

Movie Theaters of Holdrege

By Patti Simpson

For the last several months the entire community has been watching the Sun Theater with anticipation. The changes taking place are amazing! Thanks to a group of local citizens calling themselves the Strategic Community Investments Group LLC, the Sun Theater is shining brightly once again.

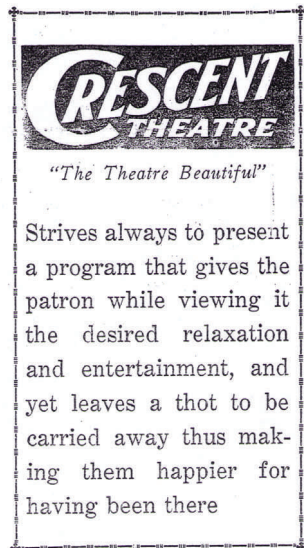
This renovation made me stop and wonder just how many different theaters have there been here in Holdrege? Well, the list maybe longer than you think.

The Gay and Edison Theaters

Although I could find no advertisements or news articles on these two early Holdrege theaters, they are listed in the Holdrege Centennial 1883-1983 Commemorative Souvenir Book. Apparently they did exist, but probably did not last very long.

The Sterling Theater

The first record of a "moving picture" theater in Holdrege to be found was a July 9, 1908 news article telling about the grand opening of "The Sterling Theater" located at 315 East Avenue. It was to be a combination vaudeville and moving picture show. A Mr. Hilsabeck was the manager. 315 East Avenue is the approximate location where The East Avenue Pub is located here today in Holdrege.



The Empress Theater

The Empress Theater was opened in Holdrege in late 1912 or early 1913 by S. D. Johnson. A 1914 news article advertised that the Empress Theater put on a series of humorous pictures of local people with the advice, "See yourself as others see you." That same year the news reported that L. C. Severns purchased both the Empress and Crescent Theaters and hired Wm. Vollman as operator at the Crescent.



Milton Borg in front of The Crescent Theater about 1916

The Crescent Theater

A March 1910 ad shows that The Crescent Theater was open for business. A week later a January 12, 1911 article told that Mr. C. A. Hilsabeck had been the owner of the Crescent Theater for the past three years and was selling the business to Mr. A. J. Severn of Lincoln.

Photos show that the Crescent was located at 421 West Avenue which is the present site of the Sun Theatre. The 1910 ad said, "a high class moving picture exhibition that will please and educate you" with performances each evening. Admission was 5 cents for children and 10 cents for adults. G. Alfred Borg and his son, Edgar Milton Borg operated the

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Crescent Theater from 1913 to 1917.

Unfortunately, records tell that the Crescent burned down in a December 1924 fire. A February 5, 1925 news article told of plans to rebuild on the same location, but then a week later another news report stated that, Garvin, the owner of the Crescent had reported that plans had changed and that he wanted to rebuild the Crescent at the corner of Fourth and Grant streets on the site then occupied by the D.L.D. Tire Shop. Apparently this new location did not work out and the Crescent Theater was no more.

The Majestic Theater also known as The Magic Theater

An April 7, 1927 news article advertised yet another new theater opening on East Avenue. A contest was being held and a prize would be given to the person selecting the best new name for the theater. The new theater was being managed by Claude C. Porter of Porter Amusement. No exact location was given in the article, but later articles lead us to believe that it was located at 421 East Avenue - the current location of the Real Estate Connection. The Magic

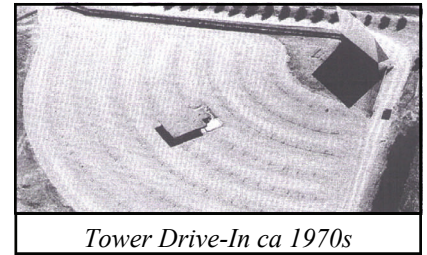


Theater lasted until it was sold and merged with the Sun Theater in 1937.

