" (52). The Alamo draws upon colorful regional folklore, while the Mecca creates an exotic aura of adventure. The Camera aptly implies both technological advancements and the visions to be experienced on the screen. The Abbott, and later, the Leachman, relied on the owners' high standing in the community to attract patrons. And, notably, Stillwater had a "Grand" Opera House.

The Camera Theatre occupies a significant place in the history of Stillwater movie houses. Articles in the *Gazette* indicate that this theater remained an independent exhibitor many years after competitors sold to Griffith Entertainment, a large motion picture exhibition circuit based in Oklahoma City. Griffith historical material indicates that the Camera did not join the circuit until September 1931. In less than a year, in May 1932, the Camera was again an independently owned theater (Rice 138). This may well illustrate Howard T. Lewis' opinion that theater managers balked at corporate control. Although no longer a member of the Griffith organization, anti-trust records indicate R. H. Russ, the Camera owner-manager, had maintained some type of business relationship with the circuit, perhaps film rentals. Advertising formats, however, indicate Russ promoted his theater independently. First owned by C. D. Jackson, the Camera was sold to F. M. Tull who later sold to R. H. Russ (*Gazette* May 23, 1930).[6]

The sale of the Camera to Tull created excitement on Main Street as a Christmas Day 1925 article in the *Gazette* records. Tull, who had operated theaters in both Oklahoma City and Shawnee, not only purchased the existing

theater but also bought two lots in the 600 block of Main Street and announced plans to build a $75,000 theater on that site. In 1907 F. M. Tull had built the prestigious Folly Theater in Oklahoma City which provided entertainment in the form of vaudeville, movies and burlesque. As a result of labor disputes with stagehand's and actor's unions, the Folly was sold in 1917 (Stewart 91). Tull extolled the virtues of business in Stillwater at a Rotary Club meeting in December 1925, and a few days later received a building permit to expand the Camera (*Gazette* Jan. 1, 1926). Census figures released in 1926 reported that the population in Stillwater had grown to 6,181 with an additional college student population of almost 2,000, indicating a strong customer base for new businesses in the town (*Gazette* Feb. 12). An August 30, 1942 half page advertisement for the Griffith theaters (Aggie, Mecca and Campus) indicates the influence of the A & M students on the local economy. In this special edition for students, manager Claude Leachman emphasizes the many conveniences his theaters provide, including "cashiers... trained to make...change quickly" with the most up-to-date "automatic, thermostatic, and humidified quiet air conditioning systems," as well as, "employees...schooled to meet any emergency" (*Stillwater Daily Press*).[7] Success seemed inevitable for the new Tull theater with the population growing in both town and on campus, yet this veteran of the entertainment business owned the Camera for only four years, selling to R. H. Russ in 1929 (*Gazette* July 28, 1939). Kathryn Fuller reports that by 1910 there were approximately ten thousand nickelodeons operating in the United States with seven thousand located outside metropolitan areas (28). Stillwater could claim two theaters in 1910 and three by 1913. Expansion in the Main Street theater district paralleled the national growth of the film industry.

Retail Roots

It is important to note that Tull, before owning Oklahoma movie houses, had been a furniture store owner (*Gazette*, Dec. 25, 1925). Like the studio founders of Hollywood, a retail background preceded his career in the film exhibition business. *Fortune Magazine* in 1932 described the major studio heads as "fur peddlers, secondhand jewelers and nickelodeon proprietors" (265). Likewise, the Griffith Brothers, destined to operate theaters throughout the southwest began as "early-day drummers...selling grocery staples." Before turning to film sales on the road, L. C. Griffith for a time sold tobacco products for the American Tobacco Company (Rice 1). The salesmanship skills of both producers and exhibitors prepared them for success in film promotion, with their understanding of the buying public. Harry Carr, writing in 1935, bemoaned the influence of non-urban theaters on the motion picture industry. He complained, "The money is made in the 'sticks.' The producers have their ears tuned to the ignorant, cowardly mutters of the small-town exhibitors....If nine people growl about a picture in a lobby after the show, the exhibitor wires in (collect) that he won't take any more pictures from that company...the exhibitor boo-hoos with childish hysteria if the wife of the garage mechanic doesn't like the show." He expresses his surprise at how good the movies really are, given the effects of low brow audiences (293-95). With money to be made in the "sticks," it would seem, contrary to his assessment, that the relationship between producers and exhibitors resulted in success, a success based on an ability to provide a product satisfying the customer's needs. Carr also fails to acknowledge in *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* that many studio heads were experienced nickelodeon exhibitors.

To promote Tull's new business coming to Stillwater, a local contest was used to choose the Marion as the new theater name, possibly in honor of the

popular Marion Davies (*Gazette*, April 9, 1926). Continuing a tradition of community service by the entertainment business in Stillwater, the Camera played host to a benefit screening for a local PTA. Perhaps indicating the problems faced by an independent exhibitor, the advertised feature, *Peck's Bad Boy* with Jackie Coogan, failed to arrive. *Snow White* and *Wild Animals of the Jungle* were substituted (*Gazette*, February 5, 1926). The Abbott theater had previously offered a triple feature benefit for the PTA in 1925 (*Gazette*, March 20, 1925). In March of 1926, E. B. Tull, the owner's son, outlined plans for a new 1,000 seat modern theater to be completed in September of that year (*Gazette* Mar. 19). However, after encountering difficulties in gaining a clear title to the property, Tull scrapped his plans to use the lots on Main to build a new theater. During the delay, Griffith Entertainment had arrived in Stillwater in the later months of 1926, purchasing one theater and building another new movie house.

By the end of 1926, increased advertising in the *Stillwater Gazette* indicated the determination of the Tulls, father and son, to keep the Camera competitive, featuring First National releases (*Gazette*, December 10, 1926). A. M. Abbott increased his Abbott Theater advertising in 1925, perhaps already having been approached by Griffith representatives. Theater advertisements had appeared regularly in the *Stillwater Daily Press*, a newspaper catering to the "city" dweller, but the *Stillwater Gazette*, a weekly publication emphasizing farm news and targeting readers with less leisure time, had carried few movie ads. The growing theater district on Main Street required greater marketing efforts, in both advertising and public service. The days of indiscriminate moviegoing for the sheer novelty of the experience were ending. Stillwater theater patrons would be able to "shop" for their entertainment, choose their favorite theater, and

their favorite "stars," just as moviegoers in urban locales were also making their entertainment choices.

