

MEMORIES OF THE STRAND

BY CATHY GEORGE

I decided to do my project on what residents who have lived in Mt. Vernon for a long time remember about the Strand Theater.

Sara Gaarde had much information to offer. She remembers that the Strand was a movie theater located where the current City Hall is. It burned down in the year of 1975 on February first. The buildings the fire took along with the Strand were a Railway Express, a hair salon, the Legion Hall, and a dentist office. Some of the physical features she remembers are the big marquee in front on the outside and a balcony on the second floor. High school students often sat in the balcony and "made-out". Also there were more seats than the Bijou which were covered with velvet. She remembers the screen was a bit bigger than the Bijou's too. There was a big velvet curtain drawn back on each side of the screen. She also told me that the owners, Lawrence and Bertha West were quite strict. For example, you couldn't bring any food or gum into the theater, and you couldn't put your feet on the seats. On one occasion when Sara was a senior in high school she was going to see a movie called Hurry Sundown that contained one partially nude scene. Mrs. West asked her if her mother knew she was at that movie. Sara said "yes". Then Mrs. West asked if her mother knew what was in the movie. She said "yes", but Mrs. West still wasn't sure so she called Sara's mother to make sure it was fine. Which it was.

I also interviewed Jay Gunn. He remembers kids always wanted to sit in the balcony and throw stuff off. But one of his favorite memories of the strand,(and a favorite story of mine) happened in the middle of the big fire. A fireman was spraying the fire with a hose. He was completely surrounded by smoke. The only way you could see him is if the wind blew the smoke away for a moment. During such a moment, the fireman signaled for the hose to be turned off. He put the hose down, reached in a pocket, pulled out a cigarette and lit it and smoked it.

Janice Johnson also talked to me about the Strand. she is the daughter of the owners, Lawrence and Bertha West. Her dad was going to be an athletic coach, but changed his mind in his final year in Cornell, and decided to go into the movie business instead. Before he opened it, it was called the Liberty. In the early years her mother played the piano for the shows. Her dad's office was upstairs with a very nice, large, brown desk.

During W.W.II, every Sunday afternoon, they would show the movie continuously to entertain the troops.

Every Tuesday night they would have something called "Bank Night". The customers put their names in bowl, and someone would draw a name out. The person picked would then receive some money. Also before every movie they would show the news and a cartoon.

Her dad would let a woman named Bertha Walters into the movies for pie.

In the winter her mother would get a pair of gloves for children that didn't have any. Her mother would also make sure all the children had a ride home before she went home.

One day a dog had accidentally been locked inside the theater. The dog leapt out through the front window called the box office.

Here are some snippets of information she told me about. No popcorn was allowed because it brought in mice. The final movie shown before the fire was The four musketeers.

Another man I spoke with is Ed Rogers who now lives in Iowa city. He couldn't go to the Strand until he was in high school, when he could use his own money. He remembered you could get a free pass to the movie by distributing hand bills for one week. He recalled the balcony, where you could take your date to "smooch". Ed had a friend named Bob Hartung who went to the movie every week. Bob Hartung ended up making a good career directing, producing, and acting.

Joy Gaarde-Morton also told me what she remembered about the Strand. She lived on Main Street along with many other kids. They would go to the strand to watch the Our Gang comedies. Afterwards they would try the tricks out on their baby-sitters.

She said about 25 people could sit in the balcony. And on the lower level there was a center section with about 12 seats per row, with two seats per row on each side of the center section.

She said that if you were below 12 years of age the admission was 10 cents. If you were older than 12 it cost 25 cents. There weren't any concessions sold. If you were caught with food you were kicked out.

Also, since she was Sara's mother, she remember Mrs. West calling her to make sure Sara could go to Hurry sundown.

The last person I talked with is Jean Stoner. She told me that she went to the Strand only once, to see Amos & Andy. Her husband and her had listened to Amos & Andy for many years on the radio. When they heard the movie was showing in town they gathered enough money for the both of them to see it. She said that the one thing that "just tickled her so" was when Amos was trying to be an important executive, he would yell through the wall to his "secretary", "Buzz me, Ms. Blue."