

“VOTE ‘NO’ ON MOVIES” – THE CONTROVERSY THAT DIVIDED A TOWN

By Ellen Knight¹

What could be more American than going to the movies? During the Great Depression especially, what was more integral to life than escaping to the movies?

So what could be better than having a movie theater in your own town? Yet, for about two decades in the early part of the 20th century, residents in one American town fought tooth and nail against a movie theater coming to town, declaring that movies were a menace to public health, morals, and character and that having a movie theater in town would mean nothing but trouble.



This attitude was not universally held by the whole town. Other residents argued back that having a movie theater in town would be a boon, especially to poorer citizens. Part of the debate pointed to concerns that would be repeated by later generations about children and television or kids and computers, but the debate of the movie theaters went far beyond worries over how kids were spending their time. It grew into something of a class struggle. And it threatened to go as far as the Supreme Court.



*Transformed into Shepard's
Orpheum*

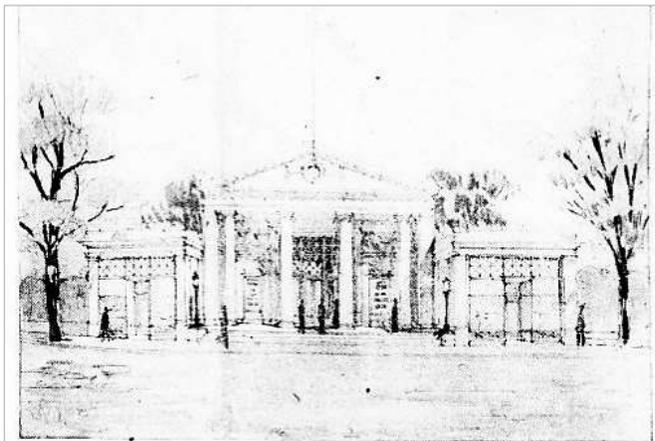
Over time, the pro-theater group got stronger and, after the introduction and enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code, eventually won. The theater was built and became a part of the community. Over time the old debate was forgotten. In time the building itself was gone. After less than 50 years, it had seen its day and was demolished, but not before making it into the movies. Though the once hotly contested building no longer exists, its image survives in Gene Shepard's *The Phantom of the Open Hearth*. None of the antics in the fictional theater, however, rival the fervor of the real war behind this predicted menace to the community.

While many young people were smitten enough with the movies to make their way to Hollywood, many of the older generation in Winchester were happy to keep them out of the community. Artist Gerrit Beneker explained why, of all the suburbs about Boston, he chose to live in Winchester in the 1930s. “Aside from the friendships we made, the comfortable homes we lived in, the good schools which were the privilege for our children to attend, we felt that Winchester is a town where Civic Pride is evident at every turn. There were no 'movies,' no bill-boards to influence the emotions of the young. The streets, the parks, the homes were well cared for. The Community, realizing the necessities of change due to growth, ... built up new churches, new schools, and, not the least, a new library. “²

“There were no ‘movies.’” Reportedly, Winchesterites vacationing as far away as Florida or the Pacific Coast could be greeted, after identifying their home, with “Ah, yes – the town that won’t show movies.”³ Actually, some movies were shown from time to time by the American Legion and other clubs, but that was a far cry from a commercial theater which would undoubtedly, it was believed, show sensational trash along with the good movies.

Residents had to go to neighboring towns like Arlington or Woburn, to see the movies. Resident Martha Speers recalled going to Arlington as a child: “We would have our quarter, which was a lot of money in those days, and we’d walk down to Cambridge Street, take the trolley to Arlington center, and that cost a nickel I believe each way, so there’s ten cents out of your quarter. And the movies cost a dime. So, if we walked from Arlington Center up to the Capital Theater, we had a nickel left over for candy. So, if we possibly could, we walked, because that candy was very, very, very important. You’d go every Saturday and you’d get the next serial movie. The lady would play the organ, and it was very exciting. It seemed like a grand thing to do. We tried to do it every Saturday so we could get in on the serial, but I don’t know if we managed to get a quarter a week to do that.”⁴