Competing for Customers

The Attorney General of Oklahoma removed one promotional technique from the theater owners' marketing plan, declaring "bank night" drawings in violation of the state's lottery laws (*Gazette* April 3, 1938). On several occasions, the Camera joined forces with local merchants to use product tie-ins. Announcing "$1,000. In Prizes Given Away in Greater Movie Season Club," the *Gazette*'s readers were offered a chance to win as first prize, a Chevrolet Coach from the local Ward-Chevrolet dealer, valued at $606; second prize, a trip to Hollywood with expenses; cash prizes to the third and fourth place winners; and movie passes for the fifth through fifteenth winners. Entrants were given "credits" with the purchase of admission; an additional ten credits were printed in the local newspapers (Nov. 2, 1934). The Camera teamed up with over a dozen grocers in a Lux Soap promotion. The shopper who spent 39 cents received 6 cakes of Lux and a theater ticket. Karen Morley, the star of the film being screened, *Wednesday's Child*, endorsed the product (*Gazette* Feb. 22, 1935). The Camera and Aggie competed fiercely with their productions of local films in 1938, often going head-to-head, screening films shot in Stillwater on the same evening. While no attendance records are available, the Camera won the bragging rights for producing the most films locally. A May 1 ad introduces the latest one hour "hometown movie...filmed exclusively in Stillwater...See your own Close-Up on the Screen, Together with 5,000 New Laughs" (*Gazette*).

Competition was not limited to the movie-men of Main Street. Throughout Stillwater's growth, many entertainments vied for public interest. As noted earlier, touring companies and itinerant showmen entered the territory on the

heels of the homesteaders. The Manville Bros. Comedians (a Metropolitan Company) "in a monster tent theatre...[provided] all new plays [and] big time vaudeville between the acts" in May of 1926 (*Gazette* May 14). The town had the opportunity to enjoy the All American Show's Carnival for one full week in 1938, "featuring *The Spotlight*, [a] Colored Minstrel Show, 14 High Class Performers, Band and Orchestra [and] Clean Amusements (*Gazette* May 27). Major Bowes, with the sponsorship of the American Legion, visited the town in 1936 (*Gazette* Nov. 13). These shows are examples of the numerous diversions commonly available to the public over the years. The Allied Arts organization of Oklahoma State University has a long history of bringing quality entertainment to Stillwater, a tradition that continues today. Typical of their offerings, the "Five-Star Series" of 1938 offered performances by John Brownlee of the Metropolitan Opera, artist-author-adventurer Rockwell Kent with an illustrated lecture, Trudi Schoop and her Dancing Comedians, Andres Segovia, and the American Repertory Theatre presenting *The School for Scandal*; all at a season ticket price of $2.00 (*Gazette* Feb. 6, 1938). Competing with the professional stage performances, as reported in the *Gazette*, local churches and businesses were bitten by the movie-bug, screening "educational" industrial films offering insight into such topics as "Modern Steel and Wire Mills" and "Oxygen" (Sept. 27, 1935; Nov. 13, 1936). In addition to all these local diversions, movie stars sometimes provided competition. The theater-men could not always count on film idols to grace their stages. The Camera was fortunate to have a Tex Ritter appearance, but Jeanette MacDonald chose to appear at A & M, and Tom Mix brought his own "Circus and Wild West Show" to town (*Daily Press* Mar. 14, 1938; Jan. 12, 1939; Oct. 2, 1935). Leisure-time could also be spent at band concerts, sporting events, school plays, pot-luck suppers, and ice cream socials, to mention but a few alternative entertainments.

The Silence of the Talkies

As Leachman and Russ fought for a share of the Stillwater market, the movie industry in Hollywood was being transformed by yet another novelty—the "talkies." With the Warner Bros. press release announcing their commitment to the new technology of "talking pictures" in April of 1925, the industry would be changed forever (Schatz 59). The introduction of sound, combined with technical improvements in lighting and film stock, as well as improved editing technique, forced the process of filmmaking to become more specialized. "In this new setting, directors gradually relinquished authority to others, not only producers but voice coaches and even writers" (Cripps 112). Gone were the days when "cameramen shot scenes wherever and whenever they wished...the producers improvised the background and setting, and made up the story as they went along...Traffic was forever being snarled up by the shooting of street scenes" (McWilliams 332). The Hollywood studio system began to assemble its product part by part, like a Model T. "Talkie" production required silence; sound stages became the industry's factories. Leo Rosten wrote in 1941, "the dazzling spotlight which Hollywood turns upon its Personalities throws into shadow the thousands who work in the movie studios—technicians and craftsmen, musicians and sound engineers, painters, carpenters, laboratory workers" (32).

In Stillwater, Fred Turner began his career in 1913, as a projectionist hand-cranking his machine four hours nightly. He successfully made the transition to sound equipment, and he made the papers. While Claude Leachman shone as the "personality" of the local movie business, Turner, the technician at the rival Camera, often received press coverage. Unlike the film workmen Rosten describes, Turner received respect for his technical expertise. On the occasion of this thirty-second year as a projectionist, the *Gazette* interviewed him extensively. Reminiscing on the arrival of sound, he commented,

"The crowd went wild over the first of the 'talkies.' They stood in line all up and down the street for hours ahead of the opening time yelling to be let in. But once inside they were the quietest theater crowds of all times... They didn't want to miss a word" (July 27, 1945). He does not date the premiere of the first talking-picture moviehouse, but it can be determined that sound-film had come to Stillwater prior to the fall of 1930. The re-opening of the Mecca with newly installed sound equipment received small mention in the *Gazette* (Oct 10, 1930). "In 1929, only 800 theaters, mostly picture palaces in urban centers, were wired for sound, whereas 22,544 other theaters, small-town and older suburban movie houses, were silent" (Fuller 195). This would indicate that Stillwater theaters were in the vanguard of those movie houses that converted to "talkies."

Although Fred Turner remained in his projection booth at the Camera, the changes in Stillwater's movie district continued on in 1926 with the announcement by Dr. D. H. Selph on April 2nd that he would begin razing his building at 619-621 Main Street to make way for a new movie house to be leased by the Griffith Brothers chain. Dr. Selph outlined the planned theater to be "50 X 140 feet, with a 21 foot ceiling. The front will be of marble, tile and plate glass. Modern equipment will be installed" (*Gazette*). The *Gazette,* on May 7, 1926 noted that the new theater would be named the Aggie. The *Gazette* also reported at that time that the Abbott Theater had been purchased by the Leachman and Griffith brothers. By May 28th a building permit had been issued to Dr. Selph for theater construction by contractors Brittain & Corgan (*Gazette*). Gates Corgan, who built the Aggie in 1926, had by 1939 built and remodeled almost 100 theaters. His son, Jack Corgan, was the architect who later designed another Griffith theater in Stillwater, the Campus, built in 1939 (Campus Program).

Film Families

Paralleling the family ties of the early years of the Hollywood film industry were the Oklahoma film families of the 1920s. At Universal, an organization that would come to have a role in Stillwater's movie business, "'Pop' Laemmle had early shown considerable tendency to employ as many of his family as possible..." as he opened new facilities "'just so he [could] employ more of his relatives'" (Fernett 239). "Pop" gave Universal Pictures to his son, Carl Jr. as a twenty-first birthday present, a "consummate act of nepotism" (Schatz 82). Similarly, Claude and Ralph Leachman, funded by their father, Dr. T. C. Leachman, entered the theater business in 1919 in Woodward OK and had expanded to Blackwell with the Rivoli, Midwest and Palace Theatres (Campus Program). Another Leachman brother, Oakley, also joined the family film business. In 1926 the Leachman brothers began a partnership with Griffith Amusement as that organization began expansion into Stillwater (Rice 138). The Griffith brothers and their dominance of film exhibition in Oklahoma, including Stillwater, will be discussed later in some detail. The vast Griffith holdings in Oklahoma and other southwestern states mirrored both the complex corporate structuring and the problems of Hollywood in the 20s and 30s.

