



2003

### Reality Bites: Social Implications of the Early 20th Century Movie

Lauren Boegen

*Illinois Wesleyan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing>

---

#### **Recommended Citation**

Boegen, Lauren (2003) "Reality Bites: Social Implications of the Early 20th Century Movie," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol4/iss1/5>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by the Constructing History editorial board and the History Department at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@iwu.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@iwu.edu).

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

## Reality Bites: Social Implications of the Early 20th Century Movie

### Abstract

This article discusses the early movie theaters of the 1920's and 30's and their role in giving working-class patrons a place to not only escape from their hardships, but also a place where they could be treated as if they were wealthy. This is emphasized in the decor and physical structure of the movie theaters as well as in the nature of the attractions themselves.

## Reality Bites: Social Implications of the Early 20th Century Movie

*Lauren Boegen*

The motion picture was developed in the 1890s and exploded in popularity during the next forty years. According to scholarly literature, the theater was popular because it was a marvel of modern technology, cheap entertainment, and, above all, provided patrons with an escape from their difficult lives. Through my research, I attempted to prove that Bloomington and Normal theaters were seen as an escape from daily life. However, because the primary sources did not include records of individual reactions to the movie theaters, my hypothesis that Bloomington-Normal theaters were an escape, although logical and reasonable, is based on my twenty-first century interpretation of movie advertisements, programming, newspaper articles, and secondary literature and is only possible historical truth.

In order to develop my conclusions, I used interpretations from secondary sources, analyzed architecture, read *Pantagraph* articles from the 1910s, 20s, and 30s, and viewed the collections of the McLean County Historical Society. It was necessary to interpret all of the primary resources; none of them explicitly said “audiences went to the movie theater to escape from reality.” Because of this, I compared the evidence of the primary sources to the evidence of the secondary sources and assumed if the evidence was similar, conclusions would be similar. Therefore, my historical truth is based on comparison of primary evidence to secondary conclusions.

The motion picture was invented in 1889 but the first motion picture projector in the Bloomington-Normal area was installed in 1911 at the old First Christian Church building in Normal.<sup>1</sup> The Irvin Theater was first building was built specifically for motion picture showings in either town. Its site on East Jefferson Street in Bloomington was considered “first class” since it was close to the heart of the city.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper coverage in *The Pantagraph* described the amenities of the theater in detail; it was supposed to have ten exits, 1000 viewer capacity, a scooped floor so all seats had unobstructed views, air conditioning to remove foul odors, a new pipe organ, and a “very attractive” exterior.<sup>3</sup> The owner, Clarence E. Irvin, planned to sponsor a contest open to all patrons to name the theater.<sup>4</sup> This seems to have been a planned promotional gimmick that never materialized, since the theater ended up being named after Irvin. The theater opened on August 24, 1915, playing “In Rags,” starring Mary Pickford.<sup>5</sup>

The emergence of the Irvin Theater in Bloomington was slightly atypical for a motion picture theater because it was primarily designed for movie showings. The transitional theaters of the early 1900s, often called “opera houses,” showed live dramatic performances as well as movies.<sup>6</sup> By associating

movies with accepted and sophisticated forms of entertainment like opera, owners created a high-class image and gained the confidence of their patrons.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the pipe organ was a visual reminder of culture because not only were customers seeing a movie, they were exposed to a musical performance. Previously, live music was reserved solely for the upper class.<sup>8</sup>

One example of the progression from opera house to movie palace in Bloomington was the Illini Theater. Like other transitional theaters, the Illini was both a play house and a movie theater. Along with its luxurious interior, this theater associated itself with plays in order to guarantee high quality shows to customers and clearly wanted to associate the Illini with class.<sup>9</sup> Another Bloomington example is the Majestic Theater. The Majestic showed movies, plays, and other types of entertainment such as recitals and unique shows like Hector the Mind Reading Dog, Alice Teddy, the Roller Skating and Whistling Bear, and juggling monoped acrobats before and after the movies.<sup>10</sup> In the Majestic's printed programs, movies are referred to as "Picture," and names are not specified.<sup>11</sup> There are no years noted on the Majestic programs.<sup>12</sup>