EARLY ATTEMPTS



Plan of theatre building submitted to the Selectmen, December 3, 1917, for erection on lot of Freeland E. Hovey, et al., adjacent to the Winchester Trust Company

*Movie theater proposed for Church Street,
as published in The Winchester Star*

That there was no movie house in Winchester was not for want of trying, but it took several attempts, from 1917 to 1937, for residents to be able to go to movies regularly in their own town. In 1918, a local group planned a Grecian-looking theater, but, when the owner of the lot found himself the object of wrath from nearly every pulpit in town, the project died. In early 1920, a Winthrop syndicate inserted an article in the town warrant for a theatre and claimed “the photoplay can be improved along educational lines and be a powerful influence for good.”⁵ It was rejected after some 400 local mothers petitioned against “vicious” films “for the best interest of the children of Winchester.”

About this time, Winchester had its first experience of being in the movies. On a Saturday afternoon in Nov. 1920, a company of actors staged “a daring film hold-up” using the outside of the Winchester Co-operative Bank and adjacent buildings as a backdrop. The newspaper reported that two “charming young ladies” followed by detectives entered the doorway of the bank, first dropping a handkerchief as a signal to male accomplices. “Nothing more startling happened,” it was reported. The identity of the film is unknown, the only clue being several signs

labeled “Nick Carter.”⁶ (Possibly it was just a stunt related to the controversy.)

But nothing changed about showing movies in town. Later in 1920, a group sought to open a Gothic-looking theater and tried forming an all-local membership. To reassure people about their young people, the hopeful group advertised that “No child under 14 will be admitted during school hours and none would be shown in at night, unless accompanied by an adult.” The proposal was met with fears about traffic jams and traffic hazards—after all, a patron “stupefied by a surfeit of sensationalism” might stumble into the street and be hit by a car!⁷—and a warning from local clergymen, doctors, and school principals was published in the local paper.

“The cry of the mothers is in our ears,” five clergymen wrote, “the moral and spiritual interest of our town is in our hearts; we protest the exposing of our young life to the dangers of ‘oversensationalism’ in many so-called good movies, and the immoral suggestiveness of prevailingly popular films.” They wrote that “commercialized movies cannot give sufficient guarantees that high grade pictures will be maintained. Fifteen doctors signed a statement that they believed “commercialized moving pictures are injurious to the health of children, a menace to the public schools and detrimental to the best interests of Winchester.” The school principals and superintendent wrote, “There is no doubt in our minds...that educational progress of...children would seriously suffer.” The superintendent added “it is very difficult for teachers to hold the interest in school of pupils who attend the movies. The ‘movie habit’ develops a morbid appetite for excitement that interferes with school work.”⁸

Nonetheless, there were people in favor of a motion picture theatre. A group of six other doctors wrote in favor of licensing a movie theater, pointing out the restrictions regarding children’s matinees and parental accompaniment. Reportedly, about 2,800 citizens signed a petition in its favor. A big spread in the *Boston Herald*⁹ cited the advantages of providing inexpensive, innocent entertainment, saving the high cost of transportation out of town, simplifying one of the serious difficulties of the domestic help problem, improving the civic center, adding income of the town, and increasing the business of local merchants. “It may be taken for granted that motion-picture playhouses have come to stay. As purveyors of afternoon and evening recreation they have now outstripped everything else. This would not be the case unless they were catering to a very large public demand. For this reason it seems clear that any municipality which undertakes to exclude or greatly restrict such establishments within its own borders is going to have an uphill fight, and, in the long, run, a losing one.”

In the 1920s, in Winchester, the fight against movies was a winning one. There was a flurry of letters pro and con. A paid advertisement proclaimed: “a Motion Picture Theatre will hurt the tone of this town EDUCATIONALLY MORALLY PHYSICALLY FINANCIALLY. It will be a catch penny for the poor. It will cheapen the town in every way. Motion pictures keep children back in their studies. PROTECT OUR CHILDREN’S MINDS...PROTECT OUR CHILDREN’S HEALTH ... PROTECT OUR CHILDREN’S CHARACTERS.”

