



THE LAST PICTURE SHOW?

We arrived at our new hometown on a hot Saturday evening. We'd been driving for two days, and though we weren't surprised by the relentless dry heat, we didn't welcome it either. The bank sign flashed 101 degrees at 7:29pm. Back in Utah, I had read article after article about the drought killing off crops and whole herds of cattle, so I knew not to be surprised as dust blew over the road in front of our car. Save for a few semi trucks rumbling along the highway, the streets were empty..We turned onto Main Street and Jim let out a low whistle.

"You think everybody left?"

I laughed, but I had to agree. It seemed entirely possible that we were all alone in the small, Kansas town. Not a single person, not even a stray animal, wandered the main drag. "I always wanted to live in a ghost town," I replied.

And then something caught my eye. An old movie theater, looked to have been built in the 20s or 30s.

"You think they still run movies there?"

We stopped the car and watched as a woman emerged to unlock the theater door. A few seconds passed and then the facade erupted in a flash of neon.

"Chief," it read, in electric pink, framed in vibrant green and blue. A little red star dotted the "i". Slowly, a truck rounded the corner and stopped in front of the theater. A few moments later, another. Then a couple cars turned onto Main from the South.

"Well, who would have guessed...?"

"Signs of life," I agreed. And I was comforted as we headed on to our new home.



That was two years ago, when Jim and I began our move onto the Plains. We knew it was impulsive--moving nearly a thousand miles on a whim. What would we find in a little dusty Plains town? Certainly we weren't expecting much of a nightlife. But, once the heat broke and a few rainstorms moved through, people were out and about, working in their gardens and roaming the aisles of the grocery store. We began to make friends and we settled into the rhythm of the place. Soon it felt natural, on many a Saturday night, to walk on down to the "Chief" and see what was playing.

Then, last summer, one of our neighbors told us the Chief was facing almost certain disaster. If it couldn't raise \$100,000 to buy a new digital projector in the next year, it would be forced to close. This was the first we had heard about the new shift away from the old 35mm film projectors. Apparently, the transformation from film to digital had been taking place for years. But since neither of us were big fans of 3D movies, we hadn't noticed that our small-town theater, and its 35mm projector, couldn't display the new trend. "Who cares if they can play 3D movies?" was my first thought upon hearing that they couldn't. But it seemed the digital trend had moved beyond 3D films--that most of the new films in the upcoming years would be released solely in digital version--and, without a digital projector, the Chief would be out of luck.

A hundred thousand dollars may not be a lot of money to big megaplex movie theaters, but in small-town Kansas, it's a pretty large amount. When rumors spread that the Chief would need \$100,000 to buy their new projector, we weren't the only regular patrons of the theater to wonder whether they would just give up and close down. But, to the Chief's credit, it stayed open. Ads in the local papers called for donations and printed thank you's to each donating towns person. Driving home one afternoon, we passed a TV news anchor from Wichita who stood outside the Chief talking into the camera. We tuned in that night to watch as the plea for money went live across the state.

After only a few months, the small theater proclaimed victory. They had raised even more money than they needed. We would have our digital projector.

And, for a little while, it was a sweet victory.

Until we scanned pages of the Gyp Hill Premiere--the newspaper from our

neighboring town--and read the following headline:

"Pageant Drive-In's Final Season: Screen to go Dark Due to Costly Upgrade."

While we had been celebrating the triumph of our own local theater, less than an hour down the road, one of the small handful of Drive-In theaters still operating in Kansas had been forced to close. The Gyp Hill article read like an obituary. It chronicled the long history of the Pageant Drive-In from its opening in 1953 and described how the new digital technology would have destroyed the small theater financially. A photo of the owner, unsmiling, standing before the doomed screen, accompanied the headline. The caption noted that his family, the Sills, had owned the theater since 1968. "I just can't justify going into that kind of debt," he said in explanation.

Suddenly, it was apparent that this problem was much larger than just our little town. I began to read about digital projection online. The movie studios heralded the technology as the saving grace of the American movie. While film was cumbersome and difficult to transport, the small hard drives containing the digital films could be shipped cheaply and easily around the world. The image was crisper. Directors had more freedom in manipulating their images. James Cameron would only use digital. Peter Jackson would only use digital. Even Martin Scorsese was hopping on board.

So, why wasn't I feeling excited? Finally, an LA Times article summed up the story behind the switch. In short, money. Studios liked the digital technology because it was cheap and easy to transport. And, once they decided they liked something, it was curtains for anyone who stood opposed.

