

FAMILY THEATRE HISTORY

Monroe, Michigan

Ronald J. Swedlund

On July 4, 1900, in a Washington Street grove, Monroe picnickers enjoyed their town's first movie, which was projected onto a bedsheet suspended between two trees. A second movie followed at Trinity Lutheran Church.¹

Beginning in 1903, Monroe denizens patronized nickelodeons. Often located in vacant stores, nickelodeons—flourishing *circa* 1905-15—were the first dedicated motion picture venues. For five cents admission, they offered an hour's entertainment, via hand-cranked reels containing melodrama, comedy, Spanish-American War documentaries, and news. Each reel lasted five to fifteen minutes.

Monroe's first movie house was Little Gem²—a former horse stable and blacksmith shop where, during films, an attendant sprayed deodorizer to dispel horse smells.³ A horn-amplified, acoustic phonograph played music.⁴ Monroe residents also viewed films in The Armory.⁵

Monroe movie houses soon proliferated. Bijou,⁶ Family Theatre,⁷ and the Munro⁸ opened for business; in 1912, Reaper⁹ replaced Little Gem.

¹ 323 Scott St. The movie was shown in the church's Library Hall. ("Monroe's Downtown Movies: Has the End of an Era Arrived?," *The Monroe Evening News*, 14 February 1975, p. 1-A.)

² Little Gem was on E. Front Street's south side, near Macomb Street—"between the alley and Macomb St." (*ibid.*). Owned and operated by J. H. Reaper and his family, it is today the Palmer room of Beek's Bar and Grill, 120 E. Front St.

³ Using an atomizer, which expels liquid in a spray of droplets.

⁴ The theme song was "Ain't You Coming Out Tonight, Mary Anne."

⁵ The Armory—featuring Monroe's talented Afro-American pianist Alcayde Bromley—was on the southwest corner of Washington St. and Second St., the "site of the Michigan Bell Telephone Co." [200 Washington St.]. The Armory burned in 1929. In addition to The Armory, there was "a kitchen-chair variety of theater on W. Front that featured songs illustrated by colored slides between the film selections. The vocalist was Billy Merriman, a local sign-painter" (*ibid.*).

⁶ Bijou was on Washington Street, "in the Kendel building." (*ibid.*)

⁷ Family Theatre was on Front Street.

⁸ Munro was on the northwest corner of Monroe Street and First Street.

⁹ 123 E. Front, on the street's north side and across the street from Little Gem. J. H. Reaper and his family owned both Little Gem and Reaper; the latter had a 1919 Wurlitzer organ and

The entrepreneur Joseph Denniston moved to Monroe in 1911 and purchased Family Theatre; in 1917, he formed a company with sixty stockholders to build a new Family Theater to replace the eponymous Family Theatre. The new Family Theatre¹⁰ opened its doors on Saturday afternoon, January 5, 1918 with a film featuring June Caprice, “the joyous motion screen actress.” A “large orchestra”—probably ten players, the orchestra pit’s maximum capacity—offered music.¹¹

In size and appointment, Family Theatre was the finest small-town theater in Michigan. Mahogany wood graced entrance and vestibule; dark crimson carpet lined the aisles; panel effects emerged from rose-tinted walls trimmed in pastels; red, white and blue indirect light blended in myriad hues. Family Theatre had eleven hundred leather seats—eight hundred on ground floor and three hundred in the balcony. A pair of winding colonial stairways led to the second floor, which featured a “beautifully furnished”¹² lounge, with fireplace. The offices boasted then-new telephone technology; the concession stand served “the best popcorn in the world.”¹³

Family Theatre’s offerings included vaudeville shows, silent films, and first-run films; a seven-piece orchestra played every afternoon and evening. Wangerin Organ Company installed a new, two-manual Barton theater pipe organ¹⁴ in 1923; Eileen Messier of Minneapolis, Minnesota became the theater’s organist.¹⁵

Butterfield Company (Detroit, Michigan) purchased Family Theatre in 1928: two photographs (figs. 1-2) document this era. Butterfield Company installed talking picture equipment in the 1930’s, renovated the theater comprehensively in 1942, and subsequently installed air conditioning. In 1944, Denniston and Butterfield Company donated Family Theatre’s organ to St. Paul’s United Methodist Church (Monroe, Michigan).

showed Mary Pickford films. Presently, the Reaper building is Lamour Printing Co. (*The Monroe News*, “Monroe’s headlines from May 1919,” 7 May 2019.)

¹⁰ 115 S. Monroe St., across the street from the former Monroe Theatre, 114 S. Monroe St., which is presently River Raisin Center for the Arts, Inc.

¹¹ “Monroe’s New Modern Playhouse Will Open to the Public Tomorrow,” *Monroe News-Courier*, 4 January 1918, p. 4.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Interview with Catherine Rogoff, December 11, 2002. Rogoff is the daughter of Jeneia Rehberg, née Bomia, a former Family Theatre concession stand employee. Informal comments by other long-time Monroe residents corroborate this verbatim.

¹⁴ Barton Organ Company’s opus 364, built by Wangerin Organ Company. The organ’s wind pressure was five inches.

¹⁵ Messler enjoyed a lengthy tenure and was succeeded by Flora Mae Younglove of Monroe, Michigan, who later married Forest D. Wolf.



Fig. 1. Family Theatre facade, *circa* 1936-38.¹⁶

Meanwhile, another movie house, the Majestic,¹⁷ opened in 1927 and, in 1938, Denniston Company itself built state-of-the-art Monroe Theatre,¹⁸ across the street from Family Theatre. The modern movie age dawned: audiences flocked to new theaters. Attendance at Family Theatre declined and, by the 1950's, Family Theatre seemed as much a historical artifact as the vaudevillians' autographs gracing its dressing room walls.¹⁹

¹⁶ Picture courtesy of *The Monroe Evening News*. The Evening News Cooking School existed from 1935 to 1938 (interview with Marge McBee, December 11, 2002). The automobile on the right is a 1936 Chevrolet Std. ("Std." designates the *standard*, as opposed to *deluxe*, model); the automobile on the left is probably a 1930 Oldsmobile (interview with A. James Swedlund, December 20, 2002).

¹⁷ 1030 E. Second St., near Winchester Street.

¹⁸ 114 S. Monroe St., presently River Raisin Center for the Arts, Inc.

¹⁹ Rogoff interview and *The Monroe Evening News*, 14 February 1975, p. 1-A.

Family Theatre closed its doors on May 11, 1959. The following year, workmen removed marquee and sign.²⁰ In 1968, Monroe Community Players announced plans to renovate Family Theatre as an arts center, but was unable due to lack of funds. Demolition crews razed the building in February, 1985.



Fig. 2. Family Theatre marquee and sign, circa 1936-38.²¹

²⁰ They were removed on June 30, 1960—Monroe Building Inspector William McKenzie had determined they posed danger to pedestrians. ("Family Theatre Marquee Comes Down," *The Monroe Evening News*, 30 June 1960, p. 17.)

²¹ Picture courtesy of *The Monroe Evening News*. The first automobile in the foreground is probably a 1930 Plymouth (*ibid*).

Bibliography

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