Stillwater was ready to welcome the arrival of the Leachman and Griffith Brothers and their new movie house. Anticipation of opening night increased as the *Gazette* reported that the new Aggie Theater was to be ready by August 1, 1926. This news article of July 2 outlined the many special features of the new theater. The most highly touted improvement in theater design was the installation of a special room for crying babies. Mothers could remove themselves and their babies to a soundproof glass-fronted room at the rear of the theater beside the projection room to continue their enjoyment of the film without disturbing the general audience. On the opposite side of the fireproof

projection room, a private box with seating for up to 27 was available for groups and parties. The presence of dressing rooms above and behind the stage indicated that entertainments other than movies were also planned for the Aggie. The "Miss Stillwater" beauty pageant was staged at the Aggie in 1933, with the winner receiving a film role in "Oklahoma Sweethearts" (*Daily Press* July 7, 1933). The annual "April Fool's Preview" regularly included live performances by the likes of the "Super-Stupendous...Big Apple Stage Presentation...[and the] Aggie Swing Band [providing] possum tail twisting music" (*Daily Press* March 31, 1938). "Willard the Wizard," a magician from San Antonio, amazed an Aggie audience one weekend in 1939 (*Daily Press* Feb. 10). Commercial office and retail space occupied the remainder of the building, typical of theater sites in those years. "Increased competition in...many small-towns brought a second generation of permanent theaters....Many [exhibitors] invested in new structures that combined theaters with rent-producing retail shops. Interiors and exteriors of movie theaters became more elegant, organized and spacious" (Fuller 73). Opening night at the new Aggie Theater would be as important to Stillwater as the debut of "Roxy" Rothafel's Roxy Theater in 1927.

Selling the Experience: Management and Modern Amenities

After a short delay, the Aggie Theater opened its doors in mid-August with dedication ceremonies that included an invocation by the Episcopalian minister and praise from Mayor Hassler for this addition to the civic progress of Stillwater. Attendance for the pre-show activities did not fill the theater at the appointed 6:00 o'clock starting time but all seats were occupied after postponing until 7:00 (*Gazette*, Sept. 17, 1926). Inaugural festivities for the successive openings of the Campus Theatre (1939) and The Leachman (1948) did not repeat this scheduling error; both began their opening programs at 7:00. The *Gazette*

reported a long list of notable guests including representatives from Oklahoma City's "Film Row," an area around Lee and California streets where all the Hollywood "majors" maintained offices (Liebmann). The Aggie provided more than entertainment to one patron in March of 1927. A robber remained hidden after an evening performance, smashed the cash box and escaped through a rear window with $47.70 (*Gazette*, March 25).

A greater misfortune befell the Aggie in 1948. Fire destroyed the theater on January 18th despite the efforts of crews using six fire trucks to battle the blaze for two hours. The firefighters received high praise for saving adjoining businesses from destruction. This disaster occurred as Claude Leachman and the Griffith's were erecting a new theater at 5th and Main. Construction on the new Leachman Theater was stepped up after the Aggie burned. Financial losses estimated at $100,000 included equipment for the new theater being stored on the second floor of the Aggie (*Daily Press*, January 19). A *Daily Press* article outlined planned improvements for the Aggie reconstruction begun in the spring of 1948. Seating was to be expanded from 710 to 1,000. The now fire-proof theater would be decorated "in keeping with new architectural developments" (April 23). Later, in May of 1948, a small fire broke out at the Camera. "Maybe there is something in a name—or a title, at least. Anyway, the fire department may have had visions of another 'Killer McCoy' fire...when the alarm was answered at the Camera...It was the same feature picture advertised on the marquee of the Aggie theater" when it burned (*Gazette* May 21).

Richard Sutton, who once worked at Main Street theaters and who now provides assistance at the Stillwater Public Library reference desk, recalled that after the Aggie was destroyed the Campus Theater began showing "A" films. Located at 202 Knoblock, this movie house had provided "B" movies for student enjoyment, closing during school breaks. The Campus Theater, another

Leachman-Griffith partnership, was the only theater built outside downtown Stillwater until the advent of drive-in theaters in 1949. In the souvenir program of the ultramodern Campus Theatre, opened on April 28, 1939, moviegoers were promised "Here amid new luxurious appointments, you will find entertainment of the highest type. Courteous attendants will look after your every want...in every way your comfort has been provided for." This statement of a "customer first" philosophy illustrates John Izod's comments in *Hollywood and the Box Office* on "the care with which...managers considered their clientele. Their ambitions reached to nothing less than the selling of a total experience. Their staff, neatly dressed and usually young, had to speak to customers in a respectful but friendly way so as to make them feel at ease, and diffuse any nervousness which some might feel in such awesome surroundings" (42). Nine years after the Campus began operation, at the time of the Leachman opening, plans were announced for expansion and technical changes at the Campus. The Leachman program described the improvements to include an additional 300 seats as the theater became "completely re-seated with correct posture easy chairs. New sound and projection equipment" were also to be installed. The program celebrating The Leachman formal opening on June 22, 1948 also outlined "plans for rebuilding and equipping...[the Aggie with] the greatest consideration for added comfort and convenience." The program indicated that customer comfort would be enhanced with circulating heat in the winter and "COOLED BY REFRIGERATION" in summer. The Aggie reopened on Dec. 1, 1948 (Rice 138). "Like rival department store owners, managers of competing picture palaces vied to introduce more and more luxuries for their clientele" (Fuller 111). Luxury meant not only lovely decor, but also, the most modern equipment.

"The opening of the beautiful LEACHMAN THEATRE climaxes Mr. Leachman's outstanding career in the theatre business and is a source of pride

not only to his associates and to him, but also to the citizens of Stillwater," reported the opening program, illustrating the importance of the movies and the managers in this town. The program also lauded Mr. Leachman as "one of Stillwater's most ardent boosters. He is an untiring civic leader and has contributed both morally and financially to the betterment of not only Stillwater but also its entire trade area." This high praise for Leachman provides an excellent example of Howard T. Lewis' emphasis on the importance of theater management.

