



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

September 2024



The Berkley Theatre—March 18 or 19, 1949

The Berkley Theatre

Part 1 of 2, The First Two Decades

by Don Callihan

The Saturday Matinee

In July of 1949, just shy of my 8th birthday, I went to my first Saturday matinee at the Berkley Theatre without an adult. We all began walking to school without adult supervision at five years of age, so walking to the matinee was not a big deal. My mother gave me a quarter for admission, popcorn, and a candy bar. (There were no beverages sold or allowed in theaters at that time.) I bought my 14-cent admission ticket and handed it to the ticket taker, who tore it in two and returned the stub to me. I then proceeded to the concession counter and bought a box of popcorn for a nickel and a candy bar for 6 cents. "Six cents for a candy bar? They were 5 cents at the store. The next time, I'll get my candy bar at the store and get a penny candy to go with it."

With adequate nourishment for the next four hours, I found my seat and a few minutes later, the first movie began. It was called *Canadian Pacific* and was about a good guy trying to build a railroad and bad guys trying to stop him. There were barroom brawls, gun fights, dynamite explosions and Indians on the warpath. In the end, the good guy won out. It was mushy, though, as he kissed the girl. Next, I watched previews of coming attractions, five cartoons and then the second feature, a Walt Disney film, *So Dear to My Heart*. This movie mixed cartoon characters with live actors and had a lot of singing. I liked *Canadian Pacific* better.

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Upcoming Events

- **Additional Museum Hours**
 - ♦ **2nd Thursday of the Month, 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.**
- **100th Anniversary of Our Lady of La Salette**
- ♦ **New Christmas Coffee Mug Coming in November to the Museum Store, City Hall, and the Library**

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The Berkley Theatre

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The matinee ended around 5 o'clock, and I emerged into the bright July sunshine and walked home. That matinee began a Saturday ritual that would continue for the next 5 or 6 years. Its location, the Berkley Theatre, was the typical small-town movie palace with a few unique features. While there was no balcony, a cry room was accessible from the second floor, where the projection room and restrooms were located. The cry room had approximately 16 theater seats and was separated from the main auditorium by soundproof glass windows. Mothers could take babies and noisy small children there and watch the movie without disturbing the audience. Another unique feature was the back row to the right of the center aisle, with earphone jacks at the side of every other seat. A hard-of-hearing individual could obtain an earphone from the concession counter, plug it in, and hold it in their ear for amplified sound. (see "hearing aids" in ad on page 3)

A New Theater in Berkley

Plans for a new theater in Berkley became known at the Berkley city council meeting on February 3, 1941 (reported in the Feb 8 Tribune) when Albert S. Johnson, a Birmingham contractor who built more than 60 theaters in Michigan, requested permission to drill for water in the alley on the north side of Twelve Mile between Robina and Wakefield in preparation for the construction of a movie theater. The prospective owners were not named at the time. However, they were two Romanian immigrants, Vincent Laica (1901-1962) and John Igna (1869-1947), who each owned a grocery store in Detroit. The 978-seat theater was quickly constructed and opened on Thanksgiving Day, November 20, 1941. Movies shown on the first day were *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* and *Harmon of Michigan*.

Movie Schedules

Programs changed every two to three days and ran Friday and Saturday; Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday; and Wednesday and Thursday. Each was a double feature. It was thus possible to see six movies every week. There were also matinees on Saturdays and Sundays, and on Wednesdays during the summer. The Saturday and Wednesday matinees were geared toward kids 12 and under. The Sunday matinees were the same movies shown on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday and were geared toward families. The more dramatic movies were reserved for the Friday-Saturday Crowd, and the lesser movies were for the Wednesday-Thursday patrons. In the 1950s, programs ran Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, and Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

Monday through Saturday, the first film began at 7:00 p.m. The second film, after previews, a cartoon and *The Movietone News*, began about 9:15 p.m. and ended around 11:00 p.m. Then, the first film would repeat. It was not uncommon to arrive late, say 8:00 p.m., watch the remainder of the first film and then stay after the first film started again and watch to the point where you came in. Thus, you knew the end before you knew the beginning. Sometimes, people liked a film so much that they stayed and watched it for a second time. On Sundays, the matinee began at about 1:30, and the first feature repeated around 6 p.m. and 10 p.m.

