

GOING TO THE “MOVIES”: AN AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT SKETCH.

The early development of motion pictures as commercial entertainment evolved around the beginning of the 20th Century with the development of motion picture cameras using 35 mm celluloid film coated with light sensitive silver nitrate emulsion which produced black and white [gray scale] images. A rapidly evolving entertainment industry arose largely in Hollywood, California where numerous studios were incorporated [e.g., Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 20th Century Fox, Paramount, RKO, Columbia, Universal-International, et al]. Similarly, iconic Movie Stars were made famous along with the renowned screen-writers, directors and producers contributing memorable [and some not-so-memorable] works. Going to the movies became a national entertainment pastime even during the world war one and two eras and the Great Depression of the early 20th Century.

TALKING PICTURES [a.k.a. “TALKIES”] EMERGE WITH AL JOLSON IN *THE JAZZ SINGER* IN 1927

Early technology produced many “silent” films [no recorded sound tracks] where captions were used to capture some of the actor’s dialogue or to explain the scene in abbreviated form. Often Theatres showing silent films would have live narrators and musicians such as organists or pianists that would play appropriate music to accompany the film. Some even traveled from theatre to theatre to provide music and narration for various films. Early sound recording efforts included recording dialogue and music on a phonograph record and then attempting to synchronize the recording with the film projector through a system of belts which proved unreliable. Vitaphone developed a 16-inch phonograph disc played at 33 1/3 rpm that was successfully linked to a projector which was used to produce the first “Talkie” film, *The Jazz Singer* in 1927. Later, a consortium of technology providers [e.g., Radio Corporation of America (RCA), Westrex (Western Electric was a division of the Bell Telephone Company)] developed optical sound tracks that were imprinted directly along the photographic images of the film and through photocell “soundbox” projection, permitted recording spoken dialogues, actors’ voices and accompanying musical scores, often composed just for a given film. Thus, entered the era of the “Talkies” in the 1930’s. The first Vitaphone Talking Picture *The Jazz Singer* starring renowned singer/actor Al Jolson thrilled moviegoers. The 1950’s musical “*Singin’ in the Rain*” depicted the transition from silent films to sound films and the development of “voice-overs” where an actor with inadequate singing skills could appear to be singing, yet the actual voice was that of a highly talented performer. Marnie Nixon often provided the singing voice-overs for many renowned stars such as Deborah Kerr in *The King and I*. Another notable musical production, *The Student Prince* starring Edmund Purdom openly featured the brilliant operatic voice of film-star tenor Mario Lanza providing voice-over songs for Purdom.

With the advent of more sophisticated sound technology, in the early 1950’s Cinerama productions released the first three strip wide-screen film *This is Cinerama* which featured seven-channel “Stereophonic Sound” where speakers behind the screen and mounted on sidewalls and rear of theatres, gave the audience high fidelity directional sound for increased realism. These features are still used in today’s ultra high definition [UHD] 4K resolution digital projection theaters and in home theater installations with 5.1, 7.1, and now 9.1 multichannel surround-sound systems.

TECHNICOLOR® BRINGS NEW REALISM TO THE MOVIES

The first feature length color motion picture was filmed by a British studio using a color film separation

process and dye transfer in 1912 and was a documentary on a British expedition to India. Early color film used a two part red and green process which provided fair color, but lacked the essential blue component to create full authentic color reproduction capability.

Black and White film gave way to an incredible revolution of color films made possible by the invention of Technicolor ®. Using a very high quality color dye-transfer process the deep rich hues of the Technicolor prints allowed for spectacular musical film productions with extraordinarily beautiful imagery filmed not only on huge interior sound stages, but in the natural beauty of striking outdoor settings. The first two major classic Technicolor films released in 1939 were *Gone With The Wind*, starring Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Olivia DeHavilland; and *The Wizard of Oz* featuring Judy Garland, Bert Lahr, Ray Bolger and Frank Morgan. The “golden age” of the very popular Technicolor musical and documentary film hits included “*Singin’ in the Rain*,” starring Gene Kelly, Debbie Reynolds and Donald O’Connor; Director Cecil B. Demille’s *The Ten Commandments*, starring Charlton Heston [as Moses], Jon Derek, Yul Brynner, Edward G. Robinson and many other renowned stars. Walt Disney Studios produced animated Cartoon film hits such as *Bambi*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Alice in Wonderland*; and numerous “short” film animated cartoons such as *Mickey Mouse* and *Donald Duck*. Warner Brothers studios also produced popular cartoons such as *Bugs Bunny*, *Sylvester the Cat*, *Yosemite Sam*, *Elmer Fudd*, *The Flintstones*, et al.