As Hollywood production companies scrambled to expand into the area of film exhibition, Lewis points out "that many producer-distributors had no uniform plan for their development of the exhibition field" (338). He describes the difficulties rapid expansion created, including "the entangled network of corporation relations which had developed." For Lewis, the most serious problem of growing theater chains involved hiring capable managers (346). A former owner of the acquired theater often proved unsatisfactory as manager of a chain theater, harboring resentment at the loss of his business and unable to adapt to centralized corporate supervision. Lewis quotes extensively from an *Harrison's Reports* article of 1931 in which the role of theater manager is described in detail:

> the character and ability of the manager contribute greatly to the success of the theater. In fact, there is no business in the world where the personality of the manager counts as much as it does in the theater business. People go to a picture theater to amuse themselves. And a bright, cheerful, and happy-looking manager is part of the 'show'...In the main a neighborhood theater, being a local house, must appeal to its clientele; in other words, it must be an intimate part of the community. The interest of such houses in

> local affairs, the personal acquaintance of the manager with persons in his community, the local prejudices, and local events of interest must be known. (354, 363)

It is as if this article were written about Louis Clyde Griffith and his brothers Rupert and Henry Jr. who founded their business first known as Griffith Brothers (Rice 2).

Roger Rice acknowledges the importance of experienced theater management participating in community life. By forming partnerships with theater owners joining the Griffith business, "the organization had concerned itself mainly with the selection and acceptance of its partners--active men of responsibility and integrity, whose principal activities were indicative of energy, ambition and ability to get along with people." Partners and employees of Griffith at that time were rewarded for their conscientious service with benefits as generous as any executive perks available today. Rice has quoted L. C. Griffith in an employee brochure, saying, "'We want you to be good citizens, trying at all times to make your community a better place in which to live, for what concerns your community also concerns you.' To back up this policy, Griffith paid all membership dues" in civic organizations (Rice 10-11). The Griffith Brothers became "an intimate part of the community."

Message from the Pulpit

However, some in Stillwater expressed concerns regarding the potential negative impact of moviegoing. The *Gazette* reported on a Sunday sermon delivered by Rev. Virgil G. Nalley in the filled auditorium of the First Christian Church. He pointed out that movie audiences were four times larger than those reached by the church. Rev. Nalley attacked the newest production code introduced by the Hays Office, indicating that this self-regulation by the industry

was in reality self-promoting publicity. He predicted that, just as the 1921 code had been subverted, so too, the new version would be ignored by the studios, although the pastor did remark regarding Hollywood's productions that "there is something good in all and, at the same time, something that appeals to the most vulgar minded." The distribution practice of block-booking forced local exhibitors to purchase objectionable films, Rev. Nalley charged. Film advertising was also a target of his comments. This *Gazette* article indicates that Rev. Nalley was often consulted by the Mayor on the propriety of films shown in Stillwater, citing a decision to allow the screening of *Party Girl*, despite questionable content (April 18, 1930). On June 20 of the same year an anonymous complaint required a meeting between Mayor Thompson and Claude Leachman to determine if "the actions of Miss Lois Wilson...in hoisting her shapely legs in the general direction of the north star while reclining in front of the Mecca theater" could be considered indecent. "A large number of the curious investigated "(*Gazette*). Miss Wilson's lobby poster created some excitement on Main Street. The opinion of some that movies negatively impacted the community was reinforced by another incident reported in a 1936 *Gazette* article. Two Aggie patrons reported that their wallets had been stolen. Determining that this had been a case of pick-pocketing, the police revealed the shocking information that the perpetrator had quite possibly been a woman (March 27). The movie houses sometimes drew more than a curious crowd.

The controversy over block-booking and blind-selling again hit the papers in 1938. The *Gazette* reprinted a letter received by Paul Harrup, state chairman of Motion Pictures and Visual Education for the Oklahoma PTA and head of the Oklahoma City YMCA. The writer hoped to arouse concerned parents to contact the House Interstate Commerce Committee demanding passage of the Neely Bill. While the author concedes "many local movie men...would cooperate with

those...who want more at the high class and fewer of the objectionable films," he attacks the profit-motive of the film industry for creating "unsafe commercial amusements" (May 27). This issue of the harmful effects of movies on American youth remained a topic in Stillwater. A lengthy syndicated column by Marian Mays Martin, titled "Comics, Movies Are Real To Youngster Audiences," appeared in the *Gazette* of May 23, 1941. Ms. Martin warns, "Children's minds are inflammable and should be protected against stray sparks that may ignite them. Handing the children unprincipled funnies, allowing them to go to the movies where 'amusing' murders are being enacted...may be easy ways of getting rid of them for a while but—what price respite?" Sporadic news coverage of the evils of the cinema indicate that the good citizens of Stillwater were not as greatly concerned with the effects of film content, as were others around the country. The "legislative censorship" epidemic predicted in the Midwest in 1941 did not infect Stillwater (Leff 111).

The Politics of Blue Laws

One serious controversy did center on the Main Street movie houses, heating up the mayoral race in 1930. Rather than concern over what should be allowed on the screen, disagreements arose over when they should be seen. Debate over Sunday movie showings became the major issue of the campaign. Mayor Thompson, up for reelection, outlined his stand on Sunday movies, stating, "I have the highest regard for those men who operate them but...Sunday shows will be harmful for the college and our churches," while promising to abide by the will of the voting public. (*Gazette* Aug. 8). On August 1 1930, the *Gazette* reported, "The contest between those who favor opening of motion picture shows and those who believe amusement houses should remain closed during Sunday reached a climax...when city commissioners ruled to place the

problem before the people...to be decided by ballot in the general election." The petitions delivered to the commissioners revealed the importance of the issue; signatures had been obtained from more than fifty percent of Stillwater's registered voters. Theatre owners Claude Leachman and "Red" Russ, theater managers, and attorney T. A. Higgins provided a petition signed by 1,045 in favor of Sunday shows. A list of 824 against Sunday movies was presented by the Reverends Davis, Herrick and Gibson. The *Gazette* noted that the first petition was signed by a large proportion of business owners, while the latter had drawn signatures largely from the city's church congregations. Legal election technicalities prevented voting on the "Sunday question" in the November 4th general election, necessitating a special election on December 12 (*Gazette* Oct. 31).

After the vote, the *Gazette* announced, "The heated fight which has raged regarding [Proposition] No. 5, for repeal of the city ordinance prohibiting Sunday moving pictures, resulted in the largest number of votes being cast on a single question, 1,871 voters participating in solving the question and of which 814 voted in favor of opening the movies and 1,057 against...Sunday movies [were] beaten by 243 in [a] hot contest." The article concluded by remarking, "the spotlight of the entire campaign was focused on the Sunday movie measure...The Sunday movie drive reached its climax [before the vote]...with both sides turning loose a barrage of advertising on the subject" (Dec. 19, 1930). The debate continued on after the general election. During the next mayoral race, the *Gazette* polled each candidate on the issue because "as the campaigning grows warmer it appears that the Sunday movie question has become the most popular point of discussion." Of the eight candidates interviewed, six promised to uphold the law, offering no personal opinion on this polarizing topic; Mayor Thompson reiterated his former anti-Sunday stance.

Frank Jardot, a prominent businessman and descendant of the Opera House owner, expressed his pro-Sunday sentiments (March 31, 1931). Mayor Thompson won the race, becoming the first-ever reelected mayor in Stillwater (*Gazette* April 7, 1931). The moral majority had won the battle, but not the war.

