

Yesterday's theaters 'reeled' viewers in

APRIL 10, 1986

By George A. Parkhurst

Would you like to go to a complete movie program and see, not just one picture, but three for less than 20 cents? As the airline commercials say, "Of course, certain restrictions apply."

You'd have to attend a matinee some afternoon and, naturally, the pictures would be in black and white and there would no sound.

If it was inconvenient for you to attend the matinee for 15 cents plus a two cent War Tax, you could cough up 20 cents plus the two cent War Tax and go in the evening. And, oh yes, there is one other restriction: you'd have to go back in time about sixty-seven years.

Where would you find this bargain? Right in Central Square at the Park Theatre, located in Odd Fellows' Hall on the second floor of what is now the First Bank Building.

The Park Theatre was operated for several years following World War I by Fred W. Park, the father of former Town Treasurer and Town Clerk Charlotte P. DeWolf. You couldn't miss it because there was a lighted sign over the door where the bank entrance is today.

Had you been there March 8, 1919, you'd have seen "Persuasive Peggy" in six reels; "The Yellow Menace" (two reels); and the comedy, "It's a Great Life" (two reels). There might have been a slight interruption between reels while the film was being changed.

Another program included "The Road Called Straight," "a drama of stout hearts and fighting fists;" followed by the "thrilling mystery melodrama: 'The Crimson Gardenia,'" also, the comedy film, "The Wild Cure." **1919**

The way it was

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You might have found it more convenient, if you lived in North or West Chelmsford, to go to the Crescent Theatre located in the North Town Hall.

The Crescent opened in 1919 and it was still packing them in at least as late as 1925. The pictures were similar to those shown at the Park Theatre. For example, the newspaper ad for the opening program on Sept. 2, 1919, listed "A 5-Reel Special Feature; a Chaplin Comedy; Educational Weekly and Others." The doors would open at 7:15 p.m. and the price "to any part of the hall" was 25 cents plus a three cent War Tax. (Obviously inflation had taken its toll since the above ad for the Park Theatre.) Afternoon prices were 15 and 20 cents plus Tax.

These were the days of the "cliff-hanging" serials like Pearl White in "The Perils of Pauline" when, just as the villain was to strike, the picture would be cut off and, in its place would appear the message: "Continued next week."

In the early 1920's the residents of Chelmsford could attend a program of movies at the Center Town Hall on one Friday night each month during the winter. These

movies were presented by the Middlesex County Bureau of Agriculture and Home Economics. There was no set admission fee but a "silver collection" (meaning dimes) was taken during intermission.

Just before the lights came on at the end of the show, the amount of the night's receipts were projected onto the screen from a glass slide (frequently cracked) by means of a projector.

Children, a good percentage of the audience, had to be accompanied by an adult. Attendance averaged about 200 per night, according to the 1922 Town Report in which the County Agent stated that "Bureau moving pictures were shown six times before a total audience of 1,210.

The programs were all similar, consisting of an agricultural or home economics film, a feature picture, and a comedy. The pictures were, of course, black and white and silent — color and sound photography were still in the distant future.

However, Miss Isabel Warren, seated at the piano, kept her eye on the screen and provided music appropriate to the scene at that instant.

These were the movie theaters in Chelmsford until the Chelmsford Drive-in Theater opened on July 31, 1957, followed seven years later by the conversion of a grocery store into the Route 3 Cinemas I and II on June 3, 1964.

More recently, both have been enlarged with the addition of a second screen at the drive-in and six more at the Route 3 Cinema.

In this respect, times have really changed.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has been in town since 1654.

APRIL 17, 1986