Mel Blanc was a renowned and versatile voice artist who provided the stylized voice dialogue for many of these cartoon characters. Blanc stated [at a cartoon symposium at the University of Colorado at Boulder], that cartoons were intended more for adults than for children but appealed to both. There were subtleties and implications in the plots and scripts that adults and older youth appreciated, and younger children liked the humor and zany interactions of the characters.

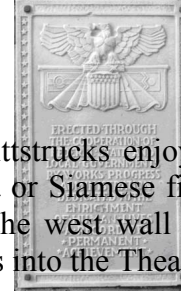
HISTORY OF THE PRINCESS THEATRE LATER CALLED THE RIO THEATRE.

Meeker’s first movie theatre, the came to Meeker with the building of the Princess Theatre by Harlan Coulter in 1920. When Glen B. and Dixie Wittstruck purchased the theatre in 1936 it was renamed the Rio Theatre, possibly reflecting the spanish name for River, since the White River was an icon of the town and County.

THE WITTSTRUCK FAMILY BRINGS QUALITY ENTERTAINMENT TO MEEKER

When I was growing up on our family Ranch next to the k-t ranch six miles east of meeker, I became friends with Richard Wittstruck, whose father and mother, Glen and Dixie Wittstruck owned and operated the Rio Theatre. Glen was originally from Nebraska and was quite a showman. He and Dixie often traveled to Denver to book “pictures” [as the movies were then called] for ensuing months. They drove black Cadillacs up until 1958 when they bought one of the new Lincoln Continental Mark Three models in white with a rolldown rear window which Richard and I thought was very cool. Dixie was the daughter of Richard Magor who owned the Sleepy Cat resort and another property which was later owned by Bill Gooseman, and was the source of many fun times fishing on the adjacent ponds and boating with a home-made raft made of oil barrels.

Glen and Dixie's home adjoined, the Rio Theatre building, and was adjacent to the Joy Motor Company’s Ford Garage, The home was light tan and brown with fence and gate off the main street entrance, and was



very well built with plush wall to wall gray carpeting and a fireplace. The Wittstrucks enjoyed having tropical fish and an aquarium with variety of Caribbean species including Beta or Siamese fighting fish which I always found fascinating to watch. Their home was built attached to the west wall of the Rio Theatre and a doorway from the lobby area into their home permitted direct access into the Theatre.

RIO THEATRE “ART DECO” INTERIOR DESIGN.

Photographs of the Art Deco Moderne interior design style [utilized by many major urban movie palaces, and by small town rural cinemas of the early twentieth century] of the Rio Theatre are rare and as yet not located. The Denver Public Library Western History and Genealogy archive was able to provide the only known photo of the exterior of the building, taken in 1967. Consequently, a verbal description of the aspects of the design and accommodations is all that are currently available for this historic and iconic structure that was unfortunately demolished in the 1970's to make way for the Rio blanco County Abstract Company.

Another classic Art Deco architectural design is exemplified by the 1939 Meeker Elementary School, designed by renowned architect Walter DeMourdan and built by the Work Projects Administration [WPA] through a special order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The cost to build

the school was \$21,000 and was supported by donation of labor and resources by local residents who quarried and hauled the beautiful red native sandstone.

Unfortunately the classic historic school has been remodeled and repurposed as part of the Justice Center so only the sandstone exterior remains. [*see WPA plaque that was mounted on the west entrance to the historic school*].

The Rio Theatre while not large, was built with red brick and would accommodate several hundred patrons. The building extended from the main street entrance all the way to the alley. There was a “cry room” attached to the ladies rest room on the east side of the lobby, with a glass window so mothers could attend their infants and small children, and still watch the movie without crying interfering with the other patron’s enjoyment of the film in the main theatre. A speaker was installed so they could hear the sound behind the glass window. The concession stand was on the east side of the lobby where popcorn and soda were vended, and the stairway to the projection booth was next to the entrance to the men's restroom. The projectionist at the time was Gerald Dickman who later became the postmaster in Meeker. Charles Rigby [son of Percy Rigby, local Attorney at law] served as a custodian, and cleaned the theatre after the shows.

RIO THEATRE PROJECTION TECHNOLOGY

The projection booth was small and crowded but was fascinating as we often got to watch how the films were prepared for showing. Two projectors with carbon arc lamp housings were present and had a manual cutover switch so one projector could be cued up with a film while the other one was running.