In the tradition of city-father Couch and the Hollywood moguls, Stillwater's theater owners chose to break the law in December 1933. The headline of the *Gazette* on December 22 announced, "ARRESTS ARE MADE IN MOVIE SHOW TEST CASE—Three Local Movies Run Programs Sunday; Short Interruptions Occur During Matinees." Five were arrested for violating the city ordinance prohibiting Sunday shows; theater managers Leachman and Russ, as well as the three projectionists on duty at the time, Clark W. Abbott, Glen Blackledge, and Fred Turner. All were quickly released on their own recognizance. At their Monday court appearance, a continuance was granted. The coverage of the police crackdown continued, reporting:

> Each of the three shows had nearly completed the first program before officers made their appearance with warrants. Theater men, anticipating the action had relief workers ready and as one group of employees was removed another set took their places. The Aggie machine never stopped, the Mecca and Camera for about a minute. Officer Ashmore caused a slight commotion at the Mecca by announcing the show was over, but as patrons began to file from the theater they were turned back by show employees and the program continued.

By mid-afternoon Monday, no comment had been made by the Stillwater Council of Churches, and although the Stillwater Ministerial Alliance held its regular Monday morning session the Sunday screenings were not discussed. Both groups were forewarned of the Sabbath shows as the theaters had previously

advertised their Sunday programs, yet neither group issued a statement (*Gazette* Dec. 22, 1933).

Unlike the silent religious leaders of the community, the district court responded quickly on appeal, ruling that the current city ordinance banning Sunday shows was illegal because the $25 maximum fine exceeded the $20 limit the city court could legally impose. The problem was sent back to the city commissioners. With equal speed, the city commission repealed the old ordinance, approved a new one, and passed a resolution that the Sunday movie issue would be resolved by the voters at the next general election if a petition bearing 200 names was received. Believing the new ban conformed to public sentiment expressed in the 1930 vote, the commission drafted an ordinance that complied with the $20 ceiling on fines, while limiting prosecution to the theater managers or owners. No theater employees could be arrested. A majority of the commissioners expressed the opinion that Sunday screenings should be allowed, leaving the theater owners an opportunity to pay a fine while keeping the moviehouses open (*Gazette* Dec. 29, 1933). On January 3, 1934, the *Gazette* reported the new ordinance had not been properly enacted, making Sunday shows legal. The absence of continued news coverage of the Sunday controversy, after this item had run, indicates a failure to gather 200 signatures on a new petition. Loudly debated only four years earlier, a silent majority now enjoyed movies seven days a week.

Efforts to police film content from the 1920s on, by self-regulation within the film industry, as well as external pressures from both religious groups and sociologists, has received much study. By 1929, Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, had noted that "more than fifty percent of the United States, as far as attendance goes, is under censorship" (Leff 8). Although films were sometimes attacked from the pulpit in

Stillwater, no steps appear to have been taken to create a formal censorship apparatus. The effects of film on youthful moviegoers remained a topic of debate in local papers, but as with the "Sabbath show" controversy, the issue was put to the "popular vote." Residents were allowed to "vote" on movie morality at the box-office. Neither Joe Breen, director of the Production Code Administration, nor Martin Quigley of the Legion of Decency, nor the creative interpreters of the *Payne Fund Studies* published in 1933 received much attention in Stillwater.[8]

Serving the Community

The adverse effects of moviegoing in Stillwater were likely outweighed by the civic involvement of Claude Leachman and "Red" Russ. Louis Clyde Griffith, affectionately nicknamed "The Skipper," set a shining example for Leachman and all his employees. Paul Liebmann of Griffith Realty emphasized the importance of L. C. Griffith's extensive community service as indicative of the founder's charitable nature as well his sound business practices. Several pages of Rice's company history are required to highlight only some of the many civic projects supported by Griffith (11-14). Trying his hand at movie production for the public good, Griffith "furnished free the necessary technicians" to aid Gov. Robert S. Kerr with the filming of "Development of Oklahoma Natural Resources," to promote the state (*Gazette* Aug. 9, 1946). Over the years, Claude Leachman actively involved himself in such community service areas as Cub Scouting, Cancer Fund Drives, and the Chamber of Commerce, as well as chairing committees with the Payne County Fair and Stillwater's Armistice Day events. In December 1936, the Aggie, in conjunction with the Boy Scouts, hosted a charity event. The *Gazette* detailed the upcoming event, saying, "Bring your spuds and see movies and Santa...To get to see several reels of hilarious

movies, watch [a] local magician take rabbits out of hats and to get a long look at Santa Claus it will cost exactly one pound of beans or potatoes. The 'tickets' must be...good enough to eat...to provide needy families with enough staple groceries to last them throughout the winter months" (Dec. 18). This became an annual event held at either the Aggie or the Mecca, and with the aid of local service clubs, expanded to two free shows--admission for one required a toy, the other a food item (*Daily Press* Dec. 10, 1937). World War II brought increased public service opportunities to local theaters. Combining movies and war bond sales proved to be highly successful in Stillwater.

Responding to slow participation in the war bond program, with only 45% participation in payroll deduction plans, quotas set by the U. S. Treasury Department were announced in April 1942. Treasury Secretary, Henry Morgenthau, outlining this policy change in a newsreel speech, called for a minimum bond investment of 10% from those Americans earning a regular income, more than doubling the level of past purchases, which had averaged 4.8% of wages. Morgenthau's quota system targeted monthly total bond purchases at one billion dollars per month. Although the plan was touted as a national populist morale booster, two important fiscal realities underscored the need for increased bond sales; financing a war-effort required greater borrowing by the government, while consumer dollars diverted from the economy helped to curb inflation (Blum 426-29).[9] The less-than-enthusiastic public participation in war bond purchases reflected both economic and political attitudes in the country. Lawrence R. Samuel quotes a *Business Week* article of 1941, writing, "An announced objective of reducing purchasing power doesn't register very well with folks whose pay envelopes are growing fatter after many lean years" (27). In the case of Stillwater, traditional Mid-American isolationism undoubtedly affected bond sales, as well.

