

## Two Reels and a Crank<sup>1</sup>

By

Nessie S. Watson

### Editor's Introduction

This paper was written more than thirty years ago. Although ACCOUNTS publishes only new essays composed expressly for it, this paper well merits an exception. Itself arguably an historical document, it is likely the most authoritative source on Mifflinburg's movie theatre in existence. Its author, Nessie S. Watson, passed away in 2009 and the essay is used with permission of her son, Jace Watson.

In 1979 Mrs. Watson enrolled at Susquehanna University in the course "Introduction To Film," taught by Richard Kamber. Her project was based on interviews and a close study of newspapers and documents. Professor Kamber wrote the following note on the front page: "An excellent piece of first hand research. I'm making a copy of this paper for my files. You ought to submit this paper or a portion of it for publication in a local newspaper. A+".

This paper would not have appeared here but for Robert Lynch, who, after bringing the manuscript's existence to the editor's attention, worked closely with the family of Nessie Watson to secure permission to include it in this issue of ACCOUNTS.

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<sup>1</sup> This article by Nessie W. Watson was submitted as a class assignment to Prof. Richard Kamber, in a course at Susquehanna University Ms. Watson took, Introduction to Film, in the fall of 1979. The paper is presented here with almost no changes (most exceptions are to correct a very few spelling and punctuation instances to re-number her footnotes, and to add identified editorial comments). The original paper included an appendix of photographs, newspaper movie notices, and correspondence that, because of contemporary copyright restrictions, cannot be included. Our thanks to Jeff Mensch for supplying the two photographs which appear here.

## **Two Reels and a Crank**

**By**

**Nessie S. Watson**

Mifflinburg, Pa, has had movies for a period of sixty years with its beginning dating back close to 1894 when Thomas A. Edison displayed his peep-show Kinetoscope in New York City. A town of perhaps 1,000 people at the beginning of the twentieth century Mifflinburg would today merit recognition if research were done to find the town with the most progressive and longest-lived movie palace. Located in the heart of Buffalo Valley, Union County, Mifflinburg citizens enjoyed movies in 1904 -- the days of "two reels and a crank." Quite an achievement considering the fact that only two years earlier, in 1902, the first motion picture theatre opened in Los Angeles, California, known as the Electric Theatre.

The very first movies in Mifflinburg were shown by itinerants at Sankey Hall or perhaps at the high school. Located on Walnut Street near Fourth, Sankey Hall was a ramshackle structure which was available to touring shows and local talent. It was during this year, 1904, that a movie was presented at the Opera House in Lewisburg, located nine miles east of Mifflinburg. A group of interested people from Mifflinburg boarded the evening train and journeyed to Lewisburg to see the movie. They came home enthused, remarking that the pictures were "true and distinct," and the action smoother than in earlier films shown by the itinerants.<sup>2</sup>

Later that same year (1904) a Mr. Brosius of Williamsport opened the first theatre in Mifflinburg. The palace, as they were called in those days, was located on the northwest corner of Chestnut and Third Streets. The structure, comparatively plain, rectangular, and of brick was set almost flush with the

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<sup>2</sup> Snyder, Charles M., Mifflinburg Telegraph, p. 2.

street. It was built by Joseph Boob, architect and builder of the 1840's and 1850's. What business originally occupied the building is not known.<sup>3</sup>

A screen was hung at the back and a projection booth erected at the front of the hall. The floor of the theatre was level, with benches for seats. Some elevated seats were along the side walls. Electricity for the lighting and operation of the equipment was furnished by a generator driven by a threshing machine engine located at the rear of the building. The theatre was known as the Nickelodeon and the admission was set at 5¢.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that Mr. Brosius opened the theatre in 1904, a year after the production of The Great Train Robbery. A film of nine minutes, or less, it was the first western, in a manner of speaking. Certainly it was the first film to establish the basic "horse opera" pattern of crime, pursuit, and capture. It was produced for the Edison Company by Edwin S. Porter who wrote, directed and photographed it. It is not known if the film was shown at the Mifflinburg theatre.<sup>5</sup> Of other movies shown one resident recalls a comedy which was quite thrilling. Not remembering the title of the film it is described as follows:

"The scene was the interior of a trolley. The action depicted a rider reading the comics. Becoming excited, he thumped the thigh of the man next to him. The latter subsequently left the seat, and a straight-laced woman took his place. Continuing to enjoy the comics, the reader brought down his hand again, only to strike the leg of the woman. Jumping to her feet she denounced his behavior and stalked toward the exit."<sup>6</sup>

Another viewer recalls a movie entitled The Black Diamond Express. The excitement of the film left lasting impressions. In one scene a train came bearing down the tracks in such a manner as to cause spectators (almost in unison) to cover their eyes to avoid catastrophe. The Black Diamond Express was the story of a train engineer whose love for a beautiful young girl was discouraged by her social climbing mother. The cast of characters included Monte Blue (engineer),

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<sup>3</sup> Snyder, Charles M., Union County, Pennsylvania, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> Snyder, Mifflinburg Telegraph, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, Joe, Classics of the Silent Screen, pp. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Snyder, Mifflinburg Telegraph, p. 2.

Edna Murphy (young girl), and Myrtle Stedman (mother). The script was written by Harvey Gates from a story by Darryl Zanuck. Howard Bretherton was the director.<sup>7</sup> This movie was not a classic but Bretherton used shooting and cutting devices that resemble those of Hitchcock.

Mr. Brosius continued to operate the Nickelodeon until 1908 and by now about 5,000 nickelodeons had appeared throughout the United States. This increased the demand for motion pictures. Originally movies were considered entertainment but with the development of new techniques and inventions it was fast becoming an industry. At the same time filming and the film industry was declared as an art form, with the credit going to the director David W. Griffith. He had mastered the techniques of film-making and made going to the cinema something more than an evening of entertainment. Films now served as a barometer to tell and record events in history, art, psychology and sociology. What was happening in the film industry affected Mr. Brosius and his management of the theatre in Mifflinburg and he decided to sell the business. Thus, the nickelodeon era came to a close in Mifflinburg.

The business was purchased by William “Fish” Romig and his wife “Kitty” and was moved to the former Reichard Store building midway between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Streets on the north side of Chestnut Street, where it remained until its doors were finally closed. Incidentally, Mr. Romig acquired the nickname “Fish” from Fisher which was his middle name. The Romigs remodeled the building, installing a stage to accommodate local musical groups and various activities of the high school. Motion picture entertainment was limited to Friday and Saturday nights. The floor was flat and the seats (benches) removable so that the auditorium could be transformed into a ballroom. The floor was great for dancing but viewing a movie required much squirming to find an open space between the heads in the next row.<sup>8</sup>

The projection room was equipped with one single machine which required rethreading and winding after each reel. This provided plenty of time for conversation and eating of roasted peanuts which was the universal

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<sup>7</sup> Hirschhorn, Clive, The Warner Brothers Story, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, Mifflinburg Telegraph, p. 2.

refreshment during the early years of movies. Fortified with bags of roasted peanuts to eat during each intermission the children crowded into the front rows leaving their parents to sit farther back in the theatre with larger bags of peanuts. Bushels of shells accumulated on the floor at each performance which necessitated employing a janitor to clean after every show.<sup>9</sup> Attendance was good at the newly acquired and remodeled theatre now named the “Lyric.” Attendance was exceptionally high on Saturday nights because a western was always shown.<sup>10</sup>

Because this was the era of silent movies Mr. Romig employed pianists who provided appropriate music as the projector was set in motion. If tough, sad eyes William Hart or tall, handsome Tom Mix galloped to the rescue a rollicking crescendo was rendered by the pianist. Anguish or sorrow radiating from the screen brought forth a series of somber chords. Mary Snyder Davies who now lives in El Paso, Texas, had this to say about her career as pianist at the Lyric:

“The regular player had quit and someone suggested I play to earn a little money. I was in the eighth grade so you can imagine the music was not at all professional. However, Mr. Romig was pleased and said to keep it up so I played for 75¢ a show. I played for the first show and maybe a little of the second showing. There was no score or even a light. I just played familiar popular songs with some improvisations thrown in depending on the action taking place on the screen. I don’t know how the patrons put up with it but I was there for about two years.”<sup>11</sup>

In the booth Romig cranked the projector as evenly as possible, though fast action on the screen almost invariably accelerated his pace just as heartbreak slowed the crank. In 1922 he added a second machine and in 1925 an assistant projectionist (John Shively), permitting a continuous operation and two showings in an evening. Now his program was heavy drama on Thursday nights and a western on Friday and Saturday nights.<sup>12</sup>

In 1926 the Romigs sold the Lyric Theatre to Carlton Theatres, Inc. of Milton, Pa. The theatre became No. 12 of the Carlton chain and was operated by

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<sup>9</sup> Shively, John W.

<sup>10</sup> Snyder, Union County, Pennsylvania, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Davies, Mary S.

<sup>12</sup> Shively, John W.

the late Carl E. Hecht and James O'Tool. The house was closed for some six weeks during alterations which consisted of installing a sloped floor and changes in the box office. Walls were covered with metal paneling, new seats were installed, and the Exit lighting system was updated. The projection room was stripped and replaced with all electric equipment and accessories, enabling each projector to be operated independently. An organ was installed and played for a time by the late Maude Ringler. At a later date a combination piano-organ replaced the organ. The house reopened in May of 1926 as the New Theatre. There was also a new admission price -- 10¢ for kids and 25¢ for adults. The seating capacity was 301 and it was usually filled to capacity. In 1927 the piano-organ was replaced by a canned music unit.

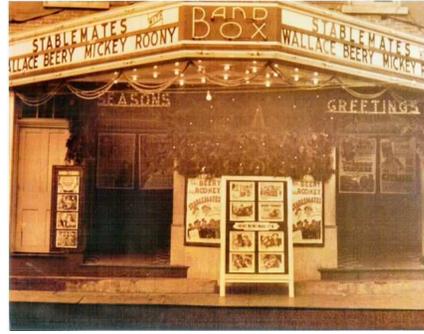
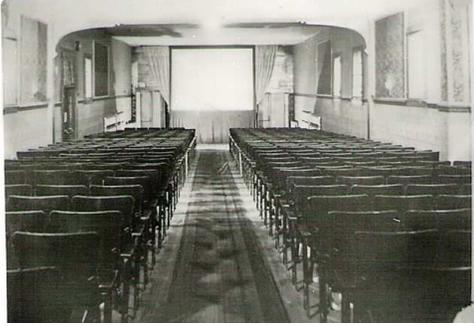
In July of 1929 the entire theatre chain was sold to two Williamsport men, Milton Forman and Howard Ulman who were now the operators. In September of the same year, with the advent of sound pictures, a sound on disc system was installed and placed in operation with Broadway Melody the first all-sound movie to be shown in Mifflinburg. This marked the demise of the silent era. It also marked the demise of the Carlton Theatres chain. With the invention of new sound equipment came the problem of added expense. Studios invested huge sums of money for the new machines to record the voice and new sound-proof stages for shooting film. The theatre owners also faced big expenses, being forced to buy new sound projectors, new speakers, and new wiring to link the two. To add to the problem the country was into a depression, attendance was declining and there was nothing to do but close the doors, and so Carlton Theatres, Inc. was dissolved in the fall of 1931. Hopefully, times would get better and the theatre would reopen.

