

A Tribute to the Jefferson

November 4, 2005

Early years

The year was 1905. The twentieth century had dawned with excitement and an expectation of discovery and innovation. The Wright brothers had just begun their attempts at flight. Construction of the Panama Canal was underway. It was the year that Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity* was published, and Kelloggs began selling Corn Flakes.

1905 in Goshen, Indiana also reflected this wave of growth and expansion. The 74-year-old town had seen a 30 percent increase in population in the previous 15 years as well as growth in commercial, manufacturing, and residential building. Construction crews had recently completed a new high school at Fifth and Jefferson, a new library at Fifth and Washington, and a ladies dormitory at Goshen College. The county courthouse was newly remodeled. These were exciting times. But as 1905 neared its close, nothing in recent memory had filled the town with as much anticipation, fervor, and pride as the upcoming opening of the Jefferson Theater.

The residents of Goshen had been hoping for years to see a new theater in town. In early 1905 a site was chosen in the 200 block of South Main Street, on a space of five lots that had stood empty for 20 years. A nationally known theater architect from Chicago was hired to design the facility, which would be constructed at a cost of \$75,000, and would be called "The Jefferson", after Joseph Jefferson, a famous actor of the time who had recently died. Goshen newspapers ran weekly reports on the progress of the building throughout the summer, highlighting every detail. The announcement that the official dedication would take place on November 6th brought much excitement.

It has been said that opening night at the Jefferson will rank as one of the proudest and most important moments in the history of Goshen. The event was attended by Indiana's governor, Frank Hanly, and the Indiana Attorney General. Prominent citizens from all over Southern Michigan and Northern Indiana reserved seats. Tickets were highly sought-after and extremely hard to come by. But the citizens of Goshen were so proud of their new theater that crowds of people who had been unable to get seats, lined the streets just to watch people go in.

At 7:30 PM, the doors opened and 11 ushers escorted delighted ticket-holders into the lavish theater, which featured green and ivory décor with gold leaf trim, red oak and mahogany. Governor Hanly gave the welcoming address from his box seat on the auditorium's south side. The Goshen News-Times reported that in his speech, the Governor noted that 'Indiana has many splendid cities, many splendid communities and many splendid buildings, but no city the size of Goshen has so splendid a playhouse.'

On a night filled with such pride, success, and joy, no one could have possibly imagined that just 13 months later, tragedy would strike the magnificent Jefferson theater. On December 18, 2006, a fire began when a clerk carried a candle to the basement of the Stiver and Smith Furniture Store on the retail level of the theater building. The Goshen fire department was called, and firemen from Elkhart responded as well, arriving by railroad car to help battle the blaze. Despite their best efforts, however, the flames eventually consumed the building. Seeing the smoke,

people came from all over town to watch in horror as firemen worked to save the rest of the city block.

The next day, shocked residents learned that the Jefferson had been completely destroyed. Out of the sadness and disbelief, however, grew a resolve to begin again, to build a new Jefferson even better than the first. On October 10, 1907 The Jefferson celebrated its return, opening to another packed crowd of dignitaries and featuring a performance by one of the top actresses and comedienne of the day, Marie Cahill. The Jefferson was off and running in what would be a rich era in its history. For the next several years, top notch theatrical troupes made Goshen a stop on their way between New York and Chicago, treating locals to first-rate performances by some of the top actors and actresses of the time. During the off-season, the Jefferson remained open, showing silent movies and hosting political and community events.

But on that much-anticipated night in November 1905, no one could have known, expected, or even imagined this roller-coaster of tragedy and triumph. As the audience took their seats in eager anticipation, as the governor's welcome drew to a close, as the curtain lifted and Richard Mansfield took the stage as the star of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", all anyone knew is that this had to be the beginning of great things to come.

1920s

The 1920's ushered in the Prohibition era in the United States. Women voted in the presidential election for the first time, Charles Lindburgh flew solo across the Atlantic. Telephones and radios were welcomed into homes. The years leading up to the stockmarket crash at the end of the decade were relatively carefree, as the amount of money Americans spent on movies, dances and sports rose by 300 percent.

In Goshen, highlights of the 20's included the election of the first woman to hold a county office position, the adoption of the first direct deposit wage payment system by Goshen Manufacturing Company, and the opening of Goshen Municipal Airport. The decade also saw gasoline prices rise to 22.4 cents per gallon, a notable jailbreak involving four inmates at the county jail, and a scarlet fever epidemic that closed schools, cancelled church services, and killed at least 15 people.

Spirits rose, however, when plans were announced for a California company to come to Goshen to film a real Hollywood movie. Local residents auditioned for roles in the movie, which was filmed in several outdoor locations around town, as well as on stage at The Jefferson in front of large crowds. The movie was first viewed by the public in September, 1925 and more than half of those who came hoping to see it were turned away.

The popularity of moving pictures during this time grew so large that the interest in live productions faded, particularly after the first "talkies" were introduced. The Jefferson showed "Singing Fool", with Al Jolson, in the late 1920's, causing much excitement in town. Across the nation, the movie industry grew by leaps and bounds over the course of the decade, with average weekly movie audiences growing from 50 to 100 million people by 1930. The Jefferson was a popular venue for local movie fans who lined up to see Hollywood's latest releases.