Not only did movie theaters associate themselves with respected types of entertainment, they were designed in a Classical style to look like respected civic buildings.<sup>13</sup> These buildings were fashionable and impressive.<sup>14</sup> The quality of architecture increased the confidence of the patrons in the quality of entertainment they were to receive. Local theaters had this impressive architecture. *The Pantagraph* described the exterior of the Irvin Theater as terra-cotta with elaborate trimmings.<sup>15</sup> The extravagant exteriors and interiors of theaters such as the Irvin and the Illini reflect the changing culture of the early twentieth century, from that of a work-based lifestyle to a leisure-based lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> In the leisure-based life, people wanted to relax by removing themselves from everyday experiences. Through the movie palace's grand decor and high quality shows, working-class patrons received an upper-class experience.

Movie palaces were targeted for reform during the Progressive Era. Movie content was often controversial, with subjects ranging from slapstick comedy to nearly pornographic romances, and theaters were often located in seedy neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup> In order to increase attendance, owners of theaters reformed the undesired aspects of the industry.<sup>18</sup> Theaters began to be concentrated in wealthier areas. The theaters in Bloomington from 1929 to 1934 were located on Washington, Front, Market, Jefferson, and Madison Streets, all downtown.<sup>19</sup> These locations meant that the areas around the theaters would be well-lit and crowded, acting to both eliminate unacceptable activities and create a safer, "family" atmosphere.<sup>20</sup> This atmosphere would probably have been a shift for the lower class patrons, from their own neighborhoods to the thriving downtown area.<sup>21</sup>

The interpretation of the theater experience by Lary May, author of *Screening Out the Past*, emphasizes the 1914 shift of decor to the exotic. After this date, both the interior and exterior of the theaters were often decorated with an Egyptian or Oriental theme. According to May, this imported look was a reproduction of upper-class culture; it all served to bring a taste of the high life to the middle and lower classes.<sup>22</sup> Electricity was utilized; marquees and flashing lights were used to differentiate between the dramatic theaters and to add a splash of glamour to the movie-going experience.<sup>23</sup> An obvious example of the décor shift to the exotic that still exists today is Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood, California.

May's interpretation also emphasizes the customer service utilized by theaters. In May's theater, not only were the patrons immersed in visual luxuries, but they were also treated as if they were upper class. Employees of the theater were instructed to serve each person as an individual, calling them "sir" or "ma'am" and catering to their needs.<sup>24</sup> In a breakdown of traditional class dichotomy, the formalities of the upper class were dismissed, and the demeanor of the staff was uniform towards all who entered the theater.<sup>25</sup> According to Kevin Corbett, author of *The Big Picture*, the movie theater allowed "otherwise overworked, unappreciated, and alienated individuals to feel like they were 'somebody.'"<sup>26</sup> Ironically, the motion picture theater, a place which existed because of a machine, was an escape from the mechanized world because it broke down the previously strict class divisions and made the patron an individual instead of one of the masses.

It is difficult to concretely apply the interpretations of Corbett and May to Bloomington and Normal theaters. From *Pantagraph* articles and the *Indenture of the Illini Theater*, the theaters were obviously designed to be luxurious. However, there is little documentation of the experiences of theater patrons. It can be assumed that theaters were popular because the number of theaters in Bloomington remained between two and five between the years of 1929 and 1938.<sup>27</sup> However, the most concrete information concerning the Bloomington-Normal theaters can be found in the Irvin Collection.<sup>28</sup> Information may also be gleaned from movie advertisements from 1915 to 1937. I interpreted comedy acts, live performances, and pipe organ recitals as a welcome escape from the daily grind, a taste of leisure for the working class.<sup>29</sup> However, without first person accounts of the theater experience, concrete historical truth cannot be obtained. This is the nature of cultural history; the historian must make inferences, therefore leaving room for error.