In May of 1932 Charles M. Weikel, owner of a 5 and 10¢ store in Mifflinburg, purchased the business and equipment and leased the building from the owner Mr. Levi, who then lived in Baltimore. Once again a renovation program was in order. A general house-cleaning took place in the auditorium and a new convenience, rest rooms, were installed. The sound on disc system had run its course and a sound on film system replaced it. New arc lights and rectifiers furnished direct current to the projection equipment which eliminated

flickers on the screen insuring a steady light for the picture. An enclosed film rewind was built which met the requirements of the Dept. of Labor and Industry. The theatre boasted new lights inside and out. Under the new name The Fox Theatre Mr. Weikel had a grand reopening May 26, 1932. Mr. Shively now held the position of chief projectionist because he had kept abreast of the mechanics of projecting films and knew how to handle most of the problems as they came along. The next seven years were profitable and exciting for Mr. Weikel and his staff.

Warner Bros., RKO, MGM, Paramount, United Artists and other film companies set up distribution centers throughout the country. The Fox selected its weekly programs from advance press books. Representatives from the various companies came from Philadelphia and bartered with Mr. Weikel for films, which were purchased in blocks of ten to twenty five. David O. Selznick was one of the "big shot" producers during the 1930's and in order to get one of his films the buyer had to take some junk films along with it. Generally, the film company received 40% to 70% of the box office receipts. Gone with the Wind took 70% of the receipts and had to be shown a specific number of days. The three-part structure of the American film industry, producer, distributor and exhibitor was working well for all parties and Mr. Weikel had a profitable enterprise operating. But, alas, another change was about to take place at the Fox.

The firm of Clifford-Flynn and Co. purchased the building, business, and equipment in 1939 and this time the theatre was completely revamped. The lobby and aisles were carpeted and new seats installed. The walls and ceiling were covered with acoustic material and finished with cloth tapestry. New drapes and curtains were hung and new lighting plus a perforated screen allowed the speaker system to be placed behind the screen. The box office was remodeled to accommodate entrance to the projection room.



The Mifflinburg Band Box Theatre, interior and exterior.  
Photos courtesy of Jeff Mensch. Photographer unknown.

The projection room was equipped with new projectors, lamps, and rectifiers along with a Western Electric Sound System. A marquee was installed along with poster display cases, and re-wiring was done throughout the theatre. Once again the name changed – this time to The Band Box. Mr. Shively was made resident manager and also assisted in the projection room when needed.

Promotional methods included serials which ran for twelve to fifteen weeks. Perils of Pauline was one of the more popular series. Wednesday nights became Ladies' Night and a glass dish was given free with the purchase of a ticket. Many ladies collected complete sets of dishes which are now collector's items. Newsreels and novelty shorts added to the reasons for spending an evening at the movies.

The firm of Clifford-Flynn continued to buy more theatres with businesses in Allentown, White Haven, Montrose, Pa., and Waterbury, Conn. Despite the fact box office receipts were slowly decreasing this chain operation continued until 1948 when it was disposed of, each theatre being sold separately.

The Band Box was sold to C. D. Weiser of Middleburg. He updated the projection and sound equipment to accommodate the wide screen pictures and he also changed the name of the theatre to The Pix. He showed good, up-to-date films at moderate prices but the attendance diminished despite his efforts. New technologies and inventions were the culprits this time.

In 1954 the theatre changed hands again. Mr. Robert Etzler of McClure was now the owner, and operated The Pix until 1956 when it permanently closed due to theatre patronage favoring television.

What was the Mifflinburg movie palace for almost sixty years now houses a Real Estate Agency. Sad. Nevertheless, nostalgia sets in as one recalls the movie theatre downtown and the fine films that were shown there: Ben Hur, Cleopatra, Gone with the Wind -- to name a few. Film makers of those days did some magnificent things -- some of them so magnificent that they have never been equaled. "Masterpiece," "genius," "great," and "superb," are superlatives befitting the directors, stars, and any others who had a hand in turning out films during the existence of the Mifflinburg movie palace. Her memory lingers on.<sup>13</sup>

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- Davies, Mary S.
- Shively, John W.

<sup>13</sup> Nessie Watson in her final footnote writes, "Pictures courtesy John W. Shively." Her paper included a supporting collection of reproduced photographs, newspaper articles, movie ads, and correspondence that cannot be included here because of contemporary permission requirements for published materials.