

CHASING MR. C: EARLY MOTION-PICTURE EXHIBITION IN ROBESON COUNTY,
NORTH CAROLINA (1896-1950)

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature.

Chapel Hill
2012

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTOPHER J. MCKENNA: Chasing Mr. C: Early Motion-Picture Exhibition in Robeson County, North Carolina (1896-1950)
(Under the direction of Timothy Marr)

This dissertation seeks to document the development of early moviegoing in a specific North Carolina county during the first half-century of commercial film exhibitions. Several local factors resulted in exhibition developments that often did not conform—or only partially conformed—to the metro-centric narratives that have dominated U.S. cinema history. Instead, Robeson’s exhibitors and audiences faced a series of economic, socio-cultural, and racial challenges that shaped the highly-contingent and inescapably public activity of moviegoing in the county’s rural, highly-decentralized, socially conservative, and racially discriminatory small-town communities. This study depicts local moviegoing as neither a ubiquitous nor fully accessible leisure activity due to:

- Local demographic factors that delayed the implementation of core commercial infrastructures and slowed the introduction and stabilization of local exhibitions until long after several notable exhibition trends that never meaningfully applied to Robeson had long since reshaped metropolitan moviegoing.
- The concerns of local civic and religious leaders that nearly resulted in the imposition of a cinema-censorship structure based on a legislative proposal during the 1921 General Assembly that had been co-sponsored by a Robeson County delegate.
- Local racial codes that sanctioned the tri-segregation of virtually all political, social, religious, and civic spaces, and which led Robeson’s exhibitors and audiences (respectively)

to construct or navigate aggressively segregated facilities whose locally paradigmatic form, the “three-entrance” theater, intentionally re-inscribed these codes within physical structures designed to perpetuate the second-class treatment of non-whites.

To the former and current residents of Robeson County, who graciously shared their memories and their history with a complete stranger.

To Ken and Marion, who remain the friends of a lifetime.

To Tom and Alice, who provided the core foundation.

To Amanda, Ashley, and my wife, Sharon, who enrich my life each and every day.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for participating in a project which, though it ranges far from the roots of most English-affiliated dissertations, seemed to me to offer an opportunity to develop an interesting—and at times compelling—set of historical narratives. Despite the project’s more obvious alignment with American, Cultural, and Media Studies, it remains rooted in the rhetorical analyses that remain the stock in trade of English scholars.

Bobby Allen’s course on early moviegoing represented one of those completely serendipitous turns in academia for me. It introduced me to the lonesome yet oddly rewarding world of archival research, to an intriguing set of multi-disciplinary scholarship, and to an eclectic set of scholars attempting to reclaim largely ignored elements of cinema history. I’ve found Bobby’s work on early cinema in general, and on the development of moviegoing in North Carolina in particular, to be both influential and instructive. I applaud him for helping to lead a charge for more empirically based cinema scholarship and for seeking a more thoroughgoing awareness of the role that motion pictures and moviegoing did (or did not) play in the “lived experience” of local community members.

I am extremely grateful to have found in Tim Marr a director whose open-mindedness and willing championship of a social history based on moviegoing has been not only administratively helpful (thanks to his involvement with both the departments of English Literature and American Studies), but whose spirit and work ethic, as evidenced by the

thoroughness of his chapter reviews, combine to form a welcome haven for graduate students pursuing interdisciplinary scholarship.

In his Philosophy of Language course, John McGowan introduced me to a useful philosophic touchstone: Wittgenstein's "rough ground" of cultural formation. In pursuing this project, I came to view Robeson's tri-racial theaters as an example of rough ground, one where I hoped to discover transgressions against social boundaries performed through the sort of "everyday life" practices chronicled by Michel de Certeau. I suspect that Dr. McGowan, perhaps the most rigorous logician I've ever met, supports the critique of master narratives that perhaps have lost touch with the "rough ground," and I am hopeful that this study's engagement with certain historical exhibition trends meets with his approval.

At a time when this project was struggling to understand the experiences of Native American moviegoers within the context of Robesonian tri-racialism, Malinda Maynor-Lowery provided me with an introduction to several extraordinarily helpful contacts in the Lumbee community. In addition, her own investigations into Lumbee history represent a welcome analysis of the ways in which Robeson's Indians sought to protect their social identity in an environment which, for all too many generations, failed to acknowledge or deter a wide range of political and economic shenanigans locally implemented to marginalize Native Americans.

More than a few years ago now, Linda Wagner-Martin helped convince me to leave Wall Street to come to Chapel Hill. In my time here, she has supported more graduate-student scholarship than any other faculty member I know. While so much good work has been accomplished by the young scholars she continues to influence and encourage, I remain cautiously optimistic that this latest dissertation will prove worthy of her faith in it—and me.

While not participating directly in the dissertation panel, several other scholars played a formative role in its development. Though the attempt to develop a meaningful historical narrative out of disparate sources and sets of evidence, I was fortunate to have studied with both John and Joy Kasson, whose works on Coney Island and Buffalo Bill Cody (respectively) provided models of what a project like this might become. Well into the project, I came across cinema historian Jane Gaines' ruminations on "counter-ideological phenomena." Her recognition that what we seek versus what we find during historical research remains as much a product of ourselves—of our hopes, fears, prejudices, and desires—than a product of the evidence we actually find and select to incorporate into our work seemed to me a bracing if necessary admission required of anyone who attempts to construct an historical narrative.

If the ghost of Walter Wishart casts the largest shadow over the first several chapters of this work, its latter chapters were heavily influenced by the existentialism inherent in C. Vann Woodward's studies of Jim Crow. Just as Woodward demonstrated a long series of individual and collective choices—rather than racial essentialism—largely restructured Southern life after the American Civil War, I hope that readers of this work will come to see that the development of Robeson's tri-segregated movie theaters was by no means an historical inevitability. It was a process, one in which specific choices were made, and a set of physical and social architectures and technologies were implemented, to achieve a particular and long-desired end. However, if theatrical segregation in Robeson was *always* influenced by the needs of the locally dominant racial group, and if that dominant group was neither simply nor inevitably white...well, these are facts that the historical record will need to account for. In addition, while Pembroke theaters did represent a counter-ideological

phenomenon, their interior composition would have been significantly different had certain other choices been made.

In expressing my thanks to the Robeson County residents who aided this project over the year, special thanks are due Donnie Douglas. As the Editor of the Robesonian, Donnie provided enthusiastic support in Lumberton, and his local knowledge led to especially useful interviews with John Wishart Campbell and John Clayton Townsend. Several of the Carolina Civic Center's directors shared their time and documents to contribute to this study, including Michael Bloomer, Angela Carter, and Richard Sceiford. Though no longer Robeson residents at the time, Alex Rivera and Jesse Oxendine offered exceptionally helpful insights into the experiences of non-white moviegoers in a tri-racial community. Equally invaluable was the assistance of Henry A. McKinnon, a distinguished former Robeson County legislator and jurist who shared his deep knowledge of local history with me. Judge McKinnon fulfilled the role of a local community historian so well that it is difficult to imagine in the wake of his passing who in Robeson County might possibly replace him. This study's attempt to document the "lived" experience of Robeson County moviegoers could not have succeeded without the assistance of someone like Judge McKinnon, who encouraged the project while acting as both a sounding board and a reasonability check. I sorely regret that I was unable to finish it before he had a chance to read it.

Finally, most of the documentation related to Robeson County that forms the foundation of this history is housed in either the North Carolina Collection or the Southern Manuscript Collection located at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill inside the Louis Round Wilson Library. Additional materials are maintained by archivists in the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh; at the D. H. Hill Library on the campus of North

Carolina State University (also located in Raleigh); at the Mary Livermore Library on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke; and within the Robeson County Public Library in Lumberton. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the staff members at each of these institutions who assisted in this project.

PREFACE

As difficult as it can be to explain to friends and relatives why I've spent several years of my life analyzing and documenting the history of early moviegoing in Robeson County, I consider the project to have been a fortunate accident. Specifically, it encouraged me to combine a longstanding interest in history with an entirely new scholarly experience: archival research. In addition, it has offered me the opportunity to engage in original scholarship leading to the development of socio-cultural narratives based largely upon close readings of several different kinds of texts that, as a student of American literature, I was previously unfamiliar with.

"Chasing Mr. C" came to represent for me an entrée into cultural histories and/or tensions of which I had only been dimly aware. These included the history of film exhibition in the United States, the behavioral practices that either constituted or were generated as a result of theatrical moviegoing, the conflicted relationship between religious fundamentalists and the cinema, the totalizing impact of race on daily life during the Jim Crow period, and key socio-economic and cultural differences between the rural South and the industrial and financial centers of the Northeast where I was raised.

As the project began to take shape, I sought to develop a local social history exploring how various regional, economic, social, political, religious and ethnic differences influenced the social practice of moviegoing during early cinema exhibitions—particularly in small towns. Initially, I expected that third-party interest in the project would remain limited to cinema historians and to the residents of Robeson County. However, I believe now that

scholars in several disciplines will find the narratives, anecdotes and data presented within this case study to be useful, including in the fields of Cinema, American, Cultural, Native American, African American, Southern, and Censorship Studies, as well as Religious, Economic, Political, and Architectural History, Sociology, Ethnography, Public Space Theory, Reception Theory, and Popular Culture.

To put the chapters and appendices that follow below into the context of moviegoing studies undertaken for the state of North Carolina, a clarification of a few of the goals of this specific project may be helpful. This study was initiated after the completion of a graduate course in early cinema history led by Dr. Robert C. Allen, and its development has been heavily informed by Dr. Allen's attempts to combat a perceived metro-centric bias in early exhibition studies. One outcome of that program was a larger initiative (again led by Dr. Allen) that sought to document a broad set of evidence pertaining to the detailed cinema-exhibition histories of dozens of North Carolina towns and cities—including, from this study, the town of Lumberton. While that project's "Going to the Show" website and database, which involved a multi-year development leveraging several teams of scholarly and staff resources at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (as well as in additional local archives), has provided useful comparative information and has been referenced at several points within this study, this dissertation that follows does not represent an attempt to synthesize the data collected in this larger effort. While I see enormous value in a thorough and systematic synthesis of the material offered within "Going to the Show," it seemed to me only fair that the right to tell that particular story belonged first to Dr. Allen and to the teams that built this extraordinary archive.

In addition, I set myself the challenge fairly early on in this project of marking out a single rural county from whose relatively finite, scattered, and difficult-to-access collection of archival materials I would attempt to develop as “deep and broad” a set of narratives as I could construct from them. The process of constructing those narratives often led me in unexpected directions. For example, I would not have expected at the project’s outset that it would become either desirable or necessary to investigate a series of local and state cinema censorship battles; to compare a series of ethnographic studies to understand the different social constraints placed on African and Native Americans during Jim Crow; to contemplate how Robesonian moviegoing conditions compared to those of apartheid-era South Africa; to incorporate theories of public space and cultural memory in forecasts about the possible fate of a former picture palace; or to develop a mini-biography of a local cinema exhibitor who died more than sixty years ago.

I leave it to the judgment of this dissertation’s readers to determine to what degree it succeeds as a scholarly work. In its defense, I will point out that—as is true of all historical writing—that the evidence that has been collected, analyzed, and documented within it has been derived from an imperfect and incomplete set of source texts. In addition, while I have remained sensitive to the many potential historical connotations embedded within these texts, I intentionally adopted a highly conservative approach in leveraging them within the narratives that follow; specifically, I have refrained from basing any arguments on singular pieces of (necessarily interpreted) evidence that could not be corroborated from other primary or secondary sources.

Finally, it is useful to recognize that I am not arguing that Robeson County’s early moviegoing experiences were somehow “unique,” with the possible exception of the

aggressively consistent local implementation of tri-racial theaters. However, I do believe that the history of small-town moviegoing remains a relatively underrepresented domain within cinema studies, and remain convinced that in-depth case studies like this one, though they can be painfully slow to develop due to a debilitating scarcity of digitized archives, represent the surest means to uncover the evidence required to produce a powerful set of contra-narratives capable of challenging baseline assumptions about the national development of early film exhibition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION.

We don't watch movies the way we used to. The development of personal digital technologies, their attendant reshaping of cinematic distribution, and the relative ubiquity of cinema-exhibition outlets have expanded non-theatrical cinema consumption possibilities towards "on demand" availability.¹ However, during the first several generations of American moviegoing the consumption of motion-picture entertainment required most film patrons to engage in an inherently social activity: moviegoing. For "small-town" American audiences in particular, moviegoing usually involved a visit to the theater located near the center of the closest downtown commercial and municipal district. Potential moviegoers who lived far from these centers bore additional attendance costs that extended well beyond the nickels or dimes saved to cover the price of admission. In the late-1930s, for example, farm families in North Carolina's Robeson County willing to travel ten or fifteen miles by foot, horse, or wagon to reach town could appreciate why one local theater operator erected a hitching post adjacent to his theater's parking lot.² The relentless local agricultural cycle that required daily farm labor usually restricted trips to town to Saturdays—and these visits were often limited to heads-of-households conducting critical farm-related business. In reality, opportunities for moviegoing remained particularly rare for rural women, children, and other farm laborers.

Rural residents were also presented with a host of conflicting economic, religious, racial, and socio-cultural factors and pressures that profoundly reduced the frequency of local

moviegoing. In many cases, these factors either partly or fully precluded moviegoing engagements by the members of specific local sub-communities. However, the cultural contexts that erected and sustained local barriers to moviegoing were neither static, nor did they apply with equal force across all community members. Rather, a complex set of competing economic interests and social hegemonies influenced the course of local moviegoing and cinema exhibition developments. For instance, some cinematic exhibitions were sponsored by a set of state-affiliated civic institutions to improve rural hygiene, even as North Carolina's General Assembly sought to impose onerous cinema-exhibition regulations informed by the moral sensibilities of local Christian conservatives. Theatrical exhibitors confronting the interference of these cultural guardians struggled to eke out a reasonable living in an industry fraught with the financial uncertainties of adopting rapidly changing projection technologies; furthermore, highly constrained film-distribution contracts limited the ability of local operators to shape their exhibitions to suit local tastes. In seeking to augment their gate revenues in communities subject to the segregationist imperatives of Jim Crowism, exhibitors were forced to invest additional capital to sub-divide their theatrical spaces racially. Theater managers were placed in the unenviable position of defending a new commercial-leisure technology from the charges of immorality levied against it by politicians and churchmen wary of cinematic entertainment. While their reactions to the growing popularity of moviegoing ranged from feigned disinterest to extreme apoplexy, local cultural guardians struggled to predict how this new leisure medium would influence standards of public morality. Though a few remained optimistic, most worried that if cinema exhibitions were not controlled—and perhaps directly co-opted—then excessive moviegoing might radically diminish the social influence of local religious institutions.

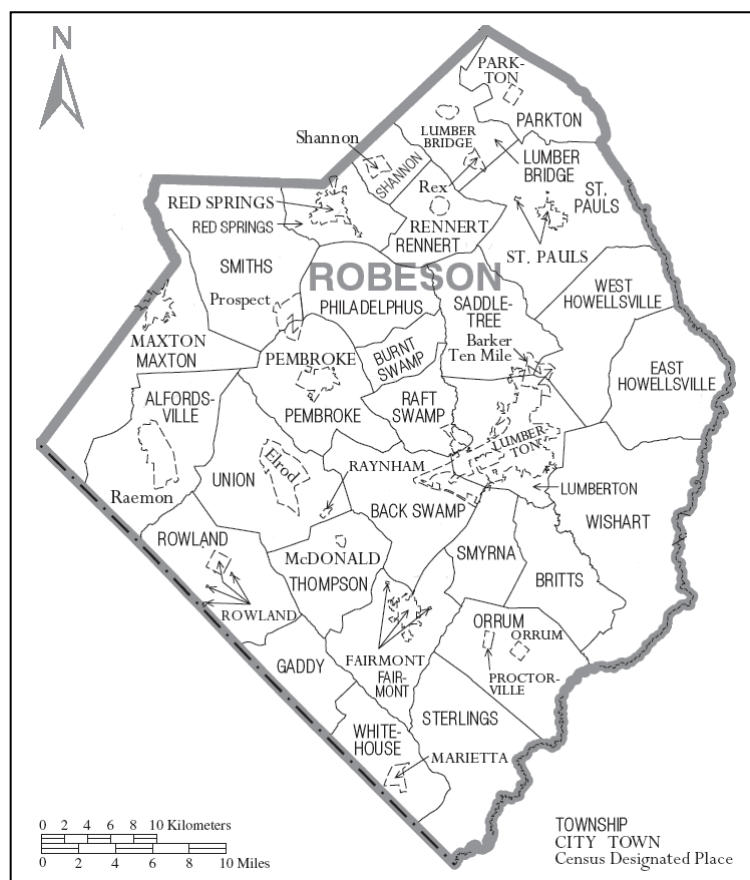


Figure 1.1: Township Map of Robeson County.³

That influence could be considerable in a region like Robeson County, which at the turn of the twentieth century amounted to a thinly populated collection of rural villages and hamlets lying across the Old North State’s coastal plain and adjacent to the South Carolina border. Originally carved out of neighboring Bladen County in 1787, Robeson County offered its settlers relatively cheap arable land capable of producing a wide variety of agricultural products.⁴ Though foodstuffs dominated local farming, the region’s cash crops initially included turpentine and distilled spirits. Over time, however, much of the available acreage was converted to serve the two most locally dominant agricultural markets: cotton and tobacco.

As they developed, Robeson's population centers became widely dispersed across a territory divided by a host of watersheds, swamps, dikes and ditches that drained into the meandering and often impassible Drowning Creek (later renamed the Lumber River). These watercourses so dominated the landscape that several of the county's more isolated townships derived their names from local swamplands.⁵ The local scarcity of roads or railroads that could have simplified the navigation of these natural barriers only served to reinforce the extraordinary degree of autonomy exercised within Robeson villages—whose largest institutions, specifically their Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, exerted greater social and political influence locally than did any of the county or state governmental agencies located in Lumberton (the county seat) or in Raleigh.

As white Europeans, often transplanted Scots congregating in communities like Maxton (a concatenation of "Mac's town"), distributed themselves throughout Robeson, they discovered that their neighbors often included a sizable number of Native Americans. At one time, in fact, a handful of Robeson's wealthier Indian landowners owned African or African-American slaves, as did several local white planters. In this tri-racial community, most of the county's African-American population residents had emigrated from Virginia as "free persons of color." Local blacks generally farmed modest parcels of their own land or acted as tenant farmers for more successful white (and occasionally Indian) farmers.⁶ While the county's unusual demographic composition produced one of North America's most tri-racial communities, the relative proportion of each ethnic sub-population varied significantly over time. During the period covered by this study, for example, while the county's white population held steady at approximately 45%, the total percentage of local black residents fell from 43 to 33% while the aggregate Indian percentage correspondingly rose from 11 to

22%.⁷ However, if Robeson's combined non-white population has long outnumbered its white population, the latter exercised an overwhelmingly disproportionate level of economic, political, and social control locally throughout most of the twentieth century. White residents often maintained their power due to the economic dependence of non-whites who, while living as tenant farmers or sharecroppers on white-owned land, were constrained by leases that included a rigorous set of conditions and payment obligations providing them little (if any) economic or homestead security. Despite the fact that extreme or widespread racial violence remained rare events in Robeson, each racial sub-group tended to self-segregate, and until the 1930s few non-whites lived within the city limits of any of Robeson's larger towns. Even though the town of Pembroke was situated near the center of the region's most densely populated cluster of Indian communities, Pembroke remained a predominantly "white" town (even from the perspective of local Indians) for the first several decades of the twentieth century. In fact, Indians tended to bypass towns like Fairmont, Maxton, Rowland, St. Pauls, Red Springs, and Lumberton altogether in order to avoid a confrontation with the second-class citizenship they imposed on all non-whites.

When motion-picture exhibitions arrived in Robeson on a permanent basis by the early 1910s, the county's racial confluence, its conservative Christian heritage, low population density, and labor-intensive agronomic base constricted the local development of exhibition spaces and of moviegoing generally. The handful of exhibitors who managed to keep operating during periodic recessions also had to negotiate the social boundaries established by local racial and religious dogma. Those who persevered in the face of outright condemnation by "church people" who considered moviegoing to be sinful were hard-pressed to determine how (or if) they could extend moviegoing to the ethnic sub-populations

that had been either denied, or offered only highly restricted, access to public spaces generally reserved for use by the county's more privileged castes. In all of Robeson's theaters, moviegoers were forced to navigate a set of highly contingent zones in which local cultural identities were variously reified and contested. Some of the exhibition solutions that acknowledged Robesonian demographics were not only highly unusual, but the consistency of their application within all of Robeson's local moviegoing communities may have been unique within the annals of American cinema.

Framed within these broader considerations, this dissertation recounts key developments during the first three generations of Robesonian moviegoing. It examines a surprisingly rich set of social negotiations, cultural contestations, accommodations, barriers to entry, moral uncertainties, and socio-political alliances amid a wide-ranging set of public and private dialogues, disputes, challenges, calls to action, charges, countercharges, and both tactical and strategic retreats. Its chapters have been divided into two logical segments: Chapters II-IV document the historical development of mainline (and principally white) small-town exhibition spaces and moviegoing locally within Robeson, while Chapters V-VII analyze the roles played by religion and race during the development of local moviegoing in Robeson, as well as the potential impact of public moviegoing memories on the fate of the last early exhibition site still operating in Robeson. In order to provide a methodological and analytical framework for the chapters that follow, this introduction will address the following questions:

1. Why attempt a history of Robesonian moviegoing?
2. What evidentiary materials have been leveraged to document that history?
3. What analytical methods have been used to evaluate this evidence?

4. What intellectual frameworks have informed this study and its conclusions?
5. What broader impacts might an account of Robesonian moviegoing have within the context of cinema, cultural and Southern studies?

One of this study's more unusual characteristics is that it was undertaken by a researcher with no personal or family ties to Robeson County and whose principal academic interests involve American literature. This account of Robeson's moviegoing history was initiated during an American Studies seminar on cinema history—a seminar which the author had mistakenly assumed involved a review of film theory, rather than a series of research projects detailing early moviegoing developments in a series of smaller North Carolina cities. However, the randomly selected city of Lumberton led the author to a series of intriguing archival discoveries, the first and perhaps most significant of which was a faded microfilm image of a newspaper clipping describing a set of “improvements” at the local Opera House that represented an early implementation of local segregationist architecture within Lumberton's first cinema-exhibition site. Similar artifacts encouraged a reconsideration of the county's tri-racial experiences through the lens of historical moviegoing. In that investigation, the author hoped to find that Robeson's unusual demographics resulted in a local overthrow of Jim Crow-style segregation earlier than 1963 (when federal officials began heavily lobbying Southern exhibitors to integrate motion-picture theaters) thanks to the presence of a “third” racial sub-population that might have encouraged cash-strapped exhibitors to abandon non-white separatism ahead of Title II of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed segregation in a list of specific “public accommodations” including theaters.

The author was also attracted by the opportunity presented by Robesonian moviegoing to engage in an interdisciplinary and artifact-based cultural analysis

demonstrating the extent to which racial factors physically and socially “architected” Southern life.⁸ In this study, the term “architected” refers to the development of specialized features in Robeson theaters that represented an intentional and physical manifestation of the underlying racial dogma that structured local social hierarchies and led to the discrimination of multiple subject minorities in theaters and other shared public spaces. These architectural developments help retrospectively to expose the racial insensitivity of those inclined to praise the film industry for its presumptive historical engagement in (and lionization of) narratives of equal opportunity in America. For instance, theatrical historian David Naylor has documented multiple cases in which industry representatives touted Main Street motion-picture theaters as “the local gathering spots, the centers of downtown nightlife” where “a ticket to a show was a passport to lives and cultures otherwise beyond reach.”⁹ Convinced that “no form of entertainment had ever been as accessible or popular” as the cinema, theater architects “saw their role in a different light” from peers who designed massive commercial structures and/or majestic residences for wealthy private citizens.¹⁰ Instead, theater architects imagined that “their purpose was to build a showplace with all the trappings of the rich, but accessible to all,” and as a result erected facilities of democratization of which “George Rapp, a leading palace architect, put it best: ‘Here is a shrine to democracy where the wealthy rub elbows with the poor.’”¹¹ Yet Rapp’s self-aggrandizing rhetoric could hardly have applied less to Robeson County, where every exhibition facility was either initially designed or subsequently modified to partition its occupants along ethnic or racial lines. Instead of bringing the masses together, Robeson’s theater architects and operations staffs erected and managed facilities that physically and psychologically constrained audience

members from transgressing the tri-racial boundaries implemented to preserve Robeson's social hierarchies.

Robesonian moviegoing also represented an opportunity to participate in a kind of grass-roots movement that is seeking to re-assess the historical nature of cinemagoing. Instead of assuming that historical cinema consumption necessarily represented a passive experience whose outcomes were predetermined by the intentions and interests of the producing auteur, some cinema scholars have increasingly viewed moviegoing as a complex set of interactions divorceable neither from local social contexts nor from the broad set of individual and group behaviors engaged in by audience members before, during, and after a given film exhibition. As a Southern social history, this Robesonian moviegoing study has reconstructed a set of historical moviegoing narratives that remain fully informed by C. Vann Woodward's research into the historical contingency of Jim Crowism. Just as the key milestones on the road to legalized segregation were (in Woodward's view) neither pre-ordained nor inevitable,¹² tri-segregated theaters were neither a necessary nor inevitable outcome—even in Robeson County. Rather, the establishment of a totalizing tripartheidism within Robesonian moviegoing was a product of the re-inscription of racial dogma on a community that was effected through the specific choices made by local exhibitors and moviegoers.

The complex relationship between race and cinemagoing in Robeson indelibly marked the career of the individual most responsible for establishing the local viability of commercial film exhibition in the county: Walter Seaman Wishart, known to several generations of Robesonians simply as "Mr. C." This study's biography of Walter Wishart attempts to reclaim a degree of individual agency for one of the thousands of motion-picture

operator/exhibitors whose efforts as the final link in the chain of cinematic production and consumption have often been passed over by cinema scholars in favor of the film industry's founding inventors, producers, directors, distributors, and stars. As a local exhibition pioneer, Walter Wishart doggedly labored for several decades to establish and manage theaters in small, sparsely populated communities on both sides of the North and South Carolina border; indeed, at the close of a long career Wishart stood in the sweltering heat of a downtown Lumberton side-street for up to ten hours a day in order to manage a flow of raced bodies into the county's grandest theater. Yet Mr. C accomplished a great deal more as a theatrical manager than his denouement as a colored-balcony attendant might otherwise suggest, for Walter Wishart made moviegoing possible for thousands of rural residents despite the toll that his managerial activities took on his personal finances and his home life. The challenges Wishart faced in attempting to operate successful theaters in racially-divided communities were compounded by periodic confrontations with some of the region's Christian fundamentalists, whose efforts to discourage and, if possible, to regulate moviegoing further limited the size of his potential audiences. In spite these difficulties, Wishart remained a motion-picture exhibitor for three decades—and who only retired after having passed his eightieth birthday.

The opportunities this project offered to investigate case studies of racial segregation, religious fundamentalism, cinema censorship, and the economic development of rural communities may never have been completed without a centralizing figure like Wishart, a small-town exhibitor around whom an entire set of moviegoing artifacts could be (and was) collected and organized. Newspaper clippings, city directory entries, faded photographs, county and township maps, and even old theater buildings linkable to Wishart and his

contemporaries represented just some of the materials supporting an evaluation of Robesonian moviegoing along several axes of interrogation. The chapters that follow, many of which feature events from Wishart's career, have been structured to highlight the economic and social headwinds that severely limited the ability of small-town exhibitors to host large-scale, multi-racial exhibitions to maximize their revenues within a Robesonian context; to foreground the implacability of the color bar and the role of cinema exhibition in the perpetuation of Jim Crow; to illustrate the performative nature of personal and group identities as those identities were defined or resisted during the social act of moviegoing; to incorporate regional economic differences into a consideration of the comparatively slow arrival of moviegoing to rural and small-town America; and to examine how and why a popular leisure technology so incited local conservative sensibilities as to result in the near-imposition in 1921 of a cinema-censorship office in the state of North Carolina.

To rally the wide range of non-literary materials and artifacts collected concerning Robesonian moviegoing into a set of coherent narratives, this study has leveraged several intellectual frameworks, including one that has influenced the work of several cinema scholars: reception theory.¹³ Just as some literary theorists have modeled reading as the active consumption of texts by individual or group meaning-makers, moviegoing case studies hold out the possibility of documenting the experiential meanings generated by film audience members beyond those presumed to have been the result of passive cinema consumption. Reception theorists generally resist a theoretical assumption of undifferentiated and passive spectators as they pursue historical and/or empirical studies of actual cinema receptors. By abandoning a presumption of identical, *a priori* spectatorship positions, reception scholars seek

to uncover the ways in which the specific circumstances and social contexts of viewership can impact the interpretation of artistic forms and mediums.¹⁴

Given the longstanding research affinities between literary and film scholars, clear parallels exist between cinema-studies practitioners who reject a theoretical assumption of audience passivity and literary critics who resist privileging the interpretive function of the artist-producer. Both groups have expanded the set of “textual objects” used to interrogate the experiences of historically situated consumers. Along these lines, Jan Radway’s study of romance-novel readers directly influenced this study through its insistence that textual analyses of romance novels could not account for the full set of meanings derived from the consumption of fictional works, particularly since (in Radway’s case) these reading acts occurred amid a complex web of social interactions that were influenced by numerous institutional processes.¹⁵ Radway’s conclusion that if the traditional object of literary studies, i.e., a work of literature, is “to be treated as a document in the study of culture,” then “it is first necessary to know something about who reads, why they do so, and how they go about it”¹⁶ applies with equal force to cinema studies—even if the evidence capable of documenting the specific activities, motivations, and experiences of actual moviegoers can be extraordinarily difficult to come by. Those who interrogate cinematic exhibitions must be willing to examine any and all activities that structure, precede, follow, and/or occur during a specific moviegoing event as they pursue the social and institutional contexts and constraints that have historically affected cinema production, distribution, and consumption. Interrogations like this study contribute to what David Bordwell has referred to as a growing interest in “culturalism” within film studies that signifies a methodological movement away from projects aligned with subject-position theory in favor of a decidedly less a-historical set of analyses often allied with, or at the very least

influenced by, reception studies.¹⁷ Bordwell would likely concur with Radway's assessment that consumers (or audience members) rarely if ever arrive at a common set of meanings after experiencing an individual text, and that the meanings derived from the event may have little or nothing to do with the contents of the text (or film) consumed. Based on her account of Book-of-the-Month club members, Radway would in turn likely acknowledge the validity of Bordwell's claim that a "consideration of advertising campaigns, exhibition circumstances, and the multifarious discourses that circulate through a culture" about a film or about film exhibition in general represents a potentially fruitful area of investigation by cinema and cultural historians.¹⁸

In both pursuing and encouraging historical cinema research delivering "both empirical and theoretical import,"¹⁹ Bordwell has acknowledged the influence of Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery, whose Film History: Theory and Practice advocated a disciplinary expansion of film studies to include "the historical study of film, not film itself."²⁰ This redefinition has encouraged new and often interdisciplinary scholarly initiatives by opening up moviegoing as an historically grounded set of social, economic, technological and/or aesthetic practices capable of supporting multiple interpretative axes and investigatory subjects. This more expansive view into cinema studies has also led to individual case studies capable of confirming or modifying broader cultural trends. For example, cinema historian Miriam Hansen's work suggests that from roughly 1890 to 1920 "the emergence of cinema spectatorship [wa]s profoundly intertwined with the transformation of the public sphere, in particular with the gendered itineraries of everyday life and leisure."²¹ Hanson's claim resonates with a number of moviegoing experiences in Robeson County; however, given the evidence contained in the source documents that underpin this study, Robesonian moviegoers tended to face a distinct set

of ideological priorities more closely aligned with racial rather than with gender bias.²²

Nevertheless, scholars thinking beyond a set of images flickering on a theater screen are positioned to describe and analyze a larger cinematic event and to account for the external influences that both color film interpretations and shape moviegoing experiences more broadly. In consciously attempting to re-imagine “the spectator [who] enters these studies as a consumer, as a member of a demographically diverse audience,” this study has largely abandoned what Hansen has referred to as the normative “psychoanalytic-semiotic framework” common within film studies in favor of considering the “culturally specific and historically variable aspects of reception.”²³

Yet despite the potential promise of moviegoing studies grounded in reception and/or spectatorship theory, the scarcity of records documenting actual audience experiences remains a critical evidentiary impediment to recreating historical film reception. While the intellectual interests and methodological positioning of reception studies may overlap with those of an expanded cinema studies, reconstructing the experiences of any actual historical film audience member remains an elusive and largely unrealizable objective. Even if such a reconstruction were possible, there is no practical way to determine whether or not a particular audience member’s response would have been typical for an entire historical audience. What this challenge appears to require of historical moviegoing studies is, first, a definitional expansion of moviegoing to include objects of investigation for which documentary evidence *does* exist—namely, evidence of cinematic exhibitions, of actual exhibition venues, and of the public and private discourses that surrounded cinemagoing. Second, it requires an imaginative reconstruction of exhibition and reception conditions based on secondary (and usually non-testimonial) evidence. Third, historical exhibition studies will likely remain largely interpretive

exercises. Though historically grounded, they will be historically incomplete. Even so, this study follows the lead of cinema historian Tom Gunning, who maintains that the study of history involves more than the sum of identifiable historical “facts.” For Gunning, historiography involves an imaginative reassembly of the available facts in ways that continue to engage contemporary observers, scholars, and analysts: “History is never simply the surviving records of the past, but always a creative and imaginative act of trying to understand the past” based on “a belief that it says something to us.”²⁴

This cinema history represents a combination of social, cultural, cinema, religious, and racial/ethnic history grounded in a set of behaviors and practices tied to a specific set of historical locations over a specific period of time. Its principal tool of analysis remains the close reading of texts. However, that use has been informed by rhetorician and cultural historian Steven Mailloux’s notion of “rhetorical hermeneutics,” a process that promotes scholarly investigations into “many different kinds of cultural productions, including noncanonical literature, nonliterary written texts, and other media such as film and television” by reading “the tropes, arguments, and narratives of its object texts (whether literary or nonliterary) within their sociopolitical contexts of cultural production and reception.”²⁵ In Robeson, the concept of “nonliterary texts” has been expanded to include a wide range of evidentiary materials that include actual theater buildings—both as a site of moviegoing activities and as an object of broader socio-cultural dialogue.²⁶ A further justification for examining theater buildings as rhetorical artifacts has been offered by Michael Putnam, whose history of small-town and neighborhood movie theaters during the first half of the twentieth century confirms that “political concerns about community power and cultural control...gave these otherwise inconsequential theaters an inordinately important role in shaping the basic structure and

practices of the American movie industry.”²⁷ Putnam’s recognition of the complex interactions between community leaders and theater operators nudged this study towards an interrogation of local power structures and the manner in which theater buildings enforced (or, as in the case of Pembroke theaters, may have challenged or reshaped) these local power structures.

This study’s pursuit of Robesonian moviegoing is also indebted to the work of the philosopher, linguist and social theorist Michel de Certeau, who suggested in his studies of the practices of everyday living that humanity could resist a general deterioration in its social relationships through the active reinterpretation of many different real-world systems of signification. Through the actions resulting from these reinterpretations, individuals could effectively rewrite the texts of their own lives.²⁸ Crucial to Certeau’s investigations is a conceptual reorientation of the object of cultural studies from producers to consumers in order to reassert the cultural significance of ordinary citizens. In his theoretical analyses of a set of recreational and leisure activities through which individuals may confront, resist, or accommodate themselves to various hegemonic systems, Certeau was fascinated by cases in which acts of consumption either “tricked” or reconstituted normative social hierarchies to produce unexpected outcomes. In perhaps his most famous illustration of the extent to which individuals engage frequently in non-sanctioned yet strategic rhetorical reinterpretations of the ordering signifiers of everyday life,²⁹ Certeau described how his view from the top of the World Trade Center that indicated that urbanites passing through the streets far below insisted upon creating and following their own paths through the labyrinths of downtown Manhattan—usually by striking out on paths bearing little resemblance to the “official” routes laid out for them by street signs, crosswalks, and city planners. To Certeau, these

street walkers engaged in a set of pedestrian enunciations that represented the personal projection of an alternative and individualized public rhetoric.³⁰ After street-walkers first “read” the pre-arranged landscapes before them, they would in turn “write” their way through public space using their own preferred set of turns, crossings, and ambulatory tropes. Within the context of Robesonian moviegoing, Certeau would likely have been particularly attracted to Pembroke’s Indian theaters, where Indians reappropriated a space typically devoted to their socio-cultural subordination during a daily leisure activity that generated and maintained an entirely different set of social hierarchies than elsewhere in Robeson.

Methodologically, this study has engaged in a range of sociological, anthropological, ethnological, philosophical, semiotic, aesthetic, and rhetorical inquiries which, when taken together, represent an instance of the interpretive *bricolage* favored by Certeau.³¹ As an analysis of an “everyday” activity like moviegoing, this study has sought “to make explicit the systems of operational combination (*les combinatoires d’opérations*) which compose a ‘culture,’ and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term ‘consumers.’”³² Within this study, for example, the discriminatory appeals voiced by Hansel Holmes in the Pastime Theatre or by Indian youths who perceived themselves to have been inappropriately discriminated against in the Pembroke Theatre reflect their status as non-passive consumers whose “daily life” resistance to imposed social identities, when combined with the subsequent re-architecting of theater balconies in Pembroke, affirm Certeau’s observation that cultural consumers often engage in “practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production” in order to serve their own ends.³³

Note that this observation suggests that the space in which consumption occurs may represent an important point of contestation, and within the context of cinema studies this possibility opens up an avenue for scholars to investigate the cultural effect of moviegoing activities even in the absence of first-hand accounts describing those activities. Indeed, even if an extensive set of individual moviegoing responses were available—say, through audience testimonials recorded outside a Lumberton movie house in 1920—this evidence could never encapsulate the full set of meanings generated as a result of that collective set of moviegoing experiences.³⁴ For an analysis of moviegoer polls available from the 1920s has led film historians Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer to conclude that the polled responses of most theater patrons foregrounded the extra-textual aspects of moviegoing, many of which continue to occur well after an actual cinema consumption event.³⁵ Similarly, Barbara Klinger’s study of non-theatrical cinematic exhibitions indicates that in many cases “the specific film may matter less to viewers than the accompanying milieu” of spectatorship.³⁶ Therefore, though this study cannot rely upon an extensive set of oral or written accounts of individual moviegoing experiences in Robeson County, it can and does interrogate moviegoing as a social practice by leveraging archival materials and oral histories in order to re-create imaginatively the conditions and contexts within which local residents and exhibitors interacted in and around cinematic space.

Fortunately, an unexpectedly rich set of resources can be called upon to recreate at least some of those conditions and to fashion a set of historical moviegoing narratives and analyses.³⁷ The primary materials supporting this project include artifacts located in the four principal repositories: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s North Carolina and Southern Manuscript Collections (Louis R. Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina); the North Carolina State Historical Archives (Raleigh, North Carolina); the Mary Livermore Library at

the University of North Carolina at Pembroke (Pembroke, North Carolina); and the Robeson County Public Library (Lumberton, North Carolina). The project's core research involved a painstaking visual review of all extant Robeson County newspapers from approximately 1895 to 1940, as well as additional weekly and monthly scans from 1940 to 1950. The county's principal newspaper, the Lumberton-based Robesonian, offers a near-continuous record of county events from 1900 onwards, and though most of the paper's pre-1900 records were destroyed in a warehouse fire, several pre-1900 records linked to the arrival of motion pictures in the region have managed to survive.³⁸ Scans of the Robesonian were undertaken after the construction of an initial exhibition timeline generated during a review of city telephone directories and fire insurance maps that had been published locally approximately every ten to fifteen years. Additional newspaper sources supporting this study include the Raleigh News and Observer's detailed accounts of the General Assembly debate concerning a state cinema-censorship program proposed during the 1921 legislative term. Finally, an incomplete set of microfilms of issues of the Pembroke Progress published during the late-1940s provide additional contemporary contextualizations of the experiences of Robeson's Native Americans at the time when Pembroke's second motion-picture theater opened.

The data from these scans—often no more than brief snippets embedded in “local news” articles—was captured, organized and assembled into a local exhibition database containing individual spreadsheet entries linking each dated item to a specific town and exhibition site. Contextual materials unrelated to any specific theater or town were also logged within the database, whose complete set of entries could be sorted to provide town-specific, theater-specific, and/or region-wide baseline chronologies. Individual entries were often tagged by one or more keywords (for example, “segregation” or “censorship”) that

could also be extracted and sorted to provide additional, theme-specific temporal frameworks.³⁹ These sorted spreadsheets permitted the subsequent assembly of detailed exhibition-development narratives encompassing specific sites, towns, or the entire region. They also supported extensive analyses of the project's chapter-specific themes, particularly the relationship between cinemagoing and race relations or between conservative Christianity, local film exhibition, and censorship. More than four-hundred database entries were supplemented by additional documentation sources that included building permits, deed transfers, tax records, wills, local histories, biographies, newspaper "clipping" files, personal journals, photographs, postcards, maps, legislative records, and other court documents. In addition, federal census records, published and unpublished scholarship, and local sociological studies provided contextual information critical to understanding the ways in which local racial demographics helped to structure Robesonian theaters.⁴⁰ Long-term changes in the general social conditions in Robeson were partially re-constructed through the assistance of periodic "historical" newspaper editions, many of which featured commentaries and/or personal reflections on earlier modes of community life.⁴¹

Unfortunately, due to the nature of these source materials, the voices of African American and Indian moviegoers have at times been unintentionally underrepresented in this study. While the Robesonian provides an extraordinary amount of information regarding daily life in Robeson, to the extent that a homeowner's decision to repaint a house or to purchase a neighbor's cow could (and did) amount to front-page news, the Robesonian remained a white-owned, white-published, and largely white-consumed newspaper. During the period covered by this study, the Robesonian rarely mentioned the activities of non-whites, and when it did, its references typically portrayed African Americans and Indians as lazy, stupid, and/or violent.⁴²

Although anecdotal evidence indicates that one or more African American newspapers may once have been published in Robeson, the whereabouts of any extant repository for them remains unknown. As a result, the history of African American moviegoing in Robeson (and the South generally) remains extraordinarily difficult to reconstruct.⁴³ The same is true of Indian moviegoing, for even in North Carolina, home to more Native Americans than any state throughout the Northeastern, Mid-Atlantic, and Southeastern regions (indeed, home to more Native Americans than any state east of the Mississippi except Wisconsin), the hometown newspaper published near the center of the most heavily populated set of Indian communities in Robeson, i.e., the Pembroke Progress, was also a white-owned and largely white-consumed news organ.⁴⁴ In any event, significant microfilm records of the Progress exist only for the last two years of the period under review, and the county's most Indian-centric newspaper, the Carolina Indian Voice, did not begin publishing until the mid-1970s.

In fact, in this study neither the Voice nor the Progress provides the most complete account of Native American moviegoing, which instead was been derived from the testimonials of a handful of elderly current or former Robeson County residents willing to pass along their memories of local moviegoing experiences in oral interviews. These accounts have provided much of the contextual evidence supplementing exhibition timelines reconstructed from newspaper scans. Oral interviews can be irreplaceable when seeking to reconstruct local exhibition practices, for they offer critical information rarely recorded in newspapers or other public records. For example, oral evidence alone has confirmed that Lumberton's Carolina Theater originally opened as a "whites-only" facility. While memory-based accounts of moviegoing experiences remain highly subjective, and therefore must be validated whenever possible against known archival records, this study's account of segregated moviegoing in

Robeson includes an oral account of how Native Americans implemented the segregation of African Americans in Pembroke theaters because the oral history upon which it is based is consistent with several scholarly accounts that confirm the fractious social relationships that often existed between Robeson's blacks and Indians during the period under review.

Additional first-person testimonies exhumed from within a variety of manuscripts, personal diaries, and contemporary academic studies offer extensive insights into the impact of religious conservatism and/or racial dogma on local cinema exhibitions. Two documents play particularly crucial evidentiary roles in Chapters V and VI, respectively: the personal diaries and newspaper submissions of the Rev. Samuel L. Morgan, a one-time Robeson County minister who initially attacked (and subsequently sought to appropriate) cinematic exhibitions to bolster local religious devotionism, and the collected papers of Dr. Guy Benton Johnson, a University of North Carolina sociologist whose field notes include useful third-party observations about the state of contemporary race relations in Robeson.⁴⁵ While Morgan's journal demonstrates the ambivalence shown by church leaders in their confrontations with cinematic leisure, Johnson's papers confirm that initially the Pembroke Theatre segregated both blacks *and* Indians from the site's white patrons. The subsequent social re-architecting of that theater space meaningfully complicates the history of racial segregation in Robeson County theaters.

Finally, though most of Robeson's early theaters have either been torn down, extensively restructured, or adaptively reused, these historic theater sites represent important evidentiary venues. Their race-specific entrances and partitioned balcony spaces denying specific social groups any access to a given theater's set of comfort, lounge and snack facilities represent physical artifacts reinforcing the rigidity of a Jim Crow system that had

been extended to commercial leisure. In addition, their architectural features help to underscore the segregationist role of public facilities throughout the American South. Though no two Robeson theaters were identical, each structure recreated (and in rare cases, challenged) normative local patterns of tri-segregation. To confirm that this pattern extended across Robeson, this study produced local development narratives for each of the seven Robeson communities whose populations exceeded one-thousand residents by 1950. These narratives affirm the evidentiary and methodological viability of performing “deep dive” reconstructions of exhibition histories in rural communities despite the severe evidentiary challenges posed in small towns and villages lacking a hometown newspaper. If it is true that the narratives in this study which target the towns of Fairmont and Rowland are less rich than those pertaining to Lumberton and Pembroke, they still manage to corroborate—or complicate—regional patterns despite the incomplete and fragmentary data from which they have been constructed. For example, though the segregation imposed on Robeson’s Indians in local white theaters seems consistent with the experiences of non-white moviegoers both regionally and nationally, the relative hospitability of Pembroke theaters to Indians discriminated against in other Robeson County sites suggests that theaters remained active sites of cultural contestation regardless of which racial group had attained local demographic dominance.

The intra-regional distinction between Robesonian and Pembroke-based moviegoing suggests a need for scholars to engage in additional Native American moviegoing research, perhaps in other bi- or tri-racial communities in the United States or Canada. Similarly targeted “micro-studies” would not only generate data useful to local social historians, but they would also serve as a disciplinary corrective to the emphasis in film studies on urban

and metropolitan moviegoing that has resulted from the relative abundance of archival sources available in major cities. By driving out the details of local exhibition in demographically and geographically disparate environments, historiographers can unearth the information necessary with which to construct broader comparative studies of cinemagoing, thereby enabling a richer understanding of the disparate patterns of consumption centered upon an important cultural product, i.e., motion pictures, without simultaneously eliding the differentiation between local experiences.

Though each historical moviegoing study would remain subject to local evidentiary constraints, many could leverage one or more of the models of inquiry identified by early exhibition scholars Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery. Of the four major axes of investigation examined in Allen and Gomery's Film History: Theory and Practice, this study has analyzed Robesonian moviegoing largely from an economic and social perspective, and has placed significantly less emphasis on a broader interrogation of cinema aesthetics and technologies (excepting theaters).⁴⁶ Economically, the slow establishment of moviegoing venues in Robeson long after a cycle of rapid theater expansion and contraction had already visited many large cities suggests that a reconsideration of the industry's "nickelodeon" phase relative to smaller and/or rural communities may well be in order. Robesonian exhibition also accentuated the difficulties facing local operators hoping to maximize gate receipts despite the serious attendance challenges posed by local religious and racial attitudes which (in the first case) informed anti-cinema rhetoric and (in the second) altered the physical construction of Robeson's exhibition spaces. Furthermore, the legacy of Robesonian moviegoing suggests that long after the golden age of theatrical exhibition had passed, these sites retained the ability to divide public opinion between the historically privileged groups interested in memorializing and/or

revitalizing early exhibition facilities and those historically marginalized groups who previously had been forced to accept a socially subordinate position within them.

The interleaving of cinema and social history within this study is not accidental. Much of the project's historical "spade work" coincided with a joint Duke/UNC film-historiography symposium titled "Local Color: A Conference on Moviegoing in the American South."⁴⁷ In his introductory conference address, Robert Allen challenged cinema historians to transcend an abiding urban (or *gothamcentric*) bias in historical cinema studies that tended to elide significant regional-moviegoing differences.⁴⁸ Noting that most Americans lived in rural rather than urban communities until approximately 1920 (and that most Southerners continued to reside in rural communities until the 1970s), Allen reported that his ongoing studies of small-town North Carolina moviegoing have indicated that historical moviegoing represented a complicated and highly contingent social practice. Moreover, Allen advocated "a more thoroughgoing historiographic and conceptual decentering" of early moviegoing studies in order to foreground the importance of "race, class, gender, community, religion, urbanity" and ethnicity within historical cinemagoing.⁴⁹

Having taken up Allen's historiographic challenge by targeting the largest tri-racial community located east of the Mississippi, this study wholeheartedly agrees with Allen's contention that race was the single-most important factor influencing local exhibition practices in the American South.⁵⁰ Indeed, one of the challenges this study faced was to avoid developing a moviegoing narrative focusing solely on race relations despite the fact that local racial prejudice led to the development of theaters designed to marginalize *most* of the county's population. Nevertheless, this study has consciously attempted to encourage cinema and social historians to move beyond Manichean racial perspectives in their work.⁵¹

All Robesonian operators had to determine whether to welcome or deny African American and Native American patronage, and each was expected to prevent the unwanted commingling of specific patron sets in order to maintain group-identity boundaries. These identities were performative in nature, since the access to Robeson theaters required non-white groups in particular to acknowledge in a distinctly public setting—and therefore symbolically to endorse (even temporarily)—specific despised and stigmatizing signifiers of racial identity. This kind of passive endorsement of second-class citizenship remained largely untenable for local Indians in particular, and their resistance to the constraints placed upon them in local exhibition spaces led to threats of theater boycotts followed by a re-architecting of Pembroke exhibition sites in which the balconies universally designated elsewhere in Robeson as “non-white” (i.e., as Native *and* African American) space were redefined specifically as “black” (i.e., African American) space. In both concrete and symbolic terms, none of Robeson’s theaters—including its Pembroke theaters—simply hosted motion-picture exhibitions; rather, they yoked cinemagoing to social structures requiring that the perpetuation of racial prejudice could not be left behind at the theater door. The emotional and psychological stresses involved in negotiating these venues for non-whites in particular were rarely if ever fully offset by the enjoyment derived from a projected set of flickering images. In the end, these tensions almost certainly depressed attendance figures in every Robeson theater for at least three moviegoing generations, while the oppressive economic legacy of racial discrimination likely depressed non-white moviegoing figures for significantly longer than that.

This study’s foregrounding of the role played by physical exhibition spaces to segregate moviegoers in specific (though not identical) ways comes as a response to Allen’s

encouraging film historians to consider reconstituting the principal object of cinema studies as the end-to-end experience of cinematic “space.” In leveraging Marxist geographer Doreen Massey’s assertion that spatial representation is “relational,” “entails multiplicity,” and is “always in process,” Allen has insisted that “the experience of cinema does not exist outside the experience of space, and as such, it is the product of historically specific, embedded material practices—of performance, of display, of exchange, of architecture, of social interaction, of remembering, as well as of signification and cinematic representation.”⁵² Any thoughtful consideration of Robeson theaters that were so obviously a product of racial triparttheidism cannot fail to imagine what these particular spaces meant to those who were variously welcomed into, denied access to, actively discouraged from attending, or grudgingly allowed to attend venues whose internal partitioning symbolically reinforced the implacability of local social hierarchies.

While Allen’s efforts continue to influence this study, its course has also been shaped by several other Southern-moviegoing researchers including Douglas Gomery.⁵³ Gomery’s work has influenced this study largely through its insistence upon situating moviegoing within the context of local business practices. In enumerating the significant financial risks facing exhibitors who attempted to develop new business models or to adapt national business practices to their specific locales, Gomery recognizes that the successful implementation of a local motion-picture theater was never a guaranteed entrepreneurial outcome. As such, Gomery’s work reflects an appreciation for exhibition pioneers who, in spite of their dogged efforts, may more often have failed than succeeded in introducing new generations of moviegoers to the cinema.