In defense of movies, a letter signed by “a citizen” argued, “We are unaware that there is the slightest intimation that the young people or children of Arlington have been affected injuriously

by the exhibition of motion pictures..... The fact that there are no 'movies' in this town is no detriment to the children as they go to our neighboring towns and see them anyway. This means to the parents an added expense of carfares. ... if the 'movies' were in our own town, the parents would accompany the children. ... The fact that there would, at all performances, be representation of parents in the audience, would serve as a restraint on any tendency to show improper pictures... It is a fact that a large number of Winchester people go to Woburn Saturday night, take in the 'movies' and incidentally leave the money for their purchases to Woburn merchants. Our Winchester merchants should rightfully enjoy this trade, but you can't drive people down to the center of our town when they can combine business with pleasure in Woburn."

People wrote letters in favor of a theater, and people wrote against it. And the Nos had it. At the Town Meeting in 1921, the theater proposal lost again. There was another attempt in 1930. Though it failed, the pro-movie group was growing. During the Depression, the extra money needed for transportation outside town became dearer and the need for escapist entertainment greater.

LOCATELLI'S ATTEMPT

Then, in 1934, Albert J. Locatelli, former operator of an Arlington theater, bought property on Winchester's Main Street and proposed to convert the existing buildings into a complex of stores and a movie house. He applied for a film license from the Board of Selectmen. The town having turned down the proposal many times, the selectmen said they would do so only after an affirmative vote of Town Meeting. So there was another warrant article.



The Locatelli Proposal

Locatelli attempted to woo the support of townspeople through the newspaper.¹⁰ First the building itself would be tasteful. "Good taste would be the standard toward which the design and construction of the proposed theatre aspires. A spacious foyer with such features as a typical old colonial hearth, stuffed divans, beautifully furnished rest and retiring rooms for the ladies and complete furnishings in the colonial style throughout would provide an ideal meeting place for

its patrons, their families and friends.” He called it “a small and discriminating community theater.”

Second, he predicted it would boost the town’s economy. “This project would be the best real estate development in Winchester in many years. The theatre would serve as a decided boom and stimulus to the business interests of the town; it would materially add to the town’s income and lessen the taxes; it would eliminate present unsightly buildings; it would enhance the business area and it would create additional employment for townspeople...”

One of the major fears, which persisted over the years through Locatelli’s time, was that through the practice of block booking the town could not choose its own movies, that it would get what the distributor gave it and improper pictures would be shown. The major protest was not that movies were never any good, but that the theater would have to show what it was given, good or bad. Locatelli sought to reassure these fears by declaring, “I feel certain that I could operate it in a manner that would meet with the approval of the most discriminating... I would be glad to co-operate with a local censorship board... I would welcome co-operation of the parents, teachers, churches, and women’s clubs concerned in the welfare of the children.” He explained that exhibitors may reject ten percent of pictures; no exhibitor is compelled to show any picture, a local censorship board would control type of pictures exhibited, and it was within the jurisdiction of the selectmen to revoke the license should theater management prove non-co-operative.

Were residents convinced? Some were; some were not. The opponents, led by the minister of the Congregational Church, with the support of the Chief of Police, Superintendent of Schools, chairmen of the Planning Board and Park Department, and several town groups, continued to predict that a movie theater would contribute to moral degeneracy, delinquency and crime.¹¹ “Winchester is a clean town. ... Shall we wreck our civic center...and turn it into a movie park? Will it be of any benefit to us? Will it help our schools, churches, and recreational endeavors? MOVIES ARE A BACKWARD STEP.”

