

# The history of theater

## ■ Rock Hill's past rich with movies and drama.

There is no known date or place to mark the first theatrical performance in this area. Undoubtedly the first public performances were prior to the Civil War and, if professional, were done by a traveling troop.

Chesterville and Yorkville are the most likely candidates.

When the Yorkville Female Seminary (College) was built in 1853, a large assembly hall was constructed. Besides plays, there were operettas, musical concerts, and oratorical contests for the public's interest as well as student recitals and "speaking."

Every school, even the one-room rural schools, had school closings with everyone in the community on hand. One-act plays were often a part of the day-long activities.

Rock Hill had an interesting group in the 1890s. Calling themselves the Combination Company, at least eight local men formed a combination theatrical company and civic improvement company. Wearing top hats and carrying canes, the men put on dramatic productions not only in Rock Hill but in Lancaster and other nearby communities.

Known members of the Combination Company were Sidney Friedheim, T.O. Flowers, Vance Sharp, James E. Parker, John Milling, Rev. A.E. Holler, S.T. Frew and John McElwee. Flowers was Rock Hill's fire chief and money made from performances was used to purchase Rock Hill's first steam fire engine.



Nearby history

LOUISE PETTUS

Rock Hill had a movie house by 1908. Young Tom Crawford cranked the projector with two assistants. The theater has been described as "150 cane-bottomed chairs and a white sheet." There was no sound until the late 1920s. A gramophone supplied the music. The name has been lost (if ever

there was one) and after a year was replaced by The Lyric. The Lyric offered vaudeville shows that trooped the country via railroad.

Then in rapid succession there was the Pastime Theater and the Imperial and a novelty — an open-air theater situated in a vacant lot between Rayless Department Store and Bailey's Tin Shop. Tom Crawford, the same fellow who cranked the first projector in town, called it the Airdrome but after three weeks of rain sold it to J.N. McElwee who also owned the Pastime.

Over the years Rock Hill had numerous movie houses. Some of the names were: Grand, Palmetto,

Omar, Stevenson, Carolina, Capitol, Pix, the Carver, etc. Every place large enough to be called a town had one or two. After the introduction of sound the next big leap came with Technicolor in 1934. By 1950, 30% of films were in color.

The movies created stars but did not dampen the enthusiasm for local productions. If anything, movies created new standards and an increased interest in professional stage. Winthrop College's first

president, D.B. Johnson, was a great supporter of theater and attracted some outstanding performers.

One of his triumphs was securing Ellen Terry, the great English actress, in 1911. In her American tour, the stop at Winthrop was her only performance south of Washington.

The Rock Hill Little Theater was organized in 1934 in Johnson Auditorium on the Winthrop campus. The Junior Chamber of Commerce acted as sponsor and Harper Gault, who made the original suggestion, with Jesse Putnam and Jack O'Neal made up the committee that established the Little Theater. The first performance was on Feb. 28, 1935.

World War II broke up the first Little Theater "for the duration." After the war the Little Theater was reorganized for the pleasure of not only Rock Hill and Winthrop College but all of the surrounding communities who would eventually organize their own groups.

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