Like Gomery, Kathy Fuller has documented the relationships between local operators and their audiences in works including At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture, which features an in-depth analysis of the ways in which small-town audiences developed a taste for moviegoing.⁵⁴ Through scholarship that has included a history of theatrical exhibitions in Richmond, Virginia⁵⁵ as well as an account of cinema developments in both small and large communities across the country, Fuller directly influenced this study's reconsideration of the applicability of temporal exhibition labels like "nickelodeon age" to rural Robeson through her suggestion that the historical timeframes for itinerant and nickelodeon exhibitions in small towns likely extended far beyond the boundaries generally applied to these terms within an urban context.⁵⁶ In fact, if one defines the nickelodeon period as an exhibition-development stage characterized by aggressive competition between small theaters and picture shows clustered along commercial city streets, then the nickelodeon age effectively bypassed virtually all of Robeson's smaller communities, almost none of whose potential audience populations proved capable of supporting multiple venues. Indeed, the town of Maxton—once the county's largest community, and home to Robeson's first commercial film exhibition—appears never to have supported more than a single downtown theater through 1950.⁵⁷ Instead, during the first several decades of the twentieth century Maxton rarely supported a single local theater of its own, and its residents were required to travel to neighboring towns in order to attend a cinema exhibition.

Fuller's work also recounts the ways in which motion-picture operators claimed a form of "high-class" status for their productions in order to forestall the condemnation of local moral guardians who often attacked the cinema indiscriminately alongside other

presumed-sinful leisure activities like dancing and gambling.⁵⁸ Several of Robeson ministers and civic leaders responded to film exhibitions in a similar manner, though they often based their objections on evidence limited to posters and handbills rather than on actual cinema viewings⁵⁹ before calling upon local and state officials to institute forms of cinema censorship. Finally, Fuller's account of the diversity of regional exhibition practices acknowledges the complex series of balcony arrangements that housed African American patrons in the South, as well as the development of African American-specific (or "colored") theaters—topics often overlooked or only briefly mentioned in early exhibition histories.⁶⁰ However, much of Fuller's work in At the Picture Show focuses on small-town exhibitions in the Northeast, Midwest, and Mid-Atlantic regions, while her most extensive Southern work concerns a large city (i.e., Richmond) rather than the sort of small rural communities found in Robeson.⁶¹ In addition, while At the Picture Show chronicles some of the discriminatory treatment faced by multiple minority groups (including African Americans, as well as Mexican, Chinese and Japanese immigrants), it provides little information regarding the moviegoing experiences of Native Americans.

In an account that moves closer to rural Southern moviegoing, Gregory Waller has recounted the early exhibition history of a regional trading hub that served a cluster of rural agricultural communities in his study of Lexington, Kentucky entitled Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930.⁶² Methodological echoes of Waller's work within this study include its evidentiary decision to abandon an extensive review of film industry trade periodicals in favor of a "day-by-day, page-by-page examination" of local newspapers in order to reconstruct its local exhibition histories.⁶³ In addition, Waller's work tends to focus less on the role of class difference in

exhibition practices (a theme commonly foregrounded in urban-industrial moviegoing studies) while favoring investigations into the influence of racial codes on local theater operations. Other exhibition-development patterns and themes noted by Waller that reappear within this study include the relative lag in the development of permanent local exhibition sites in small towns and the impact of Jim Crow policies on theater development. Yet even in the South, regional and racial differences could result in distinctive exhibition patterns. Robeson's exhibitors and audiences faced a more complex set of racial considerations than did their counterparts in the largely biracial Lexington community. Moreover, while Lexington operators actively courted non-white patrons fairly early on due to the large number of blacks living in close proximity to downtown, not a single Robeson theatrical advertisement targeted African American patrons until the mid-1930s, and not a single theater catering specifically to African Americans succeeded on even a short-term basis in Robeson until after World War II.

Nonetheless, Waller's attention to the relationship between motion-picture exhibition, radio stations and hillbilly music in south-central Kentucky in the 1930s underscores the diversity of regional exhibition practices,⁶⁴ a diversity typically elided during analyses of non-differentiating evidence like national box-office receipts.⁶⁵ Waller's regional focus also prompted this study to look beyond movie houses in Lumberton alone—even though Lumberton's theaters sufficiently confirmed a local pattern of tri-segregated moviegoing—and to consider the entire Robeson region. This regional approach yielded a set of consistent narratives outlining similar theater design and temporal development patterns throughout the county. At the same time, it helped to uncover a dramatic exception to regional audience-

segregation patterns, namely the Indian alternative to normative “non-white” moviegoing established in Pembroke theaters.

Though principally a micro-regional study, this work also seeks to place Robesonian moviegoing within the broader context of Southern studies, including Janna Jones’s set of exhibition histories collected in half a dozen medium- to large-sized cities across several Southern states.⁶⁶ Though all of the locales chronicled The Southern Movie Palace were vastly more metropolitan than any Robeson County town has ever been, her analysis of Southern theaters as the consistent product of Jim Crow-era social conflict helped to prompt this study’s set of multi-community/multi-theater investigations. In addition, Jones’ reflections on the manner in which different communities either choose to memorialize segregation, or to elide all signs pointing to a given theater’s segregationist history, encouraged this study to examine more recent debates regarding the fate of the Carolina Theatre—a former Lumberton picture palace currently redeployed as a regional performing-arts center, and a site whose operational budget depends upon the continuation of politically uncertain commitments in a community still coming to terms with its own (as well as the Carolina Theatre’s) racial history.

In taking up the challenge of broadening the available set of film-exhibition histories, scholars like Gomery, Fuller-Seeley, and Waller have found sympathetic partners in two international cinema historians and editors: Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby. Often assisted by Allen, Stokes and Maltby continue to publish investigations into how, when and why audiences attend the cinema; into the nature of local, regional, national, and international cinema distribution; and into the manner in which either specific films or cinemagoing experiences in general have been received by a disparate set of audiences and

social commentators.⁶⁷ An early version of this study's account of the development of Robeson's tri-racial theaters was introduced to a larger cinema-studies community thanks to Stokes and Maltby.⁶⁸ Their cinema history collections tend to avoid the sort of panoramic grand narratives developed in monographs like Robert Sklar's Movie-Made America, whose account of early exhibitions generally focuses on the experiences of urban, working-class audiences.⁶⁹ Moreover, in order to reflect the diversity of historical cinema exhibitions, it is necessary to examine cases where marginalized or socially peripheral groups experienced non-normative exhibition conditions, so that in time a critical mass of local exhibition studies will enable the construction of a moviegoing history that will lay to rest any hypotheses suggesting, for example, that all Americans were dedicated moviegoers consuming the same cinematic content in precisely the same manner as moviegoers elsewhere.

For as Stokes, Maltby, Allen and others have demonstrated, this simply has not been the case. In Robeson, the act of "going to the movies" involved navigating complex networks of potentially problematic social relationships and interactions involving family members, schoolmates, friends, work associates, fellow churchgoers, and less well-known (though generally recognizable) county residents. The local prohibitions that discouraged residents from interacting with the members of different social or racial groups in Robeson County moviegoing support cinema historian Barbara Klinger's claim that "the transactions between social groups and mass culture thus provide a means for investigating the hierarchies and principles that inform group identities as well as their function in society."⁷⁰

Along these lines, the archival data and artifacts captured within this study should offer useful investigatory materials for scholars beyond cinema studies, as they foreground specific religious, racial, and socio-economic developments in rural Southern communities during the

first half of the twentieth century. As an example of this study's interdisciplinary utility, its account of Robeson's distinctive theaters will provide architectural historians a basis for investigating structures that acted simultaneously as socio-spatial markers and as engineered impositions of cultural difference.⁷¹ Theaters in towns like Red Springs, Rowland and Lumberton were a form of "race-spacing" technology that poses a perhaps unexpected qualification to documentarian and film historian James Forsher's claim that local entertainment districts historically centered upon movie houses created their "own sense of community, one with its own architectural style, rules of social engagement, geographies and rules of economy,"⁷² especially since these locations intentionally relegated approximately sixty percent of the local population to a zone of second-class participation. Architectural and social historians examining these materials might also wish to qualify Kevin J. Corbett's assertion that throughout their history, motion-picture theaters both provided and were themselves examples of major advances in cinematic and non-cinematic technology.⁷³ If movie theaters in Robeson represented a kind of technology which, true to the spirit of Corbett's account of the market imperative to upgrade a theater's projection and sound equipment in order to maintain technological currency, they also undeniably represented a kind of "social" technology, one constantly being upgraded in response to local demographic conditions.

In short, Robeson's movie houses represent a potentially rich set of materials opening up fruitful interdisciplinary dialogues between cinema historians, critical race theorists, and urban sociologists. For scholars seeking to deconstruct notions of racial essentialism, Robeson's exhibition sites demonstrate the fact that racial difference often resulted from a set of local power relations constructed and maintained through the (potentially brick-and-

mortar) institutionalization of social customs and prejudices. These sites confirm the utility of urban sociologist Henri Lefebvre's "sociospatial" investigations into the public identities of individuals whose "everyday life is organized according to the cultural symbols and material objects which are part of the built environment."⁷⁴ Just as theaters in Lumberton validate Lefebvre's claim that social power relations exert an extraordinary amount of "influence on decisions about how space is allocated and structured," the pattern of exhibition developments this study traces within Pembroke theaters offers a case study of Indians seeking to "alter existing spatial arrangements and construct new spaces to express their needs and desires."⁷⁵

Even so, this dissertation's collection of moviegoing histories culled from multiple rural, conservative, and tri-racial communities highlights how the uneven and multifaceted development of local cinemagoing played out within what cinema historian Miriam Hansen has referred to as the "public dimension" of cinema.⁷⁶ In Robeson County, this dimension was structured by a variety of economic considerations, social hierarchies, racial prejudices, cultural anxieties, and moral misgivings that determined who would or could engage in acts of cinema spectatorship while stipulating the conditions under which those acts could be performed. While several cinema scholars have examined the distinctive moviegoing experiences of specific social groups—including Roy Rosenzweig on the urban working class, Elizabeth Ewen on newly-arrived immigrants, and Kathy Peiss on female moviegoers, all of whose accounts have demonstrated "the significance of the cinema for social groups whose experience was repressed, fragmented, or alienated in systematic ways"⁷⁷—this study concludes that most Southern blacks and Indians would not have considered moviegoing to represent a viable outlet for free participation within the public domain. Rather, Robeson's tri-racial theaters mandated a

highly contingent and less-than-fully participatory experience for non-whites whose physical movements were, in effect, fully circumscribed from start to finish.

If it is true, as Lee Grieveson has claimed, that cinema historians are responsible for “delineating the multiple forces that have shaped cinema and, in turn, the way cinema has participated in the shaping of culture,”⁷⁸ then this study has attempted to document some of the ways in which motion-picture exhibitions were influenced by, and in turn occasionally influenced, the local economic, social, racial, and religious conditions in rural, small-town America. Stokes and Maltby would likely regard its attempt to reconstruct “the social context and consequences of moviegoing” as an example of “an historical return to the prevailing concerns of the earliest studies of cinema.”⁷⁹ In deemphasizing analyses of decontextualized film texts in favor of their publication of historically grounded research, Stokes and Maltby hope to reorient *film studies* towards a broader-based *cinema studies* by transforming the former into “an object of sociological and psychological enquiry, rather than the object of aesthetic, critical and interpretive enquiry that has ensued from the construction of film studies as an academic discipline in the humanities.”⁸⁰ In responding to Allen’s call for a re-inscription of “the rural experience of moviegoing into American film history,”⁸¹ this study also offers up a rich set of evidence to indicate the ways in which a host of local pressures can and did coalesce around the sole movie-house that typically operated on the Main Streets of rural, small-town America.

In providing a set of narratives useful to scholars in social history, cinema history, Southern history, religious history, cultural studies, rural and/or urban sociology, and other academic disciplines, this study’s chapters have been organized as follows:

- Chapter II charts the cinema’s arrival in Robeson County up through the transition of local exhibition sites from itinerant operations into semi-permanent venues.
- Chapter III traces the career of Walter S. Wishart, the individual most responsible for establishing moviegoing in Robeson County, and the founder of the county’s first dedicated motion-picture theater in Lumberton.
- Chapter IV examines the extension of moviegoing beyond Lumberton to Robeson’s larger communities and compares the resulting exhibition narratives (and timeframes) with traditional characterizations of the “nickelodeon” and “picture palace” eras.
- Chapter V documents several attempts by civic and church leaders to establish local and state cinema censorship facilities in North Carolina. Based on evidence including a series of public debates in Lumberton and Raleigh, as well as on the personal memoirs of a local Baptist preacher, this chapter offers several reasons why local censorship initiatives in the American South may have lost their momentum, and considers the proposed appropriation of cinema technologies by former censorship advocates.
- Chapter VI analyzes the Robeson-specific exhibition developments that most clearly demonstrate the inescapable influence of racial prejudice on cinemagoing in the Jim Crow South: the extension of tri-racial theaters throughout Robeson, as well as the inversion of local racial hierarchies attempted by Indians in Pembroke theaters.
- Chapter VII considers the long-term implications of historical cinema exhibition in Robeson, a community that continues to struggle both politically and financially to determine an appropriate use for Robeson’s only remaining historical downtown motion-picture theater: the formerly tri-segregated Carolina Civic Center.

- As supplemental material, Appendix I summarizes Robeson’s key demographic trends during the period covered by this study, while Appendix II’s “heat map” provides a graphical representation of the decade-by-decade exhibition milestones of Robeson’s seven largest communities.

Collectively, these chapters confirm Haidee Wasson’s contention that motion-picture theaters were “complex sites” that (on an historical basis) have been “interwoven with the struggles that constitute the socio-political contests undergirding public life and leisure more generally.”⁸²

Yet if we can say that we no longer tend to watch movies the way we used to, it is also true that motion-picture exhibition did not develop according to a single national pattern. If exhibitors and audiences everywhere were called upon to respond to the local socio-political opportunities and challenges offered by moviegoing, it is clear that, at least from a demographic point of view, Robeson County was (and still remains) highly unusual. Nevertheless, it is possible to imagine other demographically diverse sites whose exhibition histories may, upon investigation, produce exhibition narratives similar to those encountered in Robeson. In the United States alone, obvious candidates for in-depth moviegoing studies include the multi-ethnic communities found in San Francisco, New Orleans, Hawaii, and Oklahoma, as well as within the potentially quadri-racial populations in the borderlands of Texas, Florida and Southern California. The question that remains is whether or not we will pursue these studies to broaden our awareness of early motion-picture exhibition practices capable of demonstrating the socio-cultural factors that could (and did) erect significant participatory barriers. If a century of motion-picture exhibition in Robeson County has provided local audiences with the access to a host of cinematic novelties, the inescapably

social act of moviegoing historically incurred a social, political, and/or group-identity cost among marginalized audience members that lasted far, far longer than the immediate impression caused by the evanescent images passing across the screen during a visit to their local picture show.

ENDNOTES

¹ For treatments of the film industry's reorientation towards home- and family-based exhibition and marketing practices, as well as an extended treatment of non-theatrical moviegoing generally, see Robert Clyde Allen, "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'Family Film'," Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies, eds. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), and Barbara Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

² As verified by Jesse Oxendine, son of the operator of the Pembroke Theatre, where Oxendine served several years as a house projectionist.

³ Map image originally sourced from materials developed by the United States Census Bureau (2000) and modified by Wikipedia user "Ruhrfisch." See Ruhrfisch, Map of Robeson County North Carolina with Municipal and Township Labels. Wikipedia, June 2007. Web. 6 June 2010
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Robeson_County_North_Carolina_With_Municipal_and_Township_Labels.PNG>.

⁴ Consisting of approximately 950 square miles, Robeson represents in geographic terms the largest of North Carolina's one hundred counties.

⁵ For example, note in Figure 1.1 the line of "swamp" townships—e.g. Burnt, Raft, and Back Swamps—running through the county's central north-south axis.

⁶ A note on racial qualifiers: To be consistent with the historical labels used at least until mid-century in Robeson County, in this study Caucasians will be termed "white," Native Americans "Indian," and African Americans as either "colored," "black," or "Negro," depending on the racial label used in contemporary source materials. It is useful to note that these labels were used as fastidiously as possible in Robeson County. As early as 1900, for example, Robeson's telephone directory was divided into sections for "white," "colored," and "Croatan" (or Indian) residents. However, the latter term (which sought to link local Indians to Sir Walter Raleigh's original 'Lost Colony' of Roanoke) fell into severe disfavor with the members of Robeson's Indian community. Robeson's Indian population (who have designated themselves as "Lumbee" Indians) consider the word "Croatan" to represent a highly derogatory and historically unverifiable race label. It will be avoided in this study unless it has been specifically cited in archive materials. In fact, calling a Lumbee Indian a "Croatan" (or worse, a "Cro") would elicit a reaction today similar to that of an African-American being called a "Nigger."

⁷ Robeson's demographic trends have been summarized in Appendix I.

⁸ For this study, the verb-form *architected* has been borrowed from the community of computer technicians and systems designers who use it as an adjective foregrounding the intention to design and produce an environment within which all individual components seamlessly interoperate. Based on a pre-defined series of component standards, object hierarchies, and operational assumptions, systems architects hope to effect a kind of unthinking developmental holism, one which promotes the freedom of individual developers to produce internally complex objects and processes that can subsequently be integrated with little effort into larger systems environments—thereby freeing the production process from the limitations of systems which, in order to maintain an internal consistency, have to be designed, built, tested and implemented by a single individual. The strict conformance by each member of the group to externally imposed environmental standards allows for faster development speeds and reduced integration risks.

⁹ David Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 14.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 31.

¹² C. Vann Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 3d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). While much can (and has) been said regarding Woodward's thesis, its deeply existential treatment of America's history of segregation remains an essential work in both modern-American and Southern studies.

¹³ A non-inclusive list of these scholars would include Miriam Hansen, Annette Kuhn, Barbara Klinger, Hamid Naficy, Jackie Stacey, Janet Staiger, Tom Stempel and Dan Streible.

¹⁴ For a useful review of the epistemological relationship between historical cinema studies and film spectatorship, see Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). In her study, Radway attacked what she viewed as the "condescending" treatment of mass-culture audiences by literary critics who presumed the passivity of romance readers as "the final, logical consequence of a theoretical position that reifies human activity, ignores the complexity of sign production or semiosis, and transforms interactive social process into a confrontation between discrete objects." Based on the experiences of the readers in her study, Radway shifted her analytic focus towards "the complex social event of reading," viewing reading as an activity that could not be divorced from "the context of...ordinary life" (8).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁷ David Bordwell, "Contemporary Film Studies and the Vicissitudes of Grand Theory," Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, eds. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁰ Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), iii.

²¹ Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film, 2.

²² While there is reason to suspect that cinema exhibitions in Robeson County were impacted by local gender expectations and prohibitions, the scant evidence unearthed during this study that indicates, for example, the occasional segregation of female from male audience members supports no definitive conclusions regarding the ways in which gender issues either shaped or architected local moviegoing conditions and/or experiences. Given the scarcity of gendered evidence unearthed during this study, in fact, any conclusions along those lines would be highly speculative and would, in this author's opinion, rely too heavily upon either secondary or theoretical accounts too far removed from a Robesonian context to be both locally and historically demonstrable.

²³ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁴ Tom Gunning, D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 2.

²⁵ Steven Mailloux, Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 186.

²⁶ According to Mailloux, “a study of cultural rhetoric attempts to read the tropes, arguments, and narratives of its object texts (whether literary or nonliterary) within their sociopolitical contexts of cultural production and reception.” Ibid.

²⁷ Michael Putnam, Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 4.

²⁸ Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xi-xxiv.

²⁹ Certeau’s skyscraper observations may be found in “Part VII: Walking in the City” from Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 91-110.

³⁰ In Certeau’s terms, street walkers engaged “pedestrian speech acts” that amounted to their own set of “walking rhetorics” (Ibid., terms discussed on pages 97 and 100, respectively).

³¹ A Certeauvian term indicating an “artisan-like inventiveness” (Ibid., p. xviii).

³² From the “General Introduction” to Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, xi-xii.

³³ Ibid., p. xv. The experiences of Holmes in Lumberton and the nature of Indian theaters in Pembroke are discussed in Chapter VI.

³⁴ To say nothing of the meanings generated within those denied (by racial, religious, or economic factors) the opportunity to attend motion-picture exhibitions.

³⁵ For that matter, only ten percent of those polled “went specifically to see the featured movie.” See Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer, eds., The Silent Cinema Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 275.

³⁶ Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home, 48.

³⁷ “Time and again, in-depth interrogation of the full sequence of events relevant to a film’s production, distribution, and reception has provided opportunities for new interpretive insights. Similar groundings in archival research are undoubtedly basic to the best historical work currently being done in film studies.” Charles Musser, “Historiographic Method and the Study of Early Cinema,” Cinema Journal 44.1 (2004): 104.

³⁸ Both the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the North Carolina State archives possess extensive microfilm archives of the Robesonian, (Lumberton, NC: W. Wallace McDiarmid, et. al. (1870 - current)). Additional microfilm copies are also located in the Robeson County Public Library.

³⁹ Entries were logged with the following keywords: Theater or exhibition site verification, site management, site renovations, and/or intra-site competition; general town or regional history; segregation and/or race relations; African American, Native American, and/or Colored theaters; community service and/or benefit shows; religion; plus a handful of additional keywords.

⁴⁰ Sadly no business records exist for any of the region’s theaters, though a few deed records and articles of incorporation help to confirm the existence of certain venues. Yet the list of materials that can support moviegoing studies can be surprising varied. For a helpful listing of other sources that have regularly been called upon by early cinema historians, see Part V of Gregory A. Waller, ed., Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 322-3.

⁴¹ Many of these sketches which were, in fact, written by or otherwise attributed to Walter Wishart, the first manager of Lumberton’s Pastime Theatre, and the primary subject of Chapter III.

⁴² These accounts generally took note of non-whites when their activities ran afoul of the law. For most of the period under study, news accounts concerning Indians (labeled as “Croatan,” “Cherokee,” or “Indian”) or

blacks (“colored” or “Negro”) amounted to object lessons in racial inferiority and often vilified a presumptive non-white predilection for violence typically directed at other non-whites.

⁴³ Robert Allen has noted that only scattered editions of any of the African American newspapers published in North Carolina during the period under review are still extant.

⁴⁴ According to the 1910 Federal Census, North Carolina’s total of 7,851 Native Americans (roughly 6,000 of which lived in Robeson) trailed only Wisconsin’s total of 10,142 among all states lying east of the Mississippi. However, the entire Indian populations of the Northeastern (2,076) and Mid-Atlantic (7,717) regions fell below North Carolina’s, and all but approximately 1,200 of the Indians in the Southeastern region lived outside the borders of North Carolina. The significance of the Robeson County Indian population relative to the general Indian population in the Southeast has been reviewed in Appendix I, and similar population-density disparities continued throughout the century. According to the U.S. Census bureau, in 2006, at a time when roughly 80% of North Carolina’s Native American population resided in Robeson County, the Indian population residing in North Carolina accounted for 1.1% of the national Indian population; conversely, no other state in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, or Southeast hosted more than 0.5%.

⁴⁵ Both the Morgan and Johnson papers can be located in the Southern Manuscript Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁶ See Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985).

⁴⁷ The conference was team-sponsored by the Duke University Program in Film and Video and the Departments of American Studies and Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. January 18-20, 2002.

⁴⁸ The bulk of Allen’s address was eventually refashioned into Robert C. Allen, “Relocating American Film History: The Problem of the Empirical,” Cultural Studies 20.1 (2006). In his address, Allen borrowed the useful term “gothamcentric” from Timothy Gilfoyle, who used it to describe urban biases in U.S. historiography generally. See Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “White Cities, Linguistic Turns, and Disneylands: The New Paradigms of Urban History,” Reviews in American History 26.1 (1998).

⁴⁹ As noted in Allen’s “Local Color” conference essay entitled “Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal,” University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001, p. 3.

⁵⁰ “Race—not ethnicity or social class—was the chasmic demographic, social, economic, political, and cultural divide that ran through every southern state, through every community of whatever size in those states, and through every social and cultural institution in those communities. Race is not just a part of the story of the history of moviegoing in the South; that story cannot be understood except in its relation to race.” Robert Clyde Allen, “Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal,” Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 28.

⁵¹ In fact, the polarizing white/non-white biracialism often reinscribed within U.S. ethnic histories has disturbed historian James Brooks, who noted in his “Introduction” to Confounding the Color Line that “the Native American experience, if treated at all, came to be known as the history of ‘Indian-White’ relations, while the African American past developed primarily under the rubric of ‘Race Relations’ in which Indians remained virtually invisible.” Certainly, the social interactions within a multi-racial region like Robeson County were much more complicated—and extensive—than those usually contained within works structured by simple black-white or Indian-white oppositions. See James Brooks, ed., Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 5.

⁵² Robert C. Allen, “The Place of Space in Film Historiography,” (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, (unpublished)), 2-4.

⁵³ Douglas Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). In addition to Shared Pleasures, an extraordinarily useful overview of early cinema exhibitions, Gomery's more recent case studies have included a review of regional moviegoing in the Shenandoah Valley, see also Douglas Gomery, Moviegoing in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia: A Case Study of Place, Transportation, Audiences, Racism, Censorship & Blue Laws, Shenandoah Valley Regional Studies Seminar, 2002.

⁵⁴ Kathryn H. Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Elisabeth Dementi and Wayne Dementi, Celebrate Richmond Theater (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 1-19. Fuller-Seeley's "Introduction" also provides a brief yet valuable overview of recent approaches in local cinema history.

⁵⁷ Based on records currently available, Maxton appears not to have offered local residents access to more than a single local theater of any kind until the advent of drive-ins in the 1940s. (However, as discussed in Chapter IV, a second regional theater in the proximity of Maxton was located across the county line at the former Maxton-Laurinburg air base.)

⁵⁸ These charges represent a common theme running throughout At the Picture Show.

⁵⁹ Objections quite similar to those noted in Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture, 58.

⁶⁰ See At the Picture Show, particularly Chapters 1-3.

⁶¹ However, her more recent edited collection of essays does include several case studies of small-town cinema history. See Fuller-Seeley, Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing.

⁶² Gregory A. Waller, Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). For Waller, Main Street Amusements constitutes "a counter-example to those influential studies of the nickelodeon era that focus exclusively on the urban centers of the industrialized Northeast" (257).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

⁶⁴ See Gregory A. Waller, "Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s," American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Sound Era, eds. Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes (London: BFI Publishing, 1999).

⁶⁵ In "The Myth of the Southern Box Office," cinema historian Thomas Cripps argued that the enduring myth of a monolithic Southern box office had been perpetuated by Hollywood leadership to justify a twinned set of agendas: to ensure the production of racially non-controversial films, and to deny significant on-screen roles to African-American actors. James C. Curtis and Lewis L. Gould, The Black Experience in America: Selected Essays (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), 116-44.

⁶⁶ Janna Jones, The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall and Resurrection (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2003).

⁶⁷ See Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen, Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, Exeter Studies in Film History. (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2007),

Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies (London: British Film Institute, 1999), and Melvyn Stokes, Richard Maltby and British Film Institute, eds., Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

⁶⁸ Christopher J. McKenna, "Tri-Racial Theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina, 1896-1940," Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 45-59.

⁶⁹ Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, Rev. and updated ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

⁷⁰ See Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home, 141.

⁷¹ For an additional analysis of the relationship between race and theater architecture, see the account of theaters designed by Erle Stillwell in Robert Clyde Allen and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Documenting the American South (Project), Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina, 2008, DocSouth, Available: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/index.html>.

⁷² See James Forsher, The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown (Westport, CN: Praeger, 2003), 5.

⁷³ See Kevin J. Corbett, "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and Beyond the Substitution Effect," Cinema Journal 40.2 (2001).

⁷⁴ Excerpted from the Editor's "Introduction" to Ray Hutchison, ed., Constructions of Urban Space (Stamford, Conn.: JAI Press, 2000).

⁷⁵ Ibid. For a brief synopsis of the development of socio-spatial perspectives that incorporates a sensitivity to the impact of racial segregation on public space, see Kevin Fox Gotham, "Representations of Space and Urban Planning in a Post-World War Two U.S. City," Constructions of Urban Space, ed. William R. Hutchison (Stamford, CN: JAI Press, 2000), 157.

⁷⁶ See Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film, 7.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

⁷⁸ From the "Introduction" to Lee Grieveson, "Woof, Warp, History," Cinema Journal 44.1 (2004): 124.

⁷⁹ From the "Introduction" to Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert Clyde Allen, Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, Exeter Studies in Film History. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Robert Clyde Allen, "Race, Religion, and Rusticity," Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 29.

⁸² Haidee Wasson, "The Reel of the Month Club: 16mm Projectors, Home Theaters and Film Libraries in the 1920s," Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, ed. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 217.

CHAPTER II

THE "NEW WONDER:" MOTION PICTURES ARRIVE IN ROBESON COUNTY.

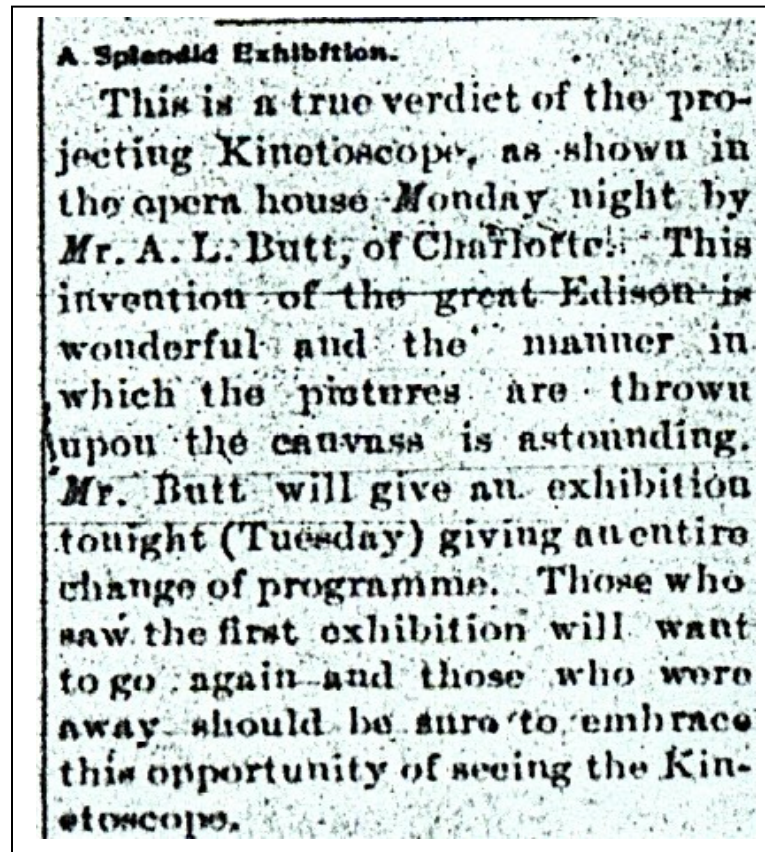


Figure 2.1: Confirmation of the first motion-picture exhibition in Lumberton, North Carolina.¹

As had been true in thousands of communities across the United States, motion pictures first appeared in Robeson County thanks to the efforts of turn of the century itinerant showmen who crisscrossed the nation. In the earliest days of cinema, films were not projected in facilities dedicated to motion-picture exhibition. While any number of cinema histories have cited the opening in mid-April 1894 of the Holland Brothers' Kinetoscope parlor in New York City as representing the birth of commercial moviegoing in the United

States,² others consider the onset of mass exhibition to have occurred two years later, when a projecting kinoscope (or “Vitascope”) was erected to display moving pictures upon a large screen mounted in Koster and Bial’s Herald Square vaudeville house.³ Entrepreneurs intending to disseminate the technological wonder of cinema beyond increasingly competitive urban markets armed themselves with mobile Kinetoscope cabinets and/or purchased their own portable projectors. The fledgling film industry’s ranks of dogged itinerant showmen transported motion-picture technology into countless towns, villages, and hamlets, and concentrated their efforts upon communities that offered ready access to sources of electrical power and to regional rail connections.

Despite the zeal of early itinerants, however, the vagaries of long-distance travel and low population densities often forced small-town residents to wait many years for the new wonder to arrive. According to the archival evidence currently available, it appears that the first Robeson resident to have attended a cinematic exhibition was J. Kirkland Hill, the editor of the Maxton Scottish Chief. Hill tantalized local readers with his account of a film exhibition held on March 19, 1897 in the Wilmington Opera House, a show featuring moving images (provided courtesy of Thomas Edison’s latest miracle) that included a pair of kissing adults, a group of firemen springing into action, a cowboy clinging desperately to a bucking bronco, a pair of boxers exchanging furious blows, and dancers performing an elaborate series of steps.⁴ Despite this visit to Wilmington, North Carolina’s largest city and an “early adopter” of motion-picture exhibitions,⁵ Hill found himself only slightly ahead of a cinema-exhibition wave that would soon reach Robeson. The county’s first recorded exhibition occurred in the late spring of 1897, when a show bypassed the county seat of Lumberton in favor of the only Robeson community whose population had nearly reached a thousand

residents, i.e., Hill's hometown of Maxton. On the evening of May 27th, Maxtonians capable of affording the 50-cent (per adult) or 25-cent (per child) ticket prices were admitted to the local Armory, in which itinerant exhibitor Ernest V. Richards had mounted an instance of "Edison's Projecting Kinetoscope,"⁶ which provided the featured attractions at a fundraiser for a local militia group, the Maxton Guards.⁷ Though Richards' role in introducing Robesonians to motion-picture entertainment has long been forgotten locally, at the time the Editor of Lee County's Jonesboro Progress commented that the projection equipment carried by Richards and other itinerant exhibitors represented "one of the greatest achievements of invention, more wonderful perhaps than the phonograph, and everybody should see it."⁸

Four days after the Maxton exhibition, a Charlotte-based itinerant showman named Arthur L. Butt arrived in downtown Lumberton with another Projecting Kinetoscope.⁹ On May 31st, Butt projected upon a canvas wall the first moving images ever viewed in the Lumberton Opera House, a facility that would host sporadic—followed by semi-permanent—cinema exhibitions for the next fifteen years. Located on the northwest corner of the intersection of Sixth and Elm streets, the Opera House had been erected sometime between 1893 and 1895¹⁰ by an elderly German immigrant and physician named Dr. Rudolph Vampill, who had purchased from fellow resident Daniel A. Prevatt property lying at the northern end of what would become Lumberton's four-block long central business district.¹¹ Vampill, whose "boon companion," namely his piano, would be housed in one of the Opera House's first-floor offices, quickly transformed the Prevatt property into a two-story, high-gabled, metal-clad structure that housed on its second story a stage and auditorium reportedly capable of seating on wooden benches up to 500 patrons.

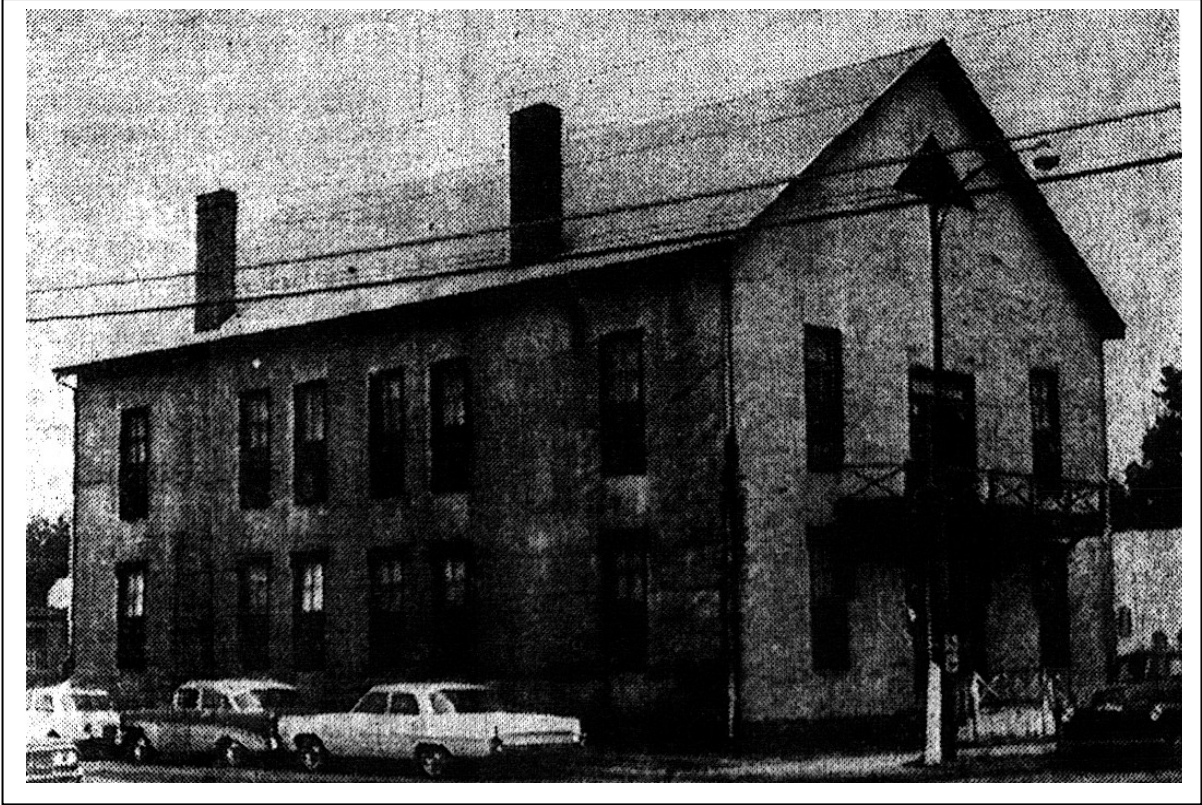


Figure 2.2: Lumberton's former Opera House (circa 1966).¹²

Along with the Robeson County Courthouse located diagonally across Elm Street, Vampill's Opera House marked the gateway to downtown Lumberton for the local white elite whose homes and churches lay directly north of town. Though modest in size and largely unadorned, the Opera House until the late 1910s represented Robeson County's largest commercial leisure facility. A wide variety of entertainment vehicles graced the Opera House stage; indeed, Vampill's auditorium hosted many amateur musical and/or dramatic performances; charity shows benefitting local, national, or international causes; philosophical and political debates; educational lectures, Lyceums, and Chautauqua sessions; travelling road shows, musical-variety shows, and vaudeville acts; and extremely popular minstrel shows, many of which were performed by "all white" ensembles. However, between 1897 and 1910 the Opera House offered occasional motion-picture shows, though

these films were rarely the centerpiece of an evening's visit to the Opera House and instead represented a single component of a multi-part entertainment program.

Though his Opera House represented Robeson's premier local entertainment facility for roughly twenty years,¹³ Vampill's tenure as the site's first manager was marked by several recurring operational and practical difficulties. Moreover, the site's crowds were often small. Though Vampill's shows were theoretically open to all (white) county residents, they were usually attended only by townfolk due to the poor quality of local transportation systems. Most of Vampill's clientele, in fact, travelled by foot, horse, or wagon at a time when automobiles were a luxury and local roads remained rough, rutted, unpaved, and prone to flooding.

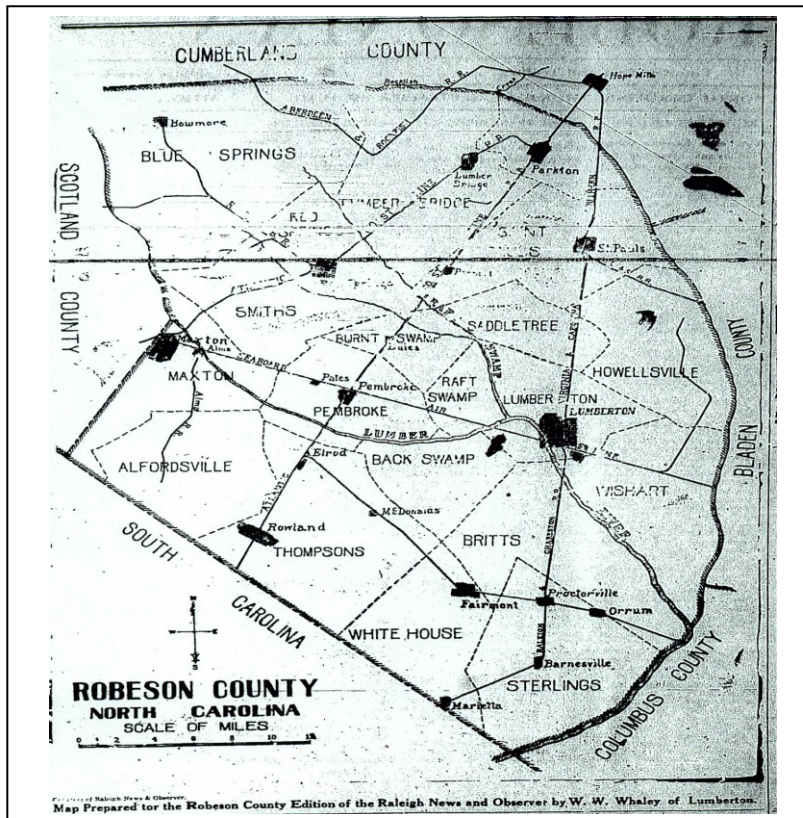


Figure 2.3: Map of Robeson County (circa 1910).¹⁴

Furthermore, the regional rail lines (see Figure 2.3) connecting many of the county's larger villages could be unreliable and inconvenient. A trip from Fairmont to Red Springs, for example, might require three or four station transfers in order to travel approximately twenty linear miles. Outlets for marketing shows across the county in advance were limited and in many cases proved ineffective. Newspaper advertisements limited by twice-weekly publication schedules often suffered delivery delays and therefore might not be available to rural residents until well after most performance troupes had left the county. Given these constraints, Vampill often announced imminent Opera House performances with what Lumberton residents referred to as the Opera House manager's preferred "call-to-arms," i.e., through Vampill's pointing an oversized gramophone speaker playing loud music out of an Opera House window that overlooked Elm Street.

The scarcity of newspaper reports recounting Opera House performances suggests that the site was used relatively infrequently. Local news accounts also indicate that the Opera House hosted significantly more local amateur and/or civic events than it did commercial exhibitions during Vampill's tenure. On dozens of occasions, Vampill offered his house up to fundraisers and charitable performances benefitting institutions like the Oxford Children's home, whose children's choir visited Lumberton annually, as well as to a disparate set of church, civic, and parent-teacher organizations. Despite the irregular success of lecture-circuit or road-show troupes visiting the Opera House—including minstrel shows so heavily attended that they spilled over into outdoor tents erected to accommodate overflow patrons—local amateur events, dance and musical recitals, school plays, mock trials, and local debating societies dominated an Opera House bill of fare that rarely included motion pictures.

In fact, newspaper archives indicate that in the twelve years following Arthur Butt's initial Lumberton show, motion-picture screenings remained—at best—highly infrequent occurrences throughout Robeson, and as the years passed the pace of commercial entertainment programs offered at the Opera House remained sluggish. Though Butt eventually came back to the Opera House, that return (which also included a series of follow-ups in Maxton) did not occur until 1901.¹⁵ Fully three and a half years later, Bell's Moving Pictures and Illustrated Songs arrived to thrill Lumberton audiences with train- and bank-robbery images that may have been quite similar to a set of films that probably passed through town two months earlier as part of the Jones Carnival Company's combined Street Fair and Carnival.¹⁶ When the Bell's group returned in early 1905 to feature additional bank-robbery footage plus filmed adaptations of *Ben Hur* and *Joseph Sold By His Brothers*, its exhibitions very nearly overlapped with those of a second travelling outfit, the New York Moving Pictures Company. However, another two years would pass before another moving-picture show, the Electric Show Company, arrived at the Opera House in the spring of 1907.¹⁷

Of course, since it is possible that not all commercial exhibitions were reported in hometown newspapers, basing an account of local cinematic developments on them (rather than, for instance, on business records) will almost certainly result in an underestimation of the actual number of historical performances. Yet even if newspapers failed to mention every moving-picture show that passed through Lumberton, it is highly unlikely that its residents experienced motion-picture exhibitions on anything resembling a regular basis until the early 1910s. Despite the broad-based expansion of film exhibitions across the nation during the early 1900s, several factors likely account for the infrequency of early cinema

exhibitions either in Lumberton or Robeson County more generally. Though it soon overtook Maxton as the county's largest community, Lumberton still housed fewer than a thousand residents in 1900. Its population base was neither larger enough to tempt itinerant showmen into extending their infrequent local visits to include multi-evening performances, nor affluent enough to encourage exhibition entrepreneurs to outfit a dedicated picture-show facility there. The county's poor roads probably further diminished itinerant interest in Robeson, as did the region's oft-oppressive summer and autumn heat. Additionally, the shortage of new films produced during the film industry's infancy meant that in order to survive financially, most itinerant exhibitors were forced to pursue audience pools previously unexposed to their limited wares. Robeson's geographic and demographic challenges discouraged frequent itinerant stopovers since repeated exhibitions would have to be marketed to the exact same sub-population that likely viewed an exhibitor's last performance. The unpredictability of regional train service may have forced itinerant showmen seeking to squeeze in additional rural shows between more lucrative urban engagements to arrive in small towns or hamlets with little to no advanced warning. In many cases, travel delays would have prevented them from soliciting local patrons effectively on a short-term basis through flyers, handbills, or posters. Finally, rural regional centers like Lumberton often featured a large percentage of "in-town" residents who were either too old, too young, or otherwise disinclined (due to a host of economic, religious, and/or racial factors) to attend public cinema exhibitions. In sum, the unlikelihood of engaging in fruitful return visits probably deterred itinerant exhibitors from more frequently servicing communities perceived as unprofitable cultural backwaters.

Yet if itinerant exhibitors tended to bypass Robeson, the sizable crowds drawn to the few intermittent exhibitions that were held, combined with an awareness of the explosive growth of nickelodeons in large cities periodically visited by local businessmen, eventually captured the imaginations of local entrepreneurs aware that Lumberton's population was growing over sixteen percent *per year* during the new century's first decade. Additionally, Robeson's business leaders were motivated by an intense desire to "measure up" to larger regional centers like Fayetteville and Wilmington, i.e., the larger regional bellwethers that they hoped to compete with both economically and culturally. Business and civic leaders also hoped that improvements in cultural infrastructures would result in an influx of new residents that could both increase the available pool of labor for local farms and generate additional customers for local merchants.

This confluence of interests informed the actions of early local risk takers seeking to impose a more aggressively commercial orientation that would improve upon the unpredictable and relatively haphazard gate revenues previously generated by Vampill.¹⁸ After Vampill executed a series of Opera House ventilation upgrades and other structural improvements in the fall of 1901, the Robesonian reported that a new set of individuals were assuming the management responsibilities for Vampill's Opera House: Messrs. George G. French, a well-to-do local grocer, and A. P. Caldwell, a Lumberton merchant tied to several downtown businesses. Under the auspices of French and Caldwell, the Opera House began to book a series of individual performers and road show acts on a quasi-regular basis, though their new schedule still remained heavily influenced by seasonal economic cycles: the bulk of French and Caldwell's shows were booked in the late spring and fall when regional crops had either been planted or already harvested.¹⁹ French and Caldwell also acted as local

booking agents to link Lumberton on a more permanent basis to regional vaudeville circuits. The Opera House's new and proactive managers soon purchased the first set of regular entertainment advertisements in the history of the Robesonian, thereby providing the latter with a welcome new revenue stream. French and Caldwell also implemented a decentralized box-office to offer additional customer convenience by selling Opera House tickets at French's grocery and/or within local Lumberton drug stores. If patrons shopping downtown were saved the additional effort of walking an extra block or two to secure tickets to an evening's show, these new box-office procedures also resulted in keeping staffing costs low, since the Opera House's box office could be shuttered during the day.²⁰

Under French and Caldwell, Opera House shows took on an increasing degree of stability, and the hybrid or multi-element entertainment programs characterized by extreme content variability from roughly 1901 to 1908 eventually began to deemphasize live performances in favor of motion pictures. After the managerial transition from Vampill to French and Caldwell, local audiences found themselves more commonly treated to commercial road shows featuring jugglers, comedians, mini-melodramas, concert soloists, blackface minstrels, brass bands, and silent films. However, French and Caldwell struggled to shoe-horn large-scale travelling shows into their venue. To travelling performers, the Opera House's relatively narrow and short auditorium, its rudimentary seating, the garret-like ambiance of its modest stage, and its tiny downstairs dressing rooms marked it as a zone of "professional amateurism"²¹ better suited to the sort of intimate local recitals favored by Vampill. In time, acts considering Lumberton stopovers may have been alarmed by a growing instability in local house management, as Caldwell largely disengaged himself from

the operation while French either engaged a series of additional Opera House co-managers, including S. B. Lewis, a minority partner in French's grocery, or managed the site alone.

Nevertheless, with a nascent management infrastructure in place at the modest but functional Opera House, the itinerant cinema exhibitions that had trickled into Lumberton for roughly a decade began arriving more regularly, thanks in part to an important strategic change in 1908 that redefined the goals of the Opera House business. A clear set of corporate objectives codified within a role-based management structure encouraged the site's owners to step away from day-to-day operational activities. In foregoing the sort of showman's role performed by Vampill, the Opera House's new owners elected to engage third-party managers to whom they ceded the authority to book theatrical and/or motion picture-based exhibitions, to serve as the public face of the facility, and to ensure that exhibition content remained within the bounds of local propriety. Under this new division of labor, Opera House shows began to abandon privileging the musical and educational programming that had characterized Vampill's managerial tenure. Picture-show content in particular held several advantages over travelling road shows, including its novelty, cost, and popularity. Indeed, so great was the local appetite for motion pictures that itinerants still occasionally operated non-theatrical exhibitions in outdoor tents, empty building lots, street fairs, and carnival midways in Lumberton for several years after film exhibitions had migrated into the Opera House. In addition, Opera House managers quickly came to appreciate the simplicity of cinema exhibitions that did not require the arrival, set-up, and disassembly of stage shows in a facility lacking a fly-tower, a dedicated loading zone, and an easy means of hoisting equipment or props to its second-floor stage.

As a result of these and other factors, cinematic exhibitions began transitioning towards becoming an Opera House staple after the death of Dr. Vampill in 1907, or two years after Vampill had deeded the Opera House as well as several other valuable downtown properties to his only child, Mrs. William W. (Lillian O.) Carlyle, after the death of his Mrs. Vampill. In turn, Vampill's death provided French a prime opportunity to exert more direct control over an Opera House venue that French rented, but did not yet own. Regardless of Vampill's fondness for musical and/or amateur performances, French favored a move towards cinematic content in part because films could be projected rather than staged at a time when the Opera House's relatively small stage area—reportedly 23-feet wide by 18-feet deep by 20-feet high—severely limited the acts that could reasonably perform there.²²

However, if in retrospect the featuring of motion-picture content seems a logical and obvious decision for French to have made, it was neither an inevitable nor a riskless move. French faced significant financial and reputational risks in aggressively committing his exhibition schedule to a young entertainment medium fraught with a host of operational uncertainties. Even if on a national level the monopolistic amalgamation in late-1908 of key industry players into Motion Picture Patents Company helped to establish consistent standards for film production, distribution and exhibition, cinema operators far removed from regional film-distribution centers continued to face chronic canister shortages and film-delivery delays. Once canisters did arrive, local exhibitors usually had little or no opportunity to screen a film's content prior to its public exhibition; therefore, in addition to potentially disappointing local audiences with underwhelming or poor quality films, exhibitors faced the public criticism of local conservatives and church leaders who remained generally apprehensive about the social appropriateness of, and the possible moral hazards

involved in, motion-picture exhibition. Ministers disappointed by an apparent failure of exhibitorial discretion denounced operators from their pulpits who they believed had failed to protect local audiences from morally offensive film content. In addition, municipal and public safety officials often harbored significant concerns about the extraordinary flammability of early film stock. The possibility that a local theater might experience a fire as devastating as those that occurred in 1903 at Chicago's Iroquois Theatre (i.e., the nation's deadliest single-building fire, based on its six-hundred fatalities) or in 1908 at the Rhoads Opera House in Boyertown, Pennsylvania (where close to two-hundred patrons perished) remained a terrifying prospect for fire marshals and civic leaders charged with protecting downtown districts still dominated by wooden-framed buildings. Although flammable celluloid was not responsible for either the Iroquois or Rhoads tragedies, the widespread perception that film stockpiles either prompted or accelerated theatrical fires might otherwise have convinced French to steer clear of cinematic exhibitions, especially once he invested his own capital in the Opera House facility.