They predicted a movie theater would result in additional expense for policing, children pressuring their parents to be allowed to attend every movie that comes along, inability for Winchester to select its own movies under block booking, and eventual introduction of Sunday movies. They claimed that movies would not bring trade and, with movie theaters on every side, Winchester people can see all the movies they want.

“Do you want your children sitting at a movie—or out in the open enjoying healthy sport? Winchester churches and societies provide abundant evening entertainment. Theatricals, socials, and entertainments of a healthful nature are more abundant here than in any surrounding place. A movie theater will stop this.” The pastor of the First Congregational Church even predicted that, due to the traffic jam already existing on the street, “some child would be killed, as sure as shooting. I’m not willing to sign his death warrant with my vote.”¹²

VOTE "NO" ON MOVIES

Keep Winchester the Best Town in the State

Winchester is a clean town. It has thrived and grown through the years--BECAUSE its citizens have kept it clean, and have planned ahead; have given time and money to keep it so; have erected fine schools, playgrounds and recreational places.

AND NO MOVIES HAS BEEN NO HARDSHIP

Shall we now alter this plan? Shall we wreck our civic center, with its fine buildings --Schools, Church, War Memorial, Manchester Field--and turn it into a movie park? Will it be of any benefit to us? Will it help our schools, churches and recreational endeavors?

MOVIES ARE A BACKWARD STEP

Reasons Why We Should Not Have Movies in Winchester--

ADDITIONAL EXPENSE TO TOWN. At this time with everyone facing increased taxation, it is unwise to add additional expense necessary for policing, etc. This is an important and expensive item.

CHILDREN AND MOVIES. We are well aware that children now go out of town to movies, but parents are not subjected to the constant pressure on the part of their children to be allowed to attend every movie that comes along, as they would be if there were a movie theater in town.

BLOCK BOOKING. Under block booking as it stands today, Winchester will not be able to select its own movies. It will get what the producer gives it, statement to the contrary notwithstanding.

SUNDAY MOVIES. Sunday movies will come. Sunday movies are necessary to the financial success of the theater. Do not be deceived about this. Ask your Arlington friends.

THE TRADE FALLACY. Movies will not bring trade. The movie houses will have its own spa for the sale of candy, drinks and ice cream. Other trade will not be affected.

FINANCIAL SUCCESS. The financial success of movies in Winchester has been questioned. It is reported that large houses in surrounding places have been obliged to drop from second to third run pictures.

No matter what the future holds for a Winchester movie house, the town will always have it--good, bad or worse.

CIVIC CENTER. Winchester has spent thousands of dollars developing a beautiful civic center. An unsightly movie house in its midst will undo all that has been accomplished through years of effort.

MOVIES ATTRACT UNDESIRABLES. Winchester holds an enviable reputation for freedom from crime. Movies will not help to maintain this record.

GRADE CROSSING A FEATURE. Winchester's grade crossing will undoubtedly be removed. It is a mistake to add a large building like a movie house without knowledge of what will be done with the crossing. Damages will be a large factor in the crossing elimination.

WILL UNDO OUT-DOOR RECREATIONAL FEATURES. Winchester has spent large sums on playgrounds, tennis courts, swimming pools, baseball diamonds. Do you want your children sitting at a movie--or out in the open enjoying healthy sport? Movies will undo all of this affecting planning for our young people.

EVENING ENTERTAINMENT WILL STOP. Winchester churches and societies provide abundant evening entertainment. Theatricals, socials and entertain-

ments of a healthful nature are more abundant here than in any surrounding place. A movie theater will stop this.

WINCHESTER SUFFERS NO HARDSHIP. With movie theaters on every side, some showing pictures much better than Winchester could possibly expect; all within the same average distance of a center movie house, Winchester people can see all the movies they want. The town suffers no hardship without movies in its center.

MOVIES IN WINCHESTER ARE A FINANCIAL "FLYER" FOR SPECULATION. Do not be deceived. The promoter of movies in Winchester is out to make some money for himself. Whether he turns the theater over to someone else a year after it is built or not, he expects to make his profit. "After that, What?"

