The **Silver Screen** in Indiana

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Before AMC and other multiplex cinemas forced many independent theaters out of business, it was small neighborhood cinemas who "made movies better," as Nicole Kidman famously says in an AMC promo. Today, even multiplexes like AMC have begun to struggle due to the rise of streaming services.

In cataloguing the many documents at the Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology that movie theater enthusiast Gene Gladson collected in his time, patterns begin to appear. Fires, riots, and parking lots are all prevalent motifs throughout the archive collection of theater documentation Gladson amassed. Whether we are looking at newspaper articles, promotional items, or survey records, it becomes clear that the history of theaters in Indiana is reflective of greater societal shifts that reach beyond the silver screen.

At the turn of the 20th century, Indiana set up funds for the creation of opera houses and theaters in towns and cities across the state. Today, only a small fraction of those historic theaters are still in operation. The progression of motion picture technology, urban decentralization, and the corporatization of movie theaters are all factors in the fading of the neighborhood or downtown theater, but perhaps a new push for the funding of the arts could bring these theaters back.

In the early 1900s, neighborhood "nickelodeons" were common, especially in bigger cities and towns, and neighborhood theaters survived into the 1960s. But, along with the flight to the suburbs in the '70s and '80s came the deaths of many independent theaters and the rise of the mall multiplex movie theater. In a 1980 *News-Sentinel* article, reporter Dick Isenhour discusses Fort Wayne's Rialto Theater and the possibility that it might be refurbished. Isenhour notes both urban flight and urban blight in accounting for the decline of the theater,

Fort Wayne's Rialto Theatre

and he cites an outbreak of violence in 1967 in which a riot broke out during a screening of *The Ten Commandments*. He goes on to write that the theater's owner

identified a need for community support if the theater were to come back in any way, and a group called the South-Central Alliance of Neighborhoods attempted to bring the theater back to its former glory. However, the group received no response from civic leaders on requests for support. If the theater could have garnered public funding or at least spoken support from local leadership, there is a chance it could still be operating today rather than sitting vacant.

Changing movie theater technology also made it difficult for independent theaters to keep up with chain multiplexes. Reporter Rita Rose writes in a 1985 *Indianapolis Star* column that the Eastwood Theater in Indianapolis was the best equipped to keep up with chain competitors because of its large screen, "six-channel Dolby Stereo, coupled with 750 comfortable seats," and cheaper tickets. Because of its updated, curved screen, it was the area's only venue to see the first *Star Wars* film, which connects the effects of the changing technology of film screening at the time to the cultural changes regarding what movies the public goes to the theater to see. The owner of the Eastwood, Ron Keedy, also called out the film companies as antagonists to the independent movie theater because they would not bother doing business with places with only one screen. However, even the Eastwood was part of a shopping center and offered a large parking lot, which highlights the shifts in American culture and suburbanization that are prominent in the history of theaters in Indiana.

The Eastwood Theatre, part of a shopping center on the East side of Indy that was anchored by the Ayr-Way department store.

In Bloomington, Kerasotes Theatres at one time owned both the Von Lee and Buskirk-Chumley Theater (formerly the Indiana Theatre). They also opened several multiplexes in Bloomington, which are now AMC Showplaces. Kerasotes Theatres' hold on the movie theater business made it difficult for smaller theaters in the town to survive, and only the Buskirk-Chumley still shows movies downtown today. The Buskirk's continuing success is owed in large part to the city of Bloomington stepping in to save it in the early 2000s and grants that the theater received from the state of Indiana. In 2001, the city acquired the Buskirk-Chumley using taxpayer funding, which was a controversial show of support for the arts in the Bloomington community. The partnership between the city and the theater was then praised at an Indiana Arts Commission meeting. Because the theater had support from the city, city officials were able to convince Kerasotes Theatres to lift

The Buskirk-Chumley Theatre several years after renovations.

the ban on using it to screen films, and the Buskirk-Chumley continues to show movies today. Thus, this large show of support from the city and the community, both financial and vocal, allowed the former Indiana Theater to escape the same fate as the Von Lee, which became retail and office space around the same time that the Buskirk-Chumley made its rebound.

The Von Lee before and after becoming retail and office space.

Aside from the multiplex boom in the 1980s, parking lots became another nail in the coffin for independent theaters. As people spread out into suburbs and the United States grew its car-centric infrastructure, movie theaters were purchased and demolished to provide parking lots for other businesses. Among DHPA's records about the Historic Theater Inventory, there are newspaper articles describing the fates of at least eight theaters that were razed for more parking. This phenomenon does not only belong to the 20th century, as the Indianapolis Star published a 2004 article about the razing of the Hilton U. Brown Theatre on Butler University's campus to make way for more parking lots. The Palace Theatre in Allen County, the Lincoln Theatre in Elkhart County, the Sipe Theatre in Howard County, the Madison Grand Opera House in Jefferson County, the Wallace Theater in Miami County, the Crystal Theatre in Noble County, and the Carlton Theatre in Vanderburgh County all met the same fates from the 1950s to the 2000s. There are likely other theaters throughout the state that have also been razed to become parking lots, and it is likely that if these historic theaters had been given more support from their communities, they could still be around today to find new avenues of success.

Although headlines that read "Theater razed for bank parking lot" make the future for historic theaters seem bleak, the success of theaters like the Artcraft in Franklin and the Buskirk-Chumley in Bloomington inspire hope for the independent theater. These theaters also provide lessons in what historic local arts businesses need: local and state support and funding for the arts. While a total paradigm shift in American culture may be necessary to ever have the movie house culture of days of yore, supporting at least some of these local venues would help engage local communities in the arts and push back against the corporate culture of the movie theaters. Learn more about historic Indiana theaters by visiting the DHPA's State Historic Architectural and Archaeological Research Database at on.IN.gov/SHAARD.