Yet French ultimately elected to prioritize cinematic over road show and lecture-circuit exhibitions, and probably did so for two reasons. First, motion-pictures were financially less risky to stage than road shows. Not only was it much simpler to coordinate the activities of a single operator and pianist than a troupe of actors, but cinema exhibitions did not require a guaranteed up-front payment regardless of whether or not a given road-show performance actually garnered a sizable local audience. Second, and perhaps more significantly, motion-pictures offered residents a relatively novel and affordable entertainment medium. Besides the novelty of experiencing the latest advancements in cinematic innovation and technology, small-town moviegoers were attracted to motion-

pictures exhibitions because films incorporated the immediacy and true-to-life characteristics of live stage performances while simultaneously presenting a seemingly endless stream of moving images featuring unfamiliar people, places, situations, and sights (both real and imagined). Over time, motion pictures became Robeson County's preferred non-domestic entertainment activity. By 1940, the point at which every county town consisting of roughly a thousand residents had come to support a dedicated movie theater, moviegoing had become a common (though by no means universal) social practice because of the cinema's ability to deliver novelties locally at a relatively low cost.

Despite the popularity of early motion pictures, they and other commercial entertainments were often mistrusted as unregulated leisure by the same conservative leadership that led the regional temperance campaign to drive out Robeson's "wets" years before North Carolina became in 1908 the first Southern state to adopt a ban on alcohol sales.²³ While as many as eighteen saloons formerly (and simultaneously) populated the roughly eight square blocks of downtown Lumberton,²⁴ moral crusaders abolished all public houses and saloons in Robeson and remained on guard against all potentially immoral encroachments downtown. For instance, not only had all of Lumberton's pool halls been forced to close as early as 1903 due to their association with gambling and intemperance, but all attempts to install billiard facilities locally were shouted down for several generations, including a proposal to install a table in a downtown hotel backed financially by future Governor Angus W. McLean. Due to the pervasive local influence of conservative Christian ministers, dance halls remained virtually non-existent in Robeson and fully chaperoned dances were rare events even among adults. In fact, religious fundamentalists often considered dancing and drinking as perhaps the two most baleful leisure practices, though the

local catalogue of presumed sin-spawning temptations also included gambling, riding in automobiles with members of the opposite sex, attending the stage theater, and moving-picture shows.

Within this socially conservative environment, French's potential audiences were already limited by a population whose working classes generated relatively low levels of disposable income. Linked to the cycles of agricultural production, most Robeson residents worked six days a week. Leisure hours on Sundays were generally dedicated (in a diminishing order of priority) to churchgoing, to domestic and/or family matters, and to sundry leisure, sporting, and outdoor events. Children of all economic backgrounds were encouraged to attend Sunday Schools that usually afforded relatively little time for local boys to pursue favored activities like fishing, hunting, and baseball. The most common leisure objects available to the county's well-to-do town children, all of which kept their operators close to home, were musical instruments or bicycles, the latter a fad jointly prompted by the development during the 1910s of paved roads and the introduction of local sidewalks (from which cyclists were eventually banned). Though some residents living near town might treat themselves to non-domestic entertainments via their attending concerts, recitals, or civic events held in local churches and schools, many other county residents devoted their rare leisure hours to religious conferences, mass meetings, or political rallies in regional population centers. The comparatively few residents ambitious enough to organize book clubs and/or literary societies found their memberships effectively limited to the population of in-town residents who could afford to purchase their own books. Within a Robesonian context, in fact, not even the town of Lumberton organized its first local library until 1926—and a non-circulating library at that.

Seasonal influences and family ties also limited the size of French's potential audiences. Members of all economic and social classes devoted a large percentage of typically scarce leisure time to maintaining a network of existing social obligations, while seasonal heat often prompted family visits to the cooler climes available in the state's mountain and coastal communities. Thanks to local railroad connections, well-to-do Robesonians often frequented communities clustered around Asheville and Wilmington, both of which represented popular destinations for those seeking to escape the summer heat baking local crops. Family breadwinners compelled by economic necessity to stay home and brave the summer heat often attended "smokers" or other social functions at local Mason, Odd Fellows, and Knights of Pythia lodge halls, while during much of the year their spouses attended local or regional meetings of the Daughters of the American Revolution and/or the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Many Robesonians attended family reunions and homecomings, a large number of which were held far beyond the county's borders, and citizens of all social and economic classes could be found at local or regional religious revivals that could last for weeks, most of which roundly criticized "worldly" leisure activities like moviegoing. Finally, the Robesonian's daily and weekly travel notices embedded within local news reports provide compelling evidence of the frequency with which Robeson residents allocated the lion's share of their available leisure towards visiting friends and family members.

Exceptions to these general leisure patterns often occurred during the fall, when post-harvest prosperity afforded many residents the wherewithal to attend the transitory commercial leisure offered by traveling shows, fairs and carnivals. Local exposure to these typically tent-based productions, however, occurred more frequently after 1915, when

residents voted to support an annual county fair over the county-wide objections of local ministers, who subsequently insisted that town and county commissioners join with them and the local police to patrol and monitor carnival midways in order to prevent the corruption of local children and young adults. Local guardians roundly criticized the presumed immorality of the infrequent street fairs that visited Lumberton, many of whose tent-based shows included motion pictures.

However, the implementation of local electric-power grids as well as the incremental yet persistent expansion of electric lights within and beyond downtown businesses—a process that began in Lumberton in 1904—soon prompted local residents to spend more of their evening hours beyond the confines of home. That same year, the electrification of the Opera House simultaneously reduced the need for open-flame footlights to light the stage area while satisfying the power requirements of itinerant film exhibitors whose offerings often surprised, excited, or shocked early cinema audiences.²⁵

Once electrical power found its way into local homes and businesses, its extension to public facilities both rewarded local utility investors and encouraged entrepreneurs to consider gambling on new commercial leisure practices dependent upon electricity. The first formal business structure implemented in Robeson chartered to incorporate the prospects of electrified leisure into its mission appears to have been the Lumberton Lyceum Bureau. Organized in March 1908 after the death of Dr. Vampill and the Bureau's subsequent purchase of the Opera House, the Bureau sought to reposition the facility as an overtly commercial venture under the direction of French and his latest partner, Hugh M. McAllister, a local merchant, banker, and senior member of the Lumberton Chamber of Commerce. If during the early 1900s the Opera House offered non-commercial programs designed to foster

a sense of community “uplift” while opening its doors to educational addresses, school commencement exercises, readings, lectures, and musical recitals, under French’s influence these activities gave way to small-time vaudeville acts, travelling road shows, and motion pictures as the site underwent a series of infrastructural changes to accommodate the larger audiences that French hoped would be enticed by more “popular” fare. Though local government workers were temporarily transplanted into first-floor Opera House offices in 1908 as the new county courthouse was under construction across the street,²⁶ French and McAllister (on behalf of the Lyceum Bureau) pooled their capital to purchase the site and its contents, including the house’s seats, curtains, furniture, and even Dr. Vampill’s piano, from Lillian Carlyle for a grand total of five thousand dollars.²⁷ Subsequently, the Bureau renovated the site in order to serve additional demographic groups via a series of race-specific modifications discussed at length in Chapter VI.

Once reopened, the Opera House remained a “mixed-use” facility even as French and McAllister ceded its day-to-day management to a succession of three only partially successful managers/management teams. The site’s first third-party manager appears to have been John Poythress, who had managed the Electric Show Company exhibitions that visited Lumberton the in 1907. Poythress’ shows interspersed small-time vaudeville acts on the Opera House stage with motion pictures provided by the Dixie Amusement Company. During his rather short tenure (which roughly lasted from April until October), Poythress sponsored several exhibitions to curry favor with local civic leaders by forwarding some of his gate proceeds to a local prohibition league.²⁸ Within several months, however, Poythress was succeeded by a flamboyant, theatrical, and self-promoting couple consisting of Professor T. P. DeGafferelly and his wife, Marie.²⁹ Late of the Demorest Stock Company, a visiting

troupe that had performed in the Opera House when the former was managed by the Professor as the Demorest Comedy Company, the DeGafferellys supervised all Opera House exhibitions and performances from February until August 1909. Like Poythress, the DeGafferellys were not Robesonian natives, and their interest in Lumberton may have reflected their desire to abandon the uncertainties of the road-show circuit. In Lumberton, the Professor and Marie devoted several months to offering their new neighbors “clean and wholesome” pictures and “high-class” vaudeville. Generous and public spirited, they went so far as to lend local performers the benefit of their stage experiences, as well as the use of their own stage make-up kits, as they coached amateur theatrical performances like *Under the Southern Cross*, a Civil War drama staged as a benefit for a local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

During their six-month tenure, the DeGafferellys employed multiple strategies to develop an enthusiastic, dedicated, and regular set of patrons for their “Electric Theater.” In addition to supporting the local talent contests and amateur performances with which they bracketed screen exhibitions, the couple initiated promotional efforts including “lucky number” contests that awarded cash or other prizes to fortunate moviegoers in giveaways that became an operational mainstay of small-town exhibitions in Robeson for at least two decades. Furthermore, and in a marked improvement over earlier itinerant and Poythress-operated shows, they worked diligently to provide at least some new film content for each evening’s screening. Other customer-service improvements included the installation of what appear to have been the very set of electric fans used to cool Opera House audiences.

Thanks to the DeGafferellys’ efforts, local patrons had access to a more consistent motion-picture service than the town or county ever known. However, their shows

eventually suffered from unreliable film-distribution channels that often failed to provide new film canisters as and when promised. The couple's efforts were also hampered by the inexperience of Lumberton patrons. Though the first problem often required the Professor to apologize on stage and in print to audiences disappointed by stale film content, the naïveté of local patrons sometimes put the audience's safety at risk, as when the Professor once took to the stage to quell a "mock epic" donnybrook staged by performers located in the back of the theater in an attempt enliven a flagging talent show. Failing to recognize the Professor's hoax, several patrons panicked and confusedly charged down the Opera House's stairwells. In the end, despite of the fact that the DeGafferellys can be credited with establishing the first semi-permanent picture show in Robeson County through their Electric Theater, their managerial cycle ended after slightly less than six months, and their local swan-song occurred during an extended return engagement by the Williams Stock Company, which the couple rejoined after the dissolution of their Lumberton operation.³⁰

Within a few months, however, two local businessmen named "Badger" McLeod and J. A. Johnson attempted to reinvigorate the Electric Theater. In December 1909, they initiated a daily picture service that once again charged patrons an admission price of 10-cents per adult and 5-cents per child.³¹ Though their tenure represented the first instance of county natives serving as dedicated third-party Opera House, the McLeod-Johnson partnership was beset by technical difficulties that negatively impacted the quality of their exhibitions. They faced problems similar to those affecting the DeGafferellys, including unreliable canister deliveries and worn-out filmstrips that often tore while passing through early projection equipment. These operational challenges were exacerbated by the perhaps unrealistic expectations of Lumberton audiences which, in spite of their relatively modest

numbers, had come to expect high-quality service as well as a change in at least some film reels daily. Since the quality of service provided by McLeod and Johnson failed to match these expectations, their operation folded after only a few months.

To put these three failures behind them, French and McAllister intensified their efforts to identify a successful local manager even as they increased their personal stake in the Opera House without completely staking the venue's success on motion pictures, perhaps as the result of these successive failures. In May 1910, they incorporated the Lumberton Opera Company as the successor to the Lyceum Bureau and capitalized it with an asset base valued at \$25,000 for an expected corporate lifespan of fifty years.³² As co-principal shareholders, French and McAllister were supported in their efforts by minority shareholder Robert C. Lawrence, a Robeson County lawyer, jurist and state legislator.³³ Collectively, the Opera Company's leaders drafted a business charter whose mission statement clarified the group's intention to risk its capital

“...for the purposes of giving exhibitions of dramatic art, theatricals, opera, vaudeville, and other exhibitions for which entrance and other fees of charges may be made; for the purposes of establishing and conducting a lecture bureau or lyceum, giving lectures from time to time at various places; establishing and conducting one or more moving picture shows; conducting a park wherein games of baseball, football and other games may be played and an admission charged, and in general engaging in the amusement business in all its branches.”³⁴

In addition to redefining and codifying the company's broad yet overtly commercial orientation, the Opera Company's owners at last managed to identify an individual capable of transforming the venue's commercial potential into an ongoing business concern. In so doing, they helped to inaugurate the theater-management career of the individual most responsible for establishing the long-term viability of motion-picture exhibitions in Robeson County: Walter Seaman Wishart, the subject of our next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ As originally printed in the Robesonian (2-Jun-1897, p. 1).

² These parlors initially contained ranks of individual, single-viewer or “peep show” devices.

³ As discussed in Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, 5-7.

⁴ See Hill’s account as published in the 25-Mar-1897 edition of the Maxton Scottish Chief, (Maxton, NC: M.G. McKenzie). Note that most cinema historians agree that Edison’s chief engineer, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, was at least as responsible as Edison for the success of the Kinetograph camera and the Kinetoscope parlors featuring early films produced by Edison’s company. Despite the fact that Edison’s creations leveraged earlier European-based cinema innovations and research, American news editors rarely credited the “new wonder” to anyone other than “The Wizard of Menlo Park.”

⁵ See Anne Morey, “Early Film Exhibition in Wilmington, North Carolina,” Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁶ Though Edison did not invent the projecting kinetoscope, it was marketed under his name.

⁷ Eighteen months later, the Guards combined with other militia groups called out by the Governor to restore order in Wilmington in the wake of severe race riots. See 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission, 1998 Wilmington Race Riot -- Final Report, 31 2006, 2006, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Available: <http://www.history.ncdcr.gov/1898-wrrc/report/Chapter6.pdf>, 02-Sep-2011.

⁸ As recorded in the 26-May and 2-Jun-1897 issues of the Robesonian. See also “local news items” contained in the 27-May-1897 issue of the Maxton Scottish Chief.

⁹ See the Robesonian (2-Jun-1897, p. 1).

¹⁰ Establishing a more precise date of the building’s construction is not currently possible. While the Opera House does not appear on the 1893 Sanborn fire map of Lumberton, a news report in the Maxton Scottish Chief (21-Feb-1895, p.2) indicates that Belle Boyd, a well-known military spy who performed dramatic recitals of Civil War events—largely recreations of her exploits on behalf of Confederate Generals Beauregard and Jackson during the Shenandoah Valley campaign—had spent an evening in Vampill’s Opera House, where she possibly treated local residents to one of her recitals.

¹¹ A 48 by 108-foot tract of land, the Opera House plot was one of two parcels that Vampill purchased from Prevatt. According to the deed of sale filed in the county courthouse, the combined parcels cost \$525.

¹² Taken by local photographer Bill Norment, this photo accompanied a story chronicling the buildings impending demolition in 1966. See Courtney Sharpe-Ward, “Once Proud in Its Heyday, City’s ‘Opera House’ Dies,” Robesonian 11-Oct-1966.

¹³ Though exhibitions similar to those held in the Lumberton Opera House may have been held in two other county sites, specifically Maxton’s Armory and a second Opera House reportedly located in Red Springs, the absence of local newspaper references to these sites suggest that Vampill’s Opera House was the unquestioned center of the county’s non-domestic entertainment by the turn of the century.

¹⁴ As originally published in the Robesonian (29-Sep-1910, p. 2).

¹⁵ As reported in *Ibid* (23-Apr-1901 and 26-Apr-1901, p. 2).

¹⁶ It remains unclear from carnival advertisements whether the acts listed involved motion pictures or whether they involved the sort of staged reenactments similar to Wild West shows or perhaps to P. T. Barnum's entertainment spectacles during an earlier age. However, since train and robbery films were staples of early cinema, and given the space constraints represented within downtown Lumberton streets, it seems likely that these show elements were, in fact, films rather than street performances.

¹⁷ See the following editions of the Robesonian: 23-Apr-1901 and 26-Apr-1901 (both p. 3) for the Butt shows; 30-Dec-1904 (p. 5) and 7-Mar-1905 (p. 1) for the Bell shows; 25-Oct-1904 (p. 1) and 4-Nov-1904 (p. 4) for the Jones Carnival; 7-Mar-1905 (multiple pages) for the New York Moving Picture shows; and 11-Apr-1907 (p. 5) for the Electric Show Company's events.

¹⁸ In support of the following account of Vampill's house, see local news items originally published in the Robesonian (13-Sep-1901 and 11-Oct-1901, p. 3) for information concerning general Opera House improvements; for confirmation of the French and Caldwell enterprise, see *Ibid.* (20-Sep-1901 and 27-Oct-1901, p. 3); and for additional Opera House performance and management news, see *Ibid.* (24-Sep-1901, p. 3; 27-Oct-1901, p. 3; 22-Nov-1901, p. 3; 21-May-1903, p. 3; and 20-Oct-1903, p. 3).

¹⁹ Few Opera House engagements were scheduled during the summer months within a tin-sided structure lacking effective interior climate-controls.

²⁰ In-town merchant box-offices also helped to deter non-white attendance at the Opera House, since most Robeson retailers either refused to serve non-whites or served them only on a very limited basis. As was true in many American towns, the shop windows of Lumberton's downtown merchants often featured placards indicating that "Whites Only" were welcome inside.

²¹ A term of the author's meant to suggest a lack of formality and design in both the Opera House's facility and in its business operations. From an architectural perspective, Vampill's house remained a small recital hall whose performance space was no more designed to accommodate travelling sets than Vampill himself had been trained to perform the duties of a dedicated stage-manager.

²² The Lumberton Opera House's stage dimensions were recorded in Gus Hill, "Gus Hill's National Theatrical Directory," (New York: Hill's National Theatrical Directory, 1914).

²³ Confirmed by Walter Wishart in an historical remembrance published as part of the forty-fifth anniversary edition of the Robesonian (16-May-1915, Section 3, p. 18). Note that prohibition did not take effect nationally until the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919.

²⁴ The estimated number of local saloons in downtown Lumberton in 1877 (which equated to roughly one saloon for each fifty residents) was reported in one of Walter Wishart's many historical remembrances in *Ibid.* (14-Nov-1927, p. 4).

²⁵ A number of film historians have adopted the term "cinema of attractions" to describe the type of kinetic, jarring, surprising, and/or spectacular action sequences common to early cinema. For an early and influential analysis of the form, see Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde," Wide Angle 8.3/4 (1986).

²⁶ Occasional court sessions continued to be held in the Opera House until well into 1909.

²⁷ Per a deed recorded on 2-Mar-1908 and filed in Deed Book 5J (p. 377) housed in the Robeson County Courthouse.

²⁸ The Robesonian (13-Apr-1908, p. 3; 30-Apr-1908, p. 3; and 18-Oct-1908, p. 3). Though ultimately unsuccessful as a Lumberton-based theatrical manager, Poythress may not have left either the role or the state after leaving town. While articles in the Robesonian referred to Poythress as "J. A." Poythress, Gus Hill's

theater directory lists a “J. S.” Poythress as the manager of Henderson’s Grand Theatre in 1914. If so, Poythress may have managed the Grand in the spring of 1915, when he would have been subjected to public criticism from the Rev. Samuel L. Morgan (as recounted in Chapter V).

²⁹ For further details of the DeGafferelly tenure at the Opera House, see *Ibid.* (22-Feb-1909, p. 3; 25-Mar-1909, p. 3; 1-Apr-1909, p. 3; 29-Apr-1909, p. 3; 5-May-1909, p. 3; 15-Jul-1909, p. 3; 2-Aug-1909, p. 3; and 12-Aug-1909, p. 3).

³⁰ The Williams Company and its successors periodically returned to Lumberton for several years, usually with one or both of the DeGafferellys in tow.

³¹ For further details on the McLeod-Johnson operation, see the Robesonian (13-Dec-1909, p. 1; 7-Feb-1910, p. 1; and 10-Feb-1910, p. 1).

³² As noted in the local business Certificate of Incorporation #8069 recorded on 20-May-1910 that remains on file in the Robeson County Courthouse. French and McAllister subsequently transferred ownership of the Opera House building and its contents to the Lumberton Opera Company that same month for a consideration of \$5000, as recorded in Robeson County Deed Book 5V (pages 241-3).

³³ Coincidentally, Lawrence was the first lawyer to try a case in the Opera House during the period when it doubled as the county courthouse. Lawrence’s judicial dealings at the site were confirmed by Walter Wishart in one of the latter’s “out-of-town” submissions to the Robesonian (25-Jul-1927, p.4).

³⁴ As recorded in Certificate of Incorporation #8069 on file in the Registrar of Deeds office in the Robeson County courthouse.

CHAPTER III

CHASING “MR. C:” WALTER WISHART, ITINERANT THEATER MANAGER.

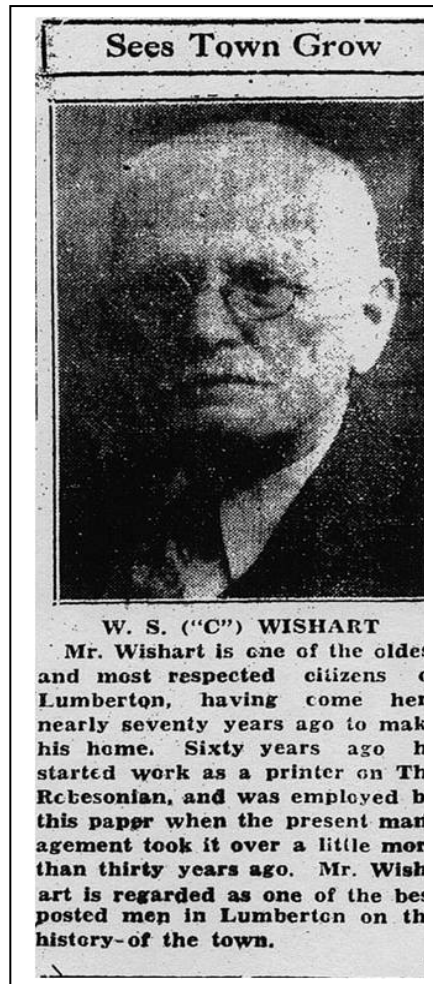


Figure 3.1: Walter S. ('C') Wishart (circa 1937).¹

As the final link in the chain connecting motion-picture producers with the actual consumers of their cinematic creations, cinema exhibitors were indispensable to the development of moviegoing; however, cinema histories have often overlooked the contributions of local exhibitors.² As noted in the previous chapter, many early theater

managers quickly discovered that picture-show operations were risky (and often unprofitable) ventures, and only after a decade of fitful county exhibitions did Walter Seaman Wishart finally establish a dependable Robeson County theater capable of consistently offering cinema exhibitions to local moviegoers.³

No history of moviegoing in Robeson County (and several other Carolina communities for that matter) would be complete without acknowledging Walter Wishart's contributions to local exhibition. Known universally to his fellow townsfolk as "Mr. C," Wishart represents one of the unheralded, and thus far largely undifferentiated, group of cinema-operators who performed a critical exhibition function in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Eventually, once Wishart's financial independence deteriorated under the constant pressure of upgrading his theaters, as well as from his abortive attempt to expand the exhibition infrastructure of his hometown beyond the capacity of local audiences to support it, Wishart was forced to relinquish his status as an independent exhibitor. Determined to remain in the business, he joined one of the regional chains that eventually dominated cinema exhibition so thoroughly that the United States Department of Justice elected to pursue landmark antitrust cases that would, in turn, help to dismantle a studio system built upon restrictive trade practices that included block booking and monopolistic national control of film production, distribution, and exhibition.⁴ By the late 1940s, however, these judicial challenges meant little to Mr. C, who had finally retired after thirty years of service in an industry from which he had eked out, even in the best of times, a marginal existence financially.⁵

Though his long theatrical-management career barely enabled him to support his small family, Wishart's choice of embarking on a career in film exhibition at the age of fifty

years suggests that a combination of adventurousness and financial desperation compelled him to abandon his original multi-decade career as a newspaper press foreman. After that career transition, Wishart would spend roughly a third of his life—and nearly half of his married life—living and working many miles from his home, family, and many friends in Robeson County. At the same time, however, Mr. C introduced motion-picture entertainment to at least two generations of small-town Southern residents.

In fact, the expansion of cinematic exhibition across the country depended upon the efforts of local exhibitors like Walter Wishart who, perhaps more than any other industry representatives, were regularly called upon to negotiate the complexities of local demographics and to address public concerns about the morality of cinematic entertainment. Consequently, while practitioners of cinema and cultural history continue to document and analyze the impact of national figures like Harry and Jack Warner, William Fox, Samuel Goldwyn, or Marcus Loew on the development of American film culture, at least some attention should be paid to early small-town exhibitors like Walter Wishart. Cinema's national expansion would not have been possible without individual exhibitors performing a variety of functional roles and bearing significant social and financial risks in their attempt to implement successful cinema operations in thousands of communities across the country.⁶

Unfortunately, since micro-studies of small-town moviegoing dependent upon non-digitized archives may take years of research to develop, it will be some time before a critical-mass of related studies can enable the development of a composite account of the small-town exhibitors who simultaneously turned film exhibition into a viable local business initiative and established moviegoing as a credible (or at least a *relatively* unobjectionable) leisure activity. Even if small-town managers like Walter Wishart bore little resemblance to

extravagant Broadway impresarios like Roxy Rothapfel, Mr. C's story remains compelling regardless of the vast differences in the relative grandeur of New York's Roxy and Lumberton's Pastime Theatres. In any case, Wishart would have been more personally familiar with each of his audience members than Rothapfel would have been with his.

In attempting to document the career of a previously unknown local exhibitor like Walter Wishart, this study has pursued the conjoined hope and promise of a program recommended by cinema historians Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, who have encouraged the development of an historical cinema studies written "from below."⁷ Intrigued by what might happen if cinema historians sought to write "histories that are not concerned with the 'great men' and women of Hollywood," but rather "concern themselves with the conditions of everyday life as they are experienced by [the] ordinary people"⁸ that attended and managed film exhibitions, Stokes and Maltby would likely view this study's account of Mr. C's career as one step in a larger process intended to "restore agency"⁹ to individuals who helped to develop the film industry from the ground up.

The success of any individual exhibitor depended upon a willingness to adapt to local economic conditions and to conform to changing operational and management structures. That Walter Wishart could and did adapt to these changes cannot be denied. After he finally retired as reportedly the oldest film-industry veteran in North or South Carolina, Mr. C could look back upon a managerial career divisible into three distinct phases:

- From 1909 to 1917, Wishart served as the independent operator of a local Opera House and as the founder of Robeson County's first dedicated picture show, the Pastime Theatre. In these venues (neither of which Wishart owned), Mr. C acted as a

theatrical manager, promoter, civic “good citizen,” moral apologist, and jack of all trades.

- From 1917 to 1931, Wishart became an itinerant theater management operating within a burgeoning regional exhibition chain, and for nearly a generation he helped to define that role despite the constraints it placed on his personal and family life.
- From 1931 to 1940, and at last back home in Lumberton, Wishart served out the remainder of his career as the “colored balcony” manager of Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre, the elegant local flagship venue that had relegated his original Pastime Theatre to second-run status.

Certainly, Wishart could never have imagined the shape that show-business career would eventually take, though a particularly sad irony of his peripatetic career is that Wishart probably pursued a theatrical management career in the hope of ensuring a way to spend more time at home with his family.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he persevered for decades to bear up under the strain of chronic travel and twelve-hour workdays for six days a week long after his peers had since retired; indeed, one of the wonders of his Mr. C’s career is precisely how after he had passed his eightieth birthday he bore up under the punishing Carolina sunshine for hours on end collecting tickets outside the Carolina Theatre’s North Door.

If the arc of Walter Wishart’s career as a theater manager eventually became characterized by its increasingly subordinate roles, his second multi-decade career began with high expectations. While his previous employer, the Robesonian, proudly announced that Mr. C was taking up the managership of the Lumberton Opera House in August 1910, according to his own account Wishart had been involved in that site’s operations since the arrival of the DeGafferellys roughly eighteen months earlier. In all probability, Wishart

established a relationship with the DeGafferellys while serving as a local agent for the Williams Stock Company either in Lumberton or Wilmington. After the DeGafferellys left Lumberton, Wishart became the first Robeson County native to serve as Opera House manager who possessed prior experience in road- and picture-show operations. After having apprenticed in the Opera House under the civic-minded DeGafferellys, Wishart understood the need to court community leaders possibly harboring concerns about conservative objections to the local continuation of cinematic entertainment.¹¹ In response, Wishart agreed to donate half of each Friday night's gross receipts to the Associated Charities of Lumberton, an act that specifically endeared him to those local business leaders (including the Opera House's owners) who tended to fund most local charities.¹²

Yet prior experience and charitable contributions do not alone account for why Walter Wishart managed to become the only exhibitor who established a viable operation during the first twenty years of Robesonian exhibition.¹³ Though Walter Wishart never recorded a personal account either of his life or of his moviegoing career, in order to construct a reasonable hypothesis as to how and why Wishart established a viable theater when all local exhibitors before him (and most after him) failed it may be useful to consider the manner in which Mr. C's personality, as well as his personal connections to local social, political, economic, and religious networks, jointly contributed to a "Robesonian"—and later, to a "regional"—pedigree that helped Mr. C to participate in the slow-but-steady development of cinema exhibition across a sizable portion of the Carolina borderlands. A perpetually self-effacing man, Wishart understood that the clannish and conservative communities in which he operated were both proud of their history and yearned for greater regional significance. Afraid of falling economically and culturally behind the larger cities to

their west, north, and east, Wishart's audiences grew to trust and value the individual most responsible for making available to them precisely the sort of leisure opportunities available in the communities that they wished to emulate and, if possible, successfully to compete with.

* * * * *

As the eldest child of Wellington and Delaney (Meares) Wishart, Walter Seaman Wishart was born on July 17, 1859 in a country homestead located several miles to the east of Lumberton. The son of a Confederate veteran widely admired by county residents for his calm and serious demeanor, Walter belonged to a relatively large Robeson family whose ties to the region ran deep.¹⁴ Born of a Scotch heritage familiar to residents across the greater Cape Fear watershed, the Wisharts had taken up residence in the vicinity of Lumberton before Robeson County was carved out of neighboring Bladen County in 1787 to form a new geopolitical entity in the Sandhills region. Walter's father, Wellington, was active in local civic and religious affairs and had served as a captain in the local militia, the county's primary military defense corps. Wellington was also an eldest son, one who in many respects resembled his own father, Eli Wishart. Though farmers, both Wellington and Eli were well-respected community leaders; in fact, Eli served as a state representative to the General Assembly at the outset of the Civil War, and both father and son had been elected as the official surveyors of Robeson County.

The high regard that county residents accorded to Eli and Wellington also extended to Walter's uncles, several of whom had distinguished themselves through military service. Every male Wishart in Wellington's generation old enough to enlist at the outset of the Civil War would serve in the Confederate forces. The most celebrated of Wellington's siblings

was Colonel Francis Marion Wishart, Captain of the Forty-Sixth North Carolina regiment under Cook's Brigade, the Army of Northern Virginia—a unit largely composed of fellow Robesonians. During the Reconstruction Era, Col. Wishart, then an officer in the state militia, was appointed to lead a local “Home Guard” unit that had been mobilized to capture outlaw Henry Berry Lowry,¹⁵ a now legendary figure among the region's Native American population. Lowry was determined to avenge the murder of several male relatives killed during conflicts tied to the involuntary conscription of coastal Indians, many of whom had been impressed into service to fortify Confederate maritime defenses near Wilmington's Fort Fisher. Many of the county's white majority strongly believed that since white soldiers continued to risk their lives fighting in the front lines of the “War against Yankee Aggression,” then local Indians ought to be willing to bear shovels for the cause—in part because the state's constitutional revisions in 1835 had legally proscribed Indians from carrying firearms. However, members of the Indian communities surrounding “Scuffletown” (i.e., a region that includes present-day Pembroke) were understandably reluctant to assist their local white oppressors who had supported the constitutional amendments that denied Indians numerous civil rights, including the right to vote. In addition, county whites had engaged over the years in a number of quasi-legalistic swindles that effectively cheated Indians out of their hereditary lands.¹⁶ Once Henry Berry Lowry finally responded to the white violence directed against his family with violence of his own, Robeson became embroiled in the “Lowry War,” a conflict that polarized county residents and seemed to offer little middle ground from which to pursue a non-violent resolution.

In fact, just as Walter Wishart was entering adolescence, his uncle Francis was ambushed and killed in 1872 while on a mission to parley with the leaders of the Lowry

gang. In response, Aladon Strong Wishart, Francis' younger brother and a fellow member of the Forty-Sixth North Carolina,¹⁷ assumed leadership of a militia group that dedicated itself to capturing or killing every member of the Lowry gang. The eventual defeat of the Lowry party particularly endeared local whites to a family that had lost Col. Wishart yet had been responsible for killing at least one member of the Lowry Gang, namely Henry Berry Lowry's brother Tom.¹⁸ Though Walter was too young to have participated in either the Civil or the Lowry Wars, as the eldest-son of the next generation of Wishart's he inherited a kind of social goodwill from the service performed by his male forebears. The social capital inherent in this kind of a legacy is difficult to over-estimate in a community whose principal annual civic celebration during most of Walter's life was designed specifically to honor the military services performed by all local residents since the Revolutionary War.¹⁹ As surviving veterans paraded past the Confederate monument anchored in front of the steps of the Robeson County Courthouse, local residents continued to honor the Wishart family for having paid its bloody civic dues, especially during the Civil and Lowry Wars.²⁰

Walter would have attended many of these celebrations, particularly after 1868 when a nine-year old Walter and his family moved from their home in Wishart's township to Lumberton, a town of approximately 300 residents that within three decades would blossom into Robeson's largest community. In Lumberton, Wellington supervised a distillery that generated turpentine, then the region's leading agricultural commodity.²¹ But agricultural pursuits did not inspire Walter, and upon finishing his local "boy's academy" program in 1877, an eighteen-year-old Walter took up a position as a "printer's devil" at the Robesonian. Walter enjoyed with the hustle and bustle of the local newspaper office, where he toiled for what decades later he recalled as the "princely sum" of seventy-five cents a

week at a time when few local positions could offer regular wages paid in cash. As a printer's devil, Walter performed odd jobs including cutting and hauling wood to keep the office's stoves lit and ferrying buckets of water from the town's central artesian well. Soon he became a compositor and typesetter, and within five years was firmly entrenched as the paper's press foreman, a position he would hold for more than a decade.

In 1882, foreman Wishart felt secure enough to marry the woman with whom he would spend the next two-thirds of a century. Five years younger than Walter, Willie D. Reeves was the daughter of a Lumberton boarding house operator known locally as "Aunt Caroline." Walter's mother-in-law offered the new couple living space in her boarding house, where Walter and Willie repaired after a modest nuptial service attended by Walter's managing editor, W. W. McDiarmid, as well as by Dr. Rudolph Vampill's wife (whose husband would within a few years erect the local Opera House). The longevity of local institutions like the Robesonian and the Opera House earned their operators a certain degree of community respect, and this was true of Aunt Caroline's, too.²² Located a block north of both the County Courthouse and the Opera House, the venerable eatery and hostel survived until 1919. At the time of its demolition, it represented one of the oldest remaining structures in Lumberton, one which for roughly three generations had welcomed out-of-towners seeking a meal or a bed downtown. In addition, it had served countless meals to local businessmen and courthouse functionaries, earning a reputation for hospitality that persisted long after Aunt Caroline had retired and relinquished her hostess duties to Willie.

As one of the very few commercial gathering spots in downtown Lumberton, Aunt Caroline's dining room would permit Wishart to gather useful "grass-roots" intelligence and provide him an opportunity to keep his finger on the pulse of the town. In addition,

Wishart's long-term relationship with many Robesonian staffers provided him a valuable communications back-channel capable of alerting him when local leaders or moral guardians became frustrated with his theatrical operations. Out-of-towners who attempted to open or manage entertainment sites in Lumberton lacked Wishart's rapid ability to access local gossip, and this comparative advantage likely enabled Mr. C either to avoid or to limit the damage from his socio-political missteps more effectively than his competitors.²³ In light of the considerable influence wielded by conservative churchmen who openly pressured political and business leaders to defend the community against perceived instances of public immorality, Wishart held an additional advantage over his competition. As a practicing member of a small Catholic congregation that for years remained in "mission" status, Wishart solidified his status as a direct supporter of local Christian leadership by permitting local Catholics to hold Sunday services in the Opera House for several years while the community's first Catholic Church was being constructed. In addition, Wishart possessed family connections with each of the three largest Christian denominations in town through his three brothers, each a practicing member of one of the town's most influential Protestant sects: Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian.²⁴ Social events with family members regularly exposed Mr. C to the leaders of multiple local church groups, and the diversity of his family's religious sensibilities lent an air of ecumenicalism to Wishart's (and his brothers') local businesses while mitigating concerns about Wishart's potential allegiance to a locally exotic religious institution whose dogmas and policies were often established in Rome.

Walter's local kinship network offered multiple points of referral capable of directing additional customers to his theatrical operations. For many years, Walter's younger and more commercially successful brother John operated an important downtown grocery located

one block southeast of Walter's exhibition venues.²⁵ Several of Mr. C's brothers and nephews also worked in groceries, pharmacies, and other retailers (not including Aunt Caroline's) that lined Elm and Chestnut streets near his theaters. Of course, Walter's patronage did not depend solely on word of mouth referrals from relatives, since most of Lumberton's leaders hoped to broaden the bases of local economic prosperity beyond agriculture. Suspecting that regional and national industries would continue to bypass their communities, they typically engaged in a kind of perpetual local boosterism. Local newspapers touted the development and simultaneously encouraged the support of local businesses, often through special historical or retrospective editions chronicling the achievements of current and former business or political leaders while enumerating with pride the commercial infrastructures of each Robeson town.²⁶ Despite the fact that local promotionalism could at times degenerated into internecine factionalism, small-town residents admired the self-reliance demonstrated by hometown institutions. While the advantage of a hometown pedigree could not overcome glaring deficiencies in a business's product quality or comparative price, Wishart's local competitors could not significantly differentiate their wares or their venues due to the constraints of film-distribution contracts and the scarcity of rentable storefront space. Moreover, Wishart's local ties likely led Lumberton's audiences to forgive him a bit more quickly than his competitors whenever his theatrical offerings failed to meet their expectations.

While community favoritism helps explain why Mr. C managed to succeed where virtually all outsiders failed, one factor contributing to the initial success of his Pastime was the extent to which Wishart personally knew his audience members. For all of his long life, Mr. C remained devoted to Lumberton, to Robeson, to the region and its history; indeed,

years after he had begun to manage theaters many miles from Robeson, Wishart continued to serve the Robesonian as a correspondent. Whether posted at home or living on the road, Wishart demonstrated his abiding dedication to his hometown community through a stream of correspondence, letters, notes, anecdotes, and snatches of historical ephemera that cemented his reputation as the unofficial historian of both Lumberton and Robeson County (as noted in Figure 3.1). Few retrospective editions of the Robesonian have ever failed to include a Wishart reminiscence, most of which ignored the county's political history in favor of his fondness for recalling the events of everyday life. For example, many of Wishart's letters published in the newspaper memorialized notable town characters or recalled severe seasonal hardships.²⁷ His local devotionism reaped significant practical rewards for Wishart, for the Robesonian effectively provided free advertising for his theater operations for fully two-and-a-half years before Walter first purchased a large-scale advertisement for one of his theater sites; furthermore, even the most mundane set of activities within the Opera House or the Pastime Theatre continued to represent "Page 1" news.²⁸

In summary, Mr. C's familiarity with his customer base, his relationships with and communications back channels linking him to local civic and moral leaders, and his acumen in responding to the operational challenges of a still-maturing medium represented foundational elements that helped to sustain his managerial career. Yet the road immediately preceding his long-term engagement with motion pictures was a difficult one, since it appears that none of the series of positions he held in different industries after leaving the Robesonian near the turn of the century was particularly financially rewarding.²⁹ After departing the Robesonian pressroom, Mr. C spent several years living in boarding houses as he toiled in other North Carolina cities, principally in Greensboro, where he managed a local Ice and

Coal Company, and later Wilmington, where he served in several capacities connected to the Independent Ice Company and several regional railroads. During his Wilmington posting in 1900, Walter became a father once Willie gave birth to Walter's only biological child, Elizabeth, better known as Betsy.³⁰ By then, Walter was forty years old, and not only had several small business ventures failed for him, including a partnership in a local beef-and-produce stand in Lumberton, but he badly missed his home and family.

At some point prior to 1907, Walter returned to work in an unknown capacity with the Robesonian, yet his travels appear to have introduced him to additional employment possibilities, particularly during his stay in Wilmington, where Walter would have been exposed to local exhibitions combining small-time vaudeville and motion-pictures. At the turn of the century, Wilmington ranked as North Carolina's largest urban center, its most significant port city, and the state's southeastern economic leader. Wilmington also represented one of North Carolina's early leaders in cinema exhibitions. According to cinema historian Anne Morey's extensive study of early Wilmington exhibitions,³¹ the city's first recorded motion-picture show occurred in March 1897, possibly as part of the same exhibition sequence that J. K. Hill, editor of the Maxton Scottish Chief, reported on back to Robeson just a few months prior to Maxton's initial Armory show. Wilmington served as the regional base for itinerant exhibitors who operated along several regional rail lines, including the Seaboard Air Line Railway that ran northwest through Robeson County and led to rail connections serving Charlotte and Raleigh.³² Wilmington entrepreneurs established semi-permanent and permanent exhibition venues in the city as early as 1906, when according to Morey the city's Bijou Theatre became the first North Carolina venue erected specifically for the purpose of exhibiting moving pictures. Once the Bijou's crowds demonstrated the local

potential for cinema-exhibition profits, Wilmington experienced a nickelodeon-style “boom” during which many newcomers quickly entered and exited the field. Wilmington’s local exhibition experiences even resulted by the early 1910s in the development of “colored” venues designed to serve racially mixed or predominantly African-American residential districts.³³

Even though several of the early Wilmington operators chronicled by Morey also performed in vaudeville outfits, circuses, or (like the DeGafferellys) in musical-comedy and stock melodramatic troupes, the new medium’s stunning growth attracted potential career-jumpers including Walter Wishart. By 1909, Mr. C was serving as an advanced agent for the Wilmington-based Williams Stock Company, a repertory troupe whose performances throughout the Piedmont and Sandhills regions had included stopovers at Dr. Vampill’s Opera House. Wishart soon became engaged as an on-site operator at the Opera House, where he learned the intricacies of booking small-time vaudeville acts and arranging for film deliveries under the tutelage of the DeGafferellys just prior to their departure in the fall of 1909. The Opera Company’s owners tapped Mr. C to manage the house after yet another local managerial failure, and from late 1910 until late 1911 Wishart managed a steady flow of road- and picture-shows through the Opera House.

His success doubtless pleased the site’s owners through renewed box-office receipts and ensured perennial front-page newspaper coverage of Opera House events. Wishart’s Robesonian allies were pleased with the improving fortunes of their long-time colleague and predicted that his efforts would both stabilize the Opera House and protect the general public from any unsavory entertainments, as Mr. C’s involvement was “equivalent to saying that the pictures will be good, clean, and well worth going to see.”³⁴ His colleagues also anticipated

that the professionalism and organizational skills that Wishart demonstrated as a press foreman would carry over to his new venture. In a marked contrast to the tone of mock-sympathy that Robesonian reporters had previously directed at managers who struggled to master the technical difficulties involved with Opera House film projection, the newspaper's staff bestowed a distinctive title on Wishart in his Opera House role by referring to him neither by his universal nickname of Mr. C, nor by his Christian name of Walter, but rather by the honorific *Manager*, a designation that the paper did not locally apply to any other commercial operators across the Lumberton business community.³⁵

Once Wishart reopened the Opera House in August 1910, he continued to manage the site in accordance with the “multi-use” directives embodied in the Opera Company's charter. He diligently booked acts six nights a week into the venue, though most performers stayed on for at least two consecutive days. In addition to booking small-time vaudeville and supporting local stage and musical performers, however, Wishart began increasingly to rely on motion-pictures as an exhibition-content staple. In order to maximize gate receipts, he juggled canisters in order to present at least two fresh reels per night. Since audiences were willing to accept some recycled film content, Wishart was usually able to stay afloat financially despite sporadic visits by itinerant exhibitors who sometimes cut into his business, as when a pair of exceptionally popular “ten-cent” outdoor shows resulted in Wishart temporarily closing the Opera House for a few days in October 1910 and July 1911. Nevertheless, Wishart successfully implemented a mixed-content formula that enabled him to remain operating virtually without interruption for more than a year, or nearly as long as the combined longevity of the three Opera House managers who preceded him.

Yet if cinema became an integral component of most Opera House shows, Wishart occasionally exposed local audiences to off-Broadway road shows such as *The Wolf*, a Canadian frontier melodrama characterized in its accompanying newspaper advertisement as “Redolent with the Ozone of the Great Northwest!” Stage adaptations of novels, plays, and sketches based on popular fictional characters also filled the hall, including a live-action adaptation of Bud Fisher’s comic-strip *Mutt and Jeff* (“It’s a Corker!”). Over time, minstrel shows were featured less frequently in favor of road shows offering large, and often predominantly female, casts. Examples included performances by Billy S. Clifford and his Minstrel Maids, who were accompanied by the Louverne Ladies Band and Orchestra, in the musical-comedy *Believe Me*. Additional off-Broadway productions like *The Million Dollar Doll* afforded Opera House patrons the rare opportunity of attending large-scale theatrical productions without having to travel to one of the *Doll*’s more recent “showcase” venues, including the Ziegfeld and Schubert theaters in New York and Chicago (respectively).


Opera House patrons were charged according to ticket-pricing ladders distinguishing between customers who desired to be seated in “box” versus “gallery” seats (see Figure 3.2). Yet a good deal of Opera House fare, particularly travelling road-shows like *Fine Feathers* or *The Million Dollar Doll*, tended to be priced out of the reach of all but the wealthiest Robesonians at a time when a dozen eggs cost eight cents on the open market. A family of four would need to save all of its egg-money (a common source of disposable income on family farms) for three to four months in order to afford even gallery seats at the grandest Opera House productions. These pricing structures tremendously restricted the Opera House’s potential audience and represented a significant economic risk to exhibitors whose gate receipts were subject to the impact of local weather patterns on audience travel. Site

managers like Wishart preferred exhibition-content alternatives that translated into lower ticket prices and boosted attendance figures. Pragmatic small-town operators recognized the advantages of implementing moving pictures as a content staple, and were aided in their efforts by the availability of more increasingly reliable film-distribution networks.³⁶ Motion-picture exhibitions also relieved site managers from the dual burdens of locating and booking a fresh supply of vaudeville acts requiring significant facility downtime in order to erect and disassemble cumbersome sets. For most managers motion-picture shows were simpler to implement, cost less, and were less risky than stage-show offerings significantly less subject to the vagaries of rail transportation than were much simpler film-canister deliveries.

Opera House Lumberton, Sat., Oct. 10.

Beyond Question One of the Greatest Attractions that has ever Appeared in this City

FINE FEATHERS



A Tense Situation in Fine Feathers.

The play that broke all records for business in all the principal Cities of North Carolina last season.

The Play that Ran for 150 Nights at the Astor Theatre New York and 150 Nights at the Cort Theatre Chicago.

The Original Cort Theatre Cast and Complete Production.

UNIVERSAL APPROVAL OF PRESS AND PUBLIC
PRICES \$1.50, \$1.00 75 AND 50 CENTS CHILDREN UNDER 12, 25 CENTS.

Figure 3.2: An advertisement for a (relatively expensive) Opera House “road show” production.³⁷

In addition, since motion-picture shows required simpler interior facilities in order to stage them, many early theatrical entrepreneurs elected to pursue motion-picture exhibitions over stage productions. In North Carolina, most operators interested in the mid-1910s in establishing a permanent theater site bypassed the state's relatively few (roughly two-dozen) Opera House facilities and opted to convert commercial storefronts into picture-show facilities.³⁸ When Walter Wishart, who also lacked the capital to purchase the Lumberton Opera House, struck out alone to develop the town's second commercial-exhibition facility, he focused on developing a picture-show rather than a mixed-use venue. Located approximately one block south of the Opera House, Wishart's Pastime Theatre consisted of a converted Elm Street storefront (a site formerly home to a milliners' shop and a grocery) that Wishart was able to rent.³⁹ Though the new theater's building was owned by a well-to-do Lumberton couple, Alexander H. and Helen McLeod, and not by Wishart, the local press always referred to the Pastime as Walter Wishart's theater. Neither grand nor spacious, the Pastime boasted a seating capacity of slightly more than two-hundred patrons inside a rectangular auditorium that measured roughly twenty-five by eighty feet. The initial site renovations and furnishings were almost certainly funded directly by Wishart, whose staff included James L. "Jimmie" Williamson, his assistant and long-time exhibition colleague,⁴⁰ and a pianist to provide musical accompaniment to the venue's silent films and to the modest entertainments presented on the theater's small stage. With Jimmie manning the Pastime's projector, Mr. C assumed the roles of site manager, cashier, and public face of Lumberton's newest exhibition venue.⁴¹ Since the Lumberton Opera Company did not relieve Wishart of his Opera House duties, it appears not to have considered the Pastime as a direct Opera

House competitor; otherwise, it would not have permitted Wishart to manage both houses simultaneously for the next six years.

According to the Nov 30th edition of the Robesonian, Wishart completed the process of shoe-horning a pair of pot-bellied stoves, a piano, and 216 chairs into the less than two-thousand square foot facility and anticipated having the site operational no later than December 7th, 1911, when the first of many “Page 1” show notices appeared in the Robesonian. For the next several years, while Wishart exhibited films as the principal program-feature in the Pastime (and only a recurring feature in the Opera House), Wishart’s businesses were challenged by conservative Christian leaders who profoundly distrusted commercial leisure⁴² despite their move into

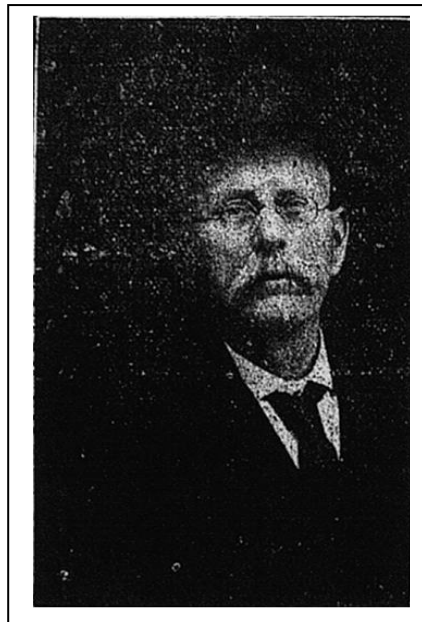


Figure 3.3: Walter Wishart (circa 1915) during his tenure as manager of both Lumberton’s Pastime Theatre and the town’s original Opera House.⁴³

permanent venues like the Pastime, rather than in temporary venues like street fairs and carnival midways—or precisely the sites deemed “unwholesome” and “low class” by town fathers dismayed by their capacity to attract large crowds of anonymous patrons whom they feared

consisted of unsophisticated and unwashed patrons predisposed to immoral behavior. Fortunately for Wishart, as a cinema exhibitor he held the distinct advantage of a kind of associative respectability thanks to his management of the Opera House, whose image he continued to burnish by scheduling a host of “high class” events including Lyceums, presentations by state political leaders, and annual Chautauqua sessions. Better yet, since the Opera House also hosted school-commencement exercises and provided temporary facilities for local church services and county-courthouse operations, few town leaders could either avoid attending it, or encountering Wishart there.

