

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 11, 2006

**“Let’s Go to the Movies”:** For 20 years starting in the mid-1930s, I loved to go to the movies. “My time” did not go back to silent films (thank goodness) but many were in black and white. The first movie I really remember was a 1929 release of Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* starring Will Rogers and Myrna Loy (a later musical version in Technicolor starred Bing Crosby and Rhonda Fleming). Through the latter years of the 1930s came the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals and the like, featuring the musical talents of Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, and Richard Rodgers. Historical films, some of them not very accurate, were popular, among which were biographies of Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas A. Edison, Stephen Foster and Abraham Lincoln. I loved all of them, and saw *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* many times.

Movie theatres were considered “first run,” “second run,” etc., which did not apply to the quality of the films but rather the order in which these theatres showed the top releases. The large theaters in downtown Philadelphia, such as the Boyd, the Mastbaum, and the Fox, were “first run,” and the best Wilmington theaters were “second run.” They showed the same films one week later. Theaters in smaller places such as Kennett Square were “third run” (a week later still), and in West Grove, Middletown, and towns with populations just over 1,000, the films were three full weeks behind Philadelphia. Some of these smaller theaters never did qualify for the top films and had to be happy to show “B pictures.” The Grand in Wilmington (now the Grand Opera House) was in this “B” category.

I remember first going to the Auditorium Theatre in Kennett Square for the Saturday matinee. At these events, the theater often featured children’s films and cartoons. Once they gave us paper goggles with one eye looking through a red lens and one through a green. This was supposed to make the image on the screen turn from black & white to color. My recollection is that it didn’t work very well, but I think tickets were only 15 cents.

The best theatres were always in the cities, as suburban theaters and open-air drive-ins did not arrive to any extent until after World War II. These top theaters were usually associated with one of the major Hollywood studios. In Wilmington, Loew’s, first located on Delaware Avenue at Adams Street, showed MGM films. *Gone with the Wind* showed here in 1939. The Rialto, between 2nd and 3rd on Market, had the latest 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox offerings. In February 1939, Warner Brothers’ new Warner Theatre opened on 10<sup>th</sup> Street between Tatnall and Orange and featured its first film *Wings of the Navy* with a color short called *Lincoln in the White House*. The first New Year’s Eve after I had my driver’s license (1940), I prevailed upon my parents to let me pick up my twin cousins, Alan and Bob Mancill, and go to the midnight show at the Warner. Loew’s later moved to Market Street between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> to become Loew’s Aldine (now the “Baby Grand”), and the old Loew’s was downgraded to the Ritz. At 5<sup>th</sup> and Market was the Queen, housed in what had been Wilmington’s best 19<sup>th</sup>-century hotel, the Clayton House, and in the same block the Arcadia. On the other side of Market between 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> was the Savoy, later called the Towne. At 24<sup>th</sup> and Market was the Strand, on Union Street near 4<sup>th</sup> was the Park, and on Maryland Avenue the Ace. A segregated theater on Walnut Street was called the National. While some of these theaters were not in the best neighborhoods, the streets were safe, and none showed racy films, as this was not allowed by Hollywood’s Hayes office of censorship.

Small towns had their local theaters, which often served as social centers for the community. New Castle had the Earle, Newark the State, Middletown the Everett, Woodcrest (near Newport) the Crest, West Grove the Roselyn, and there were several others. Suburban places got into the act just before and after World War II with the Edgemoor, the Manor (in Wilmington Manor), and several popular drive-ins. In the late 1940s, having run the open-air theater for our 55<sup>th</sup> Weather Reconnaissance Squadron on Guam in 1945, I established the Club House Theater in Yorklyn’s former community clubhouse, which showed old 16 mm. films for two winter seasons before giving way to television, then spreading to everyone’s home.