Several writers, including Gregory Waller and Kathryn H. Fuller, have complained that secondary source material about the history of the movie palace focuses almost exclusively on urban theaters when in reality, more people experienced the theater in a rural setting.<sup>30</sup> Both scholars have written about the small town movie experience, and this experience is probably more

analogous to the theaters in Bloomington and Normal. Fuller writes that small town theaters appealed to the community for publicity.<sup>31</sup> They used testimonial letters from community members, relied on endorsements of local civic groups like the Elks, Ladies Aid, and Daughters of the American Revolution, and played movies with local actors and actresses.<sup>32</sup> Small towns relied on partnerships with community churches. Small towns were especially concerned with the reform of the theater and the endorsements of local churches assured that conservative family films would be shown.<sup>33</sup> The only evidence of a relationship with a church in Bloomington or Normal is that the first building to show films was an old church building. It is unclear if this is merely coincidence or if there was a partnership between the two groups. There is evidence of local support of theaters. On the Normal Theater's Opening Day ad page in *The Daily Pantagraph*, several businesses advertise the part they played in construction and endorse the theater.<sup>34</sup>

Locality also influenced movie theater attendance. The Midwest had different characteristics than other areas. For example, Midwestern farmers made more money and had more cars than Southern farmers so they attended more movies.<sup>35</sup> Midwestern farm women had more access to cars, so they went into town more.<sup>36</sup> Because of this, Midwestern theaters often played "uplifting" and "high class" pictures that would appeal to these women, hoping they would bring their families with them to the theater.<sup>37</sup> Midwesterners tended to enjoy travelogues, religious films, and industrial films.<sup>38</sup> I did not feel that a single ad sufficiently supported Fuller's argument enough to apply it to Bloomington-Normal theaters, although there were scattered references to travelogues in ads, often as a secondary feature to the primary film.<sup>39</sup>

The Depression changed the movie industry. Although leisure time was more abundant than ever before because people were unemployed, there was little money to spend on entertainment. Box office revenues reflect this trend; between 1930 and 1932, revenues decreased by 25%.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the 1930s are sometimes called "the golden age of the movies."<sup>41</sup> It was necessary for the proprietors of theaters to change their strategies in order to stay in business, ranging from architectural appearance to promotional activities.

People expected the exotic luxury of the theater to be maintained, but this was an expensive expectation. Because of this, theaters shifted their style to the luxurious but simpler, machine-inspired Art Deco.<sup>42</sup> The architecture of the Normal Theater reflects these changes precipitated by the Depression.<sup>43</sup> The Normal Theater was air conditioned and utilized refrigeration, it had state of the art RCA sound equipment, plush coral and leather seats, "modernistic" walls and ceilings, a tastefully furnished modern cosmetics room for ladies, and a comfortable men's lounge.<sup>44</sup> The outside of the theater was composed of stucco and Vitrolite glass, and the marquee was composed of red, blue, green, and white neon lights.<sup>45</sup>

In order to stay in business, motion picture theaters also utilized promotional activities. On the national level, these promotions included activities such as double features, Screeno (similar to Bingo, numbers were flashed on the screen instead of being called), giveaways, premiers, and Bank Night.<sup>46</sup> Premiers were nights of glamour; the lights and crowds gave even Midwestern audiences the feeling of Hollywood.<sup>47</sup> On giveaway nights, the theater would give pieces of a set of flatware or dishes to customers.<sup>48</sup> When the federal government outlawed giveaways in 1933, theaters began to rely on double features to entice customers.<sup>49</sup> Double features gave viewers more bang for their buck, which was exactly what was desired in the penny-pinching years of the Depression. Perhaps the most successful national promotion was Bank Night.<sup>50</sup> *The Saturday Evening Post* called it an "oxygen tent" for struggling theaters.<sup>51</sup>

The theaters of Bloomington and Normal utilized several of these national promotions, including double features and Bank Night (see Appendix B) but also had more specialized, local promotions as can be seen in *The Daily Pantagraph* advertisements. These ranged from Amateur Night to Lucky June cards to Mickey the Singing Mouse.<sup>52</sup> These promotions would not only have brought in customers who financially supported the theater (who would not want to see a singing mouse?), but they would have provided the customer with an extended experience that would entertain them in a variety of unique ways. This wide array of entertainment made theater tickets a worthwhile investment and allowed patrons to wisely invest in a retreat from the outside world of depression. This retreat was a world of comedy shorts, singing mice, and free money. Although none of my primary sources specifically demonstrated that local theaters used these promotions to stay in business or that customers thought they were an escape from reality, per se, I have no reason to believe my inferences are illogical.