In order to minimize local misgivings against commercial entertainment while generating significant publicity for his theaters, Mr. C’s adopted the extensive use of “printer’s ink” as his most valuable marketing tactic, perhaps because of his lifelong habit of submitting news items and historical reminiscences to the Robesonian, the Wilmington Star, and other regional newspapers.⁴⁴ This habit also contributed to the extraordinarily favorable treatment Wishart and his exhibitions received in the local press. Wistfully regretting Wishart’s having been “lured away” from the Robesonian by moving pictures,⁴⁵ his former employer dutifully provided front-page coverage of his entertainments through news items that may well have been penned by Wishart, who the Robesonian continued to list as a correspondent as late as the winter of 1915.⁴⁶ Wishart’s willingness to celebrate both the Robesonian and his native region led the paper on several occasions to characterize Mr. C as “one of the truest friends” of the paper and of Robeson County. Wishart touted the importance of maintaining a strong relationship with news outlets to his fellow theater managers and encouraged them to harness the power of newspaper publicity to strengthen their relationships with their audiences. For instance, in concluding a letter of advice to Manager J. W. Griffin, his eventual successor at the

Pastime, Wishart reiterated the sort of marketing advice that had worked decades earlier for P. T. Barnum: “Use plenty of printers ink and you will see results.”⁴⁷ Finally, whenever competing picture shows attempted to usurp Wishart’s locally dominant local position through advertising blitzes of their own, Wishart doggedly informed the public of even the most trivial set of improvements undertaken in his operations, such that even a change in the Pastime’s piano player garnered front-page coverage in the Robesonian.⁴⁸

Though Wishart understood how positive publicity contributed to his theater’s survival, he also knew that it would be insufficient to establish brand loyalty to an exhibition site that provided an uncomfortable or chronically underwhelming customer experience. Given his modest means, Wishart focused on establishing incrementally higher levels of audience comfort, projection quality, and operational dependability. Aware that future competitors might seek to take advantage of newer and fresher commercial spaces, Mr. C labored to improve the Pastime’s interior by periodically closing the site temporarily to address the cumulative effects of coal stoves, wood smoke, cigars, and cigarettes. He installed extra ventilation fans and, as needed, carved additional window casements out of the Pastime’s exterior walls. Worn out seats were regularly upgraded through the installation of wider (and generally more comfortable) replacements, while the Pastime’s curtain sets and projection screens were upgraded several times as well. Outside the theater, the Pastime’s façade remained in a state of flux due to daily refreshes of poster and billboard displays incorporating the leaflets and flyers that film distributors often provided in their canister shipments. Occasionally, Wishart pursued more radical changes to the Pastime including a full-scale redesign of the theater’s exterior that incorporated a ticket booth directly into the Pastime’s front wall. As the site approached its fifth anniversary, Mr. C installed a large

electric sign overhanging the theater's sidewalk entrance. Standing at the northern-most end of Elm Street, the Pastime's marquee represented a cornerstone of downtown's push to create in Robeson's a more modest version of Broadway's electrified "White Way" in order to increase retail revenues.

However, if local newspaper accounts regularly lauded "Manager Wishart" for "ever doing things to make it more pleasant for visitors to the theatre,"⁴⁹ the Pastime's interior remained relatively spartan.⁵⁰ Its seats originally consisted of wooden folding chairs separated into two auditorium sections divided by a central aisle.⁵¹ Illuminated by just a few windows, the Pastime remained a narrow and darkened space until the site was eventually equipped with electric wall-lighting that helped patrons to find their way and to distinguish between the hallway's separate entry and exit doors. At the far end of the auditorium's bare concrete floor lay a short stage sitting beneath a film screen that was fronted by a large curtain.⁵² Though the Pastime did not feature either a concession stand or toilet facilities, patrons were able to purchase (probably from a street-side vendor) peanuts whose shells littered its floor.⁵³ Relative to its original configuration, the Pastime's building's most radical modifications during Wishart's tenure in 1915 included lengthening its auditorium by twenty-five feet to deepen the stage and to facilitate the installation of an inclined floor. A second major overhaul in 1926 introduced a three-story fly tower to the rear of the building as part of a concerted effort to produce a facility capable of staging relatively sophisticated road shows.⁵⁴ The 1926 renovations not only raised the Pastime's roof, thus enabling the expansion of a projection room now accessed by a separate stairwell opening to the street, but also finally added a one-hundred-and-forty seat balcony to Robeson's original dedicated motion-picture house (see Figure 3.4).

Inside the Pastime, local musicians—typically, pianists—of both sexes provided musical accompaniment to the site’s silent-film fare. Some performed at the Pastime for relatively

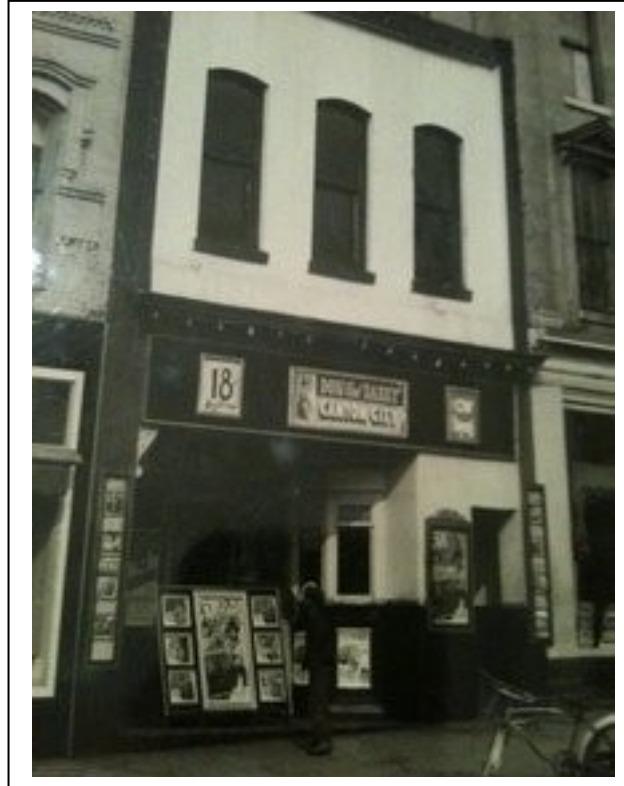


Figure 3.4: A street-front view of Lumberton’s Pastime Theatre (circa 1943).⁵⁵

lengthy periods, including an African-American performer named Buddy Love as well as a pair of blind sibling musicians; however, precisely how the latter managed to synchronize their musical interpretations with films that they could not see remains something of a mystery. In its infancy, the Pastime tended to source its reels from General Film, the distribution arm of the Motion Picture Patents Company.⁵⁶ However, some Pastime and Opera House exhibitions included a mixture of films produced by additional domestic and international suppliers. Mr. C would have screened few films prior to their exhibition due to the restrictive nature of the contracts offered by his suppliers, as according to cinema

historian Steven Ross, from 1908 to 1912, precisely the years coinciding with the development of semi-permanent and permanent exhibition in Robeson, the Film Trust effectively required local exhibitors “to take, sight unseen, whatever was sent to them by the distributor.”⁵⁷ Despite such pre-exhibition opacity, Wishart was able to provide Robeson County a sequence of single-reel (and eventually, multi-reel) films assembled into composite programs consisting of a combination of silent comedies, screen dramas, Pathé weekly newsreels,⁵⁸ travelogues, animated shorts, and (whenever possible) the extraordinarily popular film-serials that dominated the Pastime’s bill for years. The theater’s hybrid exhibitions, which usually incorporated from three to five different film genres, helped to establish moviegoing as a “going concern” in Robeson. In spite of the intermingling of vastly different film styles and content, these composite shows only occasionally elicited aesthetic criticism in the local press. For example, when a hard-charging western featuring rampaging Indians and frontier gunplay was exhibited one day removed from *The Star of Bethlehem*, an elaborate and intensely melodramatic account of the Nativity, the Robesonian characterized the experience of patrons attending both of these shows as an instance of “going from the sublime to the ridiculous.”⁵⁹ Though Wishart sought to reserve multiple-reelers like *The Star of Bethlehem* to target adult audiences on Friday and Saturday evenings, Saturday afternoons remained the theatrical province of local schoolchildren, for whom the Katzenjammer Kids remained a favorite, as well as out-of-town residents seeking to take in a picture show on a weekly visit to town.

In most cases, Mr. C’s Pastime shows provided an hour to an hour-and-a-half of motion-picture entertainment. On special occasions, the theater’s single pianist would be supplemented with mini-orchestras, musical quartets featuring a wide variety of instrumental

and vocal styles, live singers, or small musical-comedy acts. Most shows featured musical accompaniment during each silent film and provided musical interludes masking reel-changes in the event that an exhibitor lacked the capital or the space to operate a second projector. Some of Wishart's Pastime exhibitions included non-musical acts performing on the venue's small stage, including a trained pony whose feats of arithmetic astounded local children. Thanks to his dual Pastime and Opera House positions, Wishart at times shared simplified versions of acts that had previously performed in the Opera House with Pastime audiences, while some performers whose attractions were too modest to headline the Opera House were booked directly into the Pastime. As a result, Pastime audiences might find themselves entertained by "midget" orchestras consisting of a few musicians playing a wide range of instruments (typically assisted by mechanical devices that enabling the simultaneous operation of those instruments),⁶⁰ or by individual performers, hypnotists, shadowgraphers, and celebrity impersonators.

In catering to his audience, Wishart adopted promotional strategies that targeted several demographic subgroups including children, their mothers, rural residents, and the families of military veterans. Soon after opening the Pastime, Mr. C modified his exhibition schedule to begin Saturday matinees at 2 pm rather than 4:30 pm to allow rural families interested in attending a picture show enough time to travel homeward in daylight. These earlier start times were also favored by Lumberton mothers who accompanied children to the theater from residential neighborhoods that lacked electric streetlamps. In addition, Wishart set an enduring local precedent by distributing free movie passes to schoolchildren in promotions that pleased many parents and teachers, since the tickets were awarded to students who maintained spotless attendance records. Wishart also provided free tickets to

all students, teachers, and teaching assistants in the local grade schools and staggered their exhibitions on a grade-by-grade basis across different days of the week.⁶¹ Though some parents may have objected to picture-show promotions targeting children, quite a few residents incorporated the local cinema into childhood birthday celebrations by treating the fortunate playmates of their sons and daughters to a trip to the Pastime, often followed by a stopover at the soda-fountain of a local pharmacy.⁶²

Inside his theater, Wishart also engaged in ad-hoc giveaways (particularly when a local competitor attempted to encroach upon his business) with prizes that again targeted children and/or their parents. Holders of a given evening's "lucky ticket," for example, might find themselves suddenly in the possession of a small cash prize, a chocolate bar, or receipts redeemable at local merchants for ice-cream cones, soft drinks, sporting equipment, and even hand-held American flags. At the conclusion of Wishart's most spectacular and most anxiously awaited give-away, a campaign breathlessly detailed in front-page news accounts for weeks by the contest co-sponsor, the Robesonian, the reins of a Shetland pony were handed over to one very lucky youngster (see Figure 3.5).⁶³

Parents patient enough to attend specific film serials over a predetermined number of weeks could earn domestic items including pottery, silverware, and (for extraordinarily dedicated attendees) a complete set of china.⁶⁴ Parents were also targeted via "beautiful baby" contests co-sponsored in conjunction with local department stores and/or the Robesonian. During these contests, photographs of the town's recent newborns were displayed in the newspaper and/or projected onto the screen at the Pastime, where theater patrons could cast their votes for the most attractive toddler.⁶⁵ Additional family-centric schemes allowed youngsters to earn free tickets in promotions linked to other civic

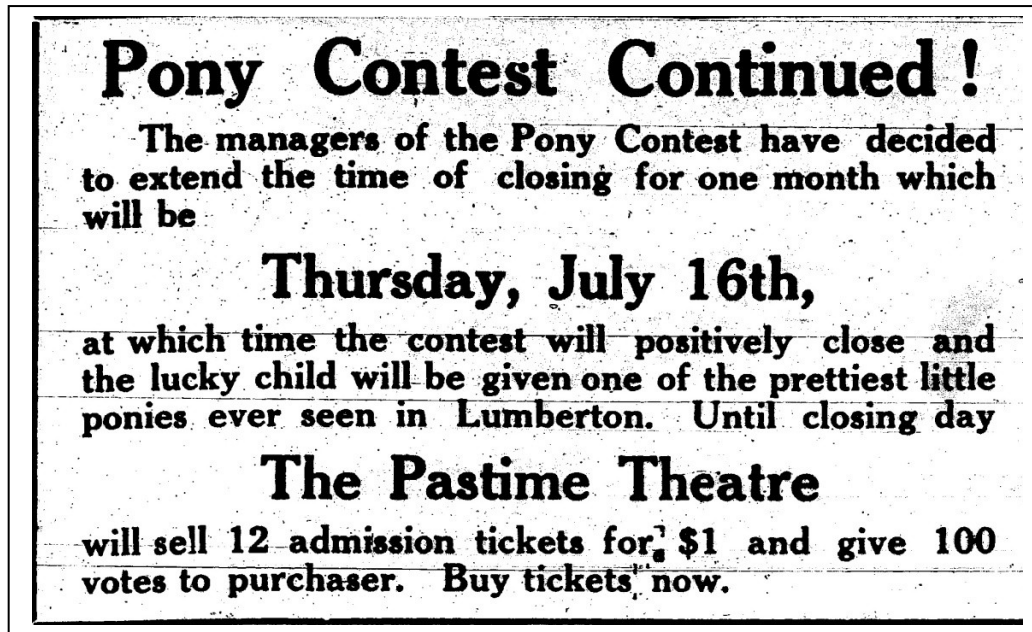


Figure 3.5: Advertisement for the Pastime's Shetland-Pony Contest.⁶⁶

initiatives, as when children were awarded complimentary passes for participating in tin-can drives designed to collect and eliminate the waste receptacles that local health officials had identified as a breeding ground for mosquitoes and other air-borne pests.⁶⁷ Similar promotions granted free tickets to ardent collectors of scrap metal during wartime recycling drives.

Though these promotions resembled giveaways similar to those in moviegoing communities across the nation, Wishart was the first operator to adopt them extensively in Robeson. He also made it a point regularly to invite veterans into his venues, particularly during the War Memorial holidays that publicly recognized the service of local participants in the Civil, Spanish American, and Revolutionary Wars. Perhaps as a tribute to the military service of his father and uncles, Wishart extended free admission to current and former veterans while arranging for film exhibitions that honored the cultural heritage that had been defended by Robeson's servicemen.⁶⁸ Sentimental documentaries like *The Passing of the Gray* and other Confederate military melodramas would have poignantly resonated in a

community located in a state which, according to admittedly incomplete sets of Confederate service and enrollment records, may have provided more soldiers, and suffered more service fatalities, than any other Southern state.⁶⁹

The Pastime eventually extended its themed programming beyond civic remembrances to include holidays previously reserved for religious observance. As general economic conditions improved during the 1910s, Christmas and New Year's Day celebrations began to incorporate theatrical exhibitions thanks to Wishart's booking and extensively publicizing religious-themed films on those holidays. Of course, Wishart continued to conform to local custom by refusing to open either the Pastime or the Opera House for commercial exhibitions on the Sabbath, though during the entirety of his managerial tenure in Lumberton he permitted local Catholics to meet in the Opera House for Sunday services during the construction of St. Francis de Sales Church.⁷⁰

Yet all of his civic good-works could not protect Wishart from exhibition newcomers looking to cut into his meager profits. Ironically, Wishart himself opened the door to a string of eventual competitors by attempting to open a second dedicated picture-show at roughly the same time when the Opera House appears to have transitioned away from motion-picture exhibitions. Since by late 1914 the Opera House no longer possessed motion-picture projection equipment, circumstantial evidence suggests that Wishart stripped the Opera House of its projection capabilities in order to equip a second local picture-show. Wishart appears to have intended to centralize the more popular and price-friendly film exhibitions at the Pastime while restoring high-class road shows, lectures, and civic or academic functions as the content focus of Opera House exhibitions⁷¹ prior to opening a second local picture show located at 203 Elm Street, or just a few blocks south of the Pastime. Wishart's newest

venture occupied the southern (i.e., left-hand) side of the recently completed McLean Building, a three-story edifice approximately thirty-feet wide by one-hundred feet deep that adjoined the Lumberton Cotton Mill Office, with which it shared its southern wall. The building's owner was none other than Angus Wilton McLean, President of the LCM along with several other core commercial ventures, and a man who within a decade would be elected as Governor of North Carolina. Whatever McLean's personal feelings may have been regarding motion-picture entertainment, he permitted his new facility to host a sequence of theater operations from 1914 to 1917,⁷² and in October 1914, in a space that Wishart had both outfitted and christened, the Lumbee Theatre opened for business under the personal management of Wishart, who appears to have left Jimmie Williamson in charge of the Pastime's day-to-day operations.

Expansion into the Lumbee represented Wishart's attempt to augment, while continuing to monopolize, Lumberton's and therefore Robeson's commercial-entertainment landscape. The Lumbee offered Lumberton residents ready access to a *second* dedicated motion-picture theater, a rare achievement anywhere in Robeson as late as 1950.⁷³ Wishart likely was attracted by the sudden availability of additional downtown retail space that could provide a more comfortable venue for his patrons than either the Opera House or the Pastime. Perhaps unsure of which operation he might eventually move into the Lumbee space, he quickly positioned the Lumbee as a hybrid venue, one that combined the cinematic content of the Pastime with many of the smaller vaudeville acts that had previously played in the Opera House or on the Pastime's stage. In effect, the Lumbee enabled Wishart to establish a different operational lineup in each of his three venues. The Pastime almost exclusively restricted itself to motion pictures, the Opera House specialized in high-class road shows,

vaudeville, and civic functions, and the Lumbee featured a combination of films and modestly-scaled live performances (see Figure 3.6).



Figure 3.6: A sample advertisement for non-cinematic fare at the Lumbee Theatre.⁷⁴

The hybridity of Wishart’s Lumbee bookings occasionally offered what some of his patrons may have recognized as a rather creative set of intertextual programming.⁷⁵ For instance, one late November Lumbee show featured a stage appearance by a reformed criminal rather colorfully marketed as “West Philadelphia Johnny.” That evening “The Wrong Road,” a cautionary lecture delivered by former bank-robber John F. McCarthy, provided an inspirational counterpoint to *Sentenced for Life*, a cinematic representation

symbolizing the sad fate that Johnny himself had managed to avoid. At other times, both Wishart and his successors leaned heavily upon films of serialized novels such as *The Master Key* and *The Trey O' Hearts*, whose episodic narratives were re-printed in newspapers as their filmed installments were simultaneously screened in the Lumbee site.

However, even with the potential of the Lumbee's content hybridity to attract a diverse audience, Wishart understood that the Lumbee's success also depended on the strength of its motion-picture offerings. Therefore, he sought to distinguish the site by booking longer feature films even though many early multi-reeled films, typically those produced overseas or by independent American producers, could be relatively challenging to acquire.⁷⁶ Undeterred, Wishart generated significant local coverage of the Lumbee's opening exhibitions, which featured an extended run of an exceptionally long film screened during the theater's October 27th premiere. Based upon a novelized account of Neronian Rome, the eight-reeled drama *Quo Vadis?* drew large and appreciative audiences despite a steep "first-night" admission price of 25 cents—a price significantly higher than the 10-cent adult admission fee charged at the Pastime and, subsequently, at the Lumbee. Wishart's opening-night revenues helped to offset the expensive oversized still-frame advertisement that Wishart had placed in the Robesonian for the extended photo-play. Despite local ads that stressed the film's overtly Christian themes, Wishart likely breathed a sigh of relief during the premiere when St. Peter at last arrived to dominate the final reels of *Quo Vadis?*, rather than Nero, who had dominated the first half of the film. While *Quo Vadis?* represented a triumph for Wishart's newest theater, it also marked Mr. C's most concerted attempt to push the boundaries of local exhibition beyond single-reel films, and as the 1910s progressed, all

of Lumberton's theatres migrated towards exhibitions that increasingly "centered on a 'feature' film of three or more reels in length that 'starred' advertised actors."⁷⁷

Nevertheless, for all of his efforts to prepare for and execute the *Quo Vadis?* exhibitions Wishart soon faced the deep disappointment of closing the Lumbee Theatre when it failed to turn a profit. His short tenure there indicates how Wishart soon recognized the practical limits that Robeson's demographics imposed on local cinema potential. As Mr. C reminded residents that the Pastime Theatre remained "on the job" a mere two months after the *Quo Vadis?* exhibition, he frankly admitted that the Lumbee had been "a losing proposition from the beginning." He also prophetically hinted that its closure had "fully demonstrated that Lumberton will not support two picture shows."⁷⁸

Curiously, Wishart's pessimistic pronouncement failed to deter other potential competitors seeking to revive his former Lumbee Theatre. After abandoned by Wishart, the site was quickly leased by Wilmington's Southern Concert Corporation (SCC). By early March, the SCC opened the now rechristened Star Theatre to feature live performances as well as serialized adaptations of popular cliffhangers like *The Master Key*.⁷⁹ The SCC also upgraded the quality and variety of the site's musical accompaniment by replacing its upright piano with an expensive Berrywood "mechanical orchestra," a device consisting of an organ housing sets of specialized mechanical traps to operate the multiple percussive instruments stored within its casing. To contrast the Star with the older facilities that hosted the Pastime and the Opera House, the SCC touted the Star's cleanliness in ads that attempted to pry customers away from Wishart's operations towards a facility that once again offered hybridized fare. In fact, the Star's featured set of vaudeville and stage acts sometimes

included the Demorest Stock Company, the current professional home of former Opera House operators Marie and T. P. DeGafferelly.

The Star represented a difficult challenge to Mr. C's promotional and managerial capabilities. As the longest-surviving local Pastime competitor up until 1928, the Star borrowed several programming and marketing tactics directly from the Wishart playbook. As the two competitors strove to convince moviegoers of the comparative advantages of their sites through faux news items and a steady stream of Robesonian advertisements, they contested every operational element that could plausibly be characterized as providing either a real or a perceived improvement in an audience's theatrical experience. In time, each theater boasted of providing its patrons with superior facilities, fresher air, cooler temperatures, roomier seats, more compelling musical accompaniment, brighter screens, and more "wholesome" pictures.

Indeed, claims surrounding the ability to provide "superior" pictures came to dominate the rhetorical showdown. The Star attempted to unseat the Pastime by contracting with a rival film service, Universal, and adopted an exhibition slogan and an advertising format that sought to undermine the Pastime reputation as a unique or trend-setting institution. While Wishart's advertisements characterized the Pastime as the "Home of Quality Pictures for Quality People," the Star strove to minimize the Pastime's degree of originality by running ads wholly derivative of Wishart's. Specifically, the Star's new ads incorporated an identical graphical format to one that the Pastime had employed for months. The Star's ads attempted to establish that site's own trend-setting reputation by incorporating the slogan "We Originate, Others Follow" (see Figures 3.7 and 3.8 below).

STAR THEATRE

Clean, Cool and Comfortable

TODAY

Ella Hall and Robert Leonard
in the 2nd episode of

"MASTER KEY"

greatest serial ever released. Bar
none.

Big L-Ko Comedy with Billie
Ritchie, the laugh producer.
2 other reels.

FRIDAY

Grace Cunard and Francis Ford
in "Three Bad Men and a Girl",
2 parts.
3 other reels.

SATURDAY

6 big reels of western drama and
L-Ko Comedy.

| Time | Place | Prices |
|---------------|-------|---------|
| 4:30 to 10:30 | STAR | 5 & 10c |

Read the Master Key story in
Robesonian. See the picture every
Thursday.

Remember the 13th episode of
Trey O' Hearts Monday.

Have you noticed the wonderful
projection?

**WE ORIGINATE,
OTHERS FOLLOW.**

Figure 3.7: Star Theatre ad for *The Master Key*. Note the Star's emphasis on the comfort and quality of their services...as well as the site's rather disingenuous and misleading operational motto.⁸⁰



Figure 3.8: Note the similarities between these contiguously placed theater advertisements. Both feature a format employed for some time by the Pastime Theatre.⁸¹

Ultimately, the SCC found it difficult for to overcome local allegiances to an establishment that had served the Lumberton community for more than three years. However, as the two theaters skirmished with volleys of newspaper ads, handbills, posters, flyers, and leaflets (many of which were posted onto the front wall of each theater or tacked onto trees around town), the stoutest weapons available to them barring free passes involved film contracts that might provide them the ability to screen films featuring popular silent-film

stars as often as possible. It was not uncommon, for example, for each house to exhibit different films starring the original “King of the Movies,” actor Francis X. Bushman, or for Wishart to offer “repeat” installments of *The Perils of Pauline* in the Pastime *The Exploits of Elaine*, a more recent vehicle starring Ms. White, the country’s favorite serial heroine, played in the Star.⁸² But even the redoubtable White was not as popular as America’s (and Lumberton’s) favorite silent-film idol, the sublime Mary Pickford, who either due to Wishart’s good luck or thanks to the assistance of Wishart’s distribution representatives always seemed to appear at the Pastime whenever the site faced a stiff challenge from another local competitor (see Figure 3.9).



Figure 3.9: An advertisement for a film featuring “America’s Sweetheart,” Mary Pickford, which appeared in the Robesonian in 1915 during the Elm Street battles involving the Pastime and Star Theatres.⁸³

Yet in the contest for Elm Street moviegoers, Wishart possessed several key comparative advantages, not the least of which included a long-established pool of community goodwill and a set of important political connections. Wishart was, by all

accounts, a humble, friendly, well-liked, and well-respected citizen, one whose participation in honorary and elective offices endeared him to the residents of Lumberton. For many years, Wishart had served as a member of the town's Volunteer Fire Company, and some of his descendents maintain that Wishart at one time captained that group through service that may have earned Mr. C his second, less commonly used nickname, of "Captain" Wishart. Additionally, Wishart was elected in 1915 as a Lumberton town commissioner shortly after his initial flirtation with operating the Lumbee Theatre.⁸⁴ The 1915 campaign represented Wishart's second attempt to secure a commissioner's seat. Local gossip attributed his failure one year earlier to a surreptitious campaign waged by Willie, who reportedly bribed potential voters not to vote for her husband by offering them savory victuals at Aunt Caroline's place.⁸⁵

Wishart's year-long term was notable for his attempt, in the midst of the most intense period of competition between the Pastime and the Star, to satisfy a specific and long-expressed hope of local Lumbertonians. In short, Wishart embarked on an attempt to bring Lumberton itself to the silver screen.⁸⁶ Working behind the scenes with Mayor A. E. White, Commissioner Wishart met with local civic and business leaders to review a "town film" proposal for submission to the Lumberton Chamber of Commerce. Upon the approval of this initial advisory group, Wishart and White lobbied the Chamber to open negotiations with the National Film Corp (NFC) of Baltimore, Maryland, which agreed to plan, produce and execute a promotional film featuring Lumberton that would incorporate as many local residents and businesses into the film as possible. Convinced that the film represented an exciting and thoroughly modern means of marketing the community to new businesses and additional prospective residents, Lumberton's town fathers were admittedly eager to see

themselves, their fellow townsfolk, and their city immortalized on the “big-screen.” They soon forwarded a fifty-dollar down payment for half the expected production cost to an NFC representative in order to commence pre-production activities. Within weeks, however, the deal fell through, and in the end Lumberton’s residents would be required to wait several decades, and to suffer through other similarly abortive town-film efforts, before finally seeing themselves on screen. Even though the NFC deal collapsed, Wishart’s efforts underscored the local perception of his leadership motion-picture programming, technology, and operations. The initiative also reflected a lifelong Lumberton advocacy that had earned Mr. C the admiration of influential townsfolk and politicians like R. C. Lawrence. A minority stakeholder in the Lumberton Opera Company, Lawrence had observed Mr. C’s capabilities firsthand at the Opera House. In a set of local historical sketches published in 1939 entitled The State of Robeson, Lawrence claimed never to have known a better man than “C” Wishart, “a great beloved citizen” of both Lumberton and Robeson.⁸⁷

Wishart eventually managed to overcome the SCC’s challenge, possibly because he could eke out a small profit while the Star faced a cost disadvantage by providing both films and vaudeville acts in a venue that had previously proven incapable of supporting such a hybrid operation. Having struggled for months to overtake the Pastime, the SCC arrived at the same conclusion as Wishart had a year earlier: Lumberton was too small to support multiple picture shows. Consequently, in August the SCC closed the Star under the pretence of implementing additional site renovations, yet in all likelihood the SCC was searching for a way to break its lease. However, with the SCC ready to abandon the site, Wilmington’s F. X. LeBeau, an operator formerly associated with the SCC jumped into the fray. Claiming

himself to be “an experienced theatrical man of Wilmington,” LeBeau willfully ignored the site’s recent theatrical failures and pressured the SCC to keep the Star operating.

When the SCC finally determined to abandon the site, LeBeau stepped in. On November 1st 1915, he reopened the Star once again as a mixed-use site. Unlike the relatively anonymous SCC, which rarely if ever commented on its operations in the Lumberton press, LeBeau reveled in his public role and reached out to his prospective audience members through news stories submitted to the Robesonian. In a “Special Notice” celebrating his recent split from the SCC, for instance, LeBeau announced not only that his now-independent theater was switching from Universal to Mutual films, but that under his management the Star would operate as a institution exclusively for white patrons.⁸⁸ Since there is no direct evidence that either the Pastime or earlier incarnations of the Star admitted non-white patrons, LeBeau may have been tacitly referring to the existence of a local colored theater that had operated in Lumberton briefly the prior year.⁸⁹ Yet just like the SCC, LeBeau sought to convert Pastime loyalists by heralding the Star as the town’s cleanest venue, one equipped with newer projection equipment and roomier seats than those available at the Pastime. As LeBeau made good on his promise to book small-time vaudeville acts into the Star, he engaged in an aggressive marketing campaign to promote his house. However, given his refusal to charge a higher admission price for his mixed fare than Wishart charged for pictures only at the Pastime, he found it difficult to sustain his site’s initial momentum. Thanks in part to his high overhead, and despite an aggressive advertising campaign that once more aped the style and format of Pastime advertisements, LeBeau’s theater was forced to close after a few months.

To Wishart's chagrin, however, additional exhibitors ignored the McLean Building's theatrical disappointments and sought to revitalize the Star, this time with even less success than LeBeau. At the tail end of February 1916, the brothers Walker and Gardner Worth entered the former Lumbee/Star site. North Carolina natives who for the past eighteen months had resided in Summerville, South Carolina trying to revive a lightly attended picture show there, the Worths pinned the hopes of their Lumberton operation on their musical talents. As former musicians and band directors, they intended leveraging their artistic connections to provide customers with a significantly grander musical experience in order to dislodge the Pastime's established audience. When they opened the now-renamed Arcade Theatre on March 10th 1916, the Worths were confident of providing a combination of motion pictures and orchestral accompaniment so pleasing to local residents that Walker confidently predicted that "when the Arcade opens...it will open to stay open."⁹⁰

Weary of facing yet another in a string of Elm Street competitors, Wishart was fortunate enough to screen his most bankable star, Mary Pickford, in the seven-months old feature *Rags*. He also handed out a set of Pickford's publicity stills to keep patrons away from the Arcade. Less than two weeks later, he supplemented his usual film-only program with *The Honeymoon Girls*, a musical stage-show that performed twice nightly on the Pastime's small stage to diminish the comparative advantage touted by the music-centric Worths. Despite their best efforts, which included explicit appeals for local patronage (see Figure 3.10), the Worths stood little chance against Wishart, particularly once Gardner opted to abandon his brother in favor of pursuing "interests elsewhere which the business outlook here did not justify." In a matter of days, Walker decided that "without the aid of his brother

as partner and musician he [i.e., Walker] felt that it would be hard for him to make a success of the house,"⁹¹ and he, too, departed the now thrice-failed theater after merely three weeks.



Figure 3.10: A last-ditch effort by the Worths soliciting local support for the Arcade Theatre.⁹²

Still, Wishart was unable to savor his latest competitive triumph for very long. On November 3rd 1916, or nearly a year to the day since LeBeau reopened the Star, another non-Robeson native strove to revive the empty theater which now stood alongside Lumberton's

newly completed Post Office. Hailing from the town of Albemarle in Stanly County, the new incoming manager C. J. Kilian left his wife operating his Albemarle theater while he, in turn, brought to Lumberton a theater-management pedigree roughly twice as long as Wishart's.⁹³ In opening his newly renamed Lyric Theatre, Kilian encouraged "Ladies and Children Especially" to partake of films sourced from yet another distributor (Paramount) along with "wholesome" small-time vaudeville. Yet despite improvements to the site that included a new "golden-fibre" movie screen, Kilian failed to attract sufficient local interest. Furthermore, his wife's illness forced him to sever his Lumberton ties in favor of his Albemarle operation by the beginning of April.

Oddly enough, Kilian's upgraded Lyric did not stay empty for long, for in the final and perhaps most unexpected turn in the history of the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric site, after Kilian departed Walter Wishart returned to the McLean Building once more.⁹⁴ However, after another brief flirtation with the combination of motion pictures and small-time vaudeville that had never truly succeeded in Lumberton once Wishart had opened the Pastime, Mr. C finally admitted defeat in a site that would never again house a movie theater.

In the end, none of the theaters operating in the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric space remained open for more than six months, and another decade would pass before local entrepreneurs seriously considered constructing a second Lumberton theater.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the site's iterative set of rapid theater openings and closings represented the sum total of Lumberton's "nickelodeon" period, if indeed that term can be said meaningfully to apply anywhere in Robeson.⁹⁶ While this competitive sequence resulted in an increasingly better-appointed, -conditioned and -ventilated Pastime, none of Wishart's non-native challengers

sustained their initial momentum (if any), and each failed to knock the Pastime out of its position of local exhibition leadership.

If Wishart triumphed over these Pastime competitors partly because he was a native Robesonian who had opened the first Elm Street theater, figures like Kilian failed to establish strong relationships with influential civic organizations—for example, through the serial sponsorship of local charity shows, as Wishart had done when he had first taken over the Opera House. Nor did they court local business leaders as Wishart had done in his NFC proposal or through his interactions with the Chamber of Commerce. In providing low-cost entertainment while supporting civic initiatives and providing free passes to students, teachers and veterans, Wishart earned the additional goodwill that would have been difficult for any out-of-town challenger to overcome *regardless* of their failure to recognize that all attempts to combine film exhibitions with live performances within a local picture-show had failed in Lumberton (even one managed by Wishart himself).

For Robesonians were comfortable with an operator recognized by his fellow Elm Street tradesmen as a kindred spirit: a multi-tasker who fulfilled several roles in his house, in which he acted as booking agent, salesman, and all-around “front man.”⁹⁷ Of course, the proposition that a theater’s success depended directly upon the capabilities of its manager was a core belief among film-industry leaders. In 1927, for instance, the former President of the West Coast Theatre Corporation, Harold Franklin, insisted that the “talents and abilities” of an independent exhibitor had been, and would likely always remain, the most essential factor in any theater’s success. In emphasizing the importance of “the personal element” in theater operations, Franklin argued that “a theater, like a man, is a personality...and each one defines itself to the locality in its own way” largely through the expression of an individual manager’s

operational acumen during his interactions with the members of his community.⁹⁸ Given the size of his Lumberton operations, Wishart never had the chance to operate his site as did the managers of metropolitan picture palaces, who delegated customer-service duties to hierarchically organized ranks of role-specific staffers, since Mr. C's humble Pastime staff only included a projectionist, musician, janitor/handyman, and ticket seller (when this last role did not also fall to Wishart, too). Furthermore, unlike the SCC, LeBeau, the Worths, or C. J. Kilian, Wishart held the advantage of his local pedigree, or what cinema historian Greg Waller has characterized as the ability to operate "on a first name basis with his patrons." In addition, while fully "aware of Baptist sermonizing against the movies," Wishart remained "deeply involved with the everyday commercial life of his town"⁹⁹ in ways that helped to generate the political capital that enabled him to avoid charges of immorality levied against him or his theaters.

Unfortunately, even with these local advantages Walter Wishart could no longer maintain his status as independent theater operator. Though the precise reasons why Wishart left Lumberton and the Pastime in 1917 cannot be verified based on direct personal testimony from Wishart, several pieces of evidence suggest that the financial pressures of remaining independent while attempting to expand his operations into multiple sites proved more than Mr. C could bear. Like many of his peers, Wishart personally bore the costs of serially upgrading his theaters in order to remain competitive, and his expansion into the Lumbee site paralleled the moves of countless local operators who sought to leverage their expertise across multiple venues. Yet in seeking out these often elusive economies of scale, operators like Wishart relied upon the willingness and ability of local audiences to support multiple sites. Since Wishart knew from bitter personal experience that Lumberton had seemed

incapable of supporting a second picture-show, his attempt to make a go of the Lyric a second time site suggests that a set of influences were at work beyond a simple desire to eke incremental revenue out of the Opera House's former projection equipment.

In fact, it appears as though Wishart's upgrades and expansions over-extended him financially, and his final attempt to resurrect the Lyric may have represented a last-ditch effort to remain independent. Local tax and deed records along with brief local news items suggest that Mr. C and his family struggled financially for most of their lives. In fact, years before his entrance into motion-picture exhibitions the strain of supporting a young family likely pressured Wishart near the turn of the century to seek higher-paying jobs in Greensboro and Wilmington. Upon returning to Lumberton in 1910, establishing and maintaining his Opera House and Pastime operations probably forced Willie and Walter to exhaust their liquid assets. Whenever the Pastime's revenues did not cover the site's operational costs, Wishart would have been forced to make up the difference himself. On several occasions, Willie resigned from her duties at Aunt Caroline's house, a facility that she managed off and on at least as late as 1915, only to return to it several times in what appears to have been an effort to keep the couple financially afloat. On at least one occasion, Willie took up a managerial position in a downtown Lumberton hotel, even though such a position almost certainly afforded her less autonomy (if possibly a higher income) than she enjoyed at Aunt Caroline's.

Wishart's debts accumulated, and on more than one occasion the Robeson County sheriff stepped in to auction off a plot of hereditary Wishart land to settle a series of back taxes.¹⁰⁰ The Lumberton deed office in the Robeson County Courthouse contains records of piecemeal property sales throughout the 1910s, as well as "deed-of-trust" records indicating

that Walter and Willie used Aunt Caroline's house, deeded to the couple in 1896, as collateral for a series of loans taken out each calendar year from 1915 to 1917.¹⁰¹ Local newspaper accounts verify that the Pastime's building had been lengthened and its facilities extensively upgraded in 1915, probably as part of Wishart's attempts to remain competitive with the newer Star Theatre. Since the courthouse contains no loan records or deeds of trust between Wishart and the Lumberton Opera Company or any other local businesses or investors in connection with these upgrades, Wishart appears to have personally funded the Pastime's expansion *in addition to* funding his initial foray into the Lumbee Theater site within a single year.

Sadly, if Wishart remained the sole survivor of the closest Lumberton ever came to experiencing a "nickelodeon war," the effort appears to have damaged his operational solvency beyond repair. Lacking the "deep pockets" required to ride out the largely recessionary period which lasted from 1910 to 1915,¹⁰² yet determined to remain independent, Wishart abandoned his beloved Pastime briefly when, after the departure of C. J. Kilian in the spring of 1917, he took the drastic step of selling the Pastime's projection equipment to the building's owner, A. H. McLeod, who promptly installed Jimmie Williamson as the new Pastime manager. Though Wishart again moved down to the Lyric site, conditions there proved no better than when he had operated it as the Lumbee Theatre. So while the Pastime finally outlasted its southern Elm Street rival, Wishart overextended himself and was, in a sense, also defeated in the process.¹⁰³ Wishart briefly reassumed the duties of Pastime manager. However, perhaps out of a concern for Wishart's expansionist tendencies or his ability to continue forwarding the Pastime's monthly rental fees to them, A. H. and Helen McLeod entered into a formal business relationship with Hyman H. Anderson

through the first lease agreement connected to the Pastime facility to be filed in the county courthouse. Anderson had lived in Lumberton for several years by then, during which time he had engaged in a number of real estate and other collateralized-lending transactions with the McLeods, and though the bulk of Anderson's business interests (including a bank) were head-quartered in South Carolina, he agreed to take a one year lease on the Pastime with an option for an additional two.¹⁰⁴

With Pastime transferred beyond his control, Mr. C's formal relationship with the county's original picture show came to an undignified end. But in a strange and rather serendipitous turn, Wishart's struggling theatrical career was quickly resurrected by none other than his Pastime successor, Hyman Anderson. Along with his brother, Bishop B. Anderson, Hyman Anderson was a senior partner in the Anderson Theatre Company, a small but ambitious regional theater chain, and he selected Wishart to serve the ATC in an entirely new role, namely that of an itinerant manager. In this capacity, Wishart eventually helped the Andersons to control cinema exhibitions across a sizable cross-section of North and South Carolina. But Wishart's loss of operational independence came at a steep price. Effectively exiled from his Lumberton home for almost twenty years, Wishart was posted by Anderson to theaters scattered across seven different Carolina counties, and as he approached sixty years of age in 1917 Mr. C faced extensive train and/or automobile travel to commute back to his Robeson County home on weekends.¹⁰⁵ Yet neither Wishart's age (he was more than twice as old as Anderson) nor his financial overextension in managing the Pastime appeared to alarm Anderson who, though he denied the managership of the Pastime to Mr. C by assigning the post instead to Jimmie Williamson, nonetheless valued Mr. C's operational skills. Wishart knew how to run a small-town theater, and despite his deep pockets,

Anderson was himself new to theater management.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Wishart had demonstrated an ability to generate and maintain civic goodwill in precisely the sort of small rural farming communities that characterized most of the Carolinas. By assigning Wishart to his operations relatively close by, Anderson also hoped to leverage Wishart's experience fending off competitors and stabilizing his acquisitions while he and his brother focused on building up their burgeoning theater chain. Since Mr. C possessed a deep knowledge of and passion for the entire coastal plain region, he remained an asset to an aggressive theater owner possessing ready access to the capital needed to expand theater operations across both sides of the Carolina border.

In the first of several postings that required Mr. C to labor six days a week away from his Lumberton home, in the fall of 1917 Wishart took charge of the Anderson's theater in Hamlet, North Carolina. After his departure from Lumberton, however, the Pastime experienced a period of managerial instability that Anderson did not anticipate. Jimmie Williamson soon departed Lumberton for Sanford, possibly on an early assignment in that community for Anderson, who for a time tried to manage the Pastime himself. But after a Pastime office fire in early-1918 injured one theater employee and badly burned Anderson's hands, within a week Williamson was recalled from Sanford to the Pastime.¹⁰⁷ By mid-year, Williamson once again departed, this time to enlist in the armed forces during the last stages of World War I, leaving Anderson alone to manage the site. By late-1919, Anderson decided to leave Lumberton to return with his family to South Carolina. Having finished his military service, Williamson briefly resumed his post at the Pastime before returning to operate Anderson's newest theater in Sanford. Since Anderson still retained the leases on the Pastime, he may have been somewhat desperate when he installed a non-native Robesonian

named J. W. Griffin as its manager in February 1920. However, Griffin was able to overcome both his “outsider” status as well as his lack of previous theatrical management experience, and he went on to operate the Pastime successfully for nearly to a decade.¹⁰⁸

After having served as Robeson’s most accomplished theater operator during the 1920s (and as the longest-serving manager of the Pastime ever), Griffin capped his Robeson career with his appointment as the first manager of Lumberton’s grandest venue, the Carolina Theatre, when it opened in 1928.¹⁰⁹

As Anderson struggled to stabilize the situation at the Pastime, Mr. C became a core manager in the growing Anderson theater chain. After a relatively brief initial posting in Hamlet, by November 1917 Wishart had relocated to Laurinburg, where he appears to have managed a recent Anderson acquisition, the Gem Theatre, for several years. Departing the Gem some time after Christmas 1925, Mr. C took charge of Laurinburg’s newest motion-picture house, the Scotland Theatre. By that time, Wishart had in fact been working for the Andersons longer than he had operated independently in Lumberton. However, his newer itinerant role typified the widespread seconding of experienced operators to support the expansion several contemporaneous regional and national exhibition corporations. It likewise afforded Mr. C the opportunity to participate in the development of moviegoing across a sizable portion of the Carolinas at a time when (as noted in Chapter IV) stable and regularized picture-show operations finally arrived in many small towns. Therefore, though he was forced to leave the Pastime behind, Wishart helped to develop regional moviegoing beyond Lumberton or Robeson, and in his typically shy and humble way, he became an important figure in the history of moviegoing across south-eastern North Carolina and north-eastern South Carolina (see Figure 3.11).

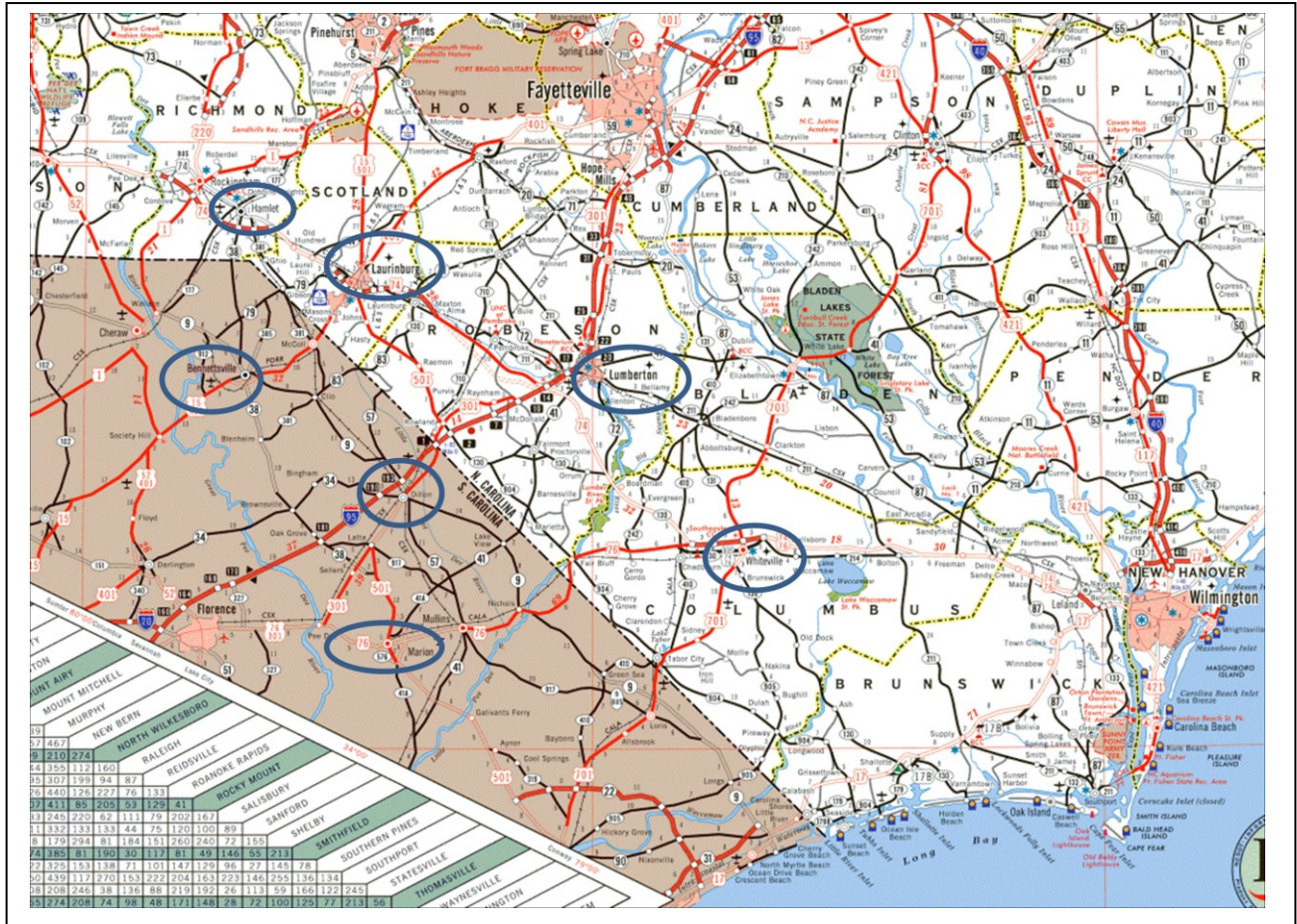


Figure 3.11: Present-day map illustrating the Carolina communities in which Walter Wishart is known to have managed movie theaters.¹¹⁰

News items published in the Robesonian, with which Wishart remained in faithful contact from 1917 to 1931, indicate that Mr. C managed exhibition sites in at least four North Carolina cities (Lumberton, Hamlet, Laurinburg and Whiteville) and another three in South Carolina (Bennettsville, Dillon, and Marion), though due to the volatility of theaters being transferred into the Anderson chain, Wishart almost certainly managed sites in other cities for short periods as well. Yet no matter what the full list of Wishart’s postings may have been, each of the seven towns listed above resembled one another in several ways. Besides their topographical consistency, lying as they all do within the coastal Carolina floodplain, each community acted as a local agricultural and commercial center connected to each other, as

well as to larger metropolitan hubs like Charlotte, Wilmington, Raleigh, and Atlanta via regional railroads.¹¹¹ In addition, of Wishart's seven confirmed postings, only Hamlet was not a county seat, while the others included the governmental hubs of Robeson (Lumberton), Scotland (Laurinburg), Columbus (Whiteville), Marlboro (Bennettsville), Marion (Marion) and Dillon (Dillon) counties. Though Richmond County maintained its county seat in Rockingham, Hamlet housed a critically important transportation hub that linked the Sandhills region northward to Washington and New York and southward all the way to Florida.

Regardless of Mr. C's advancing age, Anderson kept him continuously employed during Wishart's long tenure in the theater chain, with one known interruption. At the end of 1923, when the Laurinburg's Scotland Theatre was leased by aspiring regional chain-manager (and then-Lumberton Pastime manager) J. W. Griffin, Griffin tried to convince Wishart to stay on at the Scotland. Wishart initially agreed, offering Griffin an exceptional degree of operational continuity at his newest site. However, Wishart's honeymoon with Griffin ended quickly, for by early 1924 he was back with Anderson, for whom he soon embarked on an eventual seven-year stint as the manager of the Columbus Theater in Whiteville, a town in which the ever-energetic Wishart, in addition to managing the Columbus, also managed the local bus station and was worked in an unspecified capacity at a local hotel. The demands of these positions did not deter the sixty-five year old Wishart from submitting periodic historical reflections to his hometown newspaper,¹¹² nor did the distances involved prevent Wishart from faithfully returning to Lumberton most weekends despite the frustrations of navigating the region's sometimes balky rail and highway systems.

