Setting the Scene…

At Manchester, New Hampshire soared into the roaring twenties, it was a thriving industrial city led by the Amoskeag Mills. It was acity on the rise. Employment opportunities attracted large immigrant groups, particularly French-Canadians and Poles. These newcomers worked side by side with the native descendants of previous Irish and German immigrants. With their own traditions, religions and cultural behaviors, these ethnic groups gravitated into different regions of the city and often experienced conflict with one another on the job in the mills.

In 1918, the Amoskeag Mills experienced their largest profit in their history. By 1922, the workers embarked on the first massive strike in Manchester’s history. The mills never completely recovered their former glory and closed permanently in 1935. During the years of prosperity, the workers and their families sought enjoyment in one of the few profuse, affordable entertainments available to all – the movies.

Who, Where, What…

The intent of my research was to uncover who went to the movies in Manchester, New Hampshire; to understand what role the movie theaters played in Manchester, where the movie theaters were located, and what impact the movie theaters had on the city. My research was to uncover who went to the movies and why and why some neighborhoods were popular while other neighborhoods were not.

The Captive Audience…

Theaters clearly valued the patronage of youth. In the early 1920s, the Mary O’Beirne began to push to get children away from inappropriately adult, and Manchester theaters complied.

• On May 13, 1922, the Star Theater offered five 5c packages of Life Savers to the five youngest to attend the 10:15 am Saturday show.
• The Palace Theater promoted a 10c "Kiddie" matinee.
• The Gaston sisters (Lily and Alice, born in 1915) recall traversing the city, on foot, with other children to see movies anywhere and everywhere – except crossing over to the West Bank.

Movie theaters, while particularly appealing to the youth of Manchester, were also important to the adult workers as well. During this coal shortage in the winter of 1918, all Manchester businesses suffered a mandatory shut-down every Monday. The movie theaters petitioned the city to allow their shut-down day to be Tuesday, giving Manchester movie theaters the same day off that many of the adult workers had. During the coal shortage in the winter of 1918, all Manchester movie theaters had to pay as much there. You know, 'cause they had the same day off, and they would offer a discount on Sunday afternoon. It would have been a no-brainer if they had offered a discount on Sunday afternoon.

The Theater Boom…

There is little doubt that Manchester experienced a movie theater boom as it entered the 1920s, and according to local voices, it could have lasted to the end of time. Free time spent in saloons and taverns was now without an outlet, movie theaters, with their rapidly changing bills and diverse subject matter, could offer something for everyone. Financial claims substantiate this, since theaters all over the country were showing to record attendance. This in part Mr. Canning (the new owner of the Palace Theater) attributes to the enforcement of the prohibition law, causing hundreds of marathons of movies that were being requested by the working class. Manchester Daily Mirror and American described the new theater boom’s sunrise:

‘The whole scheme is in the lot of a combination mammoth house through the leftest walls of which can be seen the homes and rear of the power plant, and as it passes down the main street, and the many small houses of film, you get the idea that the theatre is a place to which every man can turn for entertainment. You get the idea that the theatre is open to everyone, and that the doors are always open to all. The orchestra will have a place on stage.’

August 14, 1929

The Lights Come Up…

In the early twentieth century, movies were an important method of introducing immigrants to American culture and helping them assimilate. Centralized theaters instigated physical interaction.

The smaller theater away from the main roads on the edges of working class neighborhoods conducted little advertising, relying on local patterns. The theaters downtown, in the business district, advertised heavily to attract audience members from all over the city. It is these theater patrons strongly remember visiting; it is here that all social classes and ethnicities mixed.

In 1929, the opening of Manchester’s first real movie palace, two expenses for the working-class, startled the movie-going experience. Until then, the movie was an egalitarian escape, with the mini-boom providing a taste of luxury for the working class as the city’s industry prospered.

Special Thanks...