The Tower Drive-In

We can't have an article on movie theaters without including the Tower Drive-In.

In 1950 Ervin Coyle built the Tower Drive-In Theatre on West Highway #23. It was a popular place for



Tower Drive-In ca 1970s

entertainment. Cars would pull into the stalls, roll down their windows half way and hook the large corded speaker over the window glass. A concession building supplied all kinds of food during the movie.

In 1953 Harold Struve purchased it and in 1962 sold it to Tom and Marie Sandberg. In 1968 the Sandbergs sold it to Kenneth Claypool Theatre Circuit and they later resumed ownership in May 1970. Erwin and Norma Braner then purchased the Town Drive-In in June 1971. In 1978 the drive-in started a new policy, being open only Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights during the drive-in season.

But like other drive-in theaters everywhere, the Tower had a hard time attracting enough people to make it profitable, and after 36 years of surviving a fire and tornado, the Holdrege Tower Drive-In closed on July 26, 1986.

The Sun Theater

The Sun Theatre was built in 1927 on the same location that the Crescent Theater burned down at 421 West Avenue. In looking at old photos of the Crescent, you can see the front of the building's top brickwork that still mirrors the Sun

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Theater's building today. Apparently the inside of the building was destroyed, but the brick front shell was salvageable.

In 1927 the Sun Theater advertised as being "The Home of High Class Photo Plays" and wanted people to watch for the opening of their new "wonder pipe organ."

In 1928 C. C. Porter left the Magic Theater and replaced C. P. Forbes as the manager of the Sun Theater.

In 1930 the news reported that the Sun Theater had been closed for four days and had reopened with a newly installed upgraded sound system. Manager Porter reported in the article that now that the "silent" drama has given away to the talking pictures, it will be his policy to present only the best that can be obtained.

In 1937 both the Magic and Sun Theaters were bought by the Central States Theatre Company headquartered in Des Moines, Iowa. It appears that the theaters were merged at this time and the Magic Theatre closed leaving the Sun Theater the only theater in town. It was at this time that C. C. Porter sold his share of the business and retired. In 1953 Erwin Braner became the manager for the Sun.

A 1957 news article tells of a record smashing 928 kids attending a free movie at the Sun Theater courtesy of the Holdrege Chamber of Commerce. Babysitting services were provided for "busy mothers getting shopping done." The next movie advertised to be shown was "The Devil's Hairpin" and was described with "the roar and color of the world's fastest sport, sports car racing, its heart-



June 2009 Open House at the Sun Theater. The inside remodel was complete, and the outside facelift had not yet started.

stopping thrills and moving human story behind its daredevil drivers will be portrayed in beautiful Technicolor and VistaVision." Later that summer an experiment of regular Saturday afternoon matinees was tried. A news article reported that some mothers had expressed concern at the showing of so-called horror

movies on Saturday afternoons while Mr. Braner reported that he needed an average of approximately 350 in attendance to make a reasonable profit and keep the matinees going indefinitely.



A June 19, 2009 photo shows the new exterior of the Sun. However, the sign has not been given its facelift yet.

In January 1968 a new screen was installed and later that same year in May 1968, the Central States Theater Corp sold the Sun to Kenneth Claypool Theatre Circuit. Mr. Braner was replaced by Kenneth Schultz as manager. Then in May 1970 Central States Theatre Corp. Resumed ownership and in July 1970 sold it to Tom and Marie Sandberg. In June 1971, Erwin and Norma Braner purchased the business and equipment, and in January 1974 purchased the building itself from Mrs. Blanche Severns.

The Braners later retired and their daughter, Francine Williams began operating the family business. The ice storm of January 2006 hit the aging Sun Theater hard financially, but the owners continued on until the new Strategic Community Investments Group LLC stepped up and purchased the Sun Theater in December 2008.

Today the Sun Theater is shining brightly again in downtown Holdrege. If you haven't went to a movie here in town lately, it would be well worth your while to give it a try!