For that matter, both Wishart's itinerant career and the Andersons theater-acquisition spree depended on significant improvements in regional railroad, local road, and state highway infrastructures during the 1910s, 20s and 30s. The corporatization of regional cinema exhibition required the transportation linkages to facilitate executive oversight by figureheads like Anderson who, in turn, could rapidly deploy individuals like Wishart to handle day-to-day theater operations in distant cities and towns. In fact, the regional highway construction efforts that often leveraged the availability of prison-inmate labor began to hit their stride in the early 1920s in the wake of an extensive set of construction campaigns funded by North Carolina to connect each of the state's one-hundred county seats with Raleigh by highway in an attempt to achieve a more timely and efficient execution of statewide government. Anderson understood that the success of his remote exhibition sites depended upon delivering site managers to identify, organize, and institute entertainment services acceptable to small-town audiences. They would also be called upon to arbitrate local operational issues, to determine how and where to deploy advertising materials around town, to maintain attractive street fronts and clean theater interiors, and to soothe the tempers of disgruntled patrons, community leaders, local preachers, and/or fire chiefs concerned by a site's offerings, advertising, operational practices, or structural integrity. By leveraging regional transportation infrastructures, Anderson managed to implement a standard transition cycle for his newer theaters: as each venue was brought on line, Anderson assigned Mr. C or a similarly experienced operator to act as its initial manager in a process that resulted in a kind of *de facto* regional standardization of local theater operations across the chain. In turn, Anderson arranged for more permanent staffers and managed critical contractual and financial agreements from a central location.¹¹³

Anderson's awareness of Wishart's experience managing three distinctive types of commercial-entertainment houses in Lumberton, i.e., an Opera House, a dedicated motion-picture show, and a picture-show/live-performance hybrid, may help to explain why Anderson often first seconded Wishart to his newer sites, as Wishart would likely understand whichever operational program had been deployed previously within each site. As cornerstone staff members acquired when Anderson leased the Pastime, Wishart and Jimmie Williamson enabled the Andersons to manage their growing chain of theaters from Dillon and Mullins, South Carolina, the latter of which housed the Anderson Brothers Bank. Eventually, Hyman and Bishop Anderson built up the holdings of the Anderson Brothers Theatre Company far beyond the set of houses associated with Wishart alone, as in time the ABTC included sites in Sanford, North Carolina as well as in Cheraw, Camden, Mullins, Myrtle Beach, Kingstree, Hemingway, Pamplico, and Manning, South Carolina. Yet as the availability of experienced managers like Wishart and Williamson enabled the brothers to expand their holdings centrally, positional volatility became a familiar working condition for figures like Wishart and Williamson, and it began as early as when Mr. C was initially transferred to Hamlet just as the then-Lumberton based Hyman Anderson was securing control of the Hamlet Opera House. A few months later, Anderson re-assigned Wishart to Laurinburg to help launch a new site there while Anderson continued to cover for a temporarily absent Williamson at the Pastime. During Wishart's extended stay in Laurinburg, he underwent several temporary postings during a rapid set of chain expansions initiated by Anderson. To cite just a single example: in the spring of 1920, Wishart was temporarily posted to Bennettsville, then subsequently returned for a short return stint at Laurinburg's Gem, only to be relocated to cover Anderson's newest (quite possibly a second)

Bennettsville operation later that summer. Finally relieved of his Bennettsville duties by 1921, Wishart returned to his “permanent” posting in Laurinburg, this time to manage the Scotland Theatre, the newest Anderson venue in that community.

During Wishart’s itinerancy, this small, indomitable, and gentlemanly senior citizen ingratiated himself into the daily life of several Carolina towns. In avoiding the pitfalls of being perceived as “non-local” theater manager like Kilian, LeBeau, and the Worths in Lumberton, Mr. C charmed audiences outside of Robeson, too. According to small news items from other local newspapers that were reprinted in Lumberton, Wishart expanded his deep affection for Robeson to develop a personal interest in the history of the towns where he was posted. For example, both Whiteville and Laurinburg, his two longest-lasting Anderson postings, adopted Mr. C and regarded him as a bona fide member of the local community. His capacity to generate local goodwill at least partly explains why, when Laurinburg’s Scotland Theatre came under Griffin’s control in 1923, the Laurinburg Exchange was happy to report that “Mr. W. S. Wishart, who has been here for some time as resident manager of the Scotland Theatre, will continue in this capacity under the new management. This will be good news to Mr. Wishart’s many friends here, who have come to think of him as a fixture and a Laurinburg man, though his better half and home are at Lumberton.”¹¹⁴ Wishart also continued to maintain an excellent reputation at home, as when the paper reported in 1924 that Wishart represented the oldest-surviving member early office staff at the Robesonian, whose editors publicly regretted his having been “lured away” from his press foreman’s role by the motion-picture industry.¹¹⁵

By 1924, of course, the stability of Wishart’s newspaper career was a distant memory, and despite holding down extended postings in Laurinburg and Whiteville, he remained a particularly peripatetic cog in the Andersons’ corporate-exhibition machine. His independence

long gone, Wishart had joined the growing rank of middle managers drafted into regional and national chains during the film industry's most aggressive period of vertical integration.¹¹⁶ As the production units of Hollywood studios allied themselves with enormous and proprietary distribution channels, these burgeoning chains eventually implemented geographically-aligned corporate oversight structures consisting of ranks of divisional executives, regional supervisors, and lead managers in cities that often featured multiple chain-affiliated houses. These extensive managerial networks were often quite willing to rotate supervisory personnel with so often that, according to theater historian Marion Peter Holt, they "transferred managers from city to city as frequently as the Methodist Conference reassigned its ministers."¹¹⁷

If Wishart never documented his feelings concerning his long itinerant exile from Lumberton or the diminished independence he experienced while working for Anderson, as he aged and the toll of living on the road became increasingly burdensome, he probably looked back fondly on the relative stability and autonomy of his time as Pastime manager. After having served as an Anderson itinerant for fourteen years, he at last returned to Lumberton permanently in 1931 with a desire to re-open his original picture-show, which by that time had fallen into a sad state of decline. From 1911 to 1928, the Pastime maintained its status as the county's longest-serving and most-stable exhibition venue, and assuming that a county resident did not harbor religious, moral, or social objections to moviegoing, for nearly a generation he or she was most likely to have attended motion-picture exhibitions at the Pastime. However, Wishart's modest, spare, and somewhat cramped theatrical creation was instantly relegated to obsolescence when the ornate and spacious Carolina Theatre opened in June 1928 several blocks to its southeast. Uniting classical design elements with a distinctly neo-Renaissance flair, and featuring a massive pipe-organ and an orchestra pit providing rich

musical accompaniment to silent-film fare, the elegance and grandeur the Carolina outshone (at least temporarily) every North Carolina theater located east of Charlotte, south of Fayetteville, and west of Wilmington. The Pastime simply could not compete against the Carolina, and despite its lower ticket prices it was unable to sustain itself in a community that still proved incapable of supporting multiple theaters. Soon after the Carolina irrevocably usurped the title of Robeson's preeminent exhibition space, the Pastime was shuttered, and by decade's end its operations had been purchased by the Lumberton Theatre Corporation, the owners of the Carolina Theatre.

To pursue a return on its investment, however, the LTC debated reopening the Pastime in 1931. As such, Wishart's return to Lumberton that same year was hardly a coincidence, for upon his return the Robesonian reported that Mr. C's plans were "to operate the old Pastime theatre on Elm Street in the near future."¹¹⁸ But to Wishart's chagrin, the LTC was no more willing to appoint Mr. C to the post of Pastime manager as Anderson had been since 1917. Instead, the LTC offered Wishart another job, this time at the Carolina, in a move that in all probability benefitted Mr. C in the long run. For during the depths of the Great Depression, the Pastime operated very infrequently. Both local economic hardship and the fact that the Pastime appeared structurally ill-equipped to accommodate the "talking pictures" that revolutionized the film industry at the end of the 1920s convinced the LTC to moth-ball the Pastime on several occasions, often for more than a year at a time. To add insult to injury, Wishart's hopes of returning to the Pastime were again crushed when the LTC engaged the Anderson Brothers in August 1934 to refurbish and reopen the Pastime. In all fairness to the Andersons, who were simultaneously granted operational responsibility for the Pastime and the flagship Carolina by the LTC, Wishart's former employers may have a

simple reason for not appointing the now seventy-five year old Wishart to his old post. After many years of faithful service, the Andersons may not have wanted to place on the shoulders of their old associate the burden of resurrecting a failing theater that faced grim financial prospects.

Wishart did not comment publicly when the Pastime re-opened for business without him. But it is unlikely that the irony of the Pastime's latest physical reconfiguration escaped him, based on the services he had performed at the Carolina since his return. In 1934, the remodeled Pastime allocated specific groups of balcony seats to non-white moviegoers, perhaps for the first time in its history.¹¹⁹ Yet for several years, Wishart had already confronted on a daily basis the challenge of managing the flow of non-white patrons, whose public interactions were required by local custom to be carefully choreographed, into the Carolina. Having managed any number of theaters for two decades, Wishart surely never imagined that his Lumberton homecoming would result in his appointment as manager of the "Indian and Colored" balconies designed to segregate and marginalize African-American and Native-American patrons who attended the Carolina Theatre (Figure 3.12). Ironically, Wishart's extensive knowledge of local social networks enabled him to make well-informed decisions concerning the ethnic identity of local moviegoers. One can only imagine what Wishart's response may have been when, after having faithfully served the Andersons as an itinerant manager across the Carolinas, they assigned him to act as the gatekeeper for the Carolina's (and the county's) least-privileged moviegoers.

As the 1940s approached, the LTC severed its ties with the Anderson Brothers and entered instead into a joint venture with the Wilby-Kincey organization, a much larger Southern theater chain that appeared willing to revitalize what had become a dead asset to the

LTC. Partly in response to the opening of a second “grand” Lumberton theater, namely the Riverside Theatre founded in 1939 by Morris Legendre, a Carolina and Wilby-Kincey competitor, Wilby-Kincey refurbished the Pastime and reopened it as a way to offer local moviegoers a “second-run” exhibition experience featuring significantly reduced ticket prices. In fact, at 15-cents per adult and 10-cents per child, the Pastime’s admission fees were roughly one-third less than the corresponding prices in the “first-run” Carolina and Riverside Theatres, and the Pastime’s rotation of Westerns and “second-run” features furnished Lumberton audiences with a value-priced moviegoing option similar to the mall-based “dollar” movie theaters that proliferated during the 1980s and 1990s. This final incarnation of the Pastime, staffed by a manager, camera operator, cashier, and a single usher, reverted to the limited exhibition-schedules that characterized early semi-permanent theaters.

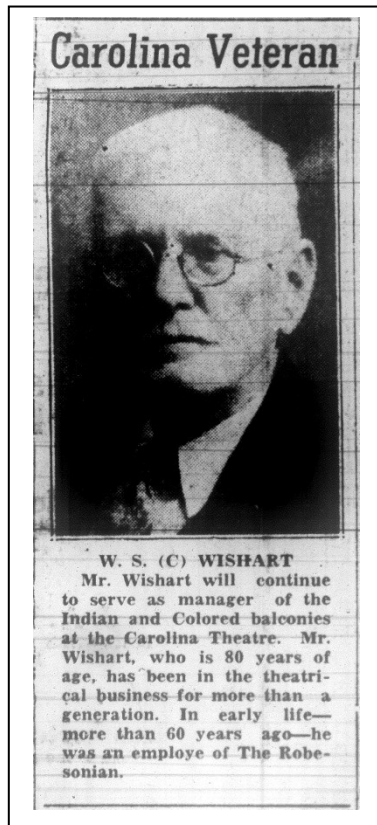


Figure 3.12: Walter Wishart (circa 1940), when he served as the Carolina Theatre’s balcony manager.¹²⁰

Initially opened four days per week (i.e., Wednesday through Saturday), the Pastime usually scheduled Western fare on Fridays and Saturdays. In time, it expanded its schedule to include Mondays and Tuesday showings, though instead of changing its content daily, the Pastime offered new films only every other day.

However, if the 1930s pushed both Wishart and his original local theater to the fringes of Robesonian moviegoing, and as a new decade turned the Pastime's managers undertook another set of modest site-upgrades in 1941, they marketed the theater's latest "grand reopening" ceremony in a unique way. In contrast to all previous and subsequent theater openings in Robeson, the Wilby-Kincey organization and the local Robeson business community dedicated the Pastime's latest opening-day ceremony to specific individual: Walter Wishart, who at long last had decided to retire from motion-picture exhibitions (see Figure 3.13). As the August 1st ceremony drew near, Mr. C resigned his post as a secondary cashier and doorman at the Carolina Theatre, thereby ending at the age of eighty-two his second approximately thirty-year professional career. In recognition of his years of community service, as well as his dedication towards documenting and celebrating the history of his home county, a host of Robeson County businesses, most of which had supplied or serviced the Pastime during its latest renovation, congratulated Wishart in newspaper ads that simultaneously touted the theater's reopening, and by implication their contribution to it. Congratulatory notes also arrived in the form of wires and personal telegrams sent by a number of Hollywood directors and film stars, possibly at the prompting of Howard Dietz, the publicity director of Metro Goldwyn Mayer, who sent his hearty congratulations to Wishart. Similar laudatory epistles trumpeted Mr. C's accomplishments across

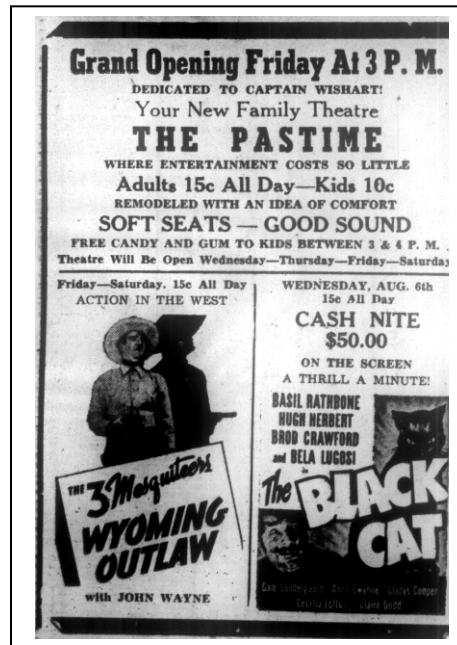


Figure 3.13: Advertisement for the 1941 Grand Reopening of the Pastime Theatre (dedicated to “Captain” Wishart).¹²¹

the Robesonian’s front page, including a proclamation signed by Lumberton Mayor E. M. Johnson, the very same local politician who, in a serendipitous case of “small-town” coincidence, Wishart had actively campaigned for as his own town-commissioner successor a quarter of a century earlier.¹²²

During the last decade of his life, Mr. C lived quietly a few blocks from his old theater. In retirement, he succumbed to age-related injuries and illnesses that considerably reduced the pace of his historical submissions to the Robesonian. Sadly, the perpetually unassuming Wishart disappointed local devotees of Robesonian history by refusing to produce either an historical memoir or an account of the town and county he knew better than any individual living partly to avoid accusations of vanity. Though jurist and local historian R. C. Lawrence admired Wishart equally for his prodigious memory and his intense modesty, he remained disappointed that his multiple entreaties to Mr. C produce such a work (with offers that included stenographic services to assist in its compilation) were always politely refused. Lawrence and other supporters could only look on as Wishart suffered significant health problems during the

late 1940s caused by the infirmities of advancing age and the overwhelming depression that descended upon Walter in the wake of Willie's passing in the spring of 1949. His decline accelerated rapidly after the loss of his lifelong companion, until he died in his sleep in mid-December 1950 roughly six months shy of his ninety-second birthday.

The fact that neither Walter nor Willie recorded a will at the county courthouse suggests that they left behind no property and few material goods accumulated during their many long decades of toil. But it would be a mistake to conclude that Walter Wishart had been a failure as an exhibitor simply because he had failed to amass significant financial wealth in that capacity. Walter Wishart's death remained front-page news in the Robesonian for two days. The newspaper's accounts of Wishart's indicated a severe reluctance to end a professional relationship that had endured for almost three-quarters of a century.¹²³ At the time of Wishart's death, few if any local residents could have recognized that the exhibition schedules and advertisements for all five of the county theaters that appeared in the newspaper pages following his obituary were a part of his professional legacy. They represented contemporary instances of local marketing practices that Wishart had first locally implemented decades earlier. If his brief accounts of upcoming motion-picture exhibitions no longer merited front-page coverage, Wishart's folksy descriptions and "faux-news" items tied to Opera House or Pastime exhibitions had eventually led to the creation of the dedicated *Entertainments* page in the Robesonian on which those contemporary 1950s ads had been printed. Indeed, the fact that not one but several Robesonian theaters were operating at the time of Wishart's passing, operating in a region largely bereft of non-domestic, non-school, and non-church sanctioned entertainments prior to Mr. C's arrival at the Opera House and his

subsequent development of the Pastime, offered silent testimony to the long-term impact of his efforts to transform moviegoing into a commonly accepted leisure practice.¹²⁴

Sadly absent from the list of theaters advertising in the Robesonian on that dreary December day, however, was the Pastime, a theater that closed its doors for good approximately one month after Wishart's death. Though other individuals had managed the Pastime significantly longer than Wishart had,¹²⁵ many Lumberton residents still regarded the Pastime as Mr. C's theater, out of gratitude for his having introduced motion-pictures into Lumberton's small-town experience. In fact, some of Wishart's contemporaries had remained so fiercely loyal to Wishart and his Pastime that they refused to attend other theaters in Lumberton for many years.¹²⁶ At Wishart's death, two generations of Robesonian moviegoers and local residents were unlikely to forget the longevity of his and his theater's services to the community. If the reclamation of a then-shuttered Carolina Theatre during the 1980s resulted in a long round of public applause for the individuals principally responsible for having founded the town's only picture palace, particularly for Drs. Earle L. Bowman and Russell S. Beam, in the early 2000s a handful of elderly Lumbertonians could still recall the courtly little man who acted as a cashier and ticket-taker outside the Carolina's West Fourth Street entrance. Even if it is not true, contrary to the claims of virtually all of these senior citizens, that *everyone* in Lumberton went to the movies in venues like the Carolina or the Pastime, a significant share of the credit for making motion-pictures available to Robeson County moviegoers surely belongs to Walter Wishart, an individual who not only served a similar function in communities scattered across North and South Carolina, but who at the end of a long career facilitated the entry of Robeson's least-privileged moviegoers into the county's flagship theater.

It is worth noting that soon after he retired, Wishart at last fulfilled his twenty-five year old dream of seeing his hometown immortalized on film.¹²⁷ Late in 1941, the Carolina Theatre contracted itinerant North Carolina filmmaker H. Lee Waters to record and then exhibit a silent film featuring Lumberton and its people. As luck would have it, Waters' film appeared in Lumberton the Friday prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. All newspaper accounts of the film's reception locally were pushed aside in lieu of the incredible and devastating news from the Pacific and from Washington. Fortunately, copies of Waters' Lumberton film still exist, and whether by design or due to a fortunate accident of history, it includes a very brief scene of a dapper, elderly, and newly retired Walter Wishart, a scene that Waters did not film outside the doors of his Wishart's recent employer, the Carolina Theatre; rather, Waters' film features Wishart standing directly in front of the Pastime Theatre, a site that he had not managed for more than a generation.¹²⁸

Born the year before Abraham Lincoln was elected President, Walter Seaman Wishart died shortly after the intervention of the United States in Korea. His accomplishments included bringing motion-picture entertainment, often for the first time, to audiences in the many small towns in which he managed theaters. Though deprived of his status as an independent-operator status early in his exhibition career, it is entirely fitting that at its conclusion Mr. C ushered non-white patrons into Robeson's only picture palace. For from its beginning to its end, Wishart's theatrical career extended the range of moviegoing possibilities available to previously under-served small-town audiences in Lumberton...and Hamlet...and Laurinburg...and Whiteville...and Bennettsville...and Dillon...and Marion, all of which provided few (if any) opportunities regularly to view motion-pictures until Walter Wishart brought the "new wonder" into their lives.

Certainly, if Walter Wishart had not succeeded in establishing regular exhibitions in these communities, some other exhibitor eventually would have done so. The fact that he succeeded where others failed, particularly in Lumberton, begs the question as to how and why he succeeded. As Kathy Fuller has claimed, early motion-picture exhibitors had to face the challenge of establishing the cinema's legitimacy for small-town audiences suspicious of commercial entertainments.¹²⁹ I contend that Walter Wishart successfully managed theaters in so many small Southern towns precisely because he himself appeared *legitimate* in the eyes of his patrons because of his humility, his doggedness, his energy, his deep and broad knowledge of and participation with local and regional social and family networks, and his longstanding commitment to the communities in which he managed theaters. These qualities complemented the operational acumen and flexibility that Wishart had demonstrated as a pressroom foreman. However, as early as 1914 even Wishart found himself confronted with local calls to impose municipal controls on cinema exhibitions.¹³⁰ Fortunately, his humility and his strategic deployment of "printer's ink" helped to stave off public censure during a period of time in which, according to film historian Steven Ross, the film industry desperately hoped to "transform movies from a cheap amusement for the masses into a respectable entertainment."¹³¹ Before documenting precisely how Wishart and other local exhibitors staved off several censorship initiatives in North Carolina, all the while bearing in mind the course of Mr. C's career as a comparative developmental baseline, we will now chart the arrival of cinema exhibitions in Robeson County's other principal towns, many of which featured individuals who performed any of the same professional functions as Walter Wishart.

ENDNOTES

¹ Undated photo of Wishart published in the Robesonian (29-Nov-1937, Section 2, p. 6).

² Instead, according to Douglas Gomery, American cinema histories typically focus “on films and their creators.” Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, xvii.

³ Information regarding Walter Wishart’s career and personal life has been derived from several sources, including Wishart’s frequent submissions to historical editions of the Robesonian as well as periodic references to Wishart in daily editions of that paper. In addition, references to the involvement of Wishart family’s in the Lowry conflict can be found in almost any study of that Reconstruction-era conflict, including William McKee Evans, To Die Game: The Story of the Lowry Band, Indian Guerrillas of Reconstruction, Iroquois and Their Neighbors (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995). For a set of brief biographical accounts of early Robeson County historical figures that include references to Wishart, see Robert C. Lawrence, The State of Robeson (Lumberton, NC and New York: J. J. Little and Ives Company, 1939). Finally, the Wishart Family Papers, an unpublished though heavily annotated set of family genealogies (many of which were compiled by Annabel Wishart Lane, a relative, though not a lineal descendent, of Walter Wishart) is currently housed as Southern Manuscript Collection item #4624 at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴ A useful summary of several scholarly works analyzing the impact of these practices, and the judicial responses to them, can be found in Waller, ed., Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition, 317.

⁵ Wishart’s financial difficulties have been detailed later in this chapter.

⁶ For an exceptional case-study of early local exhibitors, see the treatment of Bert and Fannie Cook contained in Chapter One of Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture.

⁷ Richard Maltby and Melvyn Stokes, “Introduction,” Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 3.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ As detailed below, Wishart engaged in a series of out-of-town postings for roughly a decade between his newspaper and theatrical-management careers.

¹¹ A topic discussed at considerable length in Chapter V.

¹² Kathryn Fuller has noted that many early exhibitors sought to ally themselves with charitable and other civic institutions in an attempt to bring “small-town, middle-class respectability to their performance through the place of exhibition, the society sponsoring and promoting the show, and the example set by having [charity and civic] group members in the audience.” Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture, 14.

¹³ As noted in the previous chapter, several itinerant exhibitions had involved charitable giving (including the county’s original Maxton Armory show in 1897), yet neither they nor any other local exhibitor other than Wishart managed to establish a “going concern” until the 1920s.

¹⁴ Indeed, one of Robeson County’s political sub-divisions is named Wishart’s Township. Located several miles to the east of Lumberton, the district included the family homestead where Walter and his siblings were born, and had been named in honor of Walter’s father, Wellington—a man who, as County Surveyor, may have influenced its designation.

¹⁵ Though “Lowry” and its several variations (including Lowery and Lowrie) remains a common surname in Robeson, and despite the fact that histories referring to the activities of Henry Berry have incorporated all three spellings, the “Lowry” spelling has been selected for this study. Note that this spelling has been employed by Malinda Maynor Lowery, whose great-great grandfather Henderson Oxendine was both a cousin of Henry Berry Lowry and a member of the Lowry Gang. Malinda Maynor Lowery, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation, First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 16.

¹⁶ These include a host of foreclosure-related activities recounted by Malinda Maynor Lowery (see Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South, pp. 55-70), as well as so-called “tied-mule” incidents in which local white farmers might leave a mule or other livestock on an Indian’s farm prior to accusing the Indian landowner of theft and pursuing a financial settlement that could lead to forced land sales (as recounted by Adolph Dial in The Only Land I Know, p. 45).

¹⁷ Although a third of Walter’s uncles, John Pinckney Wishart, also served as a confederate soldier, he died of smallpox in a Richmond hospital by the end of 1862, and therefore never participated in the Lowry war.

¹⁸ However, the local militia neither captured nor killed Henry Berry Lowry. What ultimately became of Lowry him remains one of Robeson’s most enduring mysteries. Rumored to have died (possibly from an accidental gunshot wound) in early 1872, Henry Berry Lowry’s body was never recovered, and the large bounty placed on his head has never been collected.

¹⁹ Possible exceptions include the “VE” and “VJ” Day celebrations that marked the Allied victories in Europe and the Pacific at the close of World War II. However, after the Civil War many southern communities doggedly refused to celebrate Independence Day until during or after World War II.

²⁰ Robeson’s Indian community doubtless remember Col. Francis Marion Wishart and his brothers much less fondly, due in part to photographic images showing the revenging Wisharts huddled over the dead body of Tom Lowry. See Lowery, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation, 16-18.

²¹ Indeed, turpentine was produced by members of all three of the community’s core racial groups. Over time, however, its regional importance drastically diminished in favor of more profitable cash crops, particularly cotton and tobacco.

²² For a description of Aunt Caroline’s place (as well as an accompanying photo), see the “Robeson County Historical Edition” of the Robesonian (26-Feb-1951, Section B, p. 10).

²³ For example, Robesonian staffers alerted Mr. C to upcoming censorship proposals as they sought him out to comment on recent local ministerial rhetoric (as discussed in Chapter V).

²⁴ How or why the Wishart brothers pursued their separate denominational affiliations remains unknown.

²⁵ Like Walter, John H. Wishart also served the Lumberton community as a town commissioner.

²⁶ For example, see the “Robeson County Development Edition” of the Robesonian (29-Jan-1932), the “Tobacco Harvest” edition (Ibid., 29-Jul-1929), or virtually any edition celebrating an incremental five- or ten-year anniversary of the Robesonian, such as the 45th Anniversary Edition (16-May-1915).

²⁷ Indeed, just such a retrospective was published only a few months after Mr. C's death (Ibid., 26-Feb-1951, Section 1, p. 2).

²⁸ Wishart's first "daily program" styled advertisement was published in the Robesonian on 9-Mar-1914 (p. 5). Ten days later, Wishart took out an ad for George Kleine's film adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It included a large, still-framed image of the Roman army marching through Egypt. When published on 19-Mar-1914 (p.8), it represented Robeson County's first photographic motion-picture advertisement.

²⁹ The precise reason for Wishart's departure from the Robesonian cannot be verified, largely because Wishart seems not to have commented on it in print. However, given his fondness for the Robesonian and the stability of the paper's management, his subsequent career moves were probably designed to increase his income, as by 1900 Wishart was responsible for providing for a family of four.

³⁰ Walter and Willie were also the adoptive parents of Helen Wishart. However, after living for many years with Willie and Walter, Helen married James P. Townsend of Lumberton in 1903. Since Elizabeth Wishart never married and died childless, Walter and Willie have no surviving biological descendants. However, some of Mrs. Helen W(ishart) Townsend's descendants continue to live in the Robeson County area.

³¹ Summarized from Morey, "Early Film Exhibition in Wilmington, North Carolina." As was true of Lumberton's Pastime Theatre, Wilmington's first theater outlasted virtually all of its rivals.

[NOTE: Wilmington also represents the most extensively documented community featured in *Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina*, a digital library of local moviegoing histories encompassing more than a thousand North Carolina exhibition sites. See Allen and (Project), [Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina](#).]

³² See Figure 3.11 later in this chapter. Note that the northern and western spurs leading to Raleigh and Charlotte (respectively) intersected at a major railway junction in Hamlet, North Carolina, yet another town in which Wishart managed a theater. The Seaboard Air Line Railway additionally connected Lumberton, Laurinburg and Bladenboro, three other towns in which Wishart managed theaters. However, most of the South Carolina communities where Wishart was posted lay along the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, and these posting likely required Wishart to change from the SAL that serviced Lumberton to the ACL at either Pembroke, Maxton or Wilmington.

³³ For example, see the *Going to the Show* narratives pertaining to Wilmington's Lyric, Queen and Brooklyn Theatres. Unlike in Lumberton, the presence of a large African-American population motivated Wilmington exhibitors to cater to black moviegoers from fairly early on. For example, the Bijou featured a roped-off section that contained segregated seating for black patrons, and the theater also incorporated designated balcony space for black patrons when the site was transformed from a semi-permanent, outdoor tent-show into a "four-walled" theater. In addition, at least one "colored" movie house remained in operation in Wilmington during the period from 1911 to 1915 while contemporaneous initiatives to implement a colored site in Lumberton were unsuccessful (as described in Chapter VI).

³⁴ Reported in the Robesonian (28-Jul-1910, p. 1).

³⁵ Despite the fact that by 1916 the Lumberton telephone directory listed roughly twenty individuals with a job title of "mgr.," only Wishart was commonly referred to as Manager in the local newspaper. For the 1916 Lumberton city directory, see Chas S. Gardiner, [Lumberton, N.C. City Directory](#), vol. 1 (1916-1917) (Florence, SC: Chas. S. Gardiner, 1916).

³⁶ Though distribution networks were still developing a standardized set of contracts and methodologies in the 1910s, a large number of film-service companies representing both independents producers as well as those allied with the Motion Picture Patents Company Trust (founded in late-1908) could provide exhibitors with "a 'complete service:' a variety package of single-reel and split-reel films that could be 'freshened' every day." See Richard Abel, "The 'Backbone' of the Business: Scanning Signs of Us Film Distribution in the

Newspapers, 1911-1914,” Networks of Entertainment: Early Film Distribution 1895-1915, eds. Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007), 85. Moreover, James Hodges’s motion-picture theater operating manual, published in 1912 less than a year after Walter Wishart opened the Pastime, identified more than three dozen film services available to local operators and outlined the cost structures that could be expected for film rentals. James Floyd Hodges, Opening and Operating a Motion Picture Theatre, How It Is Done Successfully (New York: Scenario Publishing Company, 1912), 13-18. Finally, Gregory Waller has described the wide range of services offered by some film-distribution services during the first half of the 1910s in Gregory A. Waller, “Mapping the Moving Picture World: Distribution in the United States Circa 1915,” Networks of Entertainment: Early Film Distribution 1895-1915, eds. Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff (Eastleigh: John Libbey, 2007).

³⁷ As originally published in the Robesonian (5-Oct-1914, p. 8).

³⁸ According to Gus Hill’s directory of theatrical exhibition venues, twenty-eight facilities identified as Opera Houses were scattered across the Tar Heel State in 1914. See Hill, “Gus Hill’s National Theatrical Directory.” In contrast, the *Going to the Show* database (as of 31-Oct-2011) indicates that a much larger total of approximately 126 motion-picture venues operated in the state during the calendar year.

³⁹ Though records confirming the leasing agreements between the owners of several local theaters and the managers who rented them were commonly recorded in the Robeson County Courthouse (including, as an example, the agreements outlining the operational responsibilities of N.C. Theatres, Incorporated with respect to Lumberton’s Carolina and Pastime Theatres once the Pastime had been purchased by the Carolina’s owners), no leasing records exist involving either the Lumberton Theatre Company or Walter Wishart during his tenure as either Opera House or Pastime manager. However, some leasing agreements were recorded between the Pastime building’s owner and some of Wishart’s Pastime successors.

⁴⁰ Having moved on to work for Hyman H. Anderson in 1917, Walter would find his and Jimmie’s career paths criss-crossing for decades. Nor were the men strangers prior to the Pastime’s opening, as Jimmie was the last bridegroom married in Aunt Caroline’s when the building still served as Walter’s Lumberton home.

⁴¹ In addition to Walter and Jimmie, the original Pastime probably employed at least one other staff member, namely a janitorial assistant responsible for keeping the house clean and heated; in fact, this role probably resembled the one filled by Wishart four decades earlier as a “printer’s devil” in the office of the Robesonian. However, the names of Wishart’s other original staff members (including his piano player) remain unknown.

⁴² Some of the reasons for their apprehension are discussed at length in Chapter V.

⁴³ Undated photo from the Robesonian published in the newspaper’s 45th Anniversary Edition (16-May-1915, Section 4, p. 28).

⁴⁴ Though space constraints would not permit a recitation of Wishart’s many newspaper submissions, a few examples have been provided to offer a flavor of his industriousness. In 1934, the Robesonian thanked Wishart on the eve of his seventy-fifth birthday for his “observation of changes in Lumberton and Robeson county for the past 50 years or more,” and for having “furnished many stories in The Robesonian [that] kept alive interest in the recent history of this section.” As published in the Robesonian (19-Jul-1934, p. 8). These submissions did not end when Wishart was far from home. During his initial posting to Laurinburg in 1918, Wishart submitted on April 11th a letter to the Editor of the Robesonian recounting the location and characteristics of the Lumberton’s original boys’ and girls’ academies, reflections on the use of tallow candles to light homes and stores, and remembrances of the community’s early judicial magistrates and postal workers (Ibid., 11-Apr-1918, p. 4). In congratulating Wishart on the occasion of his eighty-first birthday, the Robesonian referred to Mr. C as “a walking encyclopedia of Robeson county history” (Ibid., 17-Jul-1940, p. 1).

⁴⁵ Ibid. (25-Jul-1927, p. 4).

⁴⁶ Ibid. (see excerpts from 20-Dec-1915, p.1).

⁴⁷ As Wishart had advised Griffin in *Ibid.* (11-May-1922, p. 5).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (18-Dec-1911, p. 1). For an account of a six-piece “midget orchestra” entertaining Pastime customers, see *Ibid.* (5-Feb-1914, p. 1).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (8-Jun-1914, p.1).

⁵⁰ Since we have no extant photos or records of the Pastime’s interior, this account relies on the recollections of Lumberton senior-citizen John Clayton Townsend. Born in 1914 (just a few years after the Pastime opened), Townsend almost certainly attended Pastime shows as a child. However, his memories of the site date primarily from his teenage years when he served as an usher at Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre. After the Carolina’s owners purchased the Pastime, the Carolina’s staff members became familiar with both facilities.

⁵¹ From the records currently available, it appears that—unlike their peers in the Opera House—the Pastime’s patrons were not subjected to bench-style seating.

⁵² Curtains and movie screens were frequently upgraded, especially screens intended to improve visibility. For an account of a local upgrade to a “Goldenlite” screen, see the *Robesonian* (26-Aug-1915, p. 5).

⁵³ A much more popular alternative, i.e., hot-buttered popcorn, was eventually offered in Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre, though it may not have been available at that theater’s debut in 1928 (given the failure of opening day accounts to mention it).

⁵⁴ Lumberton lacked such a facility once the Opera House was shuttered in 1919. Afterwards, large-scale travelling productions were sometimes offered in a local high-school auditorium woefully unsuited to accommodate the rapid installation or dismantling of backdrops and sets. Eventually, the inadequacies of both the high school and the Pastime auditoriums helped to spur local interest in developing a Carolina Theatre that offered vastly improved stage and fly-tower facilities.

⁵⁵ Undated photo of the Pastime appearing in John W. Floyd, *The Pastime and Riverside Theatres: ‘B’ Movies and Serials*, 4-Sep-2011 2011, Heartland Publications, LLC, Available: http://www.robsonian.com/view/full_story/15305342/article-The-Pastime-and-Riverside-theaters--%E2%80%98B%E2%80%99-Movies-and-Serials?instance=feature_local_left_column, 12-Dec-2011. Note that the film identified above the Pastime’s entrance, *Canyon City* starring Don “Red” Barry, was initially released in November 1943.

⁵⁶ For additional accounts of the General Film Company’s distribution practices, see George Potamianos, “Building Movie Audiences in Placerville, California, 1908-1915,” *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 80, and Richard Abel, “The Movies in A “Not So Visible Place:” Des Moines, Iowa, 1911-1914,” *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*, ed. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 110-11.

⁵⁷ Steven Joseph Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 104.

⁵⁸ For an account of the influence of Pathé films on early American cinema, see Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ Per the *Robesonian* (10-Mar-1913, p.1). Though Wishart lacked the ability to sequence or hold certain films in order to balance popular serials with overtly religious fare, religious pictures were welcome offerings to all managers concerned with deflecting local charges of cinematic immorality.

⁶⁰ See *Ibid.* (5-Feb-1914, p. 1).

⁶¹ For example, see *Ibid.* (16-Oct-1913, p. 1 and 28-Feb-1916, p. 1). Wishart's first protracted local competitor, the Star Theatre, soon adopted a similar promotional campaign (*Ibid.*, 29-Mar-1915, p. 1). Perhaps because they encouraged school attendance, these promotions do not appear to have raised the ire of local ministers, who often expressed their dismay at the number of children attending motion-picture shows.

⁶² See, for example, the celebrations of Master John H Wishart, Jr. (Mr. C's nephew) and Miss Annie Buie as reported in *Ibid.* (30-Nov-1916, p. 1 and 3-Sep-1917, p. 1). Promotional schemes that rewarded children with modest gratuities at local businesses were common in each Robeson community that established a local movie house. Trips to local soda fountains were perhaps the most commonly reported adjunct to birthday-related exhibitions.

⁶³ One of the several related promotional advertisements originally published in *Ibid.* (15-Jun-1914, p. 5).

⁶⁴ As an example of a "dish night" promotion, see *Ibid.* (29-Feb-1912, p. 5).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* (30-Jul-1914, p. 5).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* (15-Jun-1914, p. 5).

⁶⁷ An example of these tin-cans drives will be explored further in Chapter VI.

⁶⁸ This tradition continued under Wishart's successor, J. W. Griffin. See the *Robesonian* (11-May-1922, p. 1).

⁶⁹ Although several states (including Tennessee and Virginia) have claimed the honor of contributing the greatest number of troops and/or casualties to the Confederate cause, no complete set of military statistics is known that accounts for all Southern enlistment and service records. However, based on statistics compiled in late 1864 by Richard C. Gatlin, North Carolina's Adjutant-General during the Civil War, the Old North State appears to have provided approximately 125,000 troops (and suffered a total of 40,000 military service deaths) during the conflict. Compiled in conjunction with the North Carolina Museum of History, these statistics have been described in further detail on the webpage entitled "North Carolina: American Civil War" (accessed 11-Nov-2011) currently located at the web address <http://thomaslegion.net/confederate.html>.

⁷⁰ Both Walter and his daughter, Elizabeth, would become faithful members of the St Francis de Sales parish.

⁷¹ Ultimately, the enduring popularity of relatively inexpensive motion-picture exhibitions doomed the Opera House to commercial obsolescence. By the fall of 1919, the facility abandoned commercial entertainment when a local couple was permitted to rent the site and redesign its interior spaces, thereby transforming Dr. Vampill's original music hall into the Elm Inn, a local boarding house. As a result, little is known about either the original construction or the interior appointments of the Opera House. According to a news story published around the time of its demolition, the Opera House was a tin-sided, two-story building whose "exterior was imprinted and painted as red brick 'mortared' with white." After parading past the offices on its first floor, theater patrons trooped up to a second-floor auditorium. Though photos taken during the building's demolition appear to show evidence of a high-gabled roof above the second story, definitive evidence confirming the existence of a potential Opera House balcony remains unknown. However, newspaper accounts suggest that the site contained some sort of gallery, a gallery possibly used to provide segregated seating, as well as a special "box" for Dr. Vampill's personal use. See Sharpe-Ward, "Once Proud in Its Heyday, City's 'Opera House' Dies." According to scattered newspaper and oral accounts, the Opera House's auditorium was light gray, while a red curtain fronted its stage. The facility also included dressing rooms for the actors, presumably on its first floor. Though the entire space was heated by coal or wood stoves, its stage eventually featured electric footlights.

In the years prior to its conversion to the Elm Inn, the former-Opera House building housed several businesses (including a newspaper press) on its first floor. In fact, immediately prior to its final conversion into the Elm Inn, the Opera House briefly hosted a colored movie theater—presumably in its original auditorium.

After its remodeling, the Elm Inn continued to operate for many years. Yet after having been severely damaged by fire on at least one occasion, it passed through the hands of various owners and commercial lenders until finally being torn down in 1966.

⁷² In the spring of 1918, its interior space was reconfigured for use as a McLellan's "5 & 10-cent" store that began operating a year later in the site.

⁷³ See Appendix II for details of simultaneous theater operations in each of Robeson's principal towns prior to 1950. In addition, Chapter IV includes an extended discussion of the rare cases of simultaneous theater operation occurring in these communities.

⁷⁴ The Robesonian (19-Nov-1914, p. 8).

⁷⁵ Useful news items concerning the development of (and programming within) the Lumbee Theatre can be located in the following issues of the Robesonian: 17-Sep-1914, p. 1; 15-Oct-1914, p. 1; 22-Oct-1914, p. 1; 26-Oct-1914, pp. 1 and 4; 12-Nov-1914, p. 1; and 7-Jan-1915, p. 1. For an advertisement for the McCarthy show, see *Ibid.* (16-Nov-1914, p. 8).

⁷⁶ Unallied with the Motion Picture Patents Company Trust, whose members actively discouraged one another from producing multiple-reel films, independent producers turned to lengthier films as a way of establishing a own competitive advantage. Beginning in roughly 1912, MPPC members began to follow suit in the wake of strongly favorable audience reactions to longer feature films.

⁷⁷ Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture, 48. According to Fuller, the release in 1915 of *Birth of a Nation* represented a tipping point marking a broad transition towards producing and distributing feature films in the United States. According to Fuller, the year 1915 also represented the symbolic end of the nickelodeon era, at least in metropolitan communities (47).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* (26-Oct-1914, p. 1). What Wishart did not say, though it was likely understood by all Robesonian subscribers, was that the local racial demographics had drastically reduced potential audience sizes at both the Lumbee and the Pastime sites, each of which operated exclusively for whites. In 1914 (as noted in Appendix I), Robeson County's population was approximately forty-five percent white. In addition, due to the decentralized nature of the county's residential population, as well as the local travel burdens described in Chapter IV, Wishart's primary audience probably consisted of little more than the 2,400 residents of Lumberton, minus the town's several hundred African Americans.

⁷⁹ For articles, advertisements and sundry news items related to the Star Theatre, see the following issues of *Ibid.*: 8-Mar-1915, p. 5; 3-Jun-1915, p. 1; 23-Sep-1915, p. 5; 28-Oct-1915, pp. 3-4; and 29-Nov-1915, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Originally published in *Ibid.* (27-May-1915, p. 5).

⁸¹ Originally published in *Ibid.* (1-Jul-1915, p. 5).

⁸² Mr. C knew Pearl White personally, having met her when she performed in a stock theater troupe that had been booked into the Lumberton Opera House. See "At the Movies" in *Ibid.* (19-Jul-1915, p. 4).

⁸³ Originally published in *Ibid.* (11-Mar-1915, p. 5). However, Little Mary's films did not guarantee a theater's long-term success: Wishart rotated a number of Pickford films through both the Lumbee and Lyric theaters, yet was unable to make a go at either site.

⁸⁴ For an account of the nomination and election process, see *Ibid.* (29-Apr-1914, p. 1). Wishart was successfully elected as commissioner four days later.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* (30-Apr-1914, p. 4).

⁸⁶ News stories and editorials concerning this initiative were originally published in *Ibid.* (2-Aug-1915, p. 1; 9-Aug-1915, p. 1; 26-Aug-1915, p. 1).

⁸⁷ As recounted in the Wishart entries in Lawrence, The State of Robeson. A beloved citizen, Wishart was hardly a career politician. He served as town commissioner for just one term, perhaps because his ongoing competition with the Star required his full attention. However, Wishart campaigned again for office in 1916 — only not for himself. Instead, he lobbied for E. M. Johnson as his successor, and thanks in part to Wishart's electioneering, Johnson's bid proved successful. Johnson would eventually serve several terms as Lumberton's mayor, and roughly twenty-five years after Wishart first helped him to office, then-Mayor E. M. Johnson took great pleasure in congratulating on behalf of the entire Lumberton community a retiring Walter Wishart for his decades of service in the motion-picture industry. As reported in the Robesonian (30-Jul-1941, p. 3).

⁸⁸ LeBeau's "whites only" site-orientation is discussed at length in Chapter VI.

⁸⁹ Although anecdotal evidence suggests that the Pastime may have engaged in segregated "owl" shows for black patrons, and despite the fact that though news accounts indicate that race-specific modifications had been incorporated into the Opera House, Wishart's other venue, as early as 1908, there is no hard evidence to confirm that the Pastime ever admitted non-white patrons during the 1910s. The Pastime's balcony, a feature generally required to segregate non-white audience members locally, was not added to the structure until the summer of 1926, or roughly the same time (as discussed in Chapter VI) that several other theaters were implementing segregated balconies across the region.

⁹⁰ The Robesonian (9-Mar-1916, p. 5).

⁹¹ *Ibid.* (27-Mar-1916, p. 5).

⁹² *Ibid.* (16-Mar-1916, p. 8).

⁹³ For articles related to Kilian's tenure at the Lyric, see *Ibid.* (2-Nov-1916, p. 1, and 1-Feb-1917, p. 5).

⁹⁴ For articles related to Wishart's tenure at the Lyric, see *Ibid.* (2-Apr-1917, pp. 4-5; 16-Apr-1917, p. 8; and 21-May-1917, p. 5).

⁹⁵ Only with the opening of the Carolina Theatre in 1928 did Lumberton resume its position as the only Robeson County town capable of supporting two concurrently operating local picture-shows. Even so, as discussed below, that experiment quickly proved unsuccessful.

⁹⁶ This question is discussed at length in Chapter IV.

⁹⁷ "Front-man," rather than "front-person," is an intentional gender distinction, since early motion-picture theater management was dominated by men. During the entire period covered by this study, the first known instance of a female theater manager in Robeson occurred in October 1942, when Mrs. Norbert E. (Josephine) Bass took over the Pastime when her husband, the site's incumbent operator, joined the Navy. However, during the war women operated in capacities well beyond the roles formerly offered to them in theaters—roles largely limited to popcorn-machine operators, usherettes, musicians or ticket sellers. Scores if not hundreds of women were trained in theater operations during World War II. In the case of Mrs. Bass, this training was provided in facilities opened by Robert B. Wilby and Herbert F. Kincey, the directors of the Wilby-Kincey organization. Wilby-Kincey operated the largest theater chain in the South between 1930 and 1970, and represented an important subsidiary of the national Paramount-Publix conglomerate from 1926 until 1950. For a fascinating account of wartime picture-show operations both at home and overseas, see "Hello, from the Men Behind You Men," (Greensboro, NC: Wilby-Kincey Theatres, 1942-45). A copy of this multi-volume serial published during the war by Wilby-Kincey staffers may be found in the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁹⁸ See Harold B. Franklin, Motion Picture Theater Management (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927), 29.

⁹⁹ Gregory A. Waller, “Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater,” Cinema Journal 44.3 (2005): 15.

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, one of these sales coincided with Walter’s final departure from the Pastime. See “Sale of Real Estate for Town Taxes” in the Robesonian (18-Oct-1917, p. 2).

¹⁰¹ Ironically, the deed office located in the basement of the County Courthouse sits directly across Elm Street from the former Pastime and Opera House sites.

¹⁰² From 1910 to the beginning of World War I (barring 1912), the United States experienced recession-level reductions in business productivity, consumer spending, and/or personal income. In fact, the United States was experiencing a rare period of deflation as the Pastime opened. See Victor Zarnowitz, Business Cycles: Theory, History, Indicators, and Forecasting (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 226-9.

¹⁰³ The Robesonian (2-Apr-1917, p. 4). Note that by the spring of 1919, the former theater was operating as a McLellan’s five-and-dime store.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson’s leases were extended until 1929, when the Pastime was transferred back to local ownership via the Lumberton Theater Corporation, the organization charged with operating the Carolina Theatre. Yet by 1930, the LTC leased both of its theaters (i.e., the Carolina and the Pastime) back to the Anderson outfit in a series of facilities-management agreements over the next decade. In 1939, however, the LTC left the Anderson chain and entered into a formal relationship with a much larger regional theater manager, the Wilby-Kincey Corporation, through a joint venture operated as part of the N.C. Theaters Corporation. Copies of the agreements struck between the LTC and Anderson, as well as those between the LTC and N.C. Theatres, remain on file in the deed office in the basement of the Robeson County courthouse.

¹⁰⁵ Some of Wishart’s descendents claim that Mr. C was one of the first Lumbertonians to own an automobile. Though a personal vehicle would have been extraordinarily useful to a traveler like Wishart, even if he owned a car the poor quality of local road systems would have forced Wishart to drive a few hours each way in order to cover the roughly 20-to-40 mile distances to and from Lumberton.

¹⁰⁶ In fact, the Pastime may have represented just the second house in the Anderson chain. By 1917, Anderson had taken control of a theater in Hamlet, possibly one operating out of that village’s Opera House facility, prior to engaging in his Pastime lease.

¹⁰⁷ The Robesonian (7-Jan-1918, p. 1). The newspaper noted Williamson’s return on 14-Jan-1918, though his subsequent departure for the armed services was noted less than six months later (Ibid., 4-Jul-1918, p. 1).

¹⁰⁸ As recounted in Ibid. (18-Jun-1928, p. 5). During the 1920s, Griffin attempted to build his own regional theater chain, and by 1924 he also controlled theaters in Laurinburg and Fairmont.

¹⁰⁹ However, Griffin was forced to leave Lumberton by early 1929 in the wake of financial disputes over rental payments that the manager had failed to forward to the Carolina’s owners. Ibid. (7-Jan-1929, p. 1).

¹¹⁰ Map selection derived from North Carolina Department of Transportation website (<http://www.ncdot.gov/travel/mappubs/statetransportationmap/>) accessed on 27-Apr-2010. The map dates from 2008, and the blue circles superimposed on it indicate all of the towns in which Walter Wishart managed theaters. Note that the rail links connecting all of these towns were fully in place prior to Mr. C’s engagement with the Andersons in 1917. [Those rail links currently appear on the map as elements in a now-consolidated “CSX” system.]

¹¹¹ Of these cities, it’s worth noting that Charlotte acted as the central distribution and collection point for most of the film-exchanges operating in the Carolinas.

¹¹² Even trivial items could motivate Wishart to send submissions back home, as when he commemorated the 49th anniversary of an especially severe frost that had hit the county on April 26th, 1873 and had killed off all local crops (see the Robesonian, 1-May-1922, p. 4). In addition, on the occasion of the Robesonian's fifty-fourth anniversary, a then Whiteville-based Wishart regaled Robeson County residents with humorous stories of the paper's earliest days, in whose offices "I spent some of my happiest young days working...nearly half a century ago" (Ibid., 18-Feb-1924, p. 6).

¹¹³ Several major industry figures including Carl Laemmle (Universal), William Fox (Fox), and Marcus Loew (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) operated local theaters—usually many at once—from central offices. See Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States, 30. While national exhibition chains have been documented in significant detail, largely as a result of their role in the anti-competitive practices which led to the Paramount Decree, regional exhibition chains represent a potentially fertile area for additional scholarly investigation. For instance, though Gomery mentions several less well-known regional chain operators alongside more well-known players like the Loew's, Stanley Company, and Balaban & Katz regional chains (Ibid., p. 38), relatively little appears to be known about how smaller regional chains developed, how they may or may not have differed from one another, and how they established and implemented their operating practices and procedures (perhaps leveraging the department- and chain-store business models discussed by Gomery (Ibid., Chapter Three)).

¹¹⁴ Originally published in the Laurinburg Exchange, the story found its way on Christmas Eve 1923 to the front page of the Robesonian. Similarly, once Wishart was scheduled to leave Whiteville after an extended posting there to return to Lumberton, the Whiteville News Record reported that since his arrival in 1923, Wishart "has become a vital part" of daily town life. Reprinted in the Robesonian (20-Jul-1931, p. 6).

¹¹⁵ As reported in Ibid. (25-Jul-1927, p. 4).

¹¹⁶ While several previous accounts of early exhibitions have recognized the key role played by itinerant showmen who acted as the industry's principal exhibitors in the years *prior* to the development of static, fixed-wall houses like the Pastime, these histories have less extensively documented the expansion and subsequent integration of regional exhibition chains. Though extensive analysis of regional-chain business methods and practices remain rare, some useful discussion of them have been included in Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture. In addition, a comprehensive overview of exhibition business practices across the country has been presented throughout Gomery, Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States.

¹¹⁷ From Marion Peter Holt, Magical Places: The Story of Spartanburg's Theatres & Their Entertainments, 1900-1950 (Spartanburg, SC: Hub City Writers Project, 2004), 59. Holt's comments were directed specifically within the context of the operating practices of the Wilby-Kincey organization.

¹¹⁸ As recounted in the Robesonian (6-Aug-1931, p. 8).

¹¹⁹ The Pastime had been extensively overhauled in 1926, when in addition to being aired-out, repainted, and generally spruced up, the theater underwent a permanent expansion of its seating capacity through the installation of a 140-seat balcony. Whether or not the Pastime's balcony was accessed by non-white patrons prior to 1934 remains unknown at this time; however, the Pastime's balcony reconfigurations in 1934 are discussed at length in Chapter VI.

