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**McWhinnie's World**

**Back to the Future**

By Jill McWhinnie

The launch of Starlight Cinema's Film Circuit series this month will begin a new chapter in the history of 19 Civic Avenue as a movie theatre.

In the 1920s the Auditorium Theatre, which was owned by the Borinsky family, was on the upper floor of the building and screened silent films two nights a week. The theatre was managed by Sidney Schmidt, who was also the projectionist.

Sid's son Stan recalls the re-opening of the building as the Stanley Theatre in 1933 after it was purchased by his family. "It was named the Stanley Theatre after my dad's brother. The upper floor was removed, the pool room and bowling alley were eliminated and a concrete floor was constructed. There was a lot of concern for fire safety as there had been a serious theatre fire in Toronto a few years earlier, with loss of life."

Excitement had been growing about the new "talkie theatre" for several months. Main Street merchants anticipated that it would attract visitors who normally motored to neighbouring towns for entertainment.

Newspaper reports praised the comfortable opera seats and sloping floor, which afforded everyone a good view of the screen. The sweeping high ceiling provided ample scope for the sound effects and kept patrons cool. And the lighting was said to be unsurpassed, even in larger theatres!

The advent of sound also spurred changes in the refreshments offered. "When we showed silent films we used to sell bags of peanuts my mother roasted in the oven at home, for 10 cents," said Stan. "When the talkies started, we had to discontinue the peanuts because there was too much noise from the patrons cracking them; it interfered with the sound of the picture."

It was also hoped that the theatre would keep young people in town. Stouffville resident Lloyd Jennings worked as an usher as a teenager. "The back row was always full of young people on Saturday afternoon when westerns like Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were playing," he recalled. "I also remember the newsreels in the World War II years. They really brought the meaning of the war home to us."

The Stanley was a popular date destination for young Stouffville couples. Long time resident Doris Farthing recalls that she and Elmer, her husband of 62 years, "went there when we were courting. There wasn't much else to do in town in those days."

Betty and Gerry Acton attended movies regularly. "Our entertainment was the

movies. And the stores on Main Street were open to 10 p.m. some nights in the summer. In those days the downtown was a going concern."

The Stanley also attracted out of town visitors. Stouffville resident Marg Curtis had a great view of the theatre from her dad's clothing store on Main Street. "I remember the vehicles from the Shadow Lake Camp (operated by the T. Eaton Company as a summer vacation spot for female employees), dropping off the ladies that were staying there to the show several nights a week."

The Stanley showed films six nights a week, with two on Saturdays. Admission was 25 cents. Stan Schmidt recalls a memorable evening in 1938 when *In Old Chicago*, which told the story of the great Chicago fire of 1871, was showing.

"When the fire was about to begin in the movie, the fire siren in Stouffville, which was located by the clock tower just in front of the theatre, began to wail. A few moments later the smell of smoke was wafting through the theatre. A barn on Mill Street, two blocks away, was burning."

At first patrons thought the proprietor was adding some special effects. When they realized the fire was for real, the theatre emptied as everyone rushed home to see if their homes were burning.

In August 1938 there were nine different shows playing at the Stanley over the course of the month, including Disney's masterpiece, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

In 1957 two Main Street businessmen, Ted Topping and Harold Spofford, acquired the Stanley and re-opened it as the Park Theatre. Significant renovation and redecoration was done - a new large screen was installed to accommodate the cinemascope pictures of the 1950s, and the acoustical and projection equipment were modernized.

Ted's wife Peggy, a long time promoter of the arts in Stouffville who produced the first *Music Mania* in 1960, recalls that the entire theatre, including the 40 foot ceiling, was painted by a female contractor, Clara Gilroy, assisted by Bessie Mitchell. But despite the significant upgrades, "it was an inopportune time for such

a project," said Peggy. "Ted and Harold wanted to bring something new to the town but people in 1959 weren't going to movies - they were buying televisions."

In 1959 the town was growing rapidly and council decided to convert the building into municipal offices. Town business was conducted there until 1997. Today, Nineteen Civic Ave. has come full circle and is once again providing movies and live entertainment to the residents of Whitchurch-Stouffville.



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