

Museum News

The Princess Theater... true Sanderson royalty



The Princess Theater, about 1936.

Photo courtesy of the Terrell County Memorial Museum

Ask anyone reared in a small town in West Texas and you will find the Number 1 complaint is that there is nothing to do. Ask any kid in Sanderson today (and a fair number of adults) that same question and you will get the same answer.

But in the early days of Sanderson, that was not strictly true. Aside from school sports and the semi-pro baseball team that was the center attraction off and on for years, Sanderson had a number of entertainment venues available. Roller skating rinks, pool halls, civic clubs, fraternal organizations, saloons (for the elders), cafes and restaurants and the ever-popular sport of depot-watching kept the populace entertained, long before radio and television came on the scene.

But for sheer flight of fancy, the Princess

Theater was probably the most popular business establishment in Sanderson for over 70 years.

The first motion pictures appeared in Sanderson just about the time the county came into being in 1905. At that time movies were shown in the skating rink tent down by the depot. The hand-cranked, flickering projectors with the jerky, speeded-up motion and dialogue boxes that flashed on the screen periodically, delighted young and old alike.

At a slightly later period a skating rink tent was set up on the corner of 2nd and Hackberry, about where the old high school shop building sits now, and it also doubled as a movie house.

A few years later the rink moved to a permanent building on the corner of 1st and Oak,

eventually becoming the old Morrison's Dime Store, and the movies followed.

When the W.F. Bohlman's moved to Sanderson in 1909, it wasn't long until they started a confectionary (candy store/soda fountain) behind the Farley Store on Oak and Persimmon, along with an outdoor theater. This business had canvas walls but no roof, and inclement weather sent patrons scurrying for shelter.

In 1917, that whole corner of businesses burned and the Bohlman's bought the property and built a fine, two-storey brick structure containing their confectionary and theater on the bottom floor and the St. Francis Hotel on the upper floor. (Francis was Mr. Bohlman's middle name, and, being devout Catholics, probably was their patron saint.)

But, at some time in the late 'Teens or early 'Twenties, the Princess Theater came to life. The first ad for the Princess appeared in the June 3, 1922, *Sanderson Times*. The *Times* archives earlier that year burned up in a tragic fire, so the actual date of formation is lost.

Later that year the *Times* announced that Mr. Tom Glover, who had been manager of the Princess, had turned the reins over to a Mr. Henry Urquhart.

Every effort was made to promote the theater for other events besides films.

In November of 1923, the *Times* reported that a baby contest was held at the Princess Theatre over the weekend. Mary Elizabeth Banner won first prize, Rose Mary Rhodes won second prize, Lillie Halley won third prize, and Mike Strange was awarded fourth prize.

In January of 1924, the Princess Theater sponsored a tacky party to raise money for the school athletic program. Besides the movie, home-made candy, cake, sandwiches, chocolate, and coffee, as well as a parcel post sale and table games, were offered after the show.

On October 14, 1925, Mrs. O.M. Shaw of Marathon, Texas, registered the Princess as a business at the County Clerk's Office. She probably had hired Glover and Urquhart as managers, since there is no record that she actually lived in Sanderson.

The year 1927 was very eventful for the Princess Theater. In January the *Times* announced that the Princess had added an orchestral organ to the theater. In those days of silent movies, musical accompaniment was usually provided by a pianist in the smaller theaters and by a theater pipe organ or even an orchestra in the big city theaters. Music was necessary to augment the theatricality, heighten the drama and cover the background noise in the theater.

To have an orchestral organ in the Princess was quite a coup for the owners. These instru-

ments were composed, basically, of a piano with organ pipes, percussion and sound effect devices added. The operator could play by hand and manipulate the sound effects, or play the instrument by paper roll, like a player piano, with the added instruments played by extra punchings in the roll. This instrument reportedly cost \$2250, quite an investment in those pre-inflation days.

In February of 1927 a fire broke out during a showing and the theater had to be evacuated. The projectionist had just removed a reel from the machine and the highly flammable celluloid film stock ignited, throwing fire into a pile of seven or eight films lying on the floor. The audience, seeing the smoke and flames belching from the projection booth, bolted for the doors. There were no injuries and the projectionist safely escaped, but the booth, equipment and room wiring was a total loss.

On August 21, 1927, one of the most eventful and fortuitous events in the life of the Princess occurred. At that time, Elouise and Carlton White bought the business, lock stock and barrel, from Mrs. Shaw, beginning a long run of success for the theater. The Whites had assumed management in January and made the deal to purchase by August.

The sale included all projection equipment, concession equipment and seating and benches, including the Princess marquee sign, hallmark of the business. Unfortunately, the theater icon disappeared sometime in the late 1930s, and its present location and the reason why it was taken down are unsolved mysteries for the moment.

In announcing the take-over, the *Times* stated that the Whites were "once again" managers of the Princess, implying that they had managed the business at some point prior to that date. The lack of newspaper archives prevents us from knowing those details. And, the location of the Princess in that period is also unknown since the building we now know as the Princess was not built until 1929.

During the next year the Whites made a deal with Mr. A.D. Brown, local rancher and property owner, to move into a new theater building he was having constructed on the site of the old Mussey Brothers Garage.

Meanwhile, the Whites also encouraged use of the old building for social functions and public meetings. The *Times* of March 1, 1929, announced that the new Loyalty Baptist Church would be meeting in the Princess Theatre each Sunday morning and evening. The first service would be held Sunday, March 3, and the title of the inaugural sermon would be, "Why Did the Pastor Resign as Pastor of First Baptist Church, Sanderson?" All citizens were invited to attend, even the other church pastors in town.

On October 4, 1929, the Whites and A.D. Brown announced the grand opening of the new and improved Princess Theater. The new building was quite plush and featured amenities of a much larger town, a first class establishment. All the latest movies of the day were featured and the *Times* for that week was virtually filled with stories about the theater and its improved services, and by ads from local businesses and individuals offering messages of welcome and congratulations to the new location.

In November of 1929, the theater was used for a community Thanksgiving Service, celebrated jointly by the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian and Church of Christ.

Always keeping up with the latest innovations, the Whites introduced "Talkies" to the eager Sanderson public in April. A way to successfully add sound to the movies was developed and the managers were always looking for ways to improve profits. The first show was "Lord Byron of Broadway," a musical comedy featuring comedian Benny Rubin, brunette bombshell Marion Shilling and a young Jack Benny in an uncredited roll. Ticket prices were 30¢ for children and 50¢ for adults, and movies changed four times a week.

The theater sailed on through 1930 and 1931, but by 1932 the Great Depression caught up with the Whites. Lagging ticket sales forced them to close the theater.

But, by March of 1933, the theater was affiliated with a national firm, OK Theaters, enabling it to open its doors once more and show high quality films on a reduced schedule of Friday and Saturday nights. First showing was "I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang."

Depression-weary families found a way to pay the price to escape the realities of everyday life, and the theater began to pick up business.

The *Times* welcomed Jack Wright, manager of the Grand Theater in Ft. Stockton, who would also manage the Princess until new management could be secured. Shortly, the Whites reassumed management and kept the theater open until they sold it in 1965.

Highlights of those years were the addition of air conditioning in 1939, and improvement to projection and sound equipment through the years. The Whites always maintained a first class business, and they quickly became known as the cheapest babysitter in town, a reputation they relished.

Also, in 1939, the theater caught fire once again, this time damaging Mr. Brown's building and causing about \$1000 in damage to the equipment, but good insurance saved the day.

Throughout the Whites' tenure they employed many adults and young people in their business.

Earlene Cox Thompson ran the concessions in the late '30s.

Eva Billings moved to Sanderson with her mother in 1942, and for twenty-seven years, she was cashier at the Princess Theater, from 1942 until 1969.

Rodolfo "Rudy" Garza was a projectionist all through the '50s, '60s and '70s. His daughter, Martha Garza Allen, ran the weekend concessions for the last three of her high school years, ending in 1980.

It was Terry Jean Hodgkins Shepp's first job at the age of twelve (1956) operating the concession stand at the Princess Movie Theater. And there were many others.

With the advent of rock and roll music, the Princess hosted a very special event in the summer of 1956. The Cavaliers, a rock group from San Angelo, did a tour through West Texas, hitting all the small towns. Their claim to fame would not come until 1964 when "Last Kiss," with J. Frank Wilson as lead singer, hit Number 1 on the charts.

But in those early days, they did a complete show at the Princess, and even recorded several of their numbers in the theater: *I Got A Woman*, *Go, Go, Go*, *I'll Never Let You Go* and *Long Tall Sally*.



Photo courtesy of www.forgottenhits.com

When they hit town, they rode around in the back of a truck, announcing the big show by bull horn. Stopped by a deputy, they told him they were trying to get customers so they could make enough gas money to get to the next town. That was perfectly fine with him, and he let them continue, as long as they left town right after the show.

In that same era, Dr. Bart Pate, son of the town's doctor, Dr. John Pate, related how, when he was in 4th grade at Sanderson Elementary School (ca 1953,) he and classmate Melinda Gilbreath Blackmon would go to the Princess together to see a movie. He said it cost 12c for him to get in, 10c for the movie and 2c tax.

Since Melinda's father, *Sanderson Times* owner/publisher Albert Gilbreath, did all the advertising for the Princess, she got in for 4c. Bart could get two "nickel cokes" for a dime, so he would hit up his father for a quarter to pay for their "date." He didn't say where the other penny came from.

Another popular offering at the Princess was the "Pot Drawing." (No, not that kind of pot!) Every Tuesday (some say Friday,) Manager Carlton White would climb up on the stage and roll a wire cage filled with names of patrons, to thoroughly mix them. Then he would draw a name (one name only) from the cage and announce the big winner of the weekly money give-away. Darlene McDonald Wright remembered that everyone would hold their breaths until the name was called, but, invariably, the name would be of someone who had moved away or died years before. The name would go back into the "pot" and the money would increase by \$15 for the next week's drawing. It was a surprisingly successful ploy to get people to the theater.

And so, the Princess continued on through the years, not just a "picture show," but the center for entertainment in town.

By 1965, the White's were ready to retire from the movie business. They found a ready buyer in Mr. O.T. "Shorty" Sudduth. Shorty had moved to Sanderson in 1938 to run the *Sanderson Times*. He sold the *Times* in 1945 and started O.T. Sudduth & Co., an appliance and butane business. He also made funeral arrangements, though he was not an undertaker.

He bought the Princess on June 1, 1965, then, just ten days later, almost lost everything in the Sanderson Flood. Water filled the basement and submerged the building up to the twelfth row. But, the damage was not permanent and he went on to run the theater successfully until the 1970s.

Here, the history becomes hazy. Martha Allen remembers that her boss in 1980 was Jack Dorris of Alpine. Other names before and after that date have not surfaced.

The Princess Theater shut down in the early 1980s, victim of television, multiplex theaters with surround sound and gigantic screens, and a



Photo courtesy of CW (Bill) Smith

population not large enough to support the business. It went out, not with a bang, but a whimper.

Today, the building sits derelict, like an old lady who has fallen on hard times. Her hardwood flooring has been spirited away, the partitions have been destroyed by vandals and a gaping hole in the roof harkens back to the Bohlman's starlight theater. The seating and projection equipment disappeared long ago, as well as everything else of value, and the building sits as a mute witness to the glories of a more prosperous time.

As was said of circuses, the Princess was the "happiest place on earth" for a multitude of patrons, folks weary of war and bad economic times who needed their spirits lifted in the face of personal challenges. It was visited by common folks who didn't come to see opera or live theater, but to while away a few hours, laughing at the cartoons, weeping at the melodrama or rolling in the aisles with the Marx Brothers.

The Princess served as the focal point of the community, the place for union Thanksgiving services, war bond rallies and fund-raising events for school and sports programs. It served ably through fire and flood, drought and cloudburst, hail and high water. It was a community forum for political rallies and concerned citizens. It, like the depot, was a place of the people.

Now it is vacant, a haunt for the ghostly images of Tom Mix and Mary Pickford, Lauren Bacall and Clark Gable, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Sadly, it, too, will probably be swept away like our other important buildings in Sanderson, under a tidal wave of apathy.

References

- Terrell County, Its Past, Its People*, Alice Evans Downie. Sanderson, Texas: Terrell Co. Heritage Commission, 1978.
Assorted articles from the *Sanderson Times*, 1922-1965, Terrell County Memorial Museum.
http://www.forgottenhits.com/last_kiss_the_incredible_convoluted_story_behind_this_1_classic_hit
Conversation with Dr. Bart Pate, Marfa, TX, July 15, 2012
Conversation with Mrs. Martha Allen, Sanderson, TX, Aug. 8, 2012

All newsletters can be found at <http://terrellmuseum.info/newsletters/>