1930s

The 1930's saw the end of Prohibition, the discovery of Pluto, and the availability of sliced bread. Amelia Earhart's plane disappeared over the Pacific, and Adolf Hitler rose to power. The Great Depression had paralyzed much of the United States, with an average of 75,000 workers per week losing their jobs. An estimated 9 million families across the country saw their life savings disappear. Food was scarce and many farms faced foreclosure. For entertainment and comfort, Americans tuned in regularly to their favorite radio programs, with the average family spending 4 ½ hours a day around their radios. Bingo also became popular, along with other means of winning cash. A new board game, Monopoly, took the country by storm, with 20 million sold in one single week. The media was a huge influence in American society. Celebrities became trendsetters, as mothers scraped together enough money to have "Shirley Temple curls" put in their daughters' hair.

Locally, the State Bank of Goshen collapsed in 1931. The Elkhart County Bankers Association agreed on a policy that prohibited withdrawals from savings accounts and limited the amount that could be withdrawn from checking accounts to 1% of the account balance per week. A bright spot during the weak economic era was the long-anticipated paving of Main Street, along with the installation of a new street lighting system.

Across the country and here in Goshen, movie-goers seeking to escape the harsh realities of life during the depression continued to pack theaters. The Jefferson dazzled audiences with first-class attractions and films including *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

1940s

World War II dominated American life in the early 1940s as the U.S. joined the fray in 1941. The fighting ended in 1945 and the troops returned home to a changing society. The post-war years began a shift from cities to suburbia. The economy saw tremendous growth, the standard of living rose, and the baby boom began. The 40s was the decade of the television sales explosion, with annual sales growing from 7,000 sets in 1946 to over 5 million in 1950. Dr. Spock came on the parenting scene with his *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. Americans idolized Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra, sang along to "White Christmas" and "Some Enchanted Evening", and waited in ticket lines to see "Citizen Kane", "Bambi", and "Miracle on 34th Street".

The early 40s in Goshen focused primarily on the war, with rationing, blackouts, and war bond drives as common parts of life. Local women were called upon to fill holes left in the workplace by men drafted to war, and victory gardens sprang up all over town.

The Jefferson was remodeled in 1948 with new seats and a new, v-shaped marquee. When the theater name was to be installed on the marquee however, the manufacturer discovered that there was not enough room for all the letters. Therefore, the theater was re-named "The Goshen Theater".

A popular draw to the theater during this time period was Bank Night, a weekly lottery which had originated during the Depression as a way to attract patrons. Crowds gathered around the

theater, where inside the building a name was drawn and an usher would reveal the name of the winner to those gathered outside. The winner had five minutes to get to the theater and collect their prize, a sum of cash ranging from \$50 to \$500.

1950s

The 50's began with North Korea's invasion of South Korea, and ended with the start of the space race between Russia and the United States, as both countries launched satellites into orbit. The U.S. was in the middle of a population explosion. Homes became more and more affordable and automobile sales soared. The Supreme Court declared racial segregation in schools unconstitutional. Alaska and Hawaii became states in the 50's and a polio epidemic prompted the development of a vaccine to fight the spread of the disease. It was the era of drive-in movies, soda shops and jukeboxes; coonskin caps, rock n' roll, and the first Barbie doll. Television became the king of the entertainment industry, as families gathered around their sets to watch "I Love Lucy", "Lassie", "Gunsmoke", and "American Bandstand". The average American now spent nearly five hours a day watching television.

For the people of Goshen the 50s brought flooding and fires, along with excitement over the commencement of plans for the Goshen High School gymnasium and groundbreaking at the site of the new general hospital. Downtown driving had a new feel as 3rd and 5th Streets became one-way. Construction was completed at Bethany Christian High School and WKAM began broadcasting.

Bank Nights at The Goshen Theater were discontinued in the 50s due to lack of interest. Television had emerged as a powerful competitor for local theaters, forcing some to close their doors as big-screen venues across the nation saw a dip in attendance. But The Goshen Theater was able to remain open for business, continuing to provide first-run movies for those who did decide to venture out of their living rooms for an evening on the town.

1960s-early 80's

The next few decades of life in the United States were a dizzying blur of political conflicts, social struggles, voyages and discoveries, and constant changes in clothing fads and entertainment trends. These were years that saw the height of the Civil Rights Movement, and the war in Vietnam. Americans mourned the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and cheered the Apollo 11 astronauts as they landed on the moon. Movie attendance across the country dropped dramatically throughout the 60s and 70s, to an average weekly attendance of 18 million, as new television shows like "The Tonight Show", "60 Minutes", "All in the Family", and "MASH" attracted large audiences.

Locally, these were also eventful years, as Goshen residents rode out the Palm Sunday tornadoes and the Blizzard of '78, and watched news coverage of the Judd-Perry fire and the Ford Pinto trial. This time period also welcomed several new buildings that helped to shape the landscape of Goshen as we see it today, including a new jail, fire station, municipal building, and a new public library that replaced the old Carnegie library. Five years after the U.S celebrated its bi-centennial, Goshen marked its sesquicentennial, with storytelling and special events highlighting its first 150 years.

As history turned page after page, The Goshen Theater neared the end of its long run as a movie house. Though the faithful still turned out to see Hollywood's latest hits, they did so in fewer and fewer numbers. When the 1986 movie, "Hoosiers", about an Indiana high school basketball team, was shown at The Goshen Theater, the popularity of the film lent a small spark to the otherwise weakening attendance. But changing times and changing pastimes would soon usher in the end of an era as the curtain prepared to close on a long, rich history of entertainment at The Goshen Theater.