According to secondary sources, local theaters during the 1910s, 20s, and 30s should have been oases from the working-class lifestyle. This was a lifestyle in which people were depersonalized, living in economic depression, and dealing with a world in between wars. Movie themes were designed to be uplifting, funny, adventurous, or dramatic, but beyond the films, the architecture and programming of the theater should have served to remove the patrons from reality. The luxury and entertainment of the theater was in sharp contrast to the lower-class life style of the movie-goers and theoretically allowed them to be treated like a Carnegie or a Rockefeller.

Through the eyes of a twentieth century interpreter, the showings of comedies and special attractions and promotional gimmicks like Mickey the Singing Mouse let patrons laugh and remove themselves from their often frustrating lives. Raffles like Screeno, Lucky June Cards, and Bank Nights gave every audience member the chance to be a winner and feel important and

fulfilled. Assuming the lives of the working class in Bloomington-Normal were similar to the lives of the typical working class American, the luxury, high-class entertainment, and promotions of movie theaters in the early twentieth-century allowed the audience a chance to escape from the lives of common people and for a few hours, be able to experience a new standard of living, the standard of individuals lounging in the lap of luxury without a care in the world.

In Bloomington-Normal, primary sources prove that theaters such as the Irvin and the Normal were lavishly decorated, had programming which mimicked that of upper-class entertainment, and used promotional gimmicks. However, there are no primary sources that directly record how the theater environment affected customers or even which economic class constituted most of the patrons. Consequently, both my interpretations and interpretation of other scholars, although logical and based on existing knowledge, are not necessarily historical truth. Other scholars do not have first person information regarding customers' feelings on Depression era movie theaters either. This means that the conclusions of the cultural history of the movie theaters are but logical inferences. Nevertheless, without contrary evidence, they cannot be discounted. Therefore, assuming Bloomington-Normal movie-goers were typical motion picture patrons, the Bloomington-Normal movie theaters were luxurious and entertaining places where the lower classes could escape from the toils of everyday life.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gary B. Nash, et al. eds., *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., vol. 2 (New York: Longman, 2000), 550; Eloise B. Craig, *Souvenirs of History: Normal, IL* (Normal, IL: The Normalite, 1965), 28.

<sup>2</sup> "New \$50,000 Photoplay Theater Assured," *Bloomington-Normal (IL) The Pantagraph*, 18 March 1915, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "\$50,000," *Pantagraph*, 18 March 1915, p.5

<sup>5</sup> Movie Ads, *Pantagraph*, 24 August 1915, p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin J. Corbett, "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and Beyond the Substitution Effect," *Cinema Journal*, 2001, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Illustrations, "The Pantagraph, 1920." This ad from 1920 is also a visual reminder of all of the different entertainment the movie palace offered. Not only does the audience get to see a feature film, they are also exposed to at least two musical acts and a news reel. Exposure to the arts was previously a privilege reserved for the upper classes; this ad demonstrates the breakdown of that social barrier.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Majestic Theater Programs, 26 November, 24 November, 8 December, Majestic Theater File, McLean County Historical Society.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Although there are no dates, they must be post-1911 because that is when



the first projector was introduced to the area. They are most likely pre-1915 because the Majestic would have to compete with the Irvin, so they would have put more emphasis on the movies being shown.

<sup>13</sup> Corbett, "Picture," 22.

<sup>14</sup> Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 150.

<sup>15</sup> "New Modern Photo Play Theater for Bloomington," *Pantagraph*, 24 August 1915, p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Kathleen D. McCarthy, "Creating the American Athens: Cities, Cultural Institutions, and the Arts, 1840-1930," *American Quarterly* (1985): 437.

<sup>17</sup> Nash, *American*, 550.

<sup>18</sup> May, *Screening*, 148.

<sup>19</sup> "Motion Picture Theaters," *Polk's Bloomington City Directory*, 4 vols. (n.l.: R.L Polk Publishing, 1929-1938).

<sup>20</sup> May, *Screening*, 149, 152.