¹²⁰ Image from the Robesonian (2-Feb-1940, p. 6). Wishart confirmed that his role as manager of the Carolina Theater's balcony spaces began 1931 in a Robesonian article published on 19-May-1937 (p. 4). Whether or not the Carolina admitted non-white patrons of any kind prior to his establishment as its balcony manager at the site remains unknown at this time.

¹²¹ As originally published in Ibid. (31-Jul-1941, p. 6).

¹²² See *Ibid.* (particularly the issues published on 22-Jul-1941, 31-Jul-1941, and 1-Aug-1941) for a wide variety of stories related to Wishart's retirement.

¹²³ Even today, major historical editions of the Robesonian usually include a reprint of one or more of Mr. C's recollections of early Lumberton.

¹²⁴ Local disagreements over the potential moral appropriateness of motion-picture entertainment, including Wishart's role in those debates, have been discussed at length in Chapter V.

¹²⁵ J. W. Griffin, for example, managed the *Pastime* for approximately four years longer than Mr. C.

¹²⁶ As recounted in the Robesonian (21-Dec-1938, p. 2).

¹²⁷ Three years after Wishart's NFC project fell through, Hyman Anderson attempted to organize and execute a similar deal with the Acme Film Co., again without success. Subsequent initiatives involving several local parties proved equally unsuccessful until the Waters effort in 1941.

¹²⁸ The largest collection of material pertaining to the small-town films recorded by H. Lee Waters throughout the Carolinas is located in the H. Lee Waters Collection, a major component of the Special Collections Library located in Duke University's Perkins Library. The collection's materials include a combined business datebook and ledger indicating that the Lumberton show occurred on the evening of December 5, 1941. Though a copy of the Lumberton film does not exist in the Waters collection at Duke, the author had obtained a copy cloned from recording owned by Robeson County historian Henry A. McKinnon, who confirmed the identity of Walter Wishart while viewing the film with the author.

¹²⁹ This represents one of the principal claims pursued in Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture.

¹³⁰ A topic discussed at length in Chapter V.

¹³¹ Ross, Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America, 30.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL-TOWN EXHIBITION IN ROBESON COUNTY.¹

Though Walter Wishart was the first resident of Robeson County to establish a local picture show, he was hardly its last. The Pastime's success attracted the attention of other regional entrepreneurs aware of the nickelodeon boom that had transformed the streetscapes of many American cities and towns. Nevertheless, motion-picture exhibitions arrived significantly more slowly in Robeson's other sizable communities than they did in Lumberton. In fact, developmental heterogeneity long characterized small-town moviegoing developments in Robeson, where the temporal lags experienced during the establishment of Lumbertonian moviegoing relative to similar developments in a metropolis like New York simply foreshadowed a second set of developmental lags, namely the differentials between cinema's arrival in Lumberton in comparison to the timing and manner of its arrival in each Robeson community that succeeded in opening at least one picture show prior to 1950. The metropolitan environment more familiar to social and cinema historians experienced significantly more volatility than did moviegoing infrastructures in Robeson during the first several decades of the twentieth century. That infrastructure remained simpler and far less ornate, and Robeson's handful of Main Street venues provided neither the spectacular architectural excesses nor the service-oriented comforts of urban America's ornate, elegant, and massive picture palaces. Taken together, the small-town developmental narratives generated within this study suggest that neither the rapid expansion (and subsequent contraction) of nickelodeon-style venues, nor the arrival of palatial theaters, were either

necessary or even characteristic features of small-town American moviegoing during the first half of the twentieth century. Instead, Robeson County's exhibition history indicates that a heterogeneous set of development narratives and timeframes are needed to account for the experiences of small-town exhibitors and moviegoers. The following town-by-town review of moviegoing developments in the largest geopolitical sub-unit of North Carolina severely challenges the national applicability of common historical theatrical trends and the extensibility of certain historical cinema-exhibition taxonomies to the majority of the communities in which most Americans lived during the first several generations of commercial moviegoing.²

Consider, for example, the extraordinary competition between the nickelodeon operators clustered along Manhattan's Broadway from 1906 to the early 1910s. Even as their activities resulted in a startlingly rapid expansion of storefront theaters and nickelodeons within a few square miles, small-town entrepreneurs in the nearly one-thousand square miles of Robeson struggled to open a single dedicated Main Street motion-picture theater. As urban picture-palace impresarios during the latter 1910s tapped into large pools of capital to create a series of impressive architectural monoliths that relegated local picture-shows overnight to second-class status, many of Robeson's eight most-heavily populated communities only Lumberton managed by the late-1920s to support two simultaneously operating movie houses, albeit never for more than a few months at a time. In fact, only half of these small towns managed to support a single dedicated movie theater as late as 1924, and while three of the remaining four established a downtown theater by 1939, the five-hundred-and-twenty-seven residents of Parkton by 1950 never boasted of a local movie house that they could call their own. Active competition between multiple small-town

venues in Robeson was largely non-existent. Once a single local theater finally managed to operate for more than six months consecutively, it became the only game in town—very often doing so for decades.

In order to place this chapter's detailed histories of early exhibition in each of Robeson's principal incorporated areas (save Lumberton and Pembroke) within a broader national context, it is useful to summarize several of the exhibition trends and their associated timelines that have dominated United States cinema history to date. The following synopsis has been derived from accounts produced by exhibition scholars Douglas Gomery, Greg Waller, Kathy Fuller-Seeley, and Barbara Stones:

1. Until approximately 1905/06, itinerant operators dominated film exhibitions across the nation by transporting camera equipment to project early motion pictures onto portable screens and their equivalent (e.g., bed linens, canvas tent walls, and the interior or exterior walls of a surprisingly diverse set of buildings). Film screenings were also widely incorporated into travelling road-shows and vaudeville performances, many of which were held in local Opera House or music-hall auditoriums.
2. Itinerant exhibitions were succeeded by the migration of cinematic exhibitions into more permanent walled venues that offered an all-weather alternative to exhibitors weary of constant travel and to audiences hungry for more regularized access to the cinema. Beginning around 1906 and lasting until roughly 1913, cinema operators caught up in the industry's "nickelodeon boom" rapidly converted an assortment of commercial spaces, halls, auditoriums, Opera Houses, and former stage theaters into venues either partially or fully dedicated to motion-pictures. During this era, exhibitors aggressively competed for patrons in local environments characterized what seemed to be an ever-expanding set of moviegoing options.
3. After peaking in 1910-11, the pace of nickelodeon openings subsided in the face of the industry over-expansion. Faced with having to present audiences a largely undifferentiated film product, exhibitors sought to establish a competitive advantage by developing impressive venues that notionally contributed an "event" status to cinema exhibitions. By the mid-1910s, they began to construct massive, multi-story picture palaces whose seating capacities dwarfed those of storefront theaters. In time, picture palaces began to appear outside of the country's major metropolitan communities, and elaborate palace construction projects continued in many cities throughout the 1920s and on into the earliest years of the Great Depression.

4. Due to their economies of scale, picture palaces tended to survive the industry's transition into the Sound Era. Since the wider introduction of "talking" pictures (circa 1928/29) led to a series of innovations requiring periodic and costly audio and projection technology upgrades, picture palaces serving large audiences tended to engage sound projection first, while many older and more modest theaters either closed or were reduced to less-expensive "second-run" houses. Buffeted by upgrade cost increases at a time when the depression had crippled the nation's economic infrastructure, many theaters (both large and small) were either shuttered or incorporated into regional or national theater chains pursuing favorable economies of scale.
5. By the latter 1930s, the American economy had improved sufficiently to support the development of additional large, if often less opulent, theaters. In addition, by the early 1950s thousands of drive-in theaters in open-air lots offered a relatively cheap and family-friendly alternative to four-walled or "hardtop" theaters by allowing "ozoners" to view motion pictures from the privacy of their own automobiles.³

In contrast, a highly limited set of small-town moviegoing options persisted long after the initial arrival of local exhibitions. This developmental lag paralleled Robeson's extraordinarily fitful introduction to cinema, when few—and in many cases no—itinerant exhibitors bothered to visit most of the county's smaller towns and hamlets. Those that did rarely returned for a subsequent engagement; in fact, not even in Lumberton would Robeson residents experience more than a handful of sporadic itinerant visits even as a contemporaneous nickelodeon explosion was permanently altering the landscape of American popular entertainment. If in Robeson this irregular itinerancy eventually gave way very slowly to dedicated exhibition sites, the county's first storefront theater did not open until almost 1912, or slightly after the peak of the country's nickelodeon boom had already passed.

The town-by-town review which follows indicates that the industry's "nickelodeon age" essentially bypassed Robeson County, and that the conversion of Opera Houses and/or storefronts into nickel theaters generally occurred nearly a full generation after similar incorporations in major metropolitan cities. Additionally, since most of Robeson's dedicated

picture shows remained their local community's principal theater through the late 1940s, virtually no Robesonian operator ever faced the aggressive competition that characterized the big-city nickelodeon era. Indeed, from 1900 to 1920 the only set of exhibition activities that even marginally resembled aggressive nickelodeon-style competition occurred from 1914 to 1917 and was effectively restricted to the competition between two Lumberton venues, the Pastime and the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric Theatres.⁴ Throughout the 1930s, most county residents never had an opportunity to choose between two local theaters, and by 1950 only the communities of Lumberton, Pembroke and Red Springs actively supported more than one hardtop theater. At no time during the period from 1900 to 1940, during which the county's aggregate population nearly doubled to seventy-seven thousand residents, had any town other than Lumberton successfully supported multiple theaters.⁵

Finally, with one exception, picture-palace developments bypassed every community in Robeson County. By 1950, only two venues in Lumberton featured a seating capacity approaching one-thousand patrons; rather, most of Robeson's small-town theaters seated four-hundred patrons or less. Though Lumberton's Riverside Theatre (opened in 1939) featured the most seats of any county venue, only one site, Lumberton's Carolina Theatre, had incorporated both the scale and architectural embellishments of a motion-picture palace.⁶ However, the Lumberton's Carolina grand opening in 1928 occurred roughly fifteen years after picture palaces accommodating a few thousand patrons, or a seating capacity larger than the total population of most Robeson County towns by 1950, had begun to proliferate in New York prior to their migration to larger communities across the country. If it was true, as Kathy Fuller has suggested, that during the picture-palace era "it became the height of civic responsibility and pride for any town or medium-sized city with aspirations toward big-city

status to have a picture palace,”⁷ within Robeson only Lumberton’s moviegoers experienced local moviegoing conditions even marginally approximating the scale and elegance of picture-palace exhibition. Moreover, only they faced the prospect of attending either a premier “first-run” or a more modest “second-run” theater, i.e., the Carolina and the Pastime Theatres (respectively). Since almost no Robeson communities supported multiple exhibition sites until after World War II, in most cases a town’s second site usually arrived in the form of a drive-in located on the outskirts of town. Indeed, the construction of four or more drive-in theaters during the middle-1940s represented one of the two most active periods of theater development in Robeson history. Only with the arrival of drive-ins could most Robesonians experience the novelty of choosing between two local cinemas, an option that had been taken for granted by metropolitan moviegoers for roughly two generations. However, this choice remained limited to residents with access to an automobile.

Consequently, this study claims that the meaning, applicability, and temporal relevance of American cinema’s “itinerant,” “nickelodeon,” and “picture palace” eras and terminology may need to be redefined and recalibrated to account for the early moviegoing experiences of the nation’s smaller communities, while some may need to be restricted to the larger urban centers in which they occurred. In Robeson, cinematic developments were handcuffed by the demographic limitations of the county’s less populated towns and villages, almost none of which managed to support even a single local storefront theater until its population passed one-thousand residents. Even when that demographic barrier had been breached, few communities managed to sustain regular exhibitions until the mid-1920s, and some failed to do so until the late-1930s. These delays would have frustrated potential moviegoers in several ways. While perhaps a few thousand Robesonians likely attended at

least one early cinematic exhibition by 1920, most of the county's population had no reasonable access to a downtown theater until long after the silent era had ended. The highly sporadic and peripheral availability of silent films probably meant that several generations of local moviegoers missed out entirely on the careers of pioneering actors, actresses, and directors. The odds of any Robesonian not living in close proximity to Lumberton managing to become a regular devotee of silent cinema remained extraordinarily high given the travel burdens and other socio-economic challenges which restricted opportunities for rural residents to engage meaningfully in film culture. In addition, the racial separatism that structured life in all Southern communities whether rural or not throughout the period covered by this study further limited moviegoing opportunities for all non-white residents.⁸

The narratives demonstrating the slow, inconsistent, and uneven development of cinematic exhibition in Robeson that follow confirm the fact that a significant amount of developmental variation existed even within the local moviegoing terrain of a largely homogeneous set of rural small towns. With the possible exception of Lumberton, a regional center featuring a population twice as large as that of any other county town, across Robeson's communities the timing and pace of early exhibition development tended to be correlated most closely with increased population growth rates rather than simply with a town's aggregate population. Most towns experienced a few very short-lived exhibition operations that failed before the establishment of the first successful local theaters, almost all of which proceeded to serve as the single Main Street venue operating in their respective communities for decades to come. One impediment to local theatrical developments stemmed from the glacial improvement in local downtown commercial infrastructures, a trend that seldom offered potential entrepreneurs inexpensive and rentable storefront space.

When picture shows did arrive, they tended to be founded by either local natives or long-term residents. Few non-Robesonians successfully opened or operated early local theaters, and none of their operations were initially developed or sponsored by either a regional or national exhibition chain. With very few exceptions, Robeson's theaters remained small, modest, and functional affairs. The numerous facility improvements undertaken in them were designed not to differentiate theaters which, in the virtual absence of competition, effectively operated as local monopolies, but rather to remain technologically current and operationally sound.

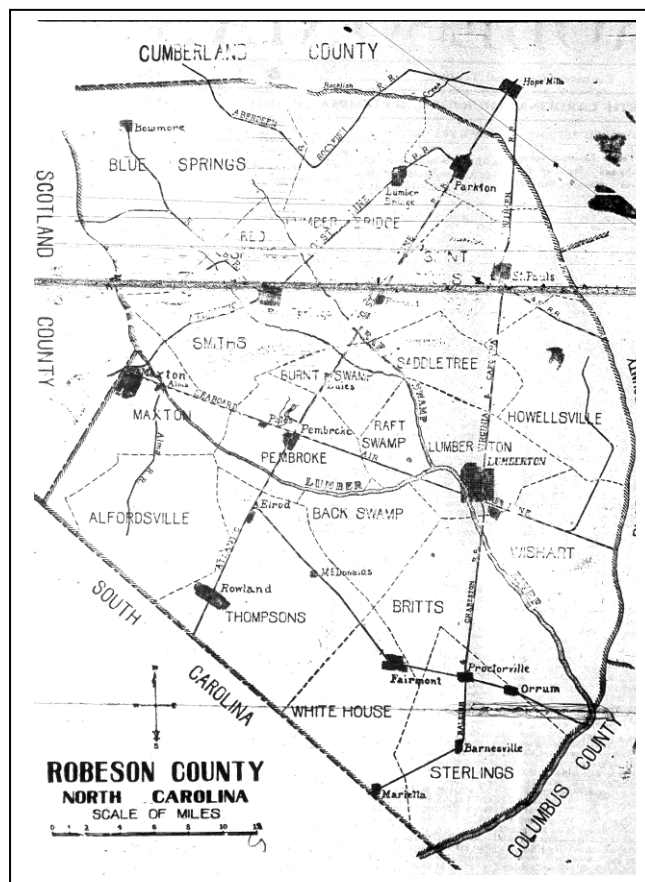


Figure 4.1: Hand-crafted map of Robeson County's principal towns (circa 1910).⁹

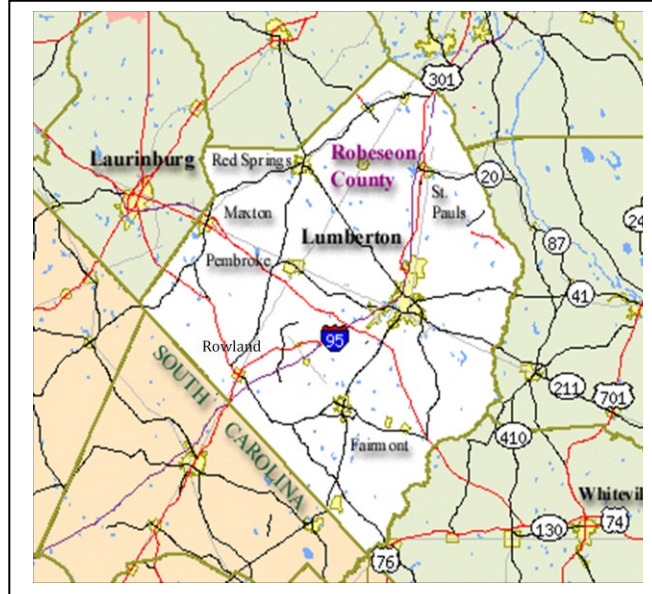


Figure 4.2: GIS-based map showing the relative position of Robeson County’s largest towns today. Note the relative distances between Maxton and the towns of Red Springs, Pembroke, Lumberton, and Scotland County’s Laurinburg.¹⁰

Maxton

Experiences in Maxton testify to the unevenness of early exhibition developments throughout Robeson County. Located northwest of Lumberton and adjacent to the Robeson-Scotland County border, Maxton hosted Robeson’s first moving-picture show in 1897 when an itinerant exhibitor, Ernest V. Richards, screened on the evening of May 27th an unidentified set of films during a fundraiser for a local militia group held in the Maxton Armory. Despite the novelty of the evening’s entertainment, both Richards and the militia’s fundraising committee were dismayed by a smaller-than-expected crowd that probably resulted from the event’s having been pushed forward a few days, perhaps to accommodate last-minute changes in Richards’ itinerary.¹¹ Unfortunately, the Armory show marked the last time in which Maxton led the county in any significant exhibition development. After the Armory show, only a few itinerant operators appear ever to have visited Maxton. If local

residents were stunned by scenes in the late fall of 1906 depicting the recent Russo-Japanese conflict, the lack of a sizable local exhibition hall meant that a tent-based show like this remained subject to the vagaries of inclement weather—often memorably so. Nearly seven decades later one Maxton resident named Baxter Morris believed that had it not been for the novelty of these early cinema exhibitions, local residents would not have subjected themselves to enduring tent-shows of any kind during the extreme cold snap afflicting the region at the time.¹²

According to all of the evidence currently available, more than two decades passed between the Armory show and Maxton’s initial short-lived attempt to establish a permanent exhibition venue in a site almost directly across the street from western Robeson’s most elegant inn, the Maple Shade Hotel.¹³ Built sometime after 1911 on a site roughly corresponding today to 124 Main Street (or McCaskill Avenue), the two-story “ACME” building by May 1919 housed a first-floor storefront theater located beneath the town’s Masonic lodge. The site’s moving-picture show was probably owned and initially managed by Howard McNair. McNair subsequently rented the operation to the youthful trio of Robert U. “Chink” Woods, Earl Fite, and Thomas Little, at least one of whom (Woods) had recently been discharged from military service. While waiting to enroll in Davidson College, Woods and his colleagues provided local patrons with thrice-daily moving-picture shows on a six-day-a-week basis. Many decades later, Woods believed these early shows, given the lack of sound roads in the area, had been heavily attended in part because the musically-inclined Fite arranged for a five-piece orchestra to provide live musical accompaniment to the operation’s silent film fare. Nevertheless, the Woods outfit’s operation lasted for less than a year, and the young men sold the business to an unnamed local concern prior to matriculating the

following fall. Their successors appear not to have been successful for very long, and newspaper evidence indicates that the theater had been out of service for a significant period of time when a local Mothers Club sought to host a fundraising dinner in the “old picture show” space in 1923.¹⁴

Perhaps because movies had been shown across the road from their hotel, the managers of the Maple Shade began actively contemplating a set of major renovations that would lead (at least as early as June 1925) to the addition of a third-story to the hotel’s main building. Eventually, a small movie-theater was introduced into the now-renovated hotel.¹⁵ To provide the most comfortable cinemagoing experience they could for audience members generally drawn from the hotel’s guests, the Maple Shade’s managers installed a restroom adjacent to the theater in a ground-breaking move rarely repeated in Robeson, where most of the county’s theaters lacked toilet facilities through mid-century. While the precise date of the Maple Shade Theatre’s opening is currently unknown, newspaper reports indicate that around Christmas 1927 a Mr. Lucas arrived to take charge of the site. Quite possibly a former manager of the Red Springs Theatre located approximately 10 miles to the northeast of Maxton,¹⁶ Lucas announced the grand opening of the Maple Shade’s Savoy Theatre just prior to New Year’s Day. Equipped with both a men’s smoker and a ladies lounge, the stylish Savoy offered elements of luxury, exclusivity, and convenience surpassing those of every other Robeson theater for the six months prior to the opening of Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre.

As remarkable as the Savoy was within the context of western Robeson County, a conspicuous absence of newspaper coverage after December 1927 suggests that it may have operated for only a few months. Once the Savoy’s doors finally closed, Maxtonians

remained without immediate local access to a dedicated picture show for the next decade. Finally, by the time that Lumberton's thousand-seat Riverside Theatre opened for business in April 1939 as the third full-time theater operating within a few blocks of downtown Lumberton, Maxton residents Mr. and Mrs. E. W. Bowman had embarked on efforts to remodel a former department store located at the intersection of Patterson and Central Avenues in the heart of downtown Maxton.¹⁷ Opened that year during the second week of June, the Maxton Theatre featured a total of 240 seats within its first-floor gallery with an additional 88 seats in a balcony that likely afforded local non-whites their first chance at moviegoing inside a Maxton area theater.

On June 9th, the Bowmans purchased the first advertisement for any Maxton theater in the long history of the Robesonian. Its publication more than forty years after the initial Armory show testifies to the fact that local exhibition infrastructures in Maxton developed more slowly than in any of Robeson's seven largest incorporated areas. Due to that delay, Maxton residents were much less likely than their other town-based peers in Robeson to have cultivated a local moviegoing culture prior to the outbreak of World War II. Maxtonians hoping to attend a local picture show fell victim to their town's relatively slow population growth, which appears to have deterred local entrepreneurs from investing in motion-picture exhibitions there. According to Federal Census figures, Maxton's population grew significantly more slowly than virtually all of Robeson's other major incorporated areas during the first several decades of the twentieth century. Shortly after 1900, Maxton had ceded the title of Robeson's most-populous community to Lumberton, and in spite of its location at the intersection of regional north-south rail line and a major east-west line that together could draw potential patrons from western and northern Robeson villages, Maxton

hosted only itinerant or other short-lived cinema operations until nearly 1940. By comparison, the towns of Fairmont, St. Pauls and Red Springs, all with populations smaller than Maxton's, each supported at least one reasonably successful hardtop prior to 1930. But Maxton's population growth-rates lagged well behind those of other county towns, often by a wide margin. Though Maxton's population in 1900 was three times as large as the population of St. Pauls, the latter nearly tripled from 1910 to 1920 before doubling yet again by 1930, when St. Pauls' population was fully 50% larger than Maxton's. During this thirty-year period, the residents of St. Pauls enjoyed significantly more frequent local film exhibitions than did Maxtonians. Moreover, while the towns of Rowland and Red Springs were significantly smaller than Maxton in 1900, all three towns had drawn roughly level by 1930, in part because Maxton's population declined slightly less than one percent between 1920 and 1930 while Rowland's had grown just over nineteen percent and Red Springs's nearly twenty-eight percent over the same period. Similar growth differentials derived from the decade-by-decade population totals recorded in Appendix II suggest why a town so clearly on the rise as Red Springs could boast of having implemented its first permanent theater operation a decade and a half before the same event in Maxton, and likely why Rowland's first dedicated motion-picture theater opened a full two years before the Maxton Theatre in 1939. Only after 1939 could Maxton's moviegoers finally forego having to travel either northeast to Red Springs (as early as 1925) or west towards Laurinburg in neighboring Scotland County (as early as the mid-1910s) in order to attend a motion-picture exhibition. For that matter, both Red Springs and Laurinburg had transitioned from an initial to a second successful theater operation at least fifteen years before the Maxton Theatre opened.¹⁸

Maxtonians likely viewed their lack of a local theater before 1939 as an embarrassing infrastructural and cultural gap. A decade earlier, Lumbertonians twenty miles to the east of Maxton enjoyed motion pictures in the stately and comfortable Carolina Theatre, while Pembroke's halfway between Maxton and Lumberton first enjoyed their own access to a dedicated local theater in 1937 despite the fact that in 1940 Maxton's population was more than twice as large as Pembroke's.¹⁹ To add insult to injury, Maxton's population total in 1950 was still fifty per-cent larger than Pembroke's, yet Pembroke boasted of not one but two local hardtops at a time when Maxton's nearly two-thousand residents remained limited to a single theater downtown.

However, Maxton residents in the 1940s with access to an automobile could head to one of the several drive-ins that were equally available to Pembroke's. Maxtonians also lived about ten miles closer than Pembroke's to a theater that had initially been developed at the Laurinburg-Maxton air field, which served as a glider-pilot training facility during World War II. Given its proximity to the Robeson and Hoke county borders, the airbase theater served the residents of three counties even though it was technically located inside neighboring Scotland County. Still, access to drive-ins or to a tri-county venue would not inspire the kind of local civic pride associated with a hometown theater. Nor is it likely that any Maxtonians would have thought of the theaters in Pembroke as an attractive moviegoing option, for if population growth-rates and residential densities remained critical factors determining the location and timing of theater-construction efforts in the American South, local racial constraints almost always served to reduce moviegoing opportunities for most local residents. Regardless of the fact that Pembroke possessed by 1947 twice as many theaters as Maxton did, and though both Pembroke theaters lay twice as close to Maxton as

did theaters in Lumberton, as an example, white Maxtonians almost certainly would have shunned Pembroke's theatres due to the favorable treatment they offered to Native Americans.²⁰ Despite possessing the lowest resident-to-theater ratio in the county, by 1947 Pembroke supported two theaters to serve an ethnic sub-population almost universally shunned by white businesses at a time when most of Robeson's "white" towns could only support a single moviegoing option.²¹ In fact, Indians often rated Maxton as the Robeson County town most hostile to Native Americans.²² Since Indians accounted for roughly eighty percent of the greater Pembroke population, white Maxtonians were unlikely to have frequented theaters in a town in which they, even if only for a short time, represented a racial minority—and certainly not when roughly equidistant alternatives could be found in Red Springs or Laurinburg.

Therefore, in spite of Maxton's relative size and regional importance at the dawn of the commercial moviegoing era, its moviegoing history suggests how often the residents of small towns were required to travel to other (albeit not necessarily to larger) communities in order to enjoy motion pictures during the first two generations of American moviegoing. Perhaps more significantly, Maxton residents with no theater to call their own were considerably less likely to become regular cinemagoers than the residents of other Robesonian communities. However, if the infrequency with which Maxton residents were exposed to motion-picture exhibitions during the 1910s and 1920s reflected the experiences of most county residents, regional exhibition development lags proved less severe in the more rapidly growing community located approximately ten miles northeast of Maxton.

Red Springs

Prior to 1939, Maxton residents who did not travel to Laurinburg to watch films likely attended exhibitions in Red Springs, the western Robeson community that offered moviegoers the longest continuously operating venue during the period covered by this study.²³ Though itinerant exhibitors almost never visited Red Springs, at least some moving pictures appear to have been incorporated into a local Masonic Fair in 1904.²⁴ Yet beyond its scarcity of itinerant exhibitions, Red Springs' move towards hardtop exhibitions was hampered by a lack of available retail storefronts. According to the 1911 Sanborn fire insurance map for the town of Red Springs, not a single unoccupied storefront existed in the downtown area large enough to host a sizable theater. In fact, with the exception of local churches, the only Red Springs site that at the time could have accommodated a large film screening was the auditorium located on the campus of the Southern Presbyterian College and Conservatory of Music, an institution renamed Flora Macdonald College in 1914. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, several of Robeson's downtown business districts including the one in Red Springs was either fully or partly ravaged by fire. The relatively few commercial structures that survived were occupied by businesses and other services that residents considered critical to their economic, social, and community infrastructure. Would-be exhibitors lacking the capital required to construct a theater site from scratch were required to wait until local building booms provided potentially suitable picture-show sites. As virtually all commercial construction projects were halted in the late 1910s during the wartime rationing of fuel and building materials, theater construction or storefront conversion projects were never attempted in most towns until after the First World War, and usually not until the early 1920s.

Local theater-development activities in Red Springs, however, prefigured a county-wide spike in post-war expansion across Robeson. The town's first theater, the Crescent, began operating in 1919. Perhaps Robeson's most successful dedicated cinema operating outside of Lumberton before 1920, the Crescent was housed in a small storefront located at 220 (now 214) South Main Street and adjoined the local Cotton Mill Office. The Crescent had opened to mixed reviews on May 1st, when some of the town's mothers complained about the "trifling" nature of the site's initial offerings, including the feature films *The Mortgaged Wife*, which depicted an unfaithful and embezzling husband, and *She Hired a Husband*, a marital-engagement comedy featuring mistaken identities.²⁵ Several of the town's leaders were mildly concerned about the arrival of motion-picture exhibitions, including some of Flora Macdonald faculty members who noted that while they believed that "there is no invention of the era with a larger scope of usefulness and educative powers than moving pictures," they also sensed that no other modern technology potentially represented "a greater menace to the morals of the youth of our land."²⁶ In a response designed to allay their concerns, the Crescent's operators sponsored a set of film exhibitions in the college auditorium that featured films appealed literary tastes on the one hand, thanks to the 1918 William Desmond Taylor feature *Huck and Tom* (originally reported as *Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn* in the Robesonian), and to patriotic sensibilities on the other, through a World War I melodrama, *The Girl Who Stayed Home*, produced and directed by D. W. Griffith.²⁷

Though these screenings indicate an awareness on the part of the Crescent that local moral guardians expected its operators to leaven their trifles with more culturally defensible and uplifting fare, their attempts proved insufficient to keep the Crescent financially afloat. The Crescent was subsequently leased for a two-year period by the owners of Fayetteville's

Rose Theatre, the second time that one of the earliest Robeson theaters had been assimilated into a regional theater chain.²⁸ Spotty subsequent newspaper coverage suggests that the Crescent remained operating only for a matter of months, and by February 1920 a local venture named the Pastime Theatre, possibly an offshoot of the Lumberton Pastime managed at that time by J. W. Griffin, supplied Red Springs' moviegoers several times a week with films like Mary Pickford's *Daddy Long Legs*, perhaps in the original Crescent site. Yet this particular Pastime operation appears also to have been a short-lived operation. After several years without local film screenings, Red Springs moviegoers in the spring of 1925 were delighted when the brand new Red Springs Theatre began operating under the auspices of a Mr. Lucas inside a one-story storefront located at 408 Main Street (approximately 156 South Main Street today). Directly adjacent to the local Telephone Exchange, the Red Springs Theatre stood on the west side of the town's primary commercial street a half block down from the local railroad depot. Perhaps aware of the desirability of developing and maintaining a positive reputation in the community, Lucas arranged for a local benefit in the Flora Macdonald auditorium to raise funds for the construction of a lake house to be used by the college's crew team. The show featured a well-established Hollywood star, Marion Davies, who appeared in a six-month-old release from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer entitled *Yolanda*..

Despite his promising start, Lucas appears to have remained in Red Springs for a short time only, though as noted above the Fayetteville native may have secured a managerial posting in Maxton's Savoy Theatre at the tail end of 1927. Soon, however, Lucas was followed in Red Springs by V. D. Humphrey, the individual most responsible for establishing motion-picture exhibitions on a permanent basis in western Robeson. Formerly of

Bishopville, South Carolina, Humphrey first began in May 1928 to manage a “Red Springs Theatre” almost certainly located in Lucas’ original storefront. Humphrey’s operation would remain the largest picture-show site operating in western Robeson during a decade in which the Red Springs population increased at an average annual rate of three percent. By 1930, Red Springs had grown into Robeson’s third-largest community. This spurred Humphrey to invest a significant amount of his own capital to develop a new theater building. As early as June 1932, Humphrey opened his “New” Red Springs Theatre across the street from his old site on a plot of land that Humphrey had purchased from the local Masonic group a year earlier. His new facility probably represented the first successful instance of a motion-picture exhibition site in Robeson both owned *and* operated by the same individual.²⁹ Opening night patrons attending the new multi-story and balconied venue thrilled to the sights and sounds of *As You Desire Me*, a talking feature from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer featuring Greta Garbo and Melvyn Douglas. In contrast to expansionist contemporaries like J. W. Griffin (and, to a lesser extent, Walter Wishart), Humphrey appears to have been content operating a single theater, barring his aborted attempt to act as a local Robeson agent for the Stanley family of Dillon, South Carolina during the latter’s presumptive yet unsuccessful foray into Lumbertonian exhibition in 1934.³⁰ After roughly a decade in Red Springs, in the late spring of 1938 Humphrey sold his theater operation to Boyd Horton of Concord, North Carolina. He subsequently departed Red Springs after having served as one of the county’s longest-tenured house managers. Among his Robeson contemporaries only Joseph L. Caudell and E. G. Pophal (discussed below) ever approached Humphrey’s theatrical longevity, and only Pophal managed one specific theater longer than Humphrey.

St. Pauls

Unlike Humphrey, both Caudell and Pophal initiated their local theatrical careers not in the town of Red Springs, but rather in the northeastern Robeson community of St. Pauls. Located roughly ten miles east of Red Springs, St. Pauls experienced population growth rates that at times surpassed even those of Red Springs. Having crossed the thousand-resident barrier in the late 1910s, St. Pauls continued growing until it became Robeson's second-largest town by 1930.³¹ This robust growth encouraged commercial risk-takers to attempt to cater to the leisure needs of a rapidly expanding population. Their initial efforts resulted in a comparatively numerous set of initiatives that predated the eventual arrival in the mid-1920s of one of the oldest and most determined theater operations in Robeson's history. However, St. Pauls appears from the start to have been bypassed completely by early itinerant exhibitions despite the fact that the town was served by a key regional rail line that also connected to Lumberton. Presumably, itinerants bypassed St. Pauls because of its unprofitably small population of roughly 400 residents in 1910. But rapid population growth by the early 1920s led to the development of St. Pauls' first known exhibition site, the Lyric Theatre.³² Though its opening date and specific street address have yet to be confirmed, the Lyric had gone through at least one managerial change by the summer of 1921 when the site's manager, local businessman W. A. Nutting, announced his intention to expand its facilities and to attach a balcony to the now-renamed Superba Theatre as early as July. At least one of the Superba's exhibitions was particularly well-attended that September, specifically the film *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* featuring Mary Pickford, even though the film had initially been released four years earlier.

If Nutting did indeed implement his balcony,³³ then the Superba would have represented the first dedicated cinema in Robeson with this feature; if so, it may have been

the first Robeson exhibition facility that had been physically segregated since a set of specific “gallery” features and staircases had been introduced into the Lumberton Opera House in 1908.³⁴ In any case, Nutting’s proposal suggests that the Superba was desperate to sell additional, possibly lower-priced, tickets. Unfortunately for Nutting, the theater soon closed, as newspaper accounts indicate that St. Pauls moviegoers again lacked a local theater by the beginning of 1923 (and probably earlier than that). Nevertheless, by January 1924 a local entrepreneur named W. Jerome Stevens converted the second-story of a local drug store into a makeshift theater. Though Stevens’ thrice-weekly show seems to have been shuttered fairly quickly, later that same summer entrepreneur John S. Butler either constructed or renovated a facility at 727 Broad Street that housed a new and rather spacious two-story theater.³⁵

Butler’s theater was initially operated by Joseph L. Caudell, who later would briefly serve in 1929 as the manager of the Lumberton Pastime. After opening on July 26th 1924, Butler and Caudell’s Grand Theatre (and its successor) went on to serve the St. Pauls community for more than a quarter century, though not without a significant amount of physical site volatility. Near the beginning of 1933, the Grand’s original facility was badly damaged by fire. Caudell and his partner at that time, a Wisconsin native and World War I veteran named Eric G. Pophal, struggled for several months before establishing a temporary theater inside a one-floor storefront located across Broad Street. By August, the pair managed to remodel yet another replacement theater in a site that this time included a balcony for colored patrons. In all likelihood, non-white audiences had been denied entrance to the Grand’s temporary (i.e., non-balconied) replacements. When Caudell left St. Pauls in 1934 to manage theaters in other towns, Pophal remained behind to ride out some of the

darkest years of the Great Depression, all the while managing to keep an alternate Grand operating until the economic situation permitted him to repair the Grand's fire-damaged original site. Near the end of 1934, the Grand's renovations had commenced. Completed by April 1935, or more than two years after the original fire, these modifications, when combined with the recent departure of Caudell, encouraged Pophal to rename the venue as the St. Pauls Theatre, a site which he continued to manage until 1948, fully three years after Pophal had returned to his native Wisconsin. After having been absent from Robeson County for approximately six years, Pophal once again returned to manage his former theater in person, if only for a short while. In 1951, only six months after the passing of his exhibition contemporary Walter Wishart, Pophal also died. Nevertheless, thanks largely to Pophal's perseverance the residents of St. Pauls had been able to enjoy motion pictures almost continuously during a period of severe economic stress. In the end, the theatrical partnership between Pophal and St. Pauls represented the longest lasting manager/community relationship anywhere in Robeson during its first three generations of moviegoing.

Fairmont

Nevertheless, St. Pauls was not alone in being favored with theatre management stability.³⁶ Moviegoers in Fairmont were also served by one of the Caudells, the "first family" of Robeson exhibitors, whose members included not only St. Pauls operator Joseph L. Caudell, who despite having been crippled by childhood polio doggedly managed a series of theaters both within and without Robeson,³⁷ but also Joseph's brother, W. F. (Fay) Caudell. As had Joseph before him, Fay Caudell also brought regularized exhibitions to another rapidly growing Robeson town. Originally chartered as Ashpole and later as Union City, the town of Fairmont, which lay approximately ten miles due south of Lumberton,

matured into one of the leading local tobacco markets in the United States. By 1950, Fairmont had grown into its position as Robeson's second-largest community. Thanks to a series of economic upswings generally correlated with strong demand for the "golden leaf," Fairmont several boomlets were marked by bursts of commercial infrastructure improvement. One such cycle resulted in the development of an early Fairmont picture-show, the Dixie, which first began to provide weekly followed by thrice-weekly exhibitions during the summer of 1915. While it almost certainly operated only for a short time, the Dixie quite possibly represented the first semi-permanent picture show in Robeson operating beyond the borders of Lumberton.³⁸

The Dixie had long been out of service when in the early 1920s a local Fairmont American Legion group debated about whether or not to assume control of a long defunct local picture-show (almost certainly the Dixie). Though the Legion appears not to have pursued a Dixie revival, the former theater's projection equipment soon would be destroyed in a garage fire in 1922. Within a year of the fire, an entirely different if equally influential civic organization reconsidered the fundraising possibilities of a local motion-picture operation. Convinced that a twice-weekly picture-show could help defer the cost of a series of school auditorium upgrades, Fairmont's Parent Teachers Association stepped forward at least as early as October 1923 to reinvigorate local film exhibition via a series of PTA-sponsored shows. In persistently demonstrating a strong entrepreneurial spirit, the PTA tinkered with several different combinations of film programs and genres and also implemented discount pricing ladders to attract larger families to shows that operated sporadically until at least 1926.

The success of these PTA shows likely caught the attention of J. W. Griffin, then manager of the Lumberton Pastime—the county’s most successful contemporary theater. While Griffin also operated a second house west of Robeson in Laurinburg, he sensed an opportunity to expand his exhibition holdings into an apparently sustainable Fairmont market. In 1924, Griffin proceeded to remodel and equip a storefront at 228 S. Main Street that formerly housed the Fairmont Barber Shop, which he transformed into his latest theatrical venture, the Star Theatre. Newspaper coverage indicates that Fairmont’s Star Theatre operated for several years and was apparently so successful that it Fairmont’s school superintendent requested the local PTA, whose members continued to offer their own periodic picture show, to refrain from allowing their children to attend any and all motion-picture shows, parties, and other social events until after the school week had ended. While it is uncertain precisely when the Star ceased operating, Griffin possibly over-extended himself attempting to build out his own regional theater chain. It remains unclear whether he either closed or retreated to the Star when he was driven out of Lumberton by the owners of the Carolina Theatre, who at the end of 1928 sued Griffin for overdue rental payments only six months after he had helped to open that site.

If the Star closed at roughly the same time that Griffin’s reputation collapsed in Lumberton (and possible therefore throughout Robeson), Fairmonters lacked access to a local exhibition site until the arrival of Fay Caudell’s Capitol Theatre several years later. Equipped specifically to accommodate talking pictures and instantly recognizable thanks to a prominent marquee that hovered over the downtown sidewalk, the Fairmont Capitol opened in early May 1934 inside a multi-story building located almost directly across the street from the former Star site.³⁹ At the Capitol, Caudell’s wife manned the counter to sell tickets to an

opening-night program that included *The Last Trail*, a Zane Grey Western, as well as *Bottoms Up*, a satirical and self-referential Hollywood musical headlined by Spencer Tracy.

Like Lumberton's Wishart, Fay Caudell was elected by his fellow residents to serve as a town commissioner. Perhaps in contrast to Griffin, who may have been perceived as a theatrical interloper from rival Lumberton, Caudell was a well-known local business figure who, as the majority owner of a local drug store, actively supported a number of local civic initiatives. Aware that newer and larger picture shows were opening across the county, Caudell distinguished himself from most of his fellow Main Street operators in Robeson by more regularly upgrading his operation; indeed, after only three years of stable operations he invested in a full complement of simultaneous upgrades to the Capitol's seats, stage fixtures, cameras, and other peripheral equipment. Perhaps following in the owner-operator footsteps of V. D. Humphrey in Red Springs, Caudell purchased an empty lot in the middle of Fairmont's commercial district upon which he placed his personal stamp on the downtown landscape by erecting a brand new theater.

After nearly a year of construction and a host of eleventh-hour fine tuning of its interior and exterior features, Caudell's New Capitol Theatre opened on August 1st 1938 in a site adjacent to (and in fact sharing a wall with) the original Capitol Theatre. The New Capitol featured a brick, three-story, art-deco styled street-front whose neon marquee would welcome Fairmont moviegoers for more than two decades. Perhaps hoping to recoup some of his investment by utilizing both resources simultaneously, Caudell briefly operated the "Old" Capitol in conjunction with the "New" in the only recorded instance in Robeson County history of two theaters operating on a side-by-side basis. Predictably, the New Capitol quickly eclipsed its predecessor, thanks in part to its stylish decorative flourishes and

its capacity to seat five-hundred patrons, nearly twice as many as the Old Capitol. Within a year, Fairmont's New Capitol remained the county's third largest theater facility, trailing in seating capacity only the Carolina and the Riverside in Lumberton. Unfortunately for Caudell, Lumberton's theaters were also better equipped to stage large road-show productions: while the New Capitol was both tall and deep enough to support a series of stage backdrops, the site remained hemmed in by other buildings on each side. Lacking as expansive a stage or as broad and deep a staging area as the Carolina and Riverside Theatres, the New Capitol focused almost exclusively on motion-picture entertainment. Yet it possessed at least one local architectural oddity, since Caudell had installed a private staircase on one side of the New Capitol leading to the projection booth, perhaps to isolate his projectionists from the non-white patrons who accessed the New Capitol's balcony through a separate staircase located on the building's opposite side.⁴⁰

Rowland

By the mid-1930s, exhibitors in Rowland were also experimenting with unusual entrance architectures. Located approximately ten miles west of Fairmont, Rowland experienced an early moviegoing history eerily similar to that of its south-Robeson neighbor.⁴¹ All evidence currently available suggests that itinerant exhibitors bypassed Rowland too, despite the fact that Rowland was situated on a major north-south rail line before 1910. In all probability, Rowland audiences waited more than a decade after the arrival of the Pastime in Lumberton for their first intermittent set of motion-picture exhibitions. In a development that mirrored similar activities in Fairmont, Rowland's earliest successful attempt to establish a regular exhibition service came about through the efforts of the local PTA.⁴² During the early 1920s, the PTA's Playground Committee sponsored

Friday-night picture shows held in a local school auditorium. Hoping to entertain large numbers of students efficiently at a fully chaperoned event featuring wholesome entertainment, the PTA actively marketed the exhibitions in news stories indicating the group's intention not only to recoup the capital expended to purchase its projection equipment, but also to deliver profits to be reinvested in upgrades to the exercise and playground equipment located in area schools. These accounts suggest that Rowland's PTA periodically sponsored film exhibitions from at least as early as 1923, and they appear to have persisted in one form or another at least through 1928.

While it remains unclear precisely who the Fairmont and Rowland PTAs contracted with to source their films, they may have arranged for film deliveries from the state and educational institutions simultaneously equipping the Community Service Picture program that operated throughout the state during in the 1920s.⁴³ Doing so would have enabled them to minimize any local controversy over the importation of film exhibitions into school facilities, as they could claim that their shows only included films that had passed through a *de facto* form of content censorship through a state-affiliated film screening process. Of course, in many communities across the nation local school officials and women's group regarded motion pictures as leisure-time distractions that tended to divert students from their schoolwork and represented an at times morally hazardous pastime capable of potentially inhibiting the development of sound moral fibre.⁴⁴ Yet in the spring of 1928, one of the most vocal critics of the Rowland PTA shows chose somewhat surprisingly *not* to bemoan the PTAs role in subjecting the community's children to cinematic entertainments, but chose *rather* to criticize the shabby state of the auditorium selected to host the exhibitions. Indeed, after complimenting the spirited and enthusiastic leadership of a PTA that had purchased an

additional projector capable of eliminate the narrative delays otherwise caused by swapping film reels on and off a single device, Mrs. N. J. Herring exhorted her fellow residents to expand the school's auditorium and to upgrade the "wretched" seats which Herring feared would deter additional patrons from attending shows "which the new and more desirable picture presentation will [otherwise] attract."⁴⁵

Regardless of Herring's practical advice, and in spite of its concerted attempt to provide an acceptable form of cinematic leisure, the Rowland PTA could offer neither the quantity nor the variety of motion pictures desired by local audiences.⁴⁶ Yet local entrepreneurs appeared to hesitate against establishing a theater locally because Rowland did not experience the explosive population growth that characterized most Robeson communities from 1900 through 1950. In fact, Rowland only surpassed the thousand-resident mark in 1940, and though it exceeded Fairmont's population in 1910, by 1940 its population had fallen to half of Fairmont's largely as a result of its slow growth during the 1910s and early 1920s. Nevertheless, steadily improving growth rates by the mid-1930s encouraged two local entrepreneurs to risk developing a commercial theater large enough to host approximately the entire population of Rowland during two consecutive film screenings.

On November 1st 1937, the native-Rowland brothers Franklin L. (LaVerne) and Salathiel L. (Liell) Adams, Jr. ushered patrons into an impressive 450-seat Rowland Theatre developed adjacent to the intersection of Main and North Railroad Streets. As an indication of the commercial changes reshaping the downtown district, while the Rowland Theatre's lot had been occupied most recently by a large retail store, only a generation earlier the engine belonging to the Rowland Volunteer Fire Company had been parked atop the same then-empty lot.⁴⁷ As had Wishart and the Caudells, the Adams brothers possessed strong ties to

their community. An attorney and a former school principal, Laverne Adams had served as town clerk and treasurer. His brother had broadly expanded his local grocery and farming interests, and after having served as a Presbyterian deacon and a Rowland town commissioner, a year earlier Salathiel had been elected as Robeson County's newest representative in the state's General Assembly.

While the Rowland Theatre represented the Adams's first foray into cinematic exhibition, the brothers spared little expense creating a venue which, though it lacked the scale and elegance of Lumberton's decade-old Carolina Theatre, still managed to impress local audiences. Structurally, the Rowland Theatre had fully incorporated the kind of segregationist architecture that would culminate two years later in the development of Lumberton's Riverside Theatre; specifically, the Rowland's approximately 140-seat balcony had been divided into distinct sections to accommodate black and Indian patrons required to enter the site through separate entrances.⁴⁸ Beyond these balcony modifications, Opening Day news accounts reported that the theater's owners had invested at least an additional \$15,000 to outfit an extensively fireproofed site that also featured an inclined auditorium, carpeted aisles and foyers, tiled interior walls, and a new "RCA Victor" sound system synchronized with a pair of leading-edge Simplex film projectors. Its full complement of staff members included General Manager Archie Bracey, who coordinated the theater's Opening Night gala while directing the activities of one female and two male ticket-sellers, one male and one female usher, and a projectionist charged with seamlessly coordinating reel changes during the evening's multiple film offerings, the most notable of which was an RKO musical-comedy, *The Life of the Party*, featuring Ann Miller and Harriet Nelson. Despite their promising start, and the fact that the duration of the Adams's personal involvement with

the site remains currently unknown, their theater remained operating as the town's only dedicated movie house well beyond 1950.

Preliminary Conclusions Regarding Small-Town Exhibition

Though these small-town moviegoing narratives will be of interest to local historians in communities like Red Springs, St. Pauls, and Fairmont, what do they imply for the development of an alternate U.S. cinema history that emphasizes small-town moviegoing? Though at times extraordinarily brief, these accounts indicate a number of ways in which the metro-centric narrative of early American moviegoing needs to be adjusted to account for the significantly different moviegoing conditions experienced in the sort of communities which the bulk of the nation's population lived in during the first several decades of the twentieth century. The temporal and qualitative characteristics of Robeson's small-town moviegoing narratives suggest that the urban-theatrical narrative outlined at the beginning of this chapter represents an inappropriate model for the development of cinema exhibitions in America's rural and/or small-town communities. Instead, this study's multi-town analysis supports the proposition that *at least* two asymmetrical development patterns nationally operated during the first several decades of the twentieth century, and it holds that historical cinema texts that depict either a monolithic or a homogeneous pattern of national exhibition development be modified in order to reflect the heterogeneity of small-town moviegoing experiences, largely because a series of local constraints restricted early moviegoers in small towns to a finite set of exhibition options that bore little resemblance (in terms of either their variety or availability) to the exhibition infrastructures that typically existed in large cities.

For instance, the kinoscope parlors that introduced motion pictures to thousands of early cinema patrons were much more commonly available within the landscape of urban moviegoing. In fact, not a single news account uncovered within this study ever referred to the existence of either a local or distant kinoscope parlor. In addition, while itinerant exhibitors carted portable motion-picture equipment to communities throughout the nation, their penetration into rural America's smaller towns and villages appears to have been highly uneven at best. As noted in Appendix II, less than fourteen percent of Robeson's population in 1910 lived within one of the county's eight largest towns, only half of which appear to have been visited by itinerant exhibitors. Since almost all of Robeson's larger communities, each of which was served by at least one rail line, had been effectively bypassed by itinerant exhibitors, how slim were the chances that an itinerant exhibitor chose to visit one of the dozens of Robeson villages and hamlets that lacked direct rail service?

Even as dedicated theaters began to arrive in Robeson's rural communities many decades after their explosive growth in large urban environs, Robeson's developmental narratives indicate that, with the single exception of Pembroke, only those towns that approached the Federal Census' "urban" population threshold of twenty-five hundred residents ever successfully attempted to develop, much less supported, a second local picture show. Instead of possessing a series of moviegoing options, most Robesonians lacked easy access to any of the county's early moviegoing venues until after the Great Depression—and possibly longer. The scarcity of exhibition sites meant that some of the earliest exhibitions in especially remote or low-density communities may well have resulted from a set of itinerant exhibitors who arrived *long after* metropolitan audiences had migrated to indoor venues.⁴⁹ Moreover, of the few itinerant showmen who ever sought to exploit the commercial potential

of cinema in Robeson, none appear to have contributed meaningfully to the establishment of any permanent or semi-permanent local venues.⁵⁰ As a result, local knowledge regarding successful cinema operations remained spotty at best. All of the attempts beginning in 1908 to open even a semi-dedicated picture show in the Lumberton Opera House were beset with chronic equipment mishaps and with problems securing new film content. Yet if Walter Wishart appears to have successfully addressed these fundamental problems by 1912, the Pastime alone could hardly serve all of the fifty-thousand Robesonians scattered across largest county in North Carolina.