By September of 1942, both the Camera and Aggie theaters announced special events to promote war bond sales (*Gazette* Sept. 15). As Robert Fyne has noted, "audiences now had two reasons to watch a double feature: a night out at the show was both entertaining and patriotic" (13). The high school band performed, as a war bonds booth was inaugurated at the Aggie on September 17, with Leachman announcing a special movie showing scheduled for September 23 for bond purchasers only. In addition to offering a free show, a six months pass would be awarded to the highest purchaser; 10 second, third and fourth largest purchasers would receive three month, two month, and one month passes (*Gazette* September 18). Payne County exceeded the $87,500 quota in September 1941, with Stillwater theaters "given a lot of credit for that last of the month buying spree." This was only the second month that quota was met (*Gazette* October 9). Stillwater bond salesmen again received assistance from Leachman in February 1944 with the city short $135,636 of the $330,000 quota for the month. Plans for gala premiers of *Madame Curie*, a 1943 release starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon, at both the Mecca and Aggie theaters were announced on February 8. In addition to the film, a stage show by the Will Rogers Army Airbase Troupe, comprised of professional entertainers, was to open the evening. The group featured a professional dancer, and the Hungry Five band along with a pianist and baritone vocalist. Prior to the scheduled program, the Rogers group would give a brief sidewalk performance while bonds were being purchased (*Daily Press*). A third show became necessary, with attendance reaching almost 1,300 bond purchasers (*Daily Press* Feb. 11, 1944). Later that year, the Camera hosted a free bond show featuring the British documentary entitled, *Desert Victory*, billed as the "most remarkable film of the entire war" (*Daily Press* July 7).[10] Acting as a district chairman for the Sixth War Loan drive, Leachman provided two official war films, *The 957th Day in*

the Pacific and *Just for Remembrance* for a dinner-meeting of the Business and Professional Women's Club in October 1944 (*Daily Press* Oct. 27).[11] The books were closed...on 'a perfect record' for Stillwater in the war bond and Victory loan drives....the city never failed to invest or go over its quotas." This *Daily Press* article of December 12, 1945 indicated "a total of $45,000 worth of E bonds represented the house for the [recent] Victory bond show at the Aggie theater." While local theaters all across the country became involved in bond sales, the Griffith Circuit participated on the national level.

The Hollywood Cavalcade

L. C. Griffith took an active role in the war effort. In July of 1941, he "was appointed director of the central coordinating office of civilian defense for Oklahoma City...The appointment was made by Mayor LaGuardia of New York City, under authority granted by President Roosevelt." Griffith was listed as "a $1 a year man" (*Gazette* July 4). Gaining recognition as the head of the state war council, Griffith, in 1943, "was asked by the National War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry to head up the campaign in behalf of the Third War Loan" (Rice 120). Many film students are familiar with Frank Capra's contribution during the war years with production of his *Why We Fight* series; and many have heard of Hollywood stars touring the country to promote war bonds during World War Two. Most, however, are probably not aware that it was Stillwater's L. C. Griffith who organized the Hollywood Cavalcade to aid in the bond drive.

Moving to New York City to lead the War Activities Committee, Griffith "arranged for over 3,000 movie theatre bond premieres, free to bond purchasers of record" (Rice 13). Rice details Griffith's efforts to mobilize over 200 stars of stage and screen, reporting:

> ...he arranged a triumphal tour of a company known as the Hollywood Cavalcade, a group of 16 top flight motion picture stars and all the personnel necessary to accommodate such a group traveling in a 20-car special train, which visited 15 principle cities across the country. The celebrities included Greer Garson, Betty Hutton, Jose Iturbi, Harpo Marx, James Cagney, Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney and the Kay Kyser band. The Hollywood Cavalcade was credited by the treasury department with assisting in the sale of one billion, seventy-nine million dollars worth of war bonds. (13)

Roy Hoopes, in *When the Stars Went to War*, expands this list with the addition of Fred Astaire, Kathryn Grayson, Paul Henreid and Dick Powell (128).

The *Daily Press* announced on October 29, 1943, "Final returns on the motion picture industry's participation in the Third War Loan Campaign tallied $1,909,889,196 in bond sales according to word received by Claude E. Leachman, Stillwater chairman of the Film War Activities Committee, from L. C. Griffith, general chairman of the campaign." Although Griffith led a successful campaign to market war bonds and created a successful theater chain, his business was destined to share in the later legal battles of Hollywood.

"THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA V. GRIFFITH, ET AL."

Griffith Amusement Company: The Corporate Structure

Despite L. C. Griffith's diligence in promoting war bonds, "There were dark times, too. A rash of federal lawsuits brought against various chain circuits and major film distributors in late 1939 by the United States Department of Justice" included the Griffith theaters (Rice 8). To understand this federal

lawsuit requires a brief outline of the corporate structure of the Griffith businesses from 1919 until the 1948 conclusion of litigation. In 1915, the three brothers purchased their first theater in San Marcos, Texas, and began partnership acquisitions in Oklahoma and Texas in 1917, leading the way in developing a "local partner-manager plan of theatre operation" (Rice 1, 2). From 1919 to 1926, the Griffith brothers operated as the Oklahoma Specialty Film Company, "a 'states rights' franchise for distributing motion picture film, accessories and advertising" (Rice 2).[12]

Griffith Amusement Company was formed in 1926 as part of negotiations with the Universal Chain Theatrical Enterprise which promised needed capital for operation and expansion by the brothers. Universal Pictures, with a 50% interest in this new Griffith venture, continued this business relationship until 1934. Consolidated Theatres, Inc. was formed in 1929, allowing the brothers to take advantage of expansion opportunities.[13] At that time, administrative services were organized and made available to all theaters of both Consolidated and Griffith Amusement.[14] By the time Howard Lewis published *The Motion Picture Industry* in 1933, Universal had divested all theater stock with the exception of holdings in the Schine circuit in New York State and in Griffith Amusement. Lewis believed that Universal, lacking a coherent business plan, erred in choosing to invest in circuits of small local theaters with no presence in larger cities (342-43). Although there are conflicting dates of Universal's divestiture, Paul Liebmann indicated that the studio may well have hoped to acquire the holdings of both Griffith Amusement and Consolidated, which had continued expansion over the years.[15] If Universal terminated the agreement, Griffith had first right to buy out the studio's shares and Liebmann believes Universal underestimated Griffith's ability to gain financing.[16]

Allegations

Civil Action No. 172 of April 28, 1939 "filed complaint against" each of the Griffith Brothers and their businesses, as well as the studio distribution companies supplying movies to the circuit (FS Vol. 68, 181).[17] The *Federal Supplement* indicates that "all of the continuances, however, were at the request of the government," due to wartime activities of Department of Justice attorneys (FS 94, 749). It might be surmised that L. C. Griffith's wartime activities as well as his involvement with local charitable concerns and political leaders may have had some bearing on the outcome of the ensuing litigation. Unlike the love-hate relationship between Hollywood and Washington that Thomas Cripps describes, the Griffith Brothers had developed important ties with government in both Washington and Oklahoma City, avoiding the "countervailing" forces exerted by Washington on the movie industry (218). Thomas Schatz concluded that the Paramount Decision meant "an empathic end to the studio-based production system" (435). However, Michael Conant notes, the government did allow the majors to comply to the consent decree more slowly than the usual two year time limit. Loew's was the last to comply in 1954 (347). Charges against the Griffith businesses centered on the effects of circuit buying power on competing exhibitors. Although no single Griffith enterprise controlled a majority of theaters in Oklahoma, the government charged that these corporations were conspiring to monopolize film exhibition in the state. [18]

Vindication

District Judge Edgar S. Vaught found that the testimony of distributor representatives supported the defense's denial of any conspiracy, calling the charges related to Stillwater, Chickasha, and Enid a local concern of "economy, expense and efficiency in operation... in [a] situation which was purely a local

one" (193-95).[19] Unlike the Paramount antitrust case begun in 1938 and culminating in the consent decree of March 3, 1949 which resulted in theater divestiture, the District Court ruled that future booking negotiations be done on a theater by theater basis in the Griffith case. Believing this to be inadequate protection for independent exhibitors, the government appealed the court's decision.