<sup>21</sup> The information about the theater locations and decorations are historical truth. However, I can only speculate on the historical truth of other cultural conclusions because I have no primary sources to describe the patrons' neighborhoods.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>23</sup> Corbett, "Picture," 22.

<sup>24</sup> May, *Screening*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 166, 157.

<sup>26</sup> Corbett, "Picture," 22.

<sup>27</sup> *City Directory*, 1929-1938.

<sup>28</sup> The Irvin Collection is a collection of the Irvin family papers at the McLean County Historical Society which document the plans for the theaters and the coverage of the theaters in *The Pantagraph*.

<sup>29</sup> See Illustrations, "Example Advertisements." I selected these movie advertisements as examples of typical ads for Bloomington-Normal theaters. By randomly sampling ads from each decade separately (1910s, 20s, and 30s), I created a "prototype" for each decade's ads. The ads in this appendix are ads I felt best fit the prototype. The ads from the 1910s most often had a verbal description of the movie's plot along with a picture, either a photograph or a drawing of the stars, show times, prices, and special features. The ads from the 1920s had less verbal description, but still included pictures of the stars, show times, and prices. The special features, usually a comedy, cartoon, news reel, or Vitaphone act, were more prominent in the ad. The 1930s ads were remarkably similar to the ads of the 20s, except when there were special promotions such as Bank Night, Amateur Night, or giveaways. The example of the 1930s ad includes the promotion of Bank Night which happened every Thursday in September and October in 1935 (*Daily Pantagraph* 1 September 1935-31 October 1935).

<sup>30</sup> Corbett, "Picture," 21.

<sup>31</sup> Kathryn H. Fuller, *Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996) 13-16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-4, 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> See Illustrations, "Community Support." These are only a few of the ads shown on the page. All businesses advertised were located in Bloomington-Normal and promote their own business as well as endorsing the Normal Theater.

<sup>35</sup> Fuller, *Small*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 78. Travelogues were movies which showed scenes of nature and industrial films showed how products were made.

<sup>39</sup> I found a single ad which advertised specifically to women (*Daily Pantagraph* 28 April 1930, 5.). I did not do enough research focusing on urban theaters to compare the themes of the movies shown in each area, nor did I have access to newspapers from different geographical areas. I did find some support for the travelogue (Ex. "Around the World in the Graf Zeppelin" *The Daily Pantagraph* 16 May 1930 5.), but not enough which created a significant pattern.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Nash, *America*, 652.

<sup>42</sup> Gomery, *Pleasures*, 74.

<sup>43</sup> See Illustrations, "Shifting Styles," to compare and contrast the architectural styles of the Normal Theater, Radio City Music Hall, and Grauman's Chinese Theater.

<sup>44</sup> *The Daily Pantagraph* 18 November 1937, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Gomery, *Pleasures*, 70-1, 77.

<sup>47</sup> David Karnes, "The Glamorous Crowd: Hollywood Movie Premieres Between the Wars," *American Quarterly*, Autumn 1986, 558, 564.

<sup>48</sup> For example, people would receive one part of a dinner set each time they came to the theater on a Monday night, often the slowest night of the week. Gomery, *Pleasures*, 71

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>50</sup> On Bank Night, people would register their name with a number at the theater. That night, a number would be drawn and the chosen number would receive a cash prize, totaling up to \$3400. The catch was, the winner must be present in the theater (meaning had purchased a ticket) in order to win. Because you did not buy your number, Bank Night avoided anti-lottery laws. Bank night was so successful, other local businesses would complain that people were spending all their money at the movie theater.

<sup>51</sup> Forbes Parkhill, "Bank Night Tonight," *Saturday Evening Post*, 4 December 1939, 20-1 and 82.

<sup>52</sup> Amateur Night was a talent show of locals (*Pantagraph* 28 April 1930, p.5.). A patron would buy a Lucky June Card and every time they bought a movie ticket, a punch was put in the June Card. When the card was full, it would be entered in a raffle (*Pantagraph*, June 1930), Mickey the Singing Mouse lived at the Irvin Theater where he performed songs for customers (*Pantagraph* 16 Jan 1937, p.3).