Due to the infrequency of both itinerant and early fixed-site exhibition, it is difficult to estimate roughly how many—or more likely, how few—Robeson residents were exposed to many of the hallmark films produced during the early silent-film era. For example, no data currently available suggests that any Robeson audience witnessed an early cinema staple like Georges Méliès' *The Eruption of Mt. Pelee* (1902), though some evidence implies that at least some residents living near Lumberton viewed some footage, possibly from famed director Edwin S. Porter, of the 1905 Russo-Japanese Peace conference that earned President Theodore Roosevelt the Nobel Peace Prize a year later. Though circumstantial evidence suggests that at least some early Robeson shows included short films that featured concerted action sequences involving hold ups, train robberies, police chases, and fire companies battling staged blazes, it was probably the case that scores rather than hundreds or thousands of Robeson residents ever witnessed Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), a milestone of narrative cinema whose infamous closing shot of a bandit firing directly into the camera shocked early moviegoing audiences. Most of Porter's groundbreaking films appear not to have been exhibited in Robeson at all due to a lack of access that impacted both imaginative

and documentary films. No evidence currently available indicates a single screening of early newsreels such as those scenes recorded during the funeral of Roosevelt's assassinated predecessor William McKinley, or of notable sporting events including early heavyweight prizefights. It is altogether that no Robesonians ever attended a local exhibition of Georges Méliès' spectacular fantasy film *Le Voyage Dans La Lune (A Trip to the Moon, 1902)*, while the early biblical and religious epics that would have appealed particularly to Robeson's religious sensibilities may never have been screened locally either. If Richard Abel has claimed, for instance, that more moviegoers saw the Pathé Company's version of the *Passion Play* than any other film during 1907 and 1908, no current evidence can document a single Robeson exhibition of the film,⁵¹ and in light of the high praise that the Robesonian reserved for local exhibitors who screened films featuring religious figures or themes, the complete lack of local newspaper references to any film depicting the Oberammergau drama at this time strongly suggests that local audiences never had an opportunity of viewing it.

While itinerant exhibitions were late and infrequent arrivals in Robeson's small towns, the same principle held true of its nickelodeons, at least to the extent whether any Robeson community can be said meaningfully to have participated in the nickelodeon era. That fact that by 1940 more than eighty percent⁵² of the county's residents still lived beyond the borders of the county's eight largest towns implies that even Robeson's most dedicated out-of-town moviegoers needed to overcome significant challenges as they travelled to attend a local theater either by foot, horse, wagon, train, or in early automobiles over an immature road system through Robeson's sandy and swampy coastal plain. Living in a region that has consistently ranked as one of the poorest counties in North Carolina, few Robeson residents could afford daily or weekly trips to any county theater regardless of their available mode of

transportation. If one assumes that some of the early *per capita* attendance figures recorded for metropolitan moviegoing were inflated by the film industry's marketing personnel, even drastically reduced figures would have been unthinkable within Robeson. For instance, industry estimates calculated that twenty-five percent of the aggregate population of New York City in 1910 engaged in cinemagoing at least once a week.⁵³ However, the seating capacity of slightly more than 200 seats available in the newly arrived Pastime Theatre in 1912 would only have accommodated approximately *five* percent of the county's total population in a given week, and this assumes that each of the theater's twice-daily shows from Monday through Saturday were sellouts.

In Robeson County, in short, a host of local factors including comparatively low local population densities, immature transportation infrastructures, insufficient disposable income, a chronic lack of available specie (particularly among farm workers), and the daily requirements of an agricultural cycle that yoked the vast majority of the population to rural farms six days a week severely inhibited the development of additional county theaters. Therefore, while some cinema historians have estimated that on average every man, woman and child between the ages of six and sixty living in the United States attended at least one motion-picture exhibition a week by 1930,⁵⁴ all of the evidence currently available leads to the conclusion that most Robeson County residents did not—if for no other reason than they could not—engage in moviegoing regularly during the first half of the twentieth century.

Nor did the incorporation of motion pictures within vaudeville programs or the transformation of vaudeville and road-show houses into picture shows during the first several decades of commercial moviegoing significantly improve Robeson's small-town moviegoing ratio. Though Richard Abel has argued that the inclusion of films within "cheap" and/or

“family” vaudeville productions represented a critical mass-market outlet that served early moviegoers,⁵⁵ the fact is that vaudeville troupes did not always extend their exhibition circuits far beyond urban centers. Residents in Robeson’s rural villages rarely experienced vaudeville performances of any kind, and only two or three county towns possessed anything resembling an exhibition hall.⁵⁶ Though many vaudeville houses nationally had integrated films into their performances by the 1905-06 seasons,⁵⁷ Robeson’s sole Opera House facility had yet to ally itself with any organized vaudeville circuit, as Dr. Vampill’s house remained a private, unaffiliated, and amateur mixed-use facility until 1908. Given that exhibitors in densely populated areas scattered across the Northeast and Midwest had already established thousands of cinema operations before a single Robeson community managed to establish even one movie house, the scale of attendance disparities between rural and metropolitan audiences could be staggering. By 1907, for example, exhibition halls in Chicago were attracting up to 100,000 patrons, or more than twice the entire population of Robeson County, on a daily basis,⁵⁸ while a single mile-long stretch of Manhattan’s Bowery district contained over two-dozen exhibition sites in 1906, a full six years prior to the first anniversary of the Pastime Theatre.⁵⁹

Though Charles Feldman has characterized “the period from 1903 to 1908” as “one of great expansion and growing stability in the American film industry,”⁶⁰ that industry had barely introduced itself to Robeson County by 1908, principally through scattered itinerant exhibitions. Walter Wishart’s largely amenity-free Pastime Theatre first opened its converted-storefront doors four years after the point at which, according to documentarian and cinema historian James Forsher, theatrical “storefronts gave way to legitimate houses with amenities that made going to the theater easier and more attractive.”⁶¹ Once the

Lumberton Opera House stopped showing films by the end of 1914, exhibition patterns in Robeson County yet again deviated from those described by Miriam Hansen, who noted that storefront nickelodeons often sought to upgrade their facilities by transplanting them into former Opera or vaudeville houses.⁶²

Even a cursory comparison between the theatrical developments in metropolitan areas versus those in small-town Robeson indicate that even if the aggregate national volume of motion-picture exhibitions underwent an astonishingly rapid increase in the years leading up to and including the nickelodeon era, motion-picture exhibition never represented a significant growth industry in the set of rural communities scattered throughout Robeson through 1950, and much less through 1915. Nor were Robeson's early venues especially welcoming or comfortable. All of the cinematic exhibitions struggling to establish a foothold in the region offered moviegoers only the most basic set of facilities. While architectural historian Dennis Sharp's description of the nickelodeon facilities developed in metropolitan regions prior to 1910 corresponds quite closely with what little is known about the configuration of the early Pastime Theatre, it also closely approximates the configuration of Robeson's other theaters as and when these opened up through the end of the 1920s. According to Sharp, nickelodeons tended to be narrow, single-aisled, cramped, and often stuffy halls fronted by a small stage beside which a local pianist would sit accompanying the otherwise silent images projected on a screen erected overhead.⁶³ A nickelodeon's narrow dimensions (typically 25 feet wide by 80 long)⁶⁴ squeezed an auditorium filled with two-hundred patrons or more into a basic storefront that left little room to maneuver.⁶⁵ Though certainly more economical to install, their bench-styled wooden seats were usually narrow and more uncomfortable than individual seats. Environmental controls in nickelodeons

remained primitive, and since these sites lacked central heating or air conditioning, the temperatures within nickelodeons fluctuated in direct correlation with seasonal weather conditions. Venues like the Pastime which were heated in winter by wood or coal-burning stoves added these fumes to an audience's collective set of exhalations. Cigar, pipe, and cigarette smoke helped to create a perpetually stale and occasionally stifling environment, particularly once each house's few windows were shuttered or darkened during film exhibitions.

In reality, the Pastime's only customer convenience was represented by management's provision of a pair of entrance and exit doors leading to and from Elm Street. Yet while these permitted local audiences to experience the relative novelty of entering and exiting a building through separate doors, they were principally installed to hasten an audience's movements and thus to minimize screen downtime. Though the Pastime's site upgrades eventually incorporate a ticket booth, balcony, and an electric marquee into the site, these modifications were intended to improve the site's marketing and/or operational capabilities rather than to effect local site differentiation (in the virtual absence of local competition) or to improve customer comfort. Finally, the Pastime's long series of projector and screen upgrades were meant to keep technologically current a site that emphasized value for money and which offered ten-cent adult ticket prices well into the 1920s.

Of course, on an historical basis ticket prices did not alone a "nickelodeon" make. Furthermore, the structural term that best characterizes most of Robeson's early theaters was almost certainly not nickelodeon, and most of the Robeson movie houses opened fifteen to twenty years after massive picture palaces began to dominate metropolitan entertainment districts hardly resembled picture palaces. With few exceptions, Robeson's theaters were

small affairs typically developed within converted storefronts rather than new structures until the late 1930s. Though several film scholars have identified key elements that helped fuel the rapid expansion of nickelodeon theaters during the early 1900s, including Charles Musser on the introduction of narrative films and the development of film-rental and exchange networks circa 1903-05, Robert Allen on the widespread incorporation of cinema exhibitions into vaudeville performances, and Richard Abel on the availability of high-quality international films (particularly those produced by Pathé), Robeson's early moviegoing history indicates that perhaps a critical pre-condition for the development of successful commercial exhibitions included entrepreneurial access to relatively inexpensive commercial real estate located in existing business districts.⁶⁶ Even as rural and urban operators demonstrated a substantial appetite for cheap storefront space, the higher costs of leasing urban storefronts could be offset by the larger and more consistent audiences drawn from densely populated urban neighborhoods. Rural exhibitors faced with attracting their audiences from decentralized villages often waited significantly longer in order to rent a more affordable commercial space.

In addition, as picture-show operators settled into permanent structures in large cities, many small towns were still struggling to establish foundational business services within their central commercial districts. Based on their relative compactness, rural town centers were more likely to suffer catastrophic damage to a local commercial infrastructure in the wake of fires that periodically swept through their predominantly wooden structures. In Robeson County, it appears that fires often severely limited surplus commercial space. Most of Robeson's essential businesses, e.g. its grocery stores, wholesalers, dry goods and hardware stores, butcher shops, furniture retailers, men's and women's clothiers, pharmacies,

telephone exchanges, and banks occupied contiguous two-to-three-block district where each business typically faced few if any local competitors. In the event of a disaster, many rural communities lacked access to large lending institutions capable of quickly providing the capital necessary to resurrect devastated downtown areas. Fire insurance maps combined with local building reports published periodically in the Robesonian indicate that unused storefront space remained in extremely short supply in Robeson for decades. Furthermore, while a local entrepreneur might be willing to risk his capital erecting a store sporting an inventory of tangible goods catering to dependable and predictable human needs like food, clothing, and health care, even moderately aggressive risk-takers hesitated against investing in either constructing or leasing a building whose revenue stream would rely upon a series of transitory entertainment experiences dependent upon a non-tangible (and non-previewable) consumer good. If excess storefront space did become available, some commercial lessors remained conflicted about granting leases to businesses whose receipts depended upon encouraging local residents to engage in a leisure activity that the lessor himself may have objected to on moral or religious grounds.

Due in part to local commercial real-estate market constraints, most of Robeson's theaters started off small and rarely expanded until the mid-to-late 1930s.⁶⁷ Even after the nation's nickelodeon craze had peaked, per-theater seating capacities in Robeson stood at approximately fifty-percent of the national average. In 1916, for instance, the average seating capacity of U.S. movie houses hovered slightly above 500 patrons at a time when no exhibition venue of any kind in Robeson could accommodate more than 250 customers.⁶⁸ While this seating-disparity ratio lessened slightly as larger theaters arrived in Robeson during the 1930s, the county's theaters were rarely filled to capacity—partly because a

significant number of seats (typically one third of a theater's total seating complement) had been deployed within often thinly attended colored balconies. So while Lumberton's Carolina and Riverside Theatres featured by 1940 a total of 900 and 1000 seats (respectively), their daily usage statistics probably stood close to the 1916 national theater average due to local economic and demographic factors.⁶⁹

Ultimately, lags in theater availability, chronic local economic hardship, concerns over the appropriateness of attending motion-picture exhibitions based on moral or racial considerations, and other factors prevented many rural or small-town moviegoers from actively participating in cinema's itinerant and nickelodeon ages.⁷⁰ If Miriam Hansen's contention that the "classical" mode of motion-picture production was effectively in place by 1917 is true,⁷¹ then it is possible to conclude that only a modest fraction of America's population engaged in "pre-classical" cinema,⁷² given the millions of rural and small-town residents who lived in communities that lacked a local picture show until the mid-1920s or later. In addition, a great deal of pre-classical cinema would have been consumed in metropolitan theaters that, unlike small-town theaters like the Pastime, could not call upon an appreciable set of midday or afternoon foot-traffickers to view early films that might be continuously looped to allow wandering moviegoers the freedom to enter and leave theaters as and when they needed. Rather, Robeson's exhibitors almost immediately gravitated towards programming schedules that offered their audiences a pair of afternoon and evening shows at set times.

Nor does it appear as if the picture-palace era ever broadly encompassed small-town America. The picture-palace renovation and construction efforts that reshaped the landscape of urban exhibition architecture from roughly 1912 to 1930 completely bypassed all but one

Robeson community. Even in Lumberton, only a single theater possessed the scale combined with the interior and exterior decorative appointments as well as a set of customer amenities (including rest rooms and snack counters) to qualify as a picture palace during the first three generations of Robesonian moviegoing. Yet by the time the Carolina Theatre opened for business in 1928, roughly fifteen years earlier theaters nearly twice its size had started populating avenues in New York. The generally modest and solitary Main Street venues that dominated Robesonian exhibition would have been swallowed up by metropolitan America's massive and ornate cinema palaces. The aggregate seating capacity of all of the theaters ever built in Robeson prior to 1940 would not have surpassed the total seating capacity of two to three large metropolitan venues in the 1920s, in part because only the town of Lumberton simultaneously supported two theaters capable of serving more than five-hundred patrons before the arrival of drive-in theaters.

In fact, single-venue moviegoing represented the dominant small-town viewing experience throughout the film industry's itinerant, nickelodeon, and picture-palace eras in Robeson. Only Lumberton, the home to twice as many residents than any other county town, and Pembroke, the center of the county's most heavily populated set of Indian communities, supported two hardtop theaters prior to 1949.⁷³ None of Robeson's other towns offered their residents access to a second downtown theater even after the towns of St. Pauls, Maxton, Fairmont and Rowland all had long since passed the thousand-resident mark. In fact, while the towns of St. Pauls, Maxton and Fairmont in 1940 each possessed nearly as many residents as the populations of Rowland and Pembroke *combined*,⁷⁴ as late as 1947 each of these larger towns supported precisely the same number of theaters as the much smaller Rowland, and half as many as Pembroke.

These facts imply that small-town audiences occupied qualitatively different spectatorial positions as they faced much more limited moviegoing possibilities than those experienced by metropolitan audiences. The familiarity of local residents with the single small and architecturally unremarkable picture show available within a ten or twenty mile radius—to say nothing of an audience member's extreme familiarity with his or her fellow audience members—lent small-town moviegoing environments a heightened degree of sameness, regularity, and predictability generally relieved only by the changing film content exhibited onscreen. At the same time, metropolitan moviegoers had for several decades been able to choose from a broad spectrum of distinctive and (given public transportation) readily accessible exhibition venues located throughout the city. For more daring cinema patrons, this profusion of theater sites provided many opportunities to frequent venues in less familiar environs, theaters in which they might share a darkened space for several hours with individuals that their parents, friends, or associates might have regarded as suspicious, culturally marginalized, and even potentially dangerous. A small-town sojourn to attend a familiar and largely utilitarian facility like the Maxton Theatre would have been unlikely to generate the same *frisson* experienced by someone visiting either a new, a stylistically unusual, or a quite possibly fantastic, sensational, and extravagant theatrical venue.

It is also likely that small-town moviegoing did not reflect many of the stereotypes that were often assigned to characterize urban moviegoing. For one thing, local economic disparities as well as the non-industrial nature of Robeson's commercial districts suggests that the county's most regular moviegoers were likely to be members of wealthier families living within walking distance of downtown, rather than working-class patrons seeking a respite from their daily merchant or manufacturing labors. If urbanity's smoke-filled

kinetoscope parlors and the nickelodeons that succeeded them drew the ire of some social reformers who considered movie houses as little more than dimly lit breeding grounds for juvenile delinquency and/or white slavery, Robeson's theaters were infrequently subjected to public rhetorical attacks by local moral guardians, who instead tended to direct their frustrations either at the Hollywood establishment, or at the anonymous functionaries who distributed films while remaining apparently indifferent to their content, rather than at local operators.⁷⁵ Since the general insularity of rural small-towns resulted in a near-instantaneous recognition of strangers, many of who often were quickly subjected to sidewalk interrogations from local sheriffs, town merchants, newspaper reporters, and even theater operators, exhibitors, and ticket-takers familiar with the members of their local community, small-town theaters represented safe zones in which the watchful eyes of neighbors generally precluded the possibility of non-chaperoned interactions between strangers and a town's elementary or young-adult populations. In fact, rather than subjecting themselves to the eyes of strangers in a local movie house, Robesonians more often faced the prospect of being observed by a set of all-too-familiar faces, whose gossipy reports of picture-show attendance may have quickly reached the ears of devout church-members indignant at the frequency with which some fellow congregants lapsed into this morally questionable habit.

So while a superfluity of exhibition choices enabled metropolitan moviegoers to participate anonymously in cinema culture if they so desired, small-town moviegoing represented a "conspicuous" brand of leisure consumption, conspicuous less in the sense of flaunting individual wealth in the pursuit of consumer pleasures than in the inevitably public placement of all audience members within a hyper-aware, xenophobic, and often socially conservative local community. Moviegoers in towns featuring just a single picture show

found little relief from the omnipresent gaze of neighbors, schoolmates, fellow parishioners, and professional or business associates, and though public transportation systems in large cities enabled patrons to sample cinema exhibitions in facilities located miles away from those closest to their homes, small-town residents appear to have had few (if any) opportunities to engage in anonymous moviegoing.

As early Robeson audiences were generally required to visit theaters in downtown commercial districts, there is reason to believe that early small-town moviegoing represented a kind of proto-urban experience, especially for out-of-town residents. But that experience probably did not give rise to the kind of urban survival mechanisms adopted by metropolitan moviegoers. According to sociologist and urban-life theorist Lyn Lofland, “to live in a city is, among other things, to live surrounded by large numbers of persons whom one does not know,” and therefore the abiding possibility of being suddenly required to interact with strangers requires that city residents develop personal strategies for acting safely and appropriately in the presence of unfamiliar individuals.⁷⁶ Small-town moviegoing probably represented a safer, though potentially less thrilling or surprising, affective experience than “city” moviegoing due to a moviegoer’s extreme familiarity with his or her surroundings and fellow moviegoers.⁷⁷ While it is impossible to predict the degree of public anonymity that any specific Robesonian moviegoer may have wished to exercise, wealthier residents able to visit theaters in Raleigh, Charlotte or Wilmington would have been much more likely to experience (and, if necessary, to respond to) the fundamental principle of city living described by Lofland than would a county resident bound to the limited and familiar set of moviegoing options available in Robeson.⁷⁸

In addition, in contrast to reports of exceptionally noisy or rowdy moviegoing in urban exhibition spaces,⁷⁹ Robeson theaters were probably comparatively tame and quiet institutions. The virtual absence of newspaper-based complaints of rowdiness in local theaters suggests that Robeson's moviegoers tended to comport themselves with restraint. Indeed, restrained behavior likely characterized small-town moviegoing from early on, when the county's earliest shows were held in a Lumberton Opera House that doubled as a home to civic functions, church services, school and musical recitals, graduation ceremonies, and educational lectures. The space had also been called upon to provide a temporary home for county municipal offices as well as rooms in which to hold judiciary hearings during courthouse renovations. Therefore, in contrast to the sort of working-class neighborhood venues examined by Steven Ross, Opera House patrons were more likely to act in a local theater as if they were visiting the "churches and museums where people spoke in hushed whispers."⁸⁰ Even once cinema exhibitions crowded out traveling lecturers or Chautauqua speakers, decorous small-town sites like the Lumberton Opera House would have discouraged the sort of behavioral license permitted in fairs, carnival midways, or outdoor tent-based exhibitions. Nor were Robeson's exhibition halls subjected to the sort of child-welfare rhetoric invoked by big-city civic guardians. Rather, when such rhetoric infrequently appeared in Robeson, it was reserved for transient and unsupervised spaces like carnivals and fairs. For that matter, personal-safety rhetoric tended to impact early moviegoing only in the context of concerns about the adequacy of the fire-prevention elements incorporated into local theaters standing alongside the core commercial enterprises of every Robeson community. And although towns like Lumberton remained nominally open to visitors

travelling by car, bus, or rail, few visited specifically to pursue leisure entertainments in small towns that offered few commercial amenities or enticements.

Several other factors also helped differentiate small-town from metropolitan moviegoing. In the absence of recreational visitors, exhibitors often eliminated morning and midday exhibitions since local school and business schedules tended to preclude anything other than afternoon or evening attendance. Prior to rural electrification, farm residents likely only attended Saturday shows that ended early enough for them to reach home before sunset. For a significant percentage of the region's agricultural workforce, i.e., its chronically cash-strapped share-croppers, moviegoing would have represented (at most) a seasonal activity. Even so, before the approach of cooler fall temperatures the summer's extreme heat would have suppressed local attendance figures. The dual impact of local racial prejudice and the significantly lower per-capita incomes of black and Indian residents left very few opportunities for non-white moviegoing, particularly in non-segregated theaters. Sunday shows of any kind were prohibited in Robeson by custom, rather than by municipal statute until the late-1940s, when some drive-in theaters finally began to operate on the Sabbath.⁸¹

However, though each of Robeson's largest towns supported a Main Street theater by 1940, no local fortunes appear to have been made through cinema exhibitions. Except in theaters whose facilities were owned by their operators, managerial turnovers occurred frequently. These perhaps reflected the frustration of operators limited by their dependence upon in-town patronage despite a concerted effort during the first decades of the twentieth century to electrify the region and to improve transportation infrastructures. These exhibitors also experienced significant lags in film distributions, often by design. Highly restrictive film-distribution contracts, predetermined and population-sensitive release schedules, and the film

industry's privileging of metropolitan picture palaces for film premieres meant that small-town moviegoers often viewed films long after they had been viewed by their big-city cousins. The significant lags in small-town exhibitions can be demonstrated by reviewing the local Robeson arrival of three milestone films: an early religious epic, an early synchronized-sound picture, and the most eagerly anticipated film ever released south of the Mason-Dixon Line. The first of these, the multi-reeled and Italian-produced Biblical epic *Quo Vadis?*, first circulated through major cities in April 1913. The film proved so successful that it returned to big-city theaters the following January.⁸² Nonetheless, *Quo Vadis?* did not arrive in Robeson until the end of October 1914 when the film opened the new Lumbee Theatre. Rural audiences had waited an additional eighteen months before viewing a film that had gone through two full metropolitan exhibition cycles. Similar lags occurred between big-city and small-town moviegoers even within the American South. For example, "talking" pictures first arrived in Richmond, Virginia in the fall of 1927 during exhibitions of the Warner Brothers smash *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, even though the film usually been credited with heralding the arrival of feature-length sound pictures was not released for general theatrical exhibition until February 1928. However, based on newspaper advertisements and schedules, the film appears never to have been exhibited in Robeson during the period examined in this study. Instead, the first talking picture exhibited in Robeson was the Warner Brothers/First National collaboration *The Barker*, a part-talking and part-silent feature film released nationally in early December 1928, a full four months before it arrived at Lumberton's flagship, the Carolina Theatre. Similar release lags continued in Robeson throughout the 1930s, as David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* opened jointly in New York and Atlanta in December 1939. The Civil War blockbuster only arrived in Richmond by the middle of the following February,⁸³ and Robeson's moviegoers

were forced to wait an additional two-and-a-half months before the film finally appeared at the Lumberton Carolina almost five months after its initial release. In effect, Hollywood's distribution process tended to relegate small-town theaters to a subordinate position requiring moviegoers to wait a considerable period before being exposed to major film releases or groundbreaking cinema technologies.

Even when they finally arrived, small-town moviegoers did not experience these films surrounded by the extravagant architectural fantasies of monolithic big-city theaters. While New York's sumptuously elegant Roxy and Paramount Theatres had been designed to dazzle and to pamper audiences within architectural showpieces that featured a host of role-specific staff members including box-office managers, ticket takers, ushers/usherettes, lounge attendants, and refreshment-counter operators responsible for maintaining the exceptional customer-service reputations of deluxe first-run theaters, small-town exhibition venues remained distinctly non-palatial. The lack of local competition provided small-town exhibitors little incentive to upgrade their venues beyond a level of basic operational and technological currency. So while metropolitan moviegoers were able to choose from a profusion of stately, exciting, and imaginative theatrical spaces during beginning in the mid-1910s, Robeson's audiences continued to face highly limited viewing options. They were hardly alone. A 1922 *Motion Picture News* poll indicated that 52% of the nation's theater operators faced no direct local competitors,⁸⁴ a trend that continued throughout almost all of Robeson until the advent of drive-in theaters in the 1940s.

These metropolitan-versus-rural exhibition disparities extended beyond the Northeast or Midwest and into the South, where moviegoers in a major city like Richmond could access multiple moviegoing options ten to fifteen years prior to the arrival of a second successful

theater in a rural regional center like Lumberton. Indeed, when Lumberton's modest two-hundred-and-sixteen seat Pastime Theatre opened shortly before 1912, Richmond's moviegoing options already included, yet were by no means limited to, a pair of twelve-hundred-seat exhibition halls.⁸⁵ Together, these two sites possessed approximately five to six times the total seating capacity of all of the venues that ever appear to have exhibited motion pictures in Robeson County through 1912.⁸⁶ After a host of theater operations opened and closed in Richmond between 1906 and 1915, fifteen motion-picture theaters remained operating at the end of that city's first decade of dedicated motion-picture exhibitions,⁸⁷ five times the number that had ever operated anywhere within the thousand square miles of Robeson County.⁸⁸ In addition, by 1915 two locally published magazines circulated among Richmond moviegoers that had been dedicated to motion-picture entertainment, one of whose inaugural issue was published before the establishment of the first semi-permanent exhibition in Robeson.⁸⁹ By 1928, in addition to the set of relatively modest theaters that had expanded beyond downtown commercial areas and into local neighborhoods, Richmond's moviegoers could access three full-scale picture palaces, a large local auditorium capable of accommodating key civic functions, and a pair of stage theaters before Robeson's single mid-sized picture palace opened that June.⁹⁰ Furthermore, despite the tremendous disparity between the number of available theatrical venues in Robeson and Richmond, a similar disparity existed between Richmond's exhibition infrastructure and those of major Northeastern and Midwestern metropolitan centers.

Had Robeson County contained two or three times as many theaters as actually operated there on an historical basis, local economic patterns would have severely limited the frequency of moviegoing especially among the local farm population. Tenants and other small-scale

farmers were usually required to patronize shops either directly owned or operated by their leaseholders or by those merchants willing to offer the credit necessary annually to seed farmlands and stock barnyards. While some merchants permitted clients to run deficit balances until their crops matured, picture-show operators could not do so given their need to generate cash receipts with which to settle film-rental bills with their distributors all year long. The seasonal cash shortage typical within agricultural communities made it difficult for rural theater operators to expand their operations when, for at least much of the year, the cash priority of many audience members involved meeting daily and weekly expenses while maintaining their lease payments on the farms that they lived on and from which earned their living. In contrast to large urban moviegoing environments whose pools of working-class moviegoers were typically paid their regular wages in cash, small-town moviegoing probably remained a middle-to-upper class phenomenon in rural communities.

Larger cities also tended to attract theatrical exhibitors in part because their high population densities had prompted the relatively early development of extensive commercial and social-service infrastructures. While the core infrastructures of small towns were still under development, in-town leisure opportunities tended not to be considered a community priority. Due to their scarcity, motion-picture entertainment may have represented a kind of luxury good in small towns during the first several decades of national film exhibitions. As a dependence on retail credit limited the prospects of small-town operators, the nascent systems of commercial and small-business credit that had begun to develop in rural areas were reluctant to prioritize funding for exhibition-based businesses. As the film industry began to expand beyond its northeastern roots, Robeson's banking establishments including the Bank of Lumberton (1897) had just begun to pool the capital necessary to develop key local infrastructures. The limited

funds available to them tended to be directed towards higher priority public health, sanitation, transportation, education, and commercial utility initiatives. For example, beginning in 1896 and continuing well into the early 1900s capital investments in Robeson resulted in the excavation of an extensive series of artesian wells that both laid the foundation for a clean and dependable water supply and prompted subsequent long-term investments in water filtration, distribution and sewerage systems. Infrastructure projects designed to increase local life expectancies included the development of community hospitals that simultaneously cared for individual patients and spearheaded campaigns to curb chronic or debilitating diseases like smallpox, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, and tuberculosis.

Local bankers and entrepreneurs also invested significant capital within Robeson's transportation infrastructure. Their efforts helped result in the development of three major railroad lines that traversed the county (i.e., the Seaboard Air Line, Atlantic Coast Line, and Virginia and Carolina Southern Line). Before the arrival of the Pastime in 1911, four additional regional arteries connected local towns to the main lines (see Figure 4.1) that linked Robeson to broader economic markets. In time, rail lines would facilitate the transfer of motion-picture canisters to and from film-distribution centers like Charlotte. Through the early 1920s, local tax levies, municipal bond offerings, and state tax revenues were dedicated towards producing a network of roads, highways and bridges that navigated the rivers and marshy swamps which had sub-divided the county into local pockets of commerce. These road systems also provided county residents with coach and automobile access to larger regional centers. However, these projects required much longer than anticipated periods of time to fund and plan them before dispatching actual construction gangs to plow, grade and pave a single road or to erect a stream-spanning bridge. If by 1920 a critical mass of eighty-eight highway miles had

been completed in Robeson, an end-to-end highway connection linking the county with Charlotte and Wilmington was not available until 1927, or the same year in which construction began on Lumberton's Carolina Theatre.

Of course, not every initiative designed to improve the safety or prosperity of Robeson's communities required mass infusions of capital. More modest improvements included the establishment of local fire-fighting and fire-prevention services that would represent an important pre-requisite for the expansion of local cinema. One local fire destroyed an entire city block in Lumberton in 1897, and fires continued to threaten Robeson's town centers for decades. Once formed in 1903, Lumberton's volunteer fire company drilled its members to respond to the multiple threats facing commercial districts consisting of contiguous wooden-frame structures. Robesonians were well aware of cautionary newspaper accounts of disastrous metropolitan-theater fires, and in time their concerns resulted in additional barriers to local cinema developments through building statutes and fire codes that encouraged the use of more expensive yet safer construction materials including brick, concrete, and iron, all of which increased the capital investments potentially facing theatrical entrepreneurs.

Other capital and labor-intensive infrastructure projects that took precedence over small-town commercial leisure early in the twentieth century in every major Robeson community included the renovation or construction of houses of worship to accommodate rapidly expanding populations. Significant investments were also made to construct schools and to provide for basic governmental services, the latter of which included the reconstruction of the Robeson County Courthouse and the development of township postal facilities throughout Robeson. In pursuing these improvements, civic leaders tended to ignore community leisure; indeed, despite its burgeoning population Lumberton did not develop a single facility to enable children freely

to congregate outside their domestic or school environments until the town's first library opened in the late-1920s. While ignoring non-essential services, Lumberton's leading citizens also aggressively pursued profitable commercial ventures through the construction of cotton and tobacco mills and the implementation of drainage and canal systems that simultaneously opened up additional arable land and provided easier transportation for transporting crops to market. Despite relatively early initiatives to expand roadways around regional hubs like Lumberton, even as these roads became available they remained relatively lightly travelled by commercial and personal vehicles due to the prohibitive cost of trucks and automobiles. While auto dealerships began to crop up sporadically in Robeson during the mid-to-late 1910s, a car remained a luxury item through World War II for most of the county's working and middle classes.

The comparatively late arrival of specific base utilities in small-town America also dampened picture-show development. Although electric lights began to replace oil-fueled streetlamps in Lumberton in 1903, most local power grids remained inefficient and required significant upgrades for years to come; furthermore, some of the region's foundational supply agreements with regional electric companies, the most important of which connected Robeson to the Yadkin River Power grid, were not struck until 1912, or shortly after the arrival of the Pastime Theatre. Moreover, despite their potential for reducing communication lags and eliminating expensive and time-consuming travel between exhibitors and film-distribution services, telephones took years locally to reach a critical mass. In Robeson, telephone service first arrived in Maxton in 1902, but its slow if steady extension to outlying homes, farms and villages took years (and in some cases decades) to complete. Shortages in even the most basic necessities also impeded local exhibitions. During the extraordinarily harsh winters of 1917 and

1918, for example, wartime rationing badly reduced already insufficient stockpiles of lumber, coal, and heating oil. Local businesses were forced to shorten their operating hours, as municipal and state officials ordered a reduction in the use of electric lights and an elimination of all non-essential fuel expenditures on specific nights each week. These shortages combined with frigid temperatures eventually forced most shops to close their doors at least one business day a week.

Commercial credit shortages and a host of other economic hardships also slowed exhibition growth in Robeson. The Great Depression effectively bankrupted Robeson's financial infrastructure, and from 1929 to 1935 at least one major bank failed in the towns of Rowland, St. Pauls, Lumberton and Maxton. Local businesses that depended on infusions of external credit often failed outright, and many businesses that managed to stay afloat closed each Thursday during the Depression's most torturous months to limit operating costs. Despite Robeson's agricultural base, local unemployment soared in the early 1930s. Many families suffered extreme privation and barely managed to subsist on their farms, while others were driven off by severe credit restrictions that prevented them from accessing the funds required to seed their fields and to maintain their farm equipment. Robeson's most concentrated employment districts, its cotton and textile mills, were also savaged during the Depression. Several mills closed, while others experienced crippling work-stoppages at times organized by terminated workers who, in refusing to leave their mill houses, openly defied mill owners and the local police. Laborers-for-hire and non-farm employees desperate to hold onto their jobs suffered through drastic wage reductions, and in a short time the local supply of ready-cash (never particularly plentiful in the first place) dried up. Even school children were impacted by the difficult conditions, for in order to reduce the operating cost of schools and to release

additional sources of cheap labor to farms struggling to survive, the county's academic calendar was drastically curtailed. After initially reducing the school-year from nine to eight months, local administrators eventually trimmed the academic calendar to a mere six months.

Despite these challenges, moviegoing did develop into an important leisure activity in Robeson, but it did not do so during the age of the nickelodeon when thousands of theaters helped to popularize motion pictures across the country. Of the terms commonly used by cinema historians to describe early moviegoing sites (e.g., converted storefronts, nickelodeons, converted Opera House or vaudeville theaters, picture shows, and picture palaces), most of Robeson's modest theaters did evolve beyond their base storefront beginnings to serve their communities as full-fledged picture shows. In an analysis of the "terrain of exhibition,"⁹¹ Richard Abel defined picture shows as relatively modest venues that differed both from the crowded, dark, and initially slapdash set of converted-storefronts and other nickelodeons whose expansion crested around 1910, as well as from the comparatively opulent picture palaces that began to arrive in major cities during the mid-1910s. While almost all of Robeson's storefront theaters developed well after the heyday of the nation's nickelodeon expansion, they underwent a long string of upgrades which, if structurally feasible, often resulted in the implementation of balcony seating. Most county moviegoers would have attended these plain and operationally homogeneous sites, since in Robeson only the Lumberton Carolina ever approached the sophistication and grandeur of a modest-sized metropolitan picture palace.⁹² While several exhibitors expanded their operations into larger, cleaner, and better-equipped facilities, most operators appeared satisfied maintaining facilities that were roughly on par with those of their county peers (save the Carolina).

Furthermore, most venues in Robeson incorporated seating capacities close to fifty percent larger than an average nickelodeon,⁹³ a size differential that appears less surprising when one considers the historical timeframes commonly assigned to demarcate the nickelodeon era. A representative sample of that period's temporal borders include the relatively generous definition provided by Allen and Gomery, who suggest that the nickelodeon period lasted from approximately 1905 through 1915 (while also noting that some picture-palace developments had begun a few years before 1915). Narrower temporal delineations for the nickelodeon era include the period of 1907-1912 offered by Thomas Doherty or the interval from 1905-1914 claimed by Russell Merritt.⁹⁴ Though cinema and architectural historians have labored to document the broad spectrum of facilities that were either converted into or otherwise hosted nickelodeons, most accounts tend to include a few characteristics of the nickelodeon age that did not generally apply within Robeson County. For one thing, while many nickelodeon sites were often erected extraordinarily quickly, usually out of converted storefront spaces, few open storefronts were available in Robeson's downtowns until well after the end of virtually any temporal definition of the nickelodeon period. Moreover, that period was characterized by the rapid arrival of thousands of nickelodeons and was followed by an equally dramatic decline in their number. Yet neither venue volatility nor intensive competition between local sites characterized Robesonian exhibition. While Ben Singer has noted in his account of Manhattan nickelodeons that scores of in-coming exhibitors clamored to enter the ranks of New York operators from 1907 to 1910 even as almost as many were seeking to leave it,⁹⁵ these boom-and-bust cycles never visited small towns in which decades might pass before a single exhibition site either opened or closed. Ultimately, most Robeson communities tended to support the first local site that managed to operate continuously for a year—and sometimes less.

Consequently, the history of Robeson County moviegoing suggests that it is necessary at a minimum significantly to qualify Dennis Sharp's assertion that the tremendous growth of nickelodeons and other exhibition venues by 1910 had transformed the United States into a nation of cinemagoers.⁹⁶ Furthermore, within the context of small-town American exhibitions it may remain largely irrelevant whether a scholarly consensus is reached as to whether the national nickelodeon era started in 1905 or 1907 and ended in either 1910, 1912, 1914 or 1915 since so many smaller communities simply never participated in moviegoing of any kind during even the most generous definition of the nickelodeon period. This was certainly the case in Robeson, where no dedicated motion-picture site consistently operated until 1912; where no town experienced anything other than the most minimal intra-site competition through the late 1920s; and where approximately 45,000 residents lacked easy access to any theater within roughly a ten-mile radius until well into the 1920s or later.

In addition, the Robeson exhibition history summarized in tabular form in Appendix II offers indisputable evidence that small-town communities did not necessarily develop Main Street theaters at the same time and in identical ways. Since a full generation or more of national moviegoing had passed before many small-town residents ever visited a local theater, and since the pattern of rapid theater expansion and decline that characterized the metropolitan nickelodeon-era seems not to have reflected the rural and small-town moviegoing experience, it would appear that cinema and social historians face the task of readjusting their considerations regarding the extensibility to non-urban communities in the United States of qualifying terms such as "the nickelodeon era" as these have traditionally been defined. It is possible that a deconstruction of homogeneous conceptions of that age may already have begun, given the skeptical tone that seems to have crept into Michael Aronson's discussion of the ways in

which “the collective history of exhibition has tended to mark the end of ‘nickel madness’ as occurring no later than 1914.”⁹⁷ Though Aronson’s investigations into nickelodeon development occur within the context of an urban-industrial community like Pittsburgh, often cited as home to the nation’s first nickelodeon in 1905, his work at least hints at a need to reassess nickelodeons relative to their common characteristics, including their physical structures, admission prices, audience demographics, the style and content of their on-screen exhibitions, and their role in the development of early moviegoing. Eschewing reductive definitions of what he views as a markedly heterogeneous set of exhibition spaces, Aronson warns that “if we are to accept the textual evidence that all of these spaces were considered by someone, at some time and in some place, to be nickelodeons, then as scholars we need to be careful of attempting historiographically to force one definition, or indeed one history, to fit them all.”⁹⁸

For its part, this study recommends that additional early moviegoing studies be initiated across a set of geographically and demographically diverse communities to confirm the variety of ways in which picture shows, the much more appropriate term to describe early Robeson theaters, developed according to vastly different timelines, through curious sets of entrepreneurial interventions, and along distinctive temporal trajectories. Regardless of the persistence of narratives touting the rapid and near-ubiquitous development of exhibition sites across the nation, experiences in Robeson County beg the question as to how it is possible that any community lacking a local theater until the latter stages of the Jazz Age, and perhaps not until long after the arrival of talking pictures, could ever claim to have participated in nickelodeon-era cinema? Furthermore, the notion that early cinema exhibition offered a sure-fire path to fame and fortune, a legend supported by captivating tales of the small handful of

Hollywood moguls whose wealth was forged through cinema distribution and exhibition, obscures the fact that many early operators suffered significant financial reverses. Indeed, these last two chapters suggest that during the early days of local moviegoing in Robeson a significantly higher percentage of initial theater operators failed than succeeded. Eventually, as a few short-lived exhibition sites began to pop up in Robeson at the tail end of the 1910s, the financial uncertainties facing local operators like Walter Wishart were compounded by the growing willingness of local moral guardians who, concerned that exposure to motion-picture entertainment might encourage—or possibly represented in and of itself an instance of—non-Christian behavior, pressured governmental institutions to impose a set of potentially onerous and costly constraints on commercial cinema. The public dialogues surrounding the activities (and at times, the decided inaction) of theater operators as well as municipal and state officials responding to the objections of conservative Christianity to cinematic leisure forms the subject of our next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹ Excluding the towns of Lumberton and Pembroke. Lumberton's exhibition-site development has been recounted in Chapter III (and to a lesser degree in Chapters VI and VII), while developments in Pembroke have been deferred to Chapter VI.

² According to the US Census Bureau, as late as 1950 fifty-one percent of the nation's population resided either in rural communities (i.e., communities with fewer than twenty-five hundred residents) or in urban communities containing less than ten-thousand residents. See Table 14 (p. 13) of United States. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States (1951), 1951, Gov't. Printing Office, Available: <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1951-01.pdf>, 10-Dec-2009.

³ In particular, see Douglas Gomery's Shared Pleasures (chapters 1, 2, 4 and 5), Greg Waller's Main Street Amusements (chapters 3 through 5), and Kathryn Fuller's At The Picture Show (chapters 1, 3 and 5). The best one-volume treatment of drive-in theaters may be found in Barbara Stones and the National Association of Theatre Owners (U.S.), America Goes to the Movies: 100 Years of Motion Picture Exhibition (North Hollywood, CA: National Association of Theatre Owners, 1993).

⁴ An account of this local competition has been provided in Chapter III.

⁵ A decade-by-decade developmental "heat map," Appendix II includes a breakdown of the maximum number of concurrent theaters operating in each of Robeson's eight largest communities. These town summaries have been provided alongside relevant local population figures.

⁶ A detailed account of the development of the Lumberton Carolina has been provided in Chapter VII.

⁷ Fuller, At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture, 111.

⁸ For an extended account of non-white moviegoing in Robeson, see Chapter VI.

⁹ Created by W. W. Whaley of Lumberton, this county map was originally published in the Robesonian (29-Sep-1910, p. 2).

¹⁰ The enclosed map is a modified excerpt derived from a digital Robeson County map published in 2004 by the University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill, NC) on behalf of the North Carolina Department of Archives and History. The original map segment was accessed on 26-Jul-2011 from an anonymously authored webpage entitled "The Way We Lived in North Carolina" available via the following web address: <http://www.waywelivednc.com/maps/countymaps/maps/robesson.htm>.

¹¹ The original Robesonian announcement (26-May-1897) anticipated a June 2nd show; however, the Armory exhibition was actually held on May 27th.

¹² As recorded in "Maxton, North Carolina, 1874-1974: Maxton Area Centennial, March 29-April 6, 1974," (Maxton, NC.: 1974).

¹³ Evidence regarding early Maxton theaters has been derived in part from Sanborn fire maps, as well as from excerpts in the chapter "Amusements of an Earlier Day" originally published in the commemorative edition "Maxton, North Carolina, 1874-1974: Maxton Area Centennial, March 29-April 6, 1974." Additional newspaper excerpts regarding early Maxton theaters can be found in the Robesonian (5-Feb-1923, p. 8; 29-Dec-1927, p. 1; and 10-Apr-1939, p. 3).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (5-Feb-1923, p. 8).

¹⁵ This is the only known instance of an early Robeson hotelier embedding a cinema exhibition site directly within a commercial-lodging facility.

¹⁶ An early iteration of the Red Springs Theatre has been identified as being managed by a “Mr. Lucas,” based on a local news item published in the Robesonian (23-Mar-1925, p. 1).

¹⁷ Ibid. (9-Jun-1919, pages 2 and 4).

¹⁸ In Red Springs, the Crescent Theatre eventually gave way by the mid 1920s to the Red Springs Theatre, while Laurinburg’s pre-1925 venues included the Scotland and Gem Theatres (as noted in Chapter III).

¹⁹ According to the figures available in Appendix II, Pembroke’s total population stood at 47% of Maxton’s population in 1940.

²⁰ For an extended discussion of Pembroke moviegoing, see Chapter VI.

²¹ From the perspective of Robeson’s Indians uncomfortable with the second-class treatment forced upon them in local white theaters, the Pembroke Theatre represented a symbol of civic pride. The Indian community’s social aspirations drove Pembroke to become the only Robeson town that successfully supported a dedicated local theater with a population of less than one-thousand residents. In fact, Pembroke’s population was twenty percent smaller than the population of the next-largest Robeson town that also boasted a local picture show (i.e., Rowland).

²² As demonstrated in the field notes of sociologist Guy Johnson, elements of the Johnson Papers that are currently housed as Southern Manuscript Collection item number 3826 in the Southern Historical Collection located at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Wilson Library facility. According to Johnson’s papers, the town of Red Springs was considered by Robeson Indians to be nearly as inhospitable as Maxton.

²³ The core data sources from which this early Red Springs moviegoing has been derived include periodic Sanborn fire insurance maps of downtown Red Springs as well as from official documents including certificates of incorporation, tax deeds, and deeds of transfer housed in the Robeson County courthouse. In addition, the account that follows draws heavily upon news items published in the Robesonian, particularly a set of untitled items appearing in the paper’s 23-Mar-1925 (p. 1), 7-May-1928 (p. 1), 30-Jun-1932 (p. 6), 5-Mar-1937 (p. 8), and 29-Nov-1937 (Section 5, p. 5) editions. Note that while an additional motion-picture house, the Center Theatre, opened in Red Springs in 1949, that venue has been largely excluded from this town-by-town review due to its insignificant impact on pre-1950s moviegoing in Robeson.

²⁴ The newspaper descriptions of several Fair acts closely resemble the narrative content of several early silent films. See the Fair advertisement published in Ibid. (8-Nov-1904, p. 3).

²⁵ Ibid. (5-May-1919, p. 1).

²⁶ Ibid. (8-May-1919, p. 1).

²⁷ Ibid. (10-Nov-1919, p. 1).

²⁸ Lumberton’s Pastime Theatre had been absorbed into the Anderson Brothers’ chain by 1917 (a noted in Chapter III). Unfortunately, the name of the chain headed by the owners of the Rose Theatre is not currently known.

²⁹ It is possible that this distinction belonged to St. Pauls exhibitor W. A. Nutting, whose Lyric Theatre operated over a decade before New Red Springs Theatre arrived. Unfortunately, studies of Nutting’s deed and lease records provide no definitive light on whether or not Nutting’s theater sat upon property owned by Nutting. However, a newspaper story indicating that Nutting considered adding a balcony to his theatre hints at his personal ownership of the venue, although Nutting may have agreed to pay for the site’s expansion while

leasing the building from someone else—as appears to have been true of the 1926 Pastime expansion overseen by operator J. W. Griffin. Yet even if Nutting both owned and operated the Lyric, his theater appears not to have operated for long, and as such, Humphrey appears to represent the candidate most deserving for the title of Robeson’s first successful cinema owner-operator.

³⁰ The Anderson Brothers paid Humphrey and the Stanleys one-hundred dollars for their agreeing not to open another theater in Lumberton, largely because the Andersons were renewing their agreements to manage the Carolina and Pastime Theaters at that time. The agreement prohibited the newcomers from entering the Lumberton market as long as either one of the two named theaters remained operating.

³¹ See Appendix II for details. Note that St. Pauls’ growth leveled off during the next two decades, while that of Red Springs continued to grow substantially. As such, by 1950 the populations of the two towns were virtually identical.

³² Sources for the history of early exhibition sites in St. Pauls include a Sanborn fire insurance map dated December 1928 and a handful of local tax and deed transfer records archived in the Robeson County Courthouse. However, the most useful information pertaining to St. Pauls’ theatrical history has been recorded in untitled local news items published in the following editions of the Robesonian: 30-Jun-1921, p. 5; 18-Jul-1921, p. 3; 26-Aug-1921, p. 5; 29-Jan-1923, Section 5, p. 1; 21-Jan-1924, p. 1; 28-Jul-1924, p. 1; 25-Oct-1928, p. 5; 20-Jul-1933, p. 3; 3-Aug-1933, p. 2; 26-Nov-1934, p. 2; 1-Apr-1935, p. 3; 15-Jul-1935, p. 7; 20-Nov-1936, p. 4; and 23-Dec-1936, p. 3, the last of which includes a summary of Joe Caudell’s career.

³³ No evidence currently available confirms how far Nutting proceeded in implementing his proposal.

³⁴ A detailed account of the Opera House’s balcony is located in Chapter VI. Note that while the incorporation of a balcony at any Robeson theater site did not automatically signify the inclusion of non-white patronage, all evidence currently available suggests that, with the possible exception of segregated “midnight” shows and/or the non-sanctioned practice of local non-whites “passing” into a local theater, non-whites were likely restricted to attending local theatrical exhibitions while seated in a segregated balcony. If so, the near-universal expansion of these balconies within new or existing Robeson theaters during the 1920s and 1930s was a critical precursor to the development of local non-white moviegoing.

³⁵ Today, the site is occupied by Brisson’s Drug Store.

³⁶ Historical evidence concerning the history of early theaters in Fairmont includes intermittent Sanborn fire insurance maps, land deeds and commercial deeds of incorporation. However, the largest set of evidence has been collected from local news stories published in the following issues of the Robesonian: 14-Jun-1915, p. 1; 8-Mar-1922, p. 1; 24-Aug-1922, p. 1; 19-Apr-1923, p. 3; 7-Jul-1923, pages 1 and 3; 18-Oct-1923, p. 1; 7-Jul-1924, p. 1; 17-Sep-1925, p. 1; 29-Jul-1929, p. 6; 12-Apr-1934, p. 3; 3-May-1934, p. 3; 30-Aug-1934, Section 3, p. 2; 13-Sep-1934, Section 2, p. 6; 30-Nov-1936, p. 4; 29-Jul-1938, p. 5; and 17-Jul-1947, p. 5.

³⁷ Unfortunately, a then-forty year old Joseph Caudell died of pneumonia in 1936 just a few days before Christmas.

³⁸ Nevertheless, a lack of subsequent newspaper coverage suggests that the Dixie was a relatively short-lived theater, perhaps operating for no longer than a few months in 1915. Alternatively, the Crescent in Red Springs (circa 1917) appears to have been a much more *successful* venue, given that it attracted more than a single operator and was incorporated into a regional chain.

³⁹ It is possible that Fay’s brother Joseph Caudell had a (presumably small) financial stake in the Capitol Theatre, as Joseph appears listed as a minority stockholder in the Caudell Company, an organization incorporated in 1928 to operate picture shows in St. Pauls and other North Carolina towns. However, W. F. Caudell remained by far the company’s principal shareholder.

⁴⁰ While the Capitol survived in Fairmont well past 1950, the site was heavily damaged by fire in 1947. Yet within a month, a tent theatre was put into operation to screen films six evenings a week and all-day Saturday. A throwback to the early days of itinerant exhibition, the Capitol's tent show probably remained operating until a reconstructed theatre reopened in August 1948. Advertisements related to the Tent Show and to the theater's eventual reopening can be found in the 22-Jan-1948 (p. 8) and 29-Jul-48 (p. 4) issues of the Pembroke Progress, (Pembroke, NC: Dougald Coxe).

⁴¹ News excerpts concerning early Rowland exhibitions were originally published as local news items in the following issues of the Robesonian: 27-Sep-1923, p. 1; 9-Apr-1928, p. 3; and 19-Apr-1928, pages 1 and 7. Of the two Sanborn maps produced of downtown Rowland in 1919 and 1925, neither identified a theater or motion-picture facility operating within Rowland.