Because studio distributors had purposefully sought out theater circuits, as well as independent exhibitors, willing to sign franchise agreements of three to five years rather than on a season to season basis, the court felt Griffith had not initiated any attempt to monopolize film exhibition.[20] As exhibitors, the Griffith circuit avoided the complicating circumstances of the production-distribution-exhibition companies in Hollywood which proved to be both a vertical and horizontal integration of business.

The District Court decision in Civil Action No. 172 actually offers praise of the Griffith brothers as "exceptionally good theater operators, keeping constantly abreast of the development of a rapidly growing industry" (FS Vol. 68, 185). Contrary to the prosecution's allegations of a "sinister" conspiracy, Judge Vaught applauded the successful business practices of the defendants. The United States Supreme Court upheld the lower court decision, stating that, "ample injunction relief has been directed to meet the ends of justice" (FS Vol. 94, 755).[21] Simon Whitney indicates "that the decrees opened up a few closed towns to competition" but no major changes occurred after the court ruled on the cases brought against three theater circuits in 1939: Griffith, Schine and Crescent (171). Unlike the Hollywood studios, the Griffith chain remained intact until 1983.

CLOSING THE FAMILY BUSINESS

The Final Griffith Years in Stillwater

Stillwater movie houses would remain in Griffith/Leachman control until being purchased by Martin Theatres, Inc. on May 3, 1983, which later became Carmike Cinemas, Inc. (Rice 26).[22] Before the sale in 1983 the Griffith business went through many transformations after "The Skipper" suffered a stroke in 1946. By 1949, leadership of the organization had been transferred to Henry S. Griffing who had been executive vice-president of Griffith Consolidated Theatres. Ensuing corporate restructuring resulted in a new business entity on December 1, 1949 called Video Independent Theatres (Rice 16).

Claude Leachman continued the management of the Stillwater movie houses until his retirement in 1953 and retained his Griffith-Video partnership until the sale to Martin (Rice 138). Before his retirement, Leachman guided the opening of the Moonlight in 1949, the first drive-in theater in Stillwater, designed for a 600-car capacity. Two additional "ozoners" were subsequently established in 1966 and 1968. In 1980, the Aggie was "twinned," becoming Centre #1 and #2 (Rice 138). The sale of Griffith-Video in 1983 marked the beginning of the end of the "family" movie business on Main Street. Stillwater would become a multiplex town.

Drawing Conclusions

This brief examination of the business of movies in Stillwater illustrates the importance of motion pictures in the life, both civic and commercial, of one small town, Stillwater, Oklahoma. Multiply that experience by a countless number of other communities outside the metropolitan hubs of America and the cultural and financial impact of film becomes apparent. The film industry, providing employment to thousands, contributed to the fiscal health of

Hollywood. The financial benefits of the entertainment business for Stillwater merchants, drawing from the surrounding trade area, began with the thousands attending the Opera House celebration on July 4, 190l. By 1948, the Main Street theater district included three well-established, yet modern movie houses, with a fourth near the A & M campus. Civic projects and charities reaped financial benefits from the theater operators' commitment to community service, while the theater businesses, in turn, gained the goodwill of the moviegoing public. With the exception of studio and star participation in wartime fundraising, the charitable contributions of local movie businesses probably far outweighed the generosity of Hollywood. As Rosten explained, "There is a basic difference between giving and spending, Hollywood spends freely; it gives cautiously." His 1941 statistics on donations to charities and philanthropic causes revealed that moviemakers gave a "median sum [of] $365, the median percentage approximately 1.2 [of their annual income]" (191, 103). With incomes usually we;; over $100,000 annually, movie producers, raised with immigrant frugality, remembering their start-up on a shoestring in the exhibition business, remained cautious in giving-away their money. "But movie people are generous to people whom they know" (Rosten 102). One aspect of that generosity manifested itself in the loyalty to family, providing jobs to relatives. The exhibitors in Stillwater were also family affairs--the Leachman Brothers; the Griffith Brothers; the Tulls, father and son. Both the Hollywood and Stillwater family businesses shared retail experience, providing the skills to define their customer base, creating and marketing a product that would attract a loyal audience, eager to see the latest release. Andrew Bergman in his study of Depression-era movies remarks, "in those painful days [of the Depression], the marquees of America's Broadways and Main Streets attracted the dispossessed farmers, the failed bankers and all the sellers who had no buyers. Americans

needed their movies. Moving pictures had come to play too important a role in their lives to be considered just another luxury item" (xii). Movies had become mainstream, a staple of popular culture.

Popularity created ambivalent reactions to the movie-mania. Locally, Rev. Nalley felt duty-bound to criticize the industry, while admitting there existed something both good and vulgar in film, never demanding a censorship committee. The passionate proponent of the Neely Bill conceded there were men of good intentions in the business. Mayor Thompson qualified his stand against Sunday movies by acknowledging his respect for the theater operators. Will Hays, too, could be sympathetic to the moviemaker's dilemma of conforming to the demands of the Production Code Administration, while struggling to release commercially successful films (Leff 59).

Like the Depression-era gangster films, some bit of good could be found in the worst. A "public enemy" could still love Mom. A cultural phenomenon, like the movies, could be both a threat to morality in minors and an innocent entertainment for wives and children. William Couch, law-breaker, facilitated the opening of the "Unassigned Lands," creating new homes and new opportunities for thousands. William Selig and all the other independent renegade filmmakers created a new entertainment industry destined to become important in the lives of millions of Americans. Claude Leachman and "Red" Russ, working to fully capitalize on the potential of their businesses, defying city law, and advertising their defiance, brought movies to Main Street on a daily basis. The religious opponents quietly let the issue fade away in Stillwater, understanding that "Americans needed their movies."

The Federal Government, happy to call a truce in anti-trust suits during the war years, later became determined to protect the public from "big business" in film production, distribution, and exhibition. The Hollywood studios were more

seriously affected by the courts than the Griffith circuit, but ultimately, social post-World War II conditions produced the end of the dominance by both studios and regional circuits. From television to lawn-care, the suburban lifestyle occupied Americans with other activities. Technology, the catalyst for the growth of the movie industry, provided emergency first aid—wide screen, 3-D, and Cinerama. Theater circuits serving hundreds of small-town theaters across the nation, as well as the Hollywood movie studios, became investment opportunities for corporations with no experience in the movie industry, but an understanding that "Americans needed their movies," banking on future screenings on television and home video, knowing how to manage the "bottom-line." Thomas Doherty describes "the moviehouse as a communal space...For momentous and bracing news,...managers-turned-deacons led audiences-turned-congregations in recitations of the Lord's Prayer....In victory or crisis, the moviehouse provided a ritual space" (84). Sterile multiplex theaters, reminiscent of the early Spartan nickelodeons, "crowd containers," as Cripps described them, have replaced the moviehouses that competed in their improvements of comfort and sensory opulence (15). Today, the technology is superior, but the sense of community has disappeared.