ALWAYS DENIED BY TOWN. Winchester has always voted against moving pictures. Never has a favorable, or near-favorable vote been recorded during the 14 years (since 1921) when the first ballot vote was held. The last vote in March was 130 against to 48 for movies. Notwithstanding these repeated expressions of rejection by the Town, movie promoters have constantly forced the project upon Winchester.

The following citizens, interested in the welfare of Winchester, who have given of their time and ability in making it the town it is, oppose the erection of a moving picture house here:

William H. Rogers, Chief of Police
James I. Quinn, Supt. of Schools
Pauline F. Hall, Pres., Music School Parent-Teacher Association
Anna M. Swanson, Pres., Junior High School P.T.A.-Teach. Assoc.
Leroy W. Jay, Pres., Wynant School Mothers' Association
Edward J. Cuddey, Pastor, Congregational Church
Anna M. Dunning, Pres., Ladies' Aid Society, Methodist Church

Ethel S. Caldwell, Pres., Wash. High School Parent-Teacher Assoc.
Charles F. Dush, Pres., District Men's Club
Dwight W. Hadley, Societ. of the Church of the Epiphany
George Hale Bond, Pastor, Winchester Unitarian Church
Nora A. Johnson, Report, Branch Catholic Women's Guild
Loretta M. Woodside, Pres., Quarter Better Homes Garden Club

WILLIAM L. FARREN, Chairman, Town Planning Board
George E. Davidson, Chairman, Park Department
Freeman T. Condon, Pres., Winchester Mothers' Association
Mrs. Jackson Cross, Pres., College Club of Winchester
Mrs. Martha T. Mason, Editor, Parent-Teacher Magazine
Mrs. Norman Mitchell, Pres., Boycot Women's League

--Political Advertisement

While it was true that the churches and clubs did present a wealth of plays, shows, and concerts, and other entertainments, the proponents rallied under a banner of financial fairness to all Winchesterites, rich or otherwise. For example, Anna Edlefsen wrote, "I am a property owner and a tax-payer and I do not hesitate to say that I want the Movies and I want only the best. ...I see nothing very immoral about a matinee throng. In fact there are a lot worse things that could happen to our children than have them...see such pictures as Alice in Wonderland, Little Lord Fautleroy, Tom Sawyer... Winchester can control what its children see if they are here. Can Winchester control what the children see when they go out of town...? The town will still be clean even if there are movies. I am sure that there are nice people in other suburbs who have not been contaminated because they have the privilege of attending a Moving Picture in their own town.... Be consistent, you know you go to the Movies, let some poor mothers who are not fortunate enough to have cars see something beside the wash-tub and house-work that they may know there is something in life besides drudgery."

Back and forth it went, with letters filling pages of the newspaper, to the point that Rupert F. Jones wrote: "My, my, what a tempest in a teapot! After reading the last few issues of the Star, I gather that we are in grave danger of becoming morally bankrupt, esthetically hopeless, architecturally passé, inextricably tangled up in our transportation, educationally inhibited, that

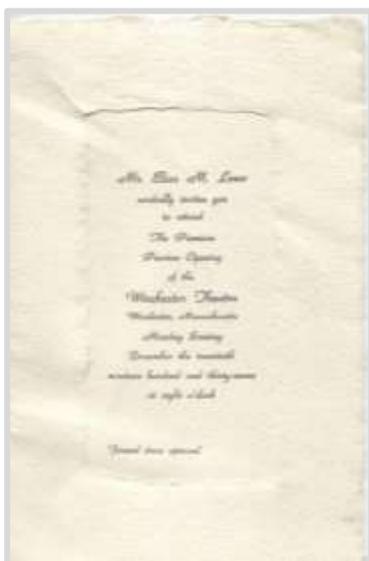
our children will become hysterical and utterly neglectful of school duties, that our Police force must be increased and our business will go to the dogs, that this 'Athens of America'... will degenerate into a sort of 'Decline and Fall,'...And all because the moves are coming to town... Seriously it seems to me that there are many pictures extant which it is as much a mark of poor taste to ignore as it is to patronize certain others.... The movies, as are, depend not so much upon what Hollywood thinks we should have, as what Hollywood has found out we will pay for in sufficient quantities.... The movies are purely and simply a thermometer of public taste, which admittedly is low. It is surprising, under the circumstances, that we have as many good pictures as we do.most of us ordinary folk, somewhat dazed, it is true, by this flood of oratory, invective, eulogisms, prejudices, and what have you, still hold to the simple notion that we get excellent entertainment from the movies (when we can afford to get where they are) and patiently wait for a chance to vote for the thing we like."