⁴² In fact, the first mention of the Fairmont PTA's plans appeared in *Ibid.* on 19-Apr-1923 (p. 3), while the first mention of the Rowland PTA's interest appeared on 27-Sep-1923 (p. 1).

⁴³ See Chapter VI.

⁴⁴ The role these organizations played in calling for statewide film censorship is briefly discussed in Chapter V.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.* (19-Apr-1928, pages 1 and 7).

⁴⁶ Local news excerpts pertaining to the development of the Rowland Theatre can be found in the following issues of the Robesonian: 29-Oct-1937, pp. 7-8; 3-Nov-1937, p. 6; and 5-Nov-1937, Section 1, p. 6 as well as Section 3, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Today, the building that housed the Adams's Rowland Theatre still stands at 432 W. Main St. within the town's historical district.

⁴⁸ For an extended discussion of the Riverside Theatre's tri-racial architecture, see Chapter VI.

⁴⁹ For instance, cinema historian Mark Swartz has documented the ways in which tent-based itinerant film exhibitions during the 1930s and 1940s served rural audiences in communities too small to support a theater of their own. According to Swartz, North Carolina was one of the several states regularly served by these itinerant exhibitors. See Mark Swartz, "Motion Pictures on the Move," Journal of American Culture 9.4 (1986): 1-7.

⁵⁰ In contrast to the experiences of many communities nationally, where quite a few itinerant operators migrated into permanent exhibition roles. This pattern has been discussed by the editors of Grieverson and Krämer, eds., The Silent Cinema Reader, 34.

⁵¹ Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 61.

⁵² See Appendix II.

⁵³ Per Lewis Jacobs, as reported in William D. Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 115.

⁵⁴ As quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 3-5.

⁵⁶ Evidence currently available indicates that only two opera houses appear to have operated within the borders of Robeson. The second Opera House, located in Red Springs, was not an individual structure, but rather an upper floor of the Bank of Red Springs, which was constructed in 1900. No news accounts in the Robesonian provide confirmation of motion-picture exhibitions in that space.

⁵⁷ Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 31.

⁵⁸ Chicago figures quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ Charles Matthew Feldman, The National Board of Censorship (Review) of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922 (New York: Arno Press, 1977), 2.

⁶¹ Forsher, The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown, 22.

⁶² See Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film, 65. The conversion of vaudeville and “legitimate” or stage theaters into movie houses has been noted by a number of film scholars. For a useful summary of the variety of those conversions, see Grieveson and Krämer, eds., The Silent Cinema Reader, 192.

⁶³ See Dennis Sharp, The Picture Palace and Other Buildings for the Movies, Excursions into Architecture. (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1969), 30. The features described by Sharp mirror the recollections of an elderly Robesonian, John Clayton Townsend, who as a teenager served as an usher at Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre. Townsend was familiar with the Carolina’s “second-run” neighbor, the Pastime, as both were operated by the same management company. Townsend’s Pastime account has been provided in John Clayton Townsend, “Personal Interview,” (Lumberton, NC: October 2001).

⁶⁴ The dimensions of the original Pastime were recorded in the 1908 Sanborn fire insurance map of downtown Lumberton.

⁶⁵ See Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 77-9. In fact, local newspaper accounts placed the Pastime’s opening-night capacity at 216 seats.

⁶⁶ These efforts by Musser, Allen and Abel have been summarized in Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 20.

⁶⁷ In fact, the first building in Robeson County that appears to have been constructed from the ground up and was designed to accommodate motion-picture exhibitions was Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre, which broke ground late in 1927.

⁶⁸ Richard Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928, History of the American Cinema, vol. 3 (New York: Scribner 1990), 10.

⁶⁹ These factors are discussed at length in Chapters VI and VII.

⁷⁰ The claim that small towns may not have participated in what cinema historians typically refer to as the “nickelodeon era” is not an entirely new assertion. Yet despite the evidentiary difficulties involved, continuing to document how historical exhibition and/or moviegoing trends either bypassed certain locations, or occurred so rarely as to have remained locally irrelevant, represents an important and ongoing research goal. This Robeson case study, for example, provides additional support for the findings of “small-town” scholars like George Potamianos, whose research into moviegoing in Placerville, California also casts doubt upon the general and temporal applicability of national theatrical trends in small (and primarily rural) communities. See Potamianos, “Building Movie Audiences in Placerville, California, 1908-1915,” 75-90.

⁷¹ Hansen, Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film, 79.

⁷² “Pre-classical” cinema represents a term often employed by film scholars to characterize early silent films that tended that offered their audiences a series of filmed “attractions” or “spectacles,” rather than incorporating an overt set of narrative structures or maintaining a high degree of narrative continuity through film editing. A

useful discussion of the “cinema of attractions” (authored by film historian Tom Gunning) as well as a series of scholarly accounts of “classical” or “narrative” cinema and their alternatives (including discussions by Kristen Thompson, David Bordwell, Richard Abel and others) have been compiled into a useful single-volume by Lee Grieveson and Peter Krämer. See Grieveson and Krämer, eds., The Silent Cinema Reader.

⁷³ Though Red Springs finally welcomed a second venue, the Center Theatre, in 1949, that theater’s arrival had effectively no impact on local moviegoing during the period covered by this study.

⁷⁴ See Appendix II.

⁷⁵ Examples of these objections are discussed in Chapter V.

⁷⁶ See Lyn H. Lofland, A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space (New York: Basic Books, 1973), ix-x.

⁷⁷ Nevertheless, small-town theaters held the potential for operating as one of the few local sites in which members of different racial groups might simultaneously inhabit the same public space. The implementation of racial segregation in Robeson’s theaters—itsself a conscious response to this possibility—is one of the principal topics of discussion in Chapter VI.

⁷⁸ Lofland believes this absence of small-town anonymity represents *the* crucial difference between town/village/tribal forms of living and city life, while simultaneously arguing that throughout history, humans have rarely chosen or been willing to live in close proximity to complete strangers. See Lofland, A World of Strangers: Order and Action in Urban Public Space, pages 4 and 8.

⁷⁹ For example, see Roy Rosenzweig, Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920, Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Modern History. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 204-10.

⁸⁰ Ross, Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America, 24.

⁸¹ Note that the Maxton-Laurinburg airbase theater had in fact offered shows seven days a week during World War II to accommodate the schedules of servicemen, though it is unlikely that the theater admitted civilian patrons at that time due to security concerns.

⁸² For an account of the film’s performance dates, see Richard Abel, Americanizing the Movies and ‘Movie-Mad’ Audiences, 1910-1914 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 35-6.

⁸³ For confirmation of the film’s arrival in Richmond, see Fuller-Seeley, Dementi and Dementi, Celebrate Richmond Theater, 97.

⁸⁴ See Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928, 13.

⁸⁵ Fuller-Seeley, Dementi and Dementi, Celebrate Richmond Theater, 29.

⁸⁶ Specifically, the Pastime Theater, the Lumberton Opera House, and the Maxton Armory, whose aggregate auditorium spaces were probably incapable of seating more than six-hundred patrons.

⁸⁷ Richmond’s theater totals have been derived from Fuller-Seeley, Dementi and Dementi, Celebrate Richmond Theater, 31.

⁸⁸ All of which were located in Lumberton, and included the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric site, the Pastime Theatre, and the Opera House (the latter of which had stopped exhibiting pictures by 1915). Moreover, the Lumbee Theatre site did not operate continuously as a theater during that period, and had closed for good in 1917 (see Chapter III).

⁸⁹ Fuller-Seeley, Dementi and Dementi, Celebrate Richmond Theater, 40.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁹¹ Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 45-6.

⁹² For an extended description of the Lumberton Carolina's internal and external appointments, see Chapter VII.

⁹³ While many nickelodeons featured seating capacities of two-hundred patrons or less, most of Robeson's picture shows developed during the 1920s and 1930s seated approximately three-hundred patrons.

⁹⁴ Allen and Gomery, Film History: Theory and Practice, Thomas Patrick Doherty, Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), and Russell Merritt, "The Nickelodeon Period, 1905-1914," Exhibition: The Film Reader, ed. Ina Rae Hark, In Focus: Routledge Film Readers (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁹⁵ From Singer's "Manhattan Nickelodeons: New Data on Audiences and Exhibitors," as reprinted in Grieveson and Krämer, eds., The Silent Cinema Reader, 129.

⁹⁶ Sharp, The Picture Palace and Other Buildings for the Movies, 36.

⁹⁷ Michael G Aronson, "The Wrong Kind of Nickel Madness: Pricing Problems for Pittsburgh Nickelodeons," Cinema Journal 42.1 (2002): 73.

⁹⁸ Aronson, "The Wrong Kind of Nickel Madness: Pricing Problems for Pittsburgh Nickelodeons," 80.

CHAPTER V

AMBIVALENCE AND APPROPRIATION: CONSERVATIVE CHRISTIANITY AND MOTION-PICTURE CENSORSHIP (1914 TO THE 1930s).

Determining what is legitimate to say and hear and see—whether in church or at the fair, in the press or on the street corner, in the union hall or in the movie theater—is a central activity of all societies and social groups. And tracking such battles over legitimacy has become a central activity of historians. Indeed, such battles increasingly present openings through which the historian may travel into the deepest recesses of social life, marking along the way the cultural and political practices that are nowhere else so accessible to observation.¹

-- Francis G. Couvares

There is reason to believe that religious acceptance of moviegoing was an issue to some degree for all southern exhibitors, and that for many southerners moviegoing fit awkwardly into the fabric of their social and moral lives.²

-- Robert C. Allen

In early 1917, several agitated members of the Lumberton ministry descended upon Mayor A. E. White. Their concern: an upcoming exhibition of *Where Are My Children?*, a film that according to its promotional material addressed “the iniquitous practice of birth control...a smashing daring subject, done in a smashing daring way.”³ When the ministers insisted that he preempt the exhibition, White was placed in the awkward position of interfering with the business prospects of Lyric Theatre operator C. J. Kilian, a newcomer who had relocated to Lumberton in an attempt to revive the town’s second, though previously unsuccessful, picture show. After Kilian’s assured him that no audience member under the age of fifteen would be admitted to the show, White agreed to permit the film’s screening; however, the denunciations of outraged church leaders launched from Sunday pulpits forced the mayor to reconsider his typical pro-business approach. To insulate himself

from accusations of having interfered with Kilian's operation or of having personally instituted censorship, White commissioned an eight-man committee to screen the picture to determine whether or not to allow its exhibition in Lumberton.

“Where Are My Children?”
Sensational, Powerful, Dignified and a Distinct Revelation to the World
Humanity's most powerful weapon against the premeditated destruction of the unborn. Has the endorsement of the best people everywhere. Endorsed by the officials of Wilmington where it was shown for seven days.
See this Picture and find out for Yourself this Picture Deserves the Condemnation it is Receiving from Misinformed People in Lumberton
LYRIC THEATRE 2-Days-2
Tuesday and Wednesday, Jan. 16 and 17
Admission, 25cts. to All Children Under 14 yrs not admitted
Show Starts 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9 p. m.
15 Prominent Citizens of Lumberton Have Been Invited to Review this picture at 10 a.m. Tuesday. Watch the Grantham Drug Store windows for their opinion

Figure 5.1: Advertisement for “Where Are My Children?”⁴

Assuming White hoped that the incident would be soon forgotten after the committee cast its vote, his expectations were quickly dashed. The committee's vote was deadlocked. Those in favor of permitting the film's exhibition included the town's newspaper editor, John Allen Sharpe, while those seeking to prohibit it included Lycurgus Rayner Varsler, who as a state senator would spearhead within four years a film-censorship campaign inside the General Assembly. In an attempt to break the tie, committee member and local grade-school superintendent Prof. R. E. Sentelle recommended that exhibition be permitted if Kilian agreed to raise the minimum attendance age to twenty-five. Eventually, the town commissioners compromised by allowing patrons eighteen years or older to attend *Where Are My Children?* Dissatisfied with the committee's ruling, a local Methodist pastor, the

Rev. Dr. W. B. North, again ascended his pulpit to denounce “what he characterized as [the] immoral pictures and immoral literature advertising these pictures that had been permitted in town during the past week.”⁵ Continuing back-channel pressure from clergymen including North soon forced the town fathers to intervene once more, and less than two months after the ruckus had begun, White authorized the Lumberton Chief of Police to prevent “a certain class of moving pictures” from being exhibited within town limits. Shortly thereafter, at least one additional exhibition scheduled to open at the Lyric was thereby suspended.⁶

Perhaps as a consequence of the new constraints placed on local operators, C. J. Kilian permanently left Lumberton roughly two months after the *Where Are My Children?* controversy. If Kilian’s departure stemmed in part from his frustrations with ministerial interference seeking to implement cinematic prohibitions, he was hardly the only North Carolina operator forced to defend himself against advocates seeking to institutionalize motion-picture censorship and to impose additional exhibition-related regulations. Around the same time, for example, an unnamed peer of Kilian’s located in Henderson, a regional-market community located several counties to the north, faced the ire of ministerial critics including the Rev. S. L. Morgan, who had once occupied a Robeson County pulpit.⁷ Unlike some of his peers, Morgan claimed not to object to all cinema exhibitions, and during his long career as a diarist and newspaper editorialist Morgan debated the proper role of motion pictures in a Christian society. On several occasions, he privately complimented the cinema on its capacity for inspiring awe within its audience members.⁸ In a 1913 diary entry, he fairly gushed in admiration of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, a film the preacher recognized as “marvelous in dramatic power, a revelation as to the possibilities of motion pictures,” and a vehicle rallying “the most powerful propaganda against militarism that is

possible.”⁹ Though he remained an irregular moviegoer, Morgan nevertheless personally recommended the films he did admire, including *The Birth of a Nation* and an early adaptation of *Ben Hur*, to family and friends.

Yet as did many of his peers, Morgan struggled to determine where cinematic entertainment ranked along a continuum of personal vices. In his public role as a conservative Baptist leader, Morgan discouraged moviegoing, particularly excessively habitual moviegoing, via critiques launched either from his pulpit or published in the local newspapers of the several North Carolina towns in which he ministered. Eventually, a series of professional reverses forced Morgan to consider the possibility of tapping into the cinema’s mass appeal to redress a widely perceived decline in local religious fervor. His diaries and essays offer useful insights into the often tumultuous public discourse that surrounded cinema exhibitions from the 1910s through the 1930s. As the South’s conservative Christians debated the relative morality of motion pictures, some church leaders like Morgan encouraged cinematic regulations even as they simultaneously considered how they might leverage the popularity of motion pictures to increase church attendance and to restore the central position local churches in the social lives of their congregants. Local moral and civic leaders seamlessly navigated the apparent inconsistency of indicting modern cinema for its contribution to a decline in religious enthusiasm while simultaneously seeking to appropriate motion pictures within charity fundraisers, public-welfare and sanitation drives, health initiatives targeting rural farm families, and wartime morale-improvement campaigns or liberty-bond drives in their determination to resist what they viewed as the impending degeneration of the longstanding social and moral authority of their institutions.

The disparities between the public and private actions and rhetoric of religious leaders like Morgan indicate that those who intended to resist the encroachments of modernity on traditional religious sensibilities and practices could indeed hold conflicting and ambivalent positions towards the cinema. Though Morgan privately agreed that “the moving picture business is not necessarily hurtful” and conceded that motion pictures “could be made one of the world’s greatest blessing[s],” in his professional capacity he worried about the extent to which “it is being noticed that regular attendants at the [picture] shows become indifferent attendants at the church services.”¹⁰ Convinced that habitual exposure to motion pictures caused “young people [to] acquire an unhealthy desire for light and sensational entertainment, and as a result the church service becomes dull to them,” Morgan decided as early as 1910 that “a judicious [cinema] censorship seems desirable” before unregulated and unrestrained film exhibitions became “injurious physically, mentally, morally and religiously” to his congregants and his community.

In fact, Morgan’s first diary entry registering an objection to motion pictures involved a critique of a 1910 documentary featuring Jack Johnson’s “Fight of the Century” defeat of former champion Jim Jeffries, a film banned in many Southern communities due to concerns about local responses to the public exhibition of a black fighter’s lopsided triumph over an aging fighter called out of retirement to reclaim the heavyweight title for the white race. Morgan indicted the film because (in his view) it exploited humanity’s immoral taste for witnessing “savage” and “brutal” spectacles.¹¹ Morgan’s nascent engagement with cinema censorship continued in 1917, when after having privately lauded the same film several years earlier, he advised a local Henderson operator to abandon his plans for exhibiting a re-release of *The Birth of a Nation*. After his private pleas went unheeded, Morgan in his role as

chairman of the local Inter-Racial Committee denounced to his colleagues a proposed exhibition that he viewed as potentially socially inflammatory, particularly since the film was to be exhibited in the aftermath of the recent death of an African-American resident who had been shot and killed by a local white woman. Familiar with the film's on-screen depictions of white-on-Negro violence, Morgan feared that the film would elicit an adverse reaction from local minorities still angry about the kind of violence that Morgan regretfully admitted represented precisely the sort of racial injustice that "the white pulpit seldom protests against," and he continued to lobby his fellow ministers and parishioners to boycott the film to prevent exacerbating simmering racial tensions.¹²

Morgan's ability both to privately recommend and to publicly denounce the identical film exhibition helps to contextualize the environment within which the advocacy by fundamentalist leaders for motion-picture censorship and exhibition regulations both waxed and waned during the 1910s and 1920s. Though moral guardians debated whether or not moviegoing represented a decidedly non-Christian leisure practice, it is clear that many conservative clergymen and congregants were convinced that attending a motion-picture exhibition was an unwholesome—and possibly inherently sinful—activity. More moderate leaders believed that moviegoing represented a gross misappropriation of time better spent in advancing God's work on Earth. If some religious leaders including Morgan were willing now and again to attend both motion-pictures and certain other commercial entertainments with their families, hardliners did more than fret about the cinema's ability to distract children from their schoolwork and their religious studies. They heatedly rejected the occasional recommendations of more progressive approaches to combat devotional recidivism by considering the incorporation of motion-picture entertainment into academic or

religious settings, since they and many less extreme conservatives would have viewed the placement of film exhibitions in churches and Sunday schools as a *de facto* union of the sacred and the profane.

In Robeson County, the leading conservative minister favoring cinema censorship included a senior Baptist pastor, the Rev. C. H. Durham, a figure characterized by at least one prominent Robeson County historian as the “Pope of Lumberton.”¹³ Along with his congregant and fellow censorship advocate L. R. Varser, Durham on a number of occasions vented his severe frustration over the appalling lack of what Durham perceived of as “clean” film product to his deeply religious Robeson community.¹⁴ But though religious leaders like Durham exercised significant political influence, they preferred to leave politicking and policy implementations to the town’s business leaders, educators, and lawyers, a few of whom (including Varser) simultaneously filled all three roles at once. In turn-of-the-century Robeson and North Carolina more generally, the beliefs of religious fundamentalism heavily influenced the pursuit of solutions to specific perceived social ills. Certainly, devout evangelicals had transformed the main streets of every significant town and village in Robeson by shuttering dozens of saloons while pressuring local and state politicians to march in the vanguard of national prohibition. Emboldened by having cleaned out the “wets” and “blind tigers,” church leaders moved to confront additional social issues that they felt indicated a questionable or inappropriate use of leisure time. In Robeson County, for instance, even a rumor of the impending installation of a billiards table, an ancillary piece of leisure equipment imaginatively associated with both gambling and intemperance, inside of Lumberton’s newest hotel elicited loud protests from religious leaders who were perfectly willing to overlook the fact that the hotel had been financed by the town’s wealthiest citizens,

including Angus Wilton McLean, who North Carolina's voters would elect to the office of Governor in 1924.¹⁵

Though some Robesonians came to associate a Saturday visit to town with a possible visit to the local picture show, church attendance on Sundays was nearly compulsory in towns whose residents were perfectly willing to cluck their tongues at perceived devotional slackers. While a small number of Catholic and Jewish residents rounded out the region's denominational profile, influential members of conservative Christian congregations lead every Robeson community. As Mayor White clearly understood, local political power remained subject to the pressures brought to bear by fundamentalist and evangelical clerics whose antagonistic to moviegoing was not based simply on aesthetic disagreements. According film historian Michael Putnam, the leaders of most communities "felt a need to have control over their cultural life, whatever its quantity or quality." Consequently, cinema exhibitions were soon targeted by small-town institutions and power players jockeyed to influence and/or control them.¹⁶

In a sense, this chapter puts Putnam's thesis to the test by examining local events in Robeson, Raleigh, and elsewhere in North Carolina in an attempt both to demonstrate and to rationalize the apparently paradoxical relationship between conservative Christianity and film exhibition. Despite their several relatively ineffectual attempts to establish local censorship boards prior to the First World War, religious and governmental leaders looked to leverage the cinema's ability to deliver sizable captive audiences for multiple non-commercial purposes. Once a consortium of conservative factions concluded after the war that a broad-based moral recidivism in America appeared to be spreading from Hollywood to Main Street, they pressured municipal, state, and national officials to enact censorship

legislation and to institute additional regulatory prohibitions on cinema exhibitions in communities across the nation. However, once this movement reached its high-water mark in the early 1920s, many censorship advocates abandoned their formerly active public engagement with censorship for several reasons. These included fundamentalist misgivings about governmental intervention in the realm of individual leisure; a general uncertainty concerning the implementability of measurable, consistent, and unambiguous standards for defining objectionable film content; and a lack of consensus among the Protestant groups leading the censorship charge that motion pictures were inherently immoral or socially destructive. In addition, many conservatives opted to redirect their energies towards what developed into more pressing modernist challenges to religious doctrine and ecclesiastical polity. Concurrently, Hollywood insiders weary from attempting to mollify an unwieldy and decentralized group of often philosophically divergent Protestant sects chose to ally themselves strategically with the Catholic-affiliated Legion of Decency in their attempts to avoid the imposition during the mid-1930s of additional state or federal censorship.¹⁷ Although sectarian demographics muted the Legion's influence in the South, the region's Baptist-dominated conservative leadership began to abandon its calls for institutionalized censorship.

Other voices called forth by the prospect of cinema censorship included newspapermen in Robeson County and elsewhere intensely concerned about something more significant than the revenues possibly lost from restrictions placed on motion-picture advertisements. Editors feared that the imposition of cinema censorship might become a precedent eventually leading to challenges to the First Amendment freedoms critical to their success. Governmental regulations imposed on local theaters also raised the possibility of

restraints being imposed upon other commercial industries. Chambers of Commerce hoping to encourage an influx of local business development and seeking to increase the prestige of their communities viewed the availability of local theaters as a civic marker that indicated a town's elevated economic and social status.¹⁸ Forced with choosing between their roles as church deacons and their responsibilities as civic boosters, many town leaders subordinated their private misgivings about possible cinematic immoralities as they actively sought to improve the local commercial infrastructure and to expand the local tax base. The pro-cinema interests of business and newspaper leaders visibly intersected in those periodic newspaper editions that functioned as thinly-veiled civic advertisements touting the advantages of each local community.¹⁹ These editions always featured photographs and descriptions of a town's commercial-entertainment venues, since the absence of such facilities could leave the impression that a given community was something less than a "first-rate" town.

As Robeson's principal theater operator until 1917, Walter Wishart was uniquely positioned to appreciate the several perspectives informing the actions of the central participants in local censorship debates. Having spent more than twenty years at the Robesonian, he understood editorial concerns about potential censorship initiatives eventually targeting newspapers. As a town commissioner, he had worked directly alongside the civic and church leaders who may have harbored at least some personal misgivings about restricting the livelihood of a peer. He was also a devout Christian who for many years allowed the local Opera House to host Catholic Sunday services.²⁰ Professionally, his managerial responsibilities logically placed Wishart in opposition to the town's anti-cinema crusaders, though all of them knew Wishart personally, and he them. Nevertheless, and

despite their generally high regard for Wishart, county residents first began to express some misgivings about the new medium's social utility soon after motion pictures arrived in Robeson. Shortly after the first movie theater opened in Red Springs, for example, a news report suggested that the recent tomfoolery engaged in by young local pranksters had been caused by their exposure to a surfeit of train- and bank-robbery films. The report also rather pessimistically predicted that the pernicious influence of such pictures might encourage additional petty crimes by children seeking ways to fund their moviegoing habits.²¹

Cinema historian Paul Moore has characterized as “in-between” the position of film exhibitors like Wishart who were “caught between responsibility for the locality” and a lengthy film-distribution chain hungry for additional gate revenues.²² The pressures of satisfying the oligarchy that originated most domestic film content and had locked theater operators into highly restrictive exhibition agreements generally required local exhibitors to oppose censorship initiatives, even when doing so might conflict with their personal, religious, or moral misgivings, in order financially to support themselves and their employees. Prior to the consolidation of theaters into regional and national chains, most decisions regarding how they might oppose regulatory initiatives remained largely the province of individual exhibitors. Since major distribution outlets like Paramount required local exhibitors to blind book film content months in advance, and usually for films that had not yet been produced, managers like Wishart had little choice but to recoup distribution fees by exhibiting whatever films they were provided.²³ Yet in his attempts to remain operating, Walter Wishart had decided that the most appropriate response to periodic regulatory initiatives was to adopt a non-confrontational stance, just as he did during Lumberton's first brush with cinema censorship in 1914. By leveraging a network of political, religious, and social ties developed over many years, rather

than by publicly antagonizing local moral guardians, Wishart managed to avoid heavy-handed interventions by local censorship advocates. His approach demonstrated the effectiveness of similar tactics described by Richard Maltby, who noted that rather than openly confronting regulators, many early exhibitors “often readily acquiesced” in the face of “political censorship.” Instead, they took whatever practical steps they could towards “ensuring that movies offended as few of their community’s cultural and legislative leadership as possible” so that “their commercial operations might thereby continued unhindered.”²⁴

At times, Wishart also fell back upon the paternalistic umbrella of local boosterism to help protect his Pastime Theater from charges of immorality. He understood that local ministers remained highly skeptical of an entertainment vehicle that many of them lumped alongside personal vices like dancing, card-playing, and (especially for single women and young ladies) riding in un-chaperoned automobiles. Without sensing the hypocrisy of their actions, the same moral leaders who despised transient commercial entertainments like fairs and carnivals felt equally justified in criticizing the moral lassitude of those who spent their leisure hours at an afternoon or evening picture show, even though civic and religious fundraisers had relied on motion-picture exhibitions since the medium’s arrival in Robeson. In fact, one of the town’s earliest itinerant exhibitions involved a church benefit held in 1901 the day after a sermon had been preached locally by a Charlotte-based Baptist minister, the Rev. R. S. Conrad, whose tour through Robeson was “raising funds to pay off a church debt, and for that purpose gave an entertainment in the opera house last night...[one that included]...a moving picture display made through an optigraph.”²⁵ This tradition of local commercial entertainment’s charitable contributions to a variety of school, church, and civic

organizations was perpetuated by Wishart, whose first Friday night Opera House show contributed half of its gate receipts to the Associated Charities of Lumberton.²⁶

But not even these and many similar good works could fully blunt the cinematic criticisms originating from the town's preachers, who in the summer of 1914 urged Mayor White to appoint several members of the town's Board of Commissioners to serve as "a committee to censor all shows that come to Lumberton," a committee they insisted be required to "pass upon all shows and see to it that nothing objectionable is presented here."²⁷ Though it remains unclear whether any of Wishart's recent shows had offended local moral sensibilities, the language surrounding the censor board's initiation suggests that it had been commissioned principally to monitor the travelling fairs and carnivals that arrived during the Carolina autumn. After prompting by the local ministry, Mayor White insisted that he was equally "determined that trashy shows shall not be put on in Lumberton,"²⁸ and hoping perhaps to project a façade of inclusivity and civic cooperation, White noted that prior to the board's establishment he had discussed the proposal with Mr. C. According to the Robesonian, Wishart readily concluded that "[t]he censorship committee is all right" and claimed that its mission to forestall potentially immoral exhibitions "will take a load off [my] shoulders."²⁹ What Wishart did not say was whether or not he felt relieved because the responsibility for adjudicating morally-offensive film content now belonged to the committee, rather than exclusively with Wishart.

Whether or not Mr. C's rapid acquiescence to the censor board represented a genuine sympathy for its mission, Wishart appears not to have objected publicly to this or any other cinema censorship initiative. He avoided becoming embroiled in any exhibition scandals because he maintained his silence in the face of proposed censorial action and because he

proactively defused potential criticism of objectionable film content through notes published by his perpetual ally, the local press. In several cases Wishart submitted newspaper articles to apologize personally for unsatisfactory pictures and/or Opera House stage shows, each time insisting that he would see to it personally that similar content would never return in his venues. In addition, some of his newspaper submissions attempted to manipulate the public taste towards an acceptance of potentially questionable cinematic material. For example, when he sensed an impending firestorm of criticism to arrive in the wake of a specific film scheduled barely six months into his Pastime tenure, Wishart arranged for the Robesonian to publish a news item whose diction and tone bore a marked resemblance to Wishart's "remember when" historical submissions. Entitled "At the Pastime—The Countess Godiva," the item called the attention of the newspaper's readership to "an interesting film at the Pastime Friday evening showing Countess Godiva riding in the altogether through the streets of Coventry."³⁰ Immediately after this rather titillating opening, the article attempted to legitimize the exhibition in three ways: by identifying the film's literary sources, i.e., the Tennyson poem *Godiva*; by condemning the actions not of the Lady, but rather those of the screen villains in this cinematic morality play, particularly Peeping Tom, "the sorry skate who was the only soul mean enough to peep at the Countess;" and by praising the personal sacrifice of the naked horse-mistress along with the civic virtue and humility she demonstrated "as she fulfilled the only condition upon which her ruffian husband—bad cess to him!—would repeal an oppressive tax." Seeking to realign the public's memory of *The Countess Godiva*, the article closed by insisting that "there was nothing at all improper about the picture—it was "chaste as ice," a film that "doubtless acquainted some people with a beautiful legend about which they had never heard."³¹ Newspaper scans of the weeks that

followed confirm that Mr. C's approach successfully forestalled public criticism in of the film. His polite acquiescence and proactive apologies for potentially scandalous films helped him to survive professional situations which, for example, proved difficult for C. J. Kilian to navigate. Nor was it the case that every questionable film proved bad for Wishart's business, at least not in light of the gate-receipt windfalls that resulted from the free publicity they generated. Many years after the fact, Wishart's daughter Elizabeth fondly remembered that whenever "bill boards pictured actresses scantily dressed," the fact that "some preacher was sure to speak of it in Sunday's sermon...usually boosted attendance" at her father's theater.³²

Despite Wishart's best efforts to mitigate moral objections to the content offered in his exhibition venues, townsfolk intractably suspicious of motion pictures periodically sought to convince parents and town officials to address what they perceived to be a growing social problem. Several months before the installation of Lumberton's first censor board in 1914, local grade-school superintendent R. E. Sentelle published a front-page "appeal to the fathers and mothers of the town to co-operate with us in helping the children" which Sentelle believed were losing the mental discipline to "keep their minds on their studies."³³ Though Sentelle failed to specify the "distracting" extra-curricular activities that students needed to forego "in order to pass their grades," an editorial published three weeks later by a rural Lumberton resident identified as "Mrs. F. F. T." interpreted Sentelle's letter to represent an indictment of youngsters who smoked too much tobacco and watched too many movies.³⁴ In a letter titled "Instruments of the Devil That Ought to be Suppressed," Mrs. F. F. T. congratulated Sentelle for his moral rectitude before proceeding to re-interpret his plea as a warning local residents that "...[t]he moving picture shows have an evil influence over the young folks and ought not to be allowed a place in town among Christian people." Basing

her indictment not on an actual film screening, but rather on the promotional materials posted in theater windows, Mrs. F. F. T. insisted that films encouraged un-Christian behavior among young people and were responsible for most of the behavioral ills that Sentelle had complained of, particularly the excessive amount of “puppy love” recently on display in school hallways and playgrounds. The observant Mrs. F. F. T. insisted that “when I see the pictures that [school-children] have to pass in going and coming from school or church,” she could no longer deny that the films they depicted represented “a deadly foe,” one that “ought to be fought by all good people.”³⁵

Yet Mayor White presented neither Prof. Sentelle nor the redoubtable Mrs. F. F. T. a position on Lumberton’s censor board later that fall. Instead, he appointed town commissioners W. P. McAllister, L. T. Townsend, and G. L. Thompson to a board that was empowered to attend any local film or commercial exhibition at any time free of charge and to terminate as needed any and all shows featuring “trashy” or “objectionable” content.³⁶ Advertising and promotional materials were also fair game for board intervention, and when the board informed Manager Wishart that posters for the film *Protea*, posters which according to the Robesonian featured “a woman lion tamer with a short dress on...up to her knees. Shocking...,” and were simply “too naughty to put before the public,” Wishart promptly agreed to remove the posters. However, he still managed successfully to screen the film.³⁷

Since subsequent references to board’s activities soon disappeared from the pages of the Robesonian, the 1914 board was almost certainly a short-lived affair, possibly because Wishart and the handful of operators rotating in and out of the Lumberton market the next few years remained fortunate that the most outspoken critic of local immoralities, the Rev.

Charles Henry Durham, had recently departed Lumberton's First Baptist Church to assume the pastorate of the Brown Memorial Baptist Church in Winston-Salem.³⁸ But even had Durham had stayed in Lumberton without interruption, there is reason to believe that this initial board would still have disbanded fairly quickly. Cinema historian Paul S. Moore has noted that despite the increasing friction between the film industry, religious leaders, and social reformers, during the 1910s most regulatory intercessions were typically short-lived affairs. Even the most vocal of local protests usually faded quickly, and many of these stop-gap censorship structures, most of which amounted to little more than temporary political window dressing, quietly passed away.³⁹ The fate of the 1914 Lumberton censor board also recalls the early censorship experiences of Edward McConoughey, a member of the Federated Council of the Churches of Christ in America (or FCC).⁴⁰ In 1916, McConoughey argued that churches should lobby local government officials to establish advisory committees to screen upcoming films, and in the event of repeated impending immoralities on the part of local exhibitors should develop and enforce local censorship codes targeting motion pictures, vaudeville, and other theatrical presentations.⁴¹ Privately, however, McConoughey quickly grew skeptical about the efficacy of local censor boards, whose members he noted soon became bogged down in their attempts to define usable and consistent standards with which to identify acceptable versus unacceptable film content. Once board members lost interest in responding to these challenges, early committees either rapidly disbanded or were rendered ineffective by a lack of participation. To prevent these censorial failures, McConoughey recommended unsuccessfully to the FCC that local schoolteachers be trained in film censorship and paid for their censorship efforts, though it remains unclear precisely who

McConoughey had in mind to provide this training, and upon which set of objective standards film censorship could better be based.

Christian leaders like the Rev. S. L. Morgan, whose Baptist ministry began in Robeson County just as motion-picture exhibitions there were attempting to gain a permanent foothold, came to doubt the efficacy of local censor boards as he struggled to determine the appropriate balance between allowing and regulating cinema exhibitions within the communities he served.⁴² From 1907 to 1909, the recently ordained Morgan cut his ministerial teeth as the pastor of Red Springs' First Baptist Church. Morgan's early clerical experiences in Robeson helped to shape his ministry, and he maintained lifelong connections to the county and its religious leaders. Raised in Red Springs, Morgan's wife Isabelle had attended nearby Flora Macdonald College, an institution whose headmaster, Presbyterian Rev. Charles G. Vardell, befriended Morgan during his Red Springs ministry. Vardell, who was widely acknowledged as one of Robeson's most well-respected spiritual leaders, and his wife had been so taken with Morgan's wife that they also named one of their own children Isabelle. After they moved on to other parishes in other towns, the Morgans remained close to the Vardells, with whom they regularly renewed their friendship during their frequent automobile or rail journeys to visit Isabelle's family. In Robeson, Morgan had also become acquainted with the county's most outspoken and galvanizing preacher, the Rev. C. H. Durham, with whom Morgan would continue to be acquainted as they participated in meetings of the North Carolina State Baptist and Southern Baptist Conventions.

Morgan's journal entries and newspaper editorials regarding commercial entertainments suggest a slightly more progressive perspective than those exhibited by a large number of his peers. For example, at a time when many clerics boycotted stage

performances of any kind, Morgan enjoyed both Shakespearean drama and opera. He allowed his family to sample the sights, sounds, and mechanical thrills of county and state fairs, though along with his clerical brethren Morgan assiduously avoided carnival midways, which he denounced for their “rotten” peep shows, hucksterism, and “devices of unadulterated gambling.”⁴³ Unlike some of his peers, Morgan was “frank to concede that there are good things even on the vaudeville stage. Much more cheerfully do I concede that a large per cent of the moving pictures given in almost every show are wholesome and instructive.”⁴⁴ However, these pro-cinema comments appeared within an editorial that advocated film censorship and complained that too many films and film advertisements continuing to offer an utterly lamentable “admixture of the evil kind.”⁴⁵

Yet both Morgan and many of his contemporary moral guardians temporarily suppressed their moviegoing concerns at the outbreak of America’s involvement in World War I. In fact, during 1917 and 1918 a large number of religious leaders were unofficially conscripted into the morale-improvement efforts spearheaded by President Woodrow Wilson’s Committee on Public Information, whose actions included pressuring the film industry’s exhibition corps to screen patriotic films and/or to sponsor fundraisers that donated their gate receipts to causes linked to the war effort. In effect, the war brought about a temporary truce between cinema operators and local clerics, and both were drafted as adjunct facilitators in a morale-improvement program that also levied significant wartime taxes on theater tickets and film rentals.⁴⁶ While many exhibitors refused to pass these charges onto their audiences and instead paid them out of their often-meager profits, civic and religious leaders requested to appear on local stages delivered brief “Four Minute” messages intended to buoy the spirits of an increasingly war-weary public. On several occasions, in fact,

Morgan spoke to local picture-show audiences to encourage their support during the global crisis and to request each audience member to assist community members suffering from personal losses or economic privation as a result of the conflict. In his diaries, Morgan proudly recorded having stepped forward “four times in [a] new role of 4-minute speaker for [the] gov’t at [our] moving picture show—a success, I was told, when I prepared carefully.”⁴⁷ Since these appearances also validated Morgan’s status as a community leader, they may have colored his perception of the films shown, as in the case when Morgan was called upon to speak “on two stormy nights to fine audiences at the movie theaters, where I saw two great films.”⁴⁸ Moreover, during this period Morgan’s relationship with his local theater operator had improved to the point where he readily agreed to attend “a third great picture on invitation of the manager.”⁴⁹

So while Morgan and other religious conservatives had spent the mid-1910s denouncing the immorality of motion pictures and the film industry, in the face of this horrific global conflict they allowed themselves to be transformed into auxiliary public-morale officers treading the boards of local cinemas which the Committee on Public Information had, in effect, both culturally sanctioned and financially leveraged. Members of the Wilson administration came to regard film production and exhibition as an “essential industry” thanks to its contributions to the war effort.⁵⁰ For a time, theater managers found their social status and the reputation of their operations elevated because of their role in war financing and in maintaining public morale. Servicemen shipped off to training camps and distant battlefields valued American films for their ability to offer military personnel at least a few precious glimpses of home. Theaters erected on military bases or near active combat zones afforded those either bored with their service training or terrified of the battles to come

a brief yet familiar leisure experience during an otherwise dangerous and uncertain period. Motion pictures also offered an opportunity for some of Robeson's soldiers to justify their engagement in the European conflict, as when an Arizona camp-bound soldier, Walter S. McLean, wrote home to praise a recent base exhibition. After reading a recently arrived copy of the Robesonian, McLean realized that the film, *The Battle Cry of Peace*, would soon be run

[...] at the Pastime theatre, of which Mr. W. S. Wishart is the manager. He shows the people of Robeson high-class pictures. *The Battle Cry of Peace* is 9-reels long and I don't think they can produce any better on the films [sic], for it is a good picture all the way through and it shows what would become of our nation if some foreign nation were to attack us. But some say, "I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier." *The Birth of a Nation* is a fine picture. It was shown here 3 days and it was a fine picture, but not as good as *The Battle Cry of Peace*, for *The Birth of a Nation* shows the past and *The Battle Cry of Peace* shows the future.⁵¹

Films like Vitagraph's cautionary *Battle Cry*, which depicted the potentially tragic consequences of the failure of the United States to implement a robust homeland defense and an intelligence-gathering network while it pursued peaceful foreign-policy negotiations, were regularly co-opted into debates over the appropriateness of America's intervention in Europe, and indeed the Robesonian praised the film and endorsed its proactively defensive military posture.⁵² On a non-political level, however, motion-picture exhibitors hoped that military-themed films would increase local attendance. These managers soon discovered their theaters being co-opted for additional and unexpected war-time initiatives, as when a Pastime Theatre advertisement for the propagandistic film *Womanhood, the Glory of the Nation* noted that military recruiters planned to attend a fall 1917 screening of *Womanhood* "for the purpose of giving information and enlisting any young man who may desire to enlist and serve his country."⁵³ The ad also proclaimed that the motion picture, which included cameo appearances by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, represented a "direct answer to

the pacifist group and the anti-American foreigners in this country.” Films like *My Four Years in Germany* and *The Kaiser* tended to inflame anti-German sentiment, while melodramas like *Heroic France* and several pathos-laden documentaries of the Belgian invasion spurred America towards temporarily suspending their isolationist tendencies. Some local entertainment venues were drafted directly into the war service, and not only during “Four Minute” presentations. The Robeson County draft board was eventually installed in the Lumberton Opera House after outgrowing the space it initially occupied in the County Courthouse.⁵⁴ Commercially, the war was a potential boon both to fixed-site and itinerant exhibitors. While in-town theaters heavily advertised upcoming newsreels featuring footage from combat zones and training camps as an opportunity for local audiences to “see your son, brother, cousin, sweetheart, or friend” in action (or better yet, resting safe and sound in camp),⁵⁵ rural residents lacking access to a local picture show were visited by trains carrying battlefield “trophies” captured by American soldiers overseas. As they crisscrossed the countryside, these trains also screened via portable projection equipment additional film footage recorded at the front and within military training camps.⁵⁶

Though the film industry scrambled to take advantage of the opportunities offered by military documentaries and patriotic films, the United States government expected it to shoulder a heavy financial burden both during and after the war. In an increasingly troubled wartime economy, the war effort siphoned off millions of dollars in military taxes from local exhibitors in the form of weekly fees and other ancillary charges.⁵⁷ As the war dragged on, Robeson exhibitors had little choice but to pass these additional costs on to the public, a move which, in combination with mounting recessionary pressures, likely depressed local attendance figures. At the same time, local theater operations were periodically interrupted

by the constraints imposed by wartime shortages. In North Carolina, crippling low fuel supplies during the winter of 1917-18 resulted in state-mandated “lightless nights” at least once a week, and in fact local fuel shortages became so severe that after striving “in vain to secure coal to meet a situation of absolute want in his home town” of Louisburg, “Governor Bickett [advised] citizens of towns in the State suffering from lack of fuel to go into the woods and cut down trees” to feed their cook-stoves and furnaces.⁵⁸ Serving only to compound their financial stresses, many local theaters were also shuttered for extended periods of time during the 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic.

Any number of exhibitors simply could not survive these simultaneous challenges, and both during and after the war the industry experienced a spate of theater closings as well as ownership transfers that began the consolidation of thousands of theaters into regional and national exhibition chains. In Robeson County, Lumbertonians witnessed in 1917 the final shuttering of the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric site, the operational transfer of the Pastime Theater from Walter Wishart to H. H. Anderson shortly thereafter, and Anderson’s disposal of the Lumberton Opera House (and the site’s subsequent transformation into a local inn) in 1919. Exhibitors tried to remain optimistic in the face of these setbacks, though they continued to be subject to post-war surcharges that remained in effect long after all battlefield hostilities had ended. For his part, Hyman Anderson continued to beat a patriotic drum on the heels of the general German armistice in late 1918. In announcing that the Pastime would continue to levy and collect post-war taxes, Anderson urged his customers to remember that “every time you pay your way into a theatre of any kind, you are contributing to the support of the boys who have whipped the Huns to a finish.” He also reminded them

that “while the war is said to be over, our boys will still be in France for at least two years and we must give them the support which they so justly deserve.”⁵⁹

As American soldiers began filtering back to their hometowns, local exhibitors hoped to maintain the unprecedented level of social respectability which they had earned through their significant home-front contributions to the successful war effort. But if exhibitors expected local civic leaders to forego their earlier regulatory impulses as a way of compensating the film industry for its recent services, operators in Robeson County quickly found their hopes dashed almost immediately after the post-war return of their most intractable foe. In February 1919, the Rev. C. H. Durham returned at long last from Winston-Salem to resume his former ministerial post in Lumberton. Though Robeson County historian Maud Thomas rather prosaically described Durham’s thirty-six year reign as the pastor of Lumberton’s First Baptist Church as a time when Durham “wielded much influence” in the community,⁶⁰ attorney and local historian Robert C. Lawrence categorized his contemporary as Lumberton’s “Defender of the Faith.”⁶¹ To Lawrence, Durham represented “not only the shepherd of his own flock, but of other flocks as well,” such that “the united Christian forces of Robeson [paid] tribute to his leadership.”⁶² Many Lumbertonians considered Durham, an experienced fire-and-brimstone preacher, the living embodiment of the town’s moral center both before and after his election as the President of the North Carolina State Baptist Association in 1911. Intolerant of perceived immoralities, Durham was a spiritual leader who “would be friends to all men, but once his mind is made up that a thing is morally wrong, then without regard to friend or foe—he just wades in and mops up.”⁶³ Durham’s religious zeal was shared by devotees that included L. R. Varsler, an active member of Durham’s First Baptist Church and a Lumberton censorship committee-

member in 1917 who voted to prohibit local screenings of *Where Are My Children?* Upon his return, Durham was determined to set the tone for a set of assaults on Lumberton's (and therefore Robeson's) perceived cinematic immoralities.

If contemporary observers living in today's post-televangelical era might be surprised to learn that "until the last few decades, the primary perception of the church's relation to film has been one of censorship,"⁶⁴ the reactionary stance of many conservative Christians with respect to commercial motion pictures during most of the twentieth century could be traced to a common Puritan heritage whose legacy included a suspicion of graven images, a general proscription against idolatrous behavior, and a fervent adherence to epistolary dictates abjuring "worldliness."⁶⁵ Advocating an intense personal commitment to a code of moral behavior wherein "any action or activity which contravened a Biblical command or failed to contribute to the individual's spiritual edification was likely to be condemned or at least questioned,"⁶⁶ Durham distinguished himself partly through the readiness with which he openly and publicly confronted what he perceived to be morally suspect leisure activities. Soon after having arriving in Winston-Salem, Durham took the city's stage- and picture-show managers to task for displaying salacious and immoral advertisements and successfully lobbied for a town ordinance to prohibit the public display of similarly offensive materials.⁶⁷ He also assumed the mantle of local censorship advocate. Yet to the locally familiar cycle of public protest followed by the establishment of short-lived censorship committees, Durham added an element he had previously instituted during his battles with Winston-Salem exhibitors, i.e., the deputization of local civilians, specifically, the town's women, to enforce censorship.

Soon after his Lumberton return, Durham became embroiled in another local censorship battle initiated by ministerial responses to a set of newspaper images and posters

advertising the upcoming Opera House musical comedy *My Soldier Girl*.⁶⁸ The ads featured more than a dozen stocking-clad women (Figure 5.2), and despite embedded post-war rhetoric seeking to legitimize the show as a “Musical Comedy ‘Beautiful’ With a Military Flavor,” its scantily-clad chorus line outraged some of the town’s moral guardians. Soon after the show’s performances had ended, in fact, the pastor of the Chestnut Street Methodist Church, the Rev. R. C. Beaman, opened fire in the latest campaign against the offensive images produced in conjunction with commercial entertainments by declaiming from his Sunday pulpit that “any so-called play that starts out with exhibitions of female nudity is rotten.”⁶⁹ Newspaper accounts of the sermon indicated that local critics automatically considered motion pictures as occupants of the same neighborhood of indecency as stage theatricals like *My Soldier Girl*:

Special Extraordinary Announcement --- The Sensational Event of Our Season


LUMBERTON
Opera House

MY SOLDIER GIRL

Wed. Feb. One Big Gala Night 12

The Musical Comedy "BEAUTIFUL" With a Military Flavor

HEAR
The Sweetest Score of Tingling, Jingling Musical Gems You've Heard in Many Years



Don't Miss The Run-Board Beauty Parade

Carrying the Largest Chorus and Most Pretentious Production Ever Offered Here.

SEE THE BIG PATRIOTIC SPECTACLES
"VICTORY" - "PEACE" - "LIBERTY FOREVER"

Prices: \$2.50 and \$1.00—Seats on Sale Monday at Pope's Drug Store. Mail and phone orders filled now in the Order of their receipt.

Figure 5.2: Advertisement for *My Soldier Girl*⁷⁰

He [Dr. Beaman] said he claimed for himself and family the "right to be protected against insulting and indecent billboards [sic]," and that the women of the town would be justified in "tearing down all these pictures and trampling them in the mire of the street, because that is where they will put you with their logical results." He appealed to church people to "keep these damning things" out of the community. In the course of his vigorous remarks he referred to moving picture shows—not with any special reference, he said, to the local show, because he had not an opportunity to observe there—which, he said, ought to be an inspiration. There are inspiring films, he said, but most of them appeal to the lowest in human nature and are a menace. "You must guard them," he said, "to save your moral life and your homes."⁷¹

Having just celebrated Durham's return, the Robesonian soon realized that when it came to commercial entertainments, Lumberton's leading minister was spoiling for a fight:

Rev. Dr. C. H. Durham, pastor of the First Baptist Church, protested personally to the management about the pictures advertising the show to be presented at the opera house this evening, and he will have something to say at his church next Sunday evening about this evil. He purposes to ask for a committee to be appointed by each of the local pastors to go before the mayor and town commissioners and ask for a town ordinance providing for censorship of such advertising.⁷²

Shortly thereafter, Durham delivered “Licensed Indecencies,” a rousing sermon that proposed banning immoral theater advertising and insisted on the implementation of “a board of censors whose duty it would be to cut out the immoral parts of all shows.”⁷³ Furthermore, despite the fact that stage theatricals rather than motion pictures had incited the latest ministerial protest, Durham saw little reason to distinguish between the two:

Speaking of moving picture shows, the preacher said he had seen some pictures that were instructive and helpful. However, many of the pictures shown are awfully suggestive and vulgar. They leave an immoral influence. “In my opinion, there is something in the picture shows that should be taken out,” he said.⁷⁴

As promised, on the following day Durham assembled the pastor and three leading congregants of each Lumberton church and descended *en masse* upon the mayor and town commissioners “for the purpose of asking that official action be taken to protect the citizens of the town from immoral shows and the posting of indecent pictures upon billboards.”⁷⁵ Overwhelmed Lumberton officials quickly agreed to implement a five-man censor board to be appointed annually by the town commissioners and granted to it the extensive powers Durham had requested via his pre-submitted Board Ordinance draft. Accordingly, members of the censor board retained the right “to enter without charge any place of amusement and to forbid any performance or picture show, or the display of any billboard advertising, that in their judgment may be immoral and against the public interest.”⁷⁶ However, since the most likely set of residents to be appointed as censor board members were those community leaders who also operated critical local businesses and/or managed local schools, Durham convinced Lumberton’s officials to enact a provision authorizing the board’s members to deputize “some of the ladies of the town to assist them” in their duties. In effect, this

provision empowered local women to act with the full force of the board's authority on an as-needed basis.

Having authorized the town's women to help police smutty posters, indecent stage shows, and unwholesome films, the ordinance's failure to identify precise and consistent decency standards resulted in considerable confusion when the board faced its first significant test less than a month later. As had been true of *My Soldier Girl*, the newest Opera House musical-comedy, *Oh! Sammy!*, was similarly marketed with large print ads that prominently featured photographs of "Bevies of Bewildering Broadway Blond and Brunette Beauties" (Figure 5.3). Even though Sammy's twenty flappers appeared significantly more mature and less scantily clad than their *My Soldier Girl* predecessors, few locals at the time could have denied the advertisement's tagline, i.e., that "The Talk of Lumberton is '*Oh! Sammy!*'"