The LA Times article contained a chilling quotation from John Fithian, the president of the National Association of Theatre Owners. "Simply put, if you don't make the decision to get on the digital train soon, you will be making the decision to get out of the business."

This seems to be the shadiest part of the deal. Let's say you own a movie theater, and suddenly you hear from the studios that they won't be releasing any new movies on film. "Okay," you might think. "I can't afford the \$100,000 upgrade, but I could just show old movies." Art house theaters across the country have made that a bankable proposition for years. Except that you can't. Because those art house theaters don't own some huge stockpile of 35mm classic films. Just like the megaplex theaters, they rely on the studios to loan them prints. And, since the advent of this new digital revolution, the studios won't be loaning those 35mm prints any longer. You want to show a Godard retrospective? A Billy Wilder double feature? Without a digital projector, it ain't gonna happen. The best you can hope for is a loaner DVD copy, which, when blown up onto a movie screen, looks ridiculous.

Our nearby Pageant Drive-In isn't the only theater going dark as a result of this "revolution." According to Oregon Public Radio, as many as 10 percent of the nation's movie theaters may be forced to close their doors. And these won't be the megaplexes, most of which made the digital transition years ago. What we'll lose are the small-town theaters--the architectural centerpieces of all the historic downtowns across rural America. We'll lose the art houses and the highbrow enclaves where film geeks flock to see their masters' works.

And we'll lose the history. Not just the history of all the theaters--the art deco facades and velvet-lined seats. We'll lose some of the history of film as well. It's in the nature of transition. In the same way that the more obscure films recorded on VHS never made the jump to DVD, countless "minor" celluloid films will simply be left behind--rendered inaccessible for future movie-goers. And likely, as digital transformations happen so frequently, with each shift in file format, more films will be stranded to history. A film may just make the cut for this digital transition, but there's no promise that it will make the next. Without the solid, dusty reel of celluloid, which, sitting in some warehouse somewhere, might someday be re-discovered and reclaimed, future films will reside only in digital space, relinquished by outdated file format and degraded data to abso-

lute nothingness.

In what seems to be the way of technical progress, more is lost than is gained. Something is gained in the new digital formats. A new freedom for the directors who choose to use it. But, in the complete deprivation of 35mm film, so much more is lost. The photochemical labs that have been engrossed for years in the printing of celluloid film; the thousands of movie projectionists who have spent decades winding film through their projectors; the entire sweep of film history, which has been "film" history from the beginning, and now will be--what, "movie" history? All swept away.

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And, honestly, I almost didn't notice. If I hadn't been living in a small town, where \$100,000 was enough money to cause a public stir, I don't think I would have even heard about the change. And now, knowing the monumental impacts of this shift, it's dreadful to see it pass so silently. Like a funeral march no one has bothered to attend. Across the country, doors will be shuttered and buildings emptied. More old theaters will become insurance offices or hardware stores, or will be razed for parking space. "Movies" will be the province of the megaplex, by the WalMart on the outskirts of town, with its standardized, identical screens all lined up in a row. And we will all keep going about our business, driving past the old buildings on our way to the grocery, stopping in the newly opened hardware store, with its curious velvet-curtained lobby, and halfway forget that we once watched Jaws here on a Saturday night. And that is when it will be clear. That forgetting, the ongoing going-about of business--that will be the saddest thing of all.



TONYA STILES is the co-publisher of the Canyon Country Zephyr.

JULIE HANCOCK
Springdale, UT



ALAN JOSLYN
Highlands Ranch, CO

MELINDA PRICE-WILTSHIRE
Vancouver, BC



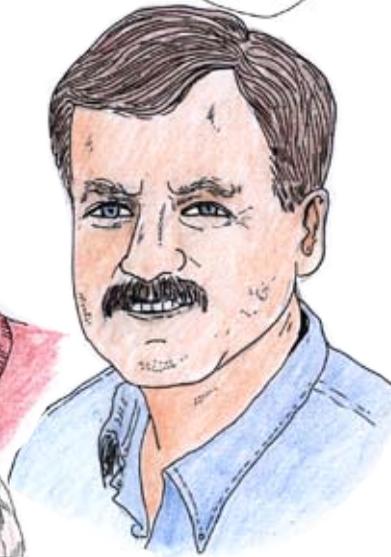
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SCOTT FASKEN
970.464.4859
fasken@bresnan.net

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