When Town Meeting shot the idea down, the pro-movie group went the route of a referendum.

On April 16, 1935, Winchester voters overturned the negative Town Meeting vote and recommended that the Selectmen grant Locatelli the license. Locatelli applied for a license six days later – but he did not get it. The selectmen decided "it would be unwise to act hastily upon a subject of such vital interest to the town as its first moving picture theater." They turned to the Planning Board for advice. The Planning Board, considering issues of traffic, the grade crossing question, and development of the center, preferred a north Main Street site. Locatelli gave up and built his building without a theater.

The selectmen did not want for other suggestions. In addition to Locatelli's, the selectmen received eight other applications for a moving picture license, beginning two days after the referendum vote through the next January. All were denied or withdrawn.

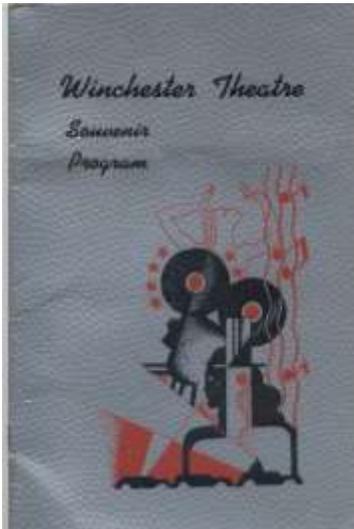
A THEATER OPENS



Later in 1936, the Winchester Theatre Company, under the aegis of the E. M. Loew chain, stepped in. Choosing a site agreeable to the Planning Board, it applied for a license. The selectmen finally gave permission on Oct 13, 1936. A new building was constructed, and the gala premiere was held on Dec. 20, 1937. Mr. Loew read congratulatory telegrams from such luminaries as Shirley Temple and former resident Bette Davis, and the Winchester audience saw its first movie in town, *Think Fast Mr. Moto*.

In addition to the introduction of the Motion Picture Production Code, the Depression undoubtedly played a role in the theater's acceptance, not only due to the cost of going to another town but also due to the fascination all of America had with Hollywood during hard economic times. When Mildred Law, who had danced at the Policeman's Ball in Winchester in 1935, signed a seven-year