Just as "Americans needed their movies," the study of film in America now has a need for more research into the motion picture business outside the gilded walls of the often discussed "picture palaces" of larger cities. Small-town movie exhibition once embodied business, pleasure, and community service. The theaters on Main Street in Stillwater or Anytown, USA were just as "grand," and equally as important, to the people of those small communities for more than the entertainment they provided. A study of theater exhibition, distanced from the metropoli, reveals much about the "*au courant*" in American culture in the early years of the movie industry, as well as demonstrating the mainstream

acceptance of film. Theater owners were respected members of the community, and theater audiences on Main Street included bankers, store clerks, and farmers. Future research, examining the films distributed to local venues by circuits such as Griffith Amusement, will surely reveal much about the local culture of non-urban America.

Notes

[1] Stillwater OK, founded in 1889, became the county seat of Payne County, as well as the home of the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (A & M became Oklahoma State University in 1957).

[2] "The United States of America vs. Griffith, et. al., case, known as No. 172 - Civil, filed in the United State District Court for the Western District of Oklahoma on August 28, 1939, [which] charged the defendants with violation of Section 1 and 2 of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and sought relief under Section 4 (Rice 9)."

[3] For more information on the Hollywood film industry, there are many good resources readily available. For insight into the business of filmmaking, rather than a discussion of the art and thematic issues of film, see Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1976); David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Modes of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985); Gerald Mast, ed., *The Movies in Our Midst: Documents in the Cultural History of Film in America* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[4] Located at 116 East Ninth Street, one block east of Main Street, the building is now the site of an antique mall. Renovations and modernizations have obscured the original grandeur of the Opera House.

[5] The *Stillwater Gazette* will be referred to as the *Gazette* in text and citations.

[6] This article celebrates the seventeen year career of projectionist Fred Turner beginning at the Alamo, owned by W. H. Cox in 1913. Turner moved to the newly built Camera Theatre that same year.

[7] The *Stillwater Daily Press* will be referred to as the *Daily Press* in text and citations.

[8] Leff and Simmons provide a "behind-the-scenes" examination of film censorship. For a detailed analysis of the *Payne Fund Studies*, see Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996). For discussions on religious and political efforts to censor movie content, consult Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) and Richard S. Randall, *Censorship of the Movies: The Social and Political Control of Mass Media* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1968). Also, see Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996).

[9] Unlike the World War I Liberty Bond campaign, World War II bonds were issued in lower denominations. Savings stamps were added to the program, as well. As Morgenthau emphasized in 1941, bonds and stamps were not "for the few...[but] for the many. They are for the great mass of people" (Samuel 18-19).

[10] For an analysis of this British Ministry of Information film of 1943, see Peter Rollins, "Document & Drama in *Desert Victory*," *Film & History* 4.2 (1974) 11-13.

[11] *Just for Remembrance* is described as "a harrowing three-minute account of the collection of personal effects sent home to the families of dead soldiers ('A bundle of souvenirs in place of a man')." William Hughes, "The Propagandist's Art," *Film & History* 4.3 (1974): 46. The National Archives in College Park, MD provided information on *The 957th Day in the Pacific*. A Navy training film, produced in cooperation with the Treasury Department for the Sixth War Loan Drive, *The 957th Day*, depicts a "typical day of war." The harsh visual reality of dead and wounded American soldiers sharply contrasts with narration of "trite newsflashes from the U.S." For information on "Victory Films" refer to Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993) 78-84.

[12] A "states rights" organization bought or leased films from small independent producers and then leased those films to local exhibitors (Lewis 11).

[13] Consolidated was formed because some stockholders in Griffith Amusement did not favor further theater acquisitions,

[14] Those services included "film buying and booking, bookkeeping and auditing..., provision of advertising and promotion materials, and truck delivery and pickup throughout the territory" (Rice 4).

[15] Records regarding the antitrust suit begun in 1939 contradict the time at which difficulties between Universal and Griffith Amusement occurred. The *Federal Supplement*, Vol. 68, stated, "The contract with the Universal Chain continued in force and effect until sometime in 1928 when difficulty was encountered by Griffith Amusement Company in procuring advancement of funds from the Universal Chain, and the contract was terminated" (184).[15] Rice, indicating no contractual termination as early as 1928, does concur with Lewis' premise that Universal did intend to discontinue involvement in theater operations (3).

[16] L. C. Griffith approached the First National Bank in Oklahoma City, receiving the moneys needed to implement the stock buy-out (Liebmann). Rice describes the steps taken by Griffith stockholders, writing, "In February of 1934,...Western States Theatres, Inc., was formed for the prime purpose of re-acquiring Griffith interests in Universal Chain Theatrical Enterprises" (Rice 6). Earlier, in 1930, R. E. Griffith formed another partnership company within the corporate umbrella, but in 1939, R. E. Griffith Theatres, Inc. became independent and expanded into additional businesses as Westex and Theatre Enterprises (Rice 6). All these companies would be included in the government's antitrust suit in 1939.

[17] Volume 94 of the *Federal Supplement* outlines the history and progress of this case from district court to the United States Supreme Court.

[18] Evidence regarding 243 theaters in 93 towns was introduced in District Court and upon appeal to the Supreme Court in 1948 a total of 331 theaters in 101 locations were included in the prosecution's argument. However, the Supreme Court allowed only those theaters in operation between 1934 and 1939 as admissible evidence under the original complaint.

[19] The *Federal Supplement*, Volume 68, comments, "the representatives of the distributors who took part in these negotiations testify that the buying power of the defendants was not considered the controlling factor in their negotiations, and some of them specify towns in the territory where they have never licensed their product first, second or third run to the defendants but have always licensed the product to their competitors" (186).

[20] In agreements with major distributors, Griffith had signed four such franchise contracts, with no more than two distributors at any time from 1930 to 1940. Therefore, Judge Vaught saw no attempt at restraint of trade (FS Vol. 68, 192). Film product was available from distributors not in franchise agreements with Griffith and no conspiracy was proven. "In the motion picture decision

[United States v. Paramount Pictures] the court apparently was influenced by the fact that no producer made enough films to supply its own theaters" indicating a horizontal conspiracy with studios as customers and suppliers among themselves (Hale 220).

[21] The court remarked that "the government insists that these corporations so far as their operations are concerned in the theatre business, be destroyed. This certainly would be a most drastic punishment when the suit was filed in 1939" (755).

[22] It should be noted that much of the information available on the Griffith circuit was rescued by Roger Rice as corporate offices in Oklahoma City were being closed by Martin.

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