The projectionist would strike up the carbon arc lamp, and adjust it, then watch for the film cue mark, [a small round circle on the film], and when the cue mark came up near [~15 seconds] the end of the reel, would step on the cue switch and start the second projector and douse the power to the first projector. Then he would pull the film out of the first projector housing, put it on the rewinder reel, and load the next film in sequence onto the projector so he could start it up when the current reel ran out. Films usually ran for about 15 minutes per reel, and took about four to eight reels depending on the length of the film as I

recall. Most feature films were about 90 minutes but some major films such as *Ben-Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* ran longer.

Occasionally a film would break and of course the lights would come up and the projectionist would have to pull the reel and splice it, then reload it and start the movie again.

TODAY'S DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AND PROJECTION TECHNOLOGY

Comparison of 20th century film and projection technology offers quite contrast to modern movie houses which are all computerized and use either continuous large film reels, or more recently have all now converted to all digital and use digital projectors with optical disc recordings. Some say that photographic film still offers the best resolution and color rendition, but digital has evolved as the state-of-the-art media now.

There is something to be said, however for the quality and nostalgia of the story telling that went on with the older films that we don't often see in today's high tech computer graphic imagery [CGI] synthesized special effects films. I always enjoy seeing the old restored films on Turner Classic Movies [TCM ®] and other TV venues, and seldom attend the modern films.

FILM PROJECTION TECHNOLOGY AND FORMAT LAYOUTS

Film "Trailers" [which were the equivalent of today's TV advertising commercials] were spliced together and shown before the main feature, and included ads from local merchants as well as "previews of coming attractions" as well as News Reels, and a Cartoon much as they are today in the large multi-theatre complexes. Thus a menu of "news, sports, cartoons and a feature film" would offer nightly entertainment for locals, much as modern television does and given the isolation of a small town, was a highlight for youth and adults of the community.

A monthly show calendar or "playbill" was issued and mailed to local residents so you could be sure to attend films which were of interest. Films were advertised in the Meeker Herald as well. There were typically three films per week, which showed in repetition on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, another on Wednesday and Thursday and then on Friday and Saturday which were usually the big family and action film dates. Often Westerns would be shown on Friday and Saturdays, and sometimes there would be Saturday kid's cartoon and family film matinee.

Walt Disney's True Life Adventure nature series of films about animals in the desert and mountains, narrated by Rex Allen were always especially fascinating.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True-Life_Adventures

Sunday through Tuesday would usually feature the big family films and epic shows such as *The Ten Commandments*. I still have a collection of Rio Theatre playbills from the 50's in some of my memorabilia.

The ticket booth was on the east side of the Lobby, and prices were around 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for kids but gradually increased later in the 50's. Folding doors separated the lobby from the right and left theatre entrance aisles to keep light from the outside doors from hitting the screen if the movie was already being projected.

MARQUEE AND ADVERTISING FOR FILMS

The outside of the theatre featured a yellow plastic neon illuminated triangular-shaped marquee where clip on letters advertised the featured films and shorts [or short subjects] such as cartoons and newsreels prior to the beginning of the main feature. It was necessary to climb out a window at the rear of the projection booth to take out the lettering and change the yellow background marquee which was angled so it could be read from the east and the west with a vertical neon lighted sign with the letters RIO.

Playbills were displayed on the outside of the lobby entrance featuring upcoming films and also inside on the hallway near the ticket booth. Another playbill sign was mounted on the outside of the Meeker Hotel and today serves as a bulletin board for community events. Playbills have become a form of collector's memorabilia considerable art work was expended on making them attractive and exciting to patrons.

OTHER RIO THEATRE EVENTS AND ATTRACTIONS

Rich Lyttle's *Ropin' the Past* article on the Rio Theatre noted that the theatre also had "Bank Night" on Wednesdays where drawings were held before the show started for prizes and helped increase attendance during a slower part of the week. Jean Scott taught tap dancing and ballet for local youth using the stage and Lucille Dunbar accompanied the dancers on a piano. Dance recitals were often given in the theatre.

BUSINESSES SHARING FRONT OF RIO THEATRE BUILDING

A beauty salon was also present adjacent to the Theatre entrance operated by Lorraine Findley on the west front side of the building. A realtor's office was located on the west front side

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN OF THE RIO THEATRE

The decor of the Theatre was classic "Art Deco" from the 1920-1950 era and featured some interesting period light fixtures on the sidewalls that were dimmed during the film and then turned up with rheostats before and after the movie. As I recall they had some red diffusers with arrow patterns on the side. A stage in front of the screen also had a piano in the corner. Music from 45 rpm records was always played before and after shows and my most memorable recollection was Dean Martin's song *That's Amore* with lyrics including *...When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore..*

MODERN 1950'S RENOVATIONS: CINEMASCOPE ® WIDE SCREEN TECHNOLOGY

Glen was always progressive and brought new innovations to the theatre. When the first wide screen or *CinemaScope* ® films were produced in 1953, Glenn remodeled the theatre, taking down the older standard 4 x 3 format screen and installed a new 16 x 9 aspect ratio CinemaScope ® curved screen, and stereophonic sound speakers to accommodate the new sound format. The screen was curved out slightly from the center to the edges to enhance the visual effect of depth. Due to width limitations of the theatre, the screen curtain had to be removed in order to extend the screen all the way to the right and left sides of the theatre. Black masking draperies with electric motors were installed and permitted masking the edges of the new wide screen when conventional 4 x 3 format films were shown. Top and bottom masking was

also required to accommodate the wider anamorphic projection screen image correctly. Existing projectors were outfitted with add-on Panavision anamorphic lenses which used prismatic optics to widen the compressed image on the 35-mm film to fill the 16 x 9 ratio wide screen. This wide screen technology has been carried forth in the form of modern high definition television curved screens using the new 4K high resolution imagery which now approaches the quality of the original projection film images of the 1950's.

The first CinemaScope film to debut at the Rio was *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, in 1954 starring Howard Keel, Jane Powell, Russ Tamblyn, and other notable actors including a Dancer from the New York City Ballet. The house raising scene was one of the most spectacular dance scenes of the film enhanced by the Cinemascope camera to show some amazing choreography. The first CinemaScope film produced in 1953 was *the Robe*, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

BUCKSKIN DRIVE IN THEATRE IN IGNACIO, COLORADO

Glen and Dixie also owned the Buckskin drive-in theatre in Ignacio south of Durango which served many members of the Southern Ute tribe and was at the time one of the largest outdoor drive-in theatres in the country. High intensity carbon arc lamps used to illuminate the wide projection screen [125 feet wide by 60 feet tall] were necessary for "long throw" projection of the movie over more than 200 yards [twice the length of a football field]. The concession stand was also very popular among patrons and the evening shows were often full of patrons in a variety of vehicles.

DENVER AND RIO GRANDE WESTERN RAILROAD NARROW GAUGE RAILWAY: popular venue for film making in the 1950's

One of the highlights of going down to Ignacio with Richard, his sister Dede and their parents was to get on the Rio Grande narrow gauge train at Silverton and ride it down the spectacular run along the Animas River Gorge on down to Durango where they would pick us up for the drive on down to Ignacio from Durango. This same train now exists and is now known as the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad which is a great attraction for tourists especially in the fall when the spectacular aspens and the towering San Juan Mountains are at their best viewing.

The narrow gauge steam locomotive train with orange and black cars was often used to make Western themed movies in the spectacular San Juan mountains between Silverton and Durango and we were there at the time they were making the movie *the Maverick Queen* with Barbara Stanwyck in Silverton around 1955 which was fascinating for us.

The 1952 film *Rio Grande* was also shot on the spectacular San Juan mountain railway between Silverton and Durango, depicting the early day conflict between the Denver and Rio Grande Western Rail Road [D&RGWRR] and the Santa Fe Railway who were competitively building the first link through the high Rocky Mountains via the northern route in the central Rockies, and the lower Royal Gorge route respectively. Other films shot on the D & RG WRR included *Around the World in 80 Days* [with David Niven and Shirley MacLaine], *Night Passage* [with James Stewart and Brandon deWilde], among many others.

DR. WILLIS AND JEAN B. SCOTT PURCHASE AND OPERATE THE RIO THEATRE CIRCA 1958.

Glen and Dixie sold the theatre to Dr. Willis and Jean Scott in the late 50's and moved to Sarasota Florida. Glen and Dixie later returned to Meeker in retirement in the seventies and owned the home on sixth street just west of the old high school building now the preschool/admin building. Glen passed away in his home in 1981 and Dixie later married M.F. "Brandy" Brandborg and lived in Meeker for a time until later moving to grand junction where she passed away a few years ago.