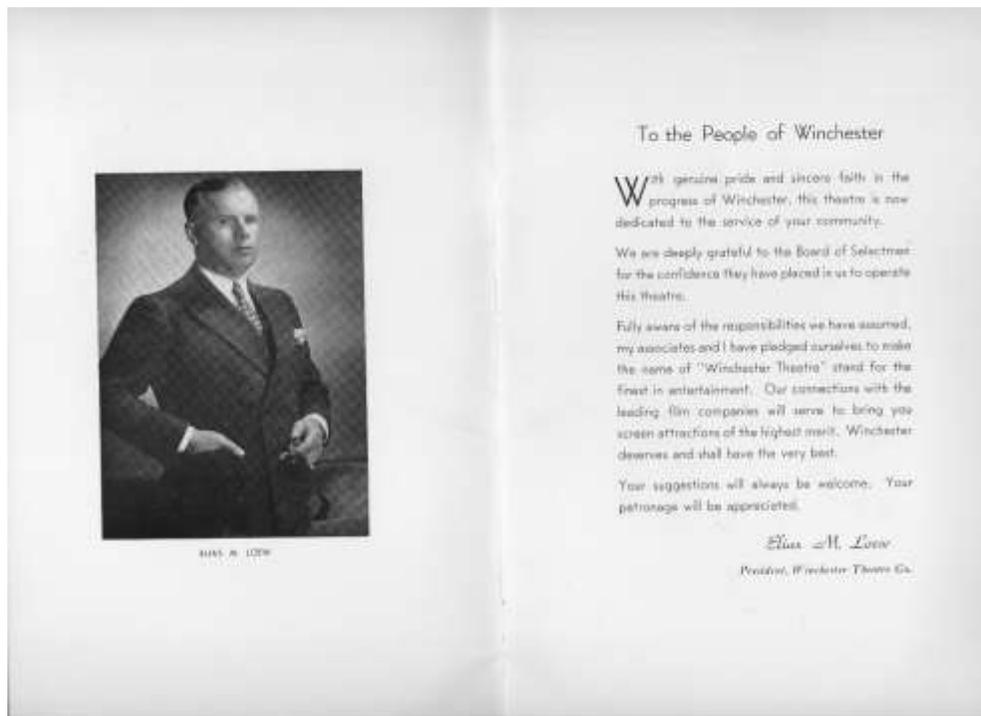
contract at the age of 16 for \$150 a week, increasing to a maximum of \$1000 per week, it was front-page news.



Also, some of the most respectable people became involved with the movies. Director Dudley Murphy, several of whose films appeared before they could be shown in his home town, was the son of Herman Dudley Murphy, one of Winchester's most prominent residents, an eminent artist, president of the Boat Club, and head of the Art Association. In 1936, the year Winchester granted its first moving picture license, high school graduate Martha Tibbetts, who grew up on the fashionable west side of town, made the local news when the Howard Hawks' film *Ceiling Zero* in which she had a supporting role opened (out of town).

In June 1936, about two dozen Winchester residents took part in an episode of *The March of Time* documentary series. The feature was about horse racing and was filmed at East Boston's one-year-old race track, Suffolk Downs. For the crowd at the race track, Louis de Rochemont called not only upon a casting agency but also upon a local couple "to assist him in selecting a group which would represent the respectable, well-dressed element which is also seen in large numbers at race tracks." Reportedly, the Winchester extras had "a most enjoyable day." Of course, they and their friends in Winchester would have had to go somewhere else to see the film since a moving picture theater in Winchester was still a year away.

But when a theatre finally came to Winchester, it came in style.





The town survived with a movie theater in its midst. Children may have seen their fair share of rotten tomatoes among movies, but no child made a fatal stumble into the traffic afterward. The town was not cheapened, nor did its tone go down. The anti-movie crowd continued to fight against Sunday movies but lost that struggle in 1941. Winchester became a movie town.

The theater, when it finally came, did a thriving business for several decades. Then it came into competition with the megaplexes in other towns.

Unable to complete, the theater closed in 1976. Before that happened, in 1975, Jean Shepherd transformed the Winchester Theatre into the "Orpheum" for the filming of the dish-night scene in *The Phantom of the Open Hearth*, shown on public television. Shortly afterward, the building once feared as a menace to all that was good within the town passed into history.



¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Aug 4, 2006. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Letter, *The Winchester Star*, December 23, 1932.

³ Bruce Winchester Stone, *History of Winchester*, II:81.

⁴ Martha Speers, Interview with the author, Winchester, Mass., 9 April 1999.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 26, 1920, p.1.

⁶ *The Winchester Star*, Nov. 19, 1920.

⁷ Quoted in Stone, p. 83.

⁸ *The Winchester Star*, March 4, 1921.

⁹ *The Winchester Star*, Jan. 24, 1921.

¹⁰ *The Winchester Star*, Apr. 12, 1934.

¹¹ *The Winchester Star*, Apr 12, 1935.

¹² Howard J. Chidley, letter, *The Winchester Star*, March 12, 1935