The Newsreel

The Movietone News was one of several black-and-white newsreels shown
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Currier & Ives
Winter Snow Scene

Giveaways at the Berkley Theatre

Over the years, the Berkley Theatre has had numerous giveaways to stimulate attendance on the slowest days of the week. The first of these began on February 9th and 10th, 1944. Every lady attending the theater on those dates and every Wednesday or Thursday night thereafter received free Currier & Ives Dinnerware. The initial promotion advertised in *The Daily Tribune* read, "This Currier and Ives Antique Set was made by the famous Edward Knowles Potteries of Canton, Ohio. Many American families are proud to own dinnerware made by this popular, reliable Concern. The Berkley Theatre, through a fortunate purchase, now offers you the ever-popular, attractive, conservative ANTIQUE SET." Any female who purchased an adult ticket qualified. The promotion continued through the end of 1944. It got even better starting Wednesday, August 30, and continuing every Wednesday and Thursday in September. In addition to the single piece of dinnerware given to every lady, four complete sets were also given away. The ladies were asked to hang on to their ticket stubs on Wednesdays and Thursdays. The theater put their stubs in a container, drew them out during intermission, and called out numbers. If the number on your ticket stub matched, you won the dishes. Each place setting consisted of a plate, cereal/soup bowl, cup, and saucer. To obtain service for eight, 32 adult female ticket purchases

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Giveaways at the Berkley Theatre

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were required. Sugar bowls, creamers and serving platters were also given away. (The author recalls these dishes being similar to the one shown on the previous page.)

Many young men were away at war at the time, and movie attendance was a popular pastime for their wives, fiancés, and girlfriends.

Giveaways continued with Atomic Rose ovenproof dinnerware offered in 1946, beau-



Honey Lee Dinnerware

tiful Honey Lee dinnerware in 1948-49, and Juliette Silverware in 1950.



The Berkley Theatre *continued from page 2*

in movie theaters. The newsreels were about 10 minutes long and highlighted the critical news of the day as well as novel and human-interest stories. During the war years, they showed the carnage of the battlefield and the suffering of refugees more vividly than could be conveyed by newspapers and radio. Updates occurred twice weekly.

The Adolescent Crowd

In the 1950s, adolescent kids made up the audience on Friday nights. As a 13-year-old, I remember a particular Friday night when the Berkley Theatre showed the movie *Reap the Wild Wind*. The movie was longer than most movies, and I could see the hands of the giant blue neon clock to the left of the screen approaching my curfew time, 11:00 p.m. However, the ship's captain, Jack Stuart (John Wayne), was in a diving suit underwater fighting a giant squid. As the hand inched toward 11 o'clock, it appeared the squid would win. I knew I would be in trouble when I got home, but what red-blooded American boy could leave John Wayne to fend for himself? In the end, John Wayne won out, and upon arriving home 25 minutes late, I lost out. The night was Friday, April 22, 1955 (I looked it up). I was grounded for a week.

BERKLEY 12 Mile-Coolidge, Berkley-LI 2-0330
Open 6:45—Park Free—ALL COLOR
Doris Day in "YOUNG AT HEART" 7:00, 11:12
"REAP THE WILD WIND," John Wayne, 9:08

The Detroit News, April 22, 1955, Page 57

The Berkley Theatre novelty wore off when we entered high school. We had football games, sock hops and Woodward Avenue drive-in cruising to occupy our Friday nights, but it was great while it lasted.

Community Events

In addition to showing movies, the Berkley Theatre also hosted community events. Beginning in June of 1942, and every January and June thereafter, Berkley High School conducted its commencement exercises at the theater until the new Berkley High School Gymnasium opened in 1949. War Bond Drives were another activity promoted by the theater. In January of 1944, Berkley was conducting a bond drive to persuade Berkley citizens to purchase war bonds to support the war effort. To wrap up the bond drive, a special program was planned at the Berkley Theatre featuring local and Detroit talent. The purchase of a \$50 war bond was the price of admission. The bond cost \$37.50, and if held to maturity, 10 years, paid out \$50.

Several Berkley protestant churches also sponsored Good Friday services at the theater in the early 1940s

The Coming of Television

The 1950s were difficult years for the Berkley and other theaters. More and more people got television, and TV programming steadily improved. Theaters battled back with innovations like 3-D, Cinemascope and stereophonic sound. However, the Berkley did not have the funds to invest in new technology. As a result, in July 1958, John Igna Jr., the son of the deceased John Igna, and Vincent Laica leased the theater to the Nederlander family, who made much-needed improvements. The Nederlanders operated the theater until 1961, when Harry Komer took over the lease. The following year, Komer bought the theater.

Watch for

The Berkley Theatre – Part 2 of 2 – The Komer Years,

in the December issue of The Museum Corner.

Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and Berkley Map prints.



New Christmas Coffee Mug - Available for \$15 in early November at the Museum, the Library, and City Hall

NEW! - Original artwork prints from Berkley artists

L to R, The Berkley Theater Marquee by Steven Patterson, Downtown Berkley—January 13, 2024 by Dale Carlson, The Vinsetta Garage by Steven Patterson.



Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
3338 Coolidge Highway
Berkley, MI 48072
248-658-3335
museum@berkleymich.net

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

Visit us on the web at
www.berkleyhistory.org

Facebook: Berkley Historical Museum

Instagram:
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Donate Items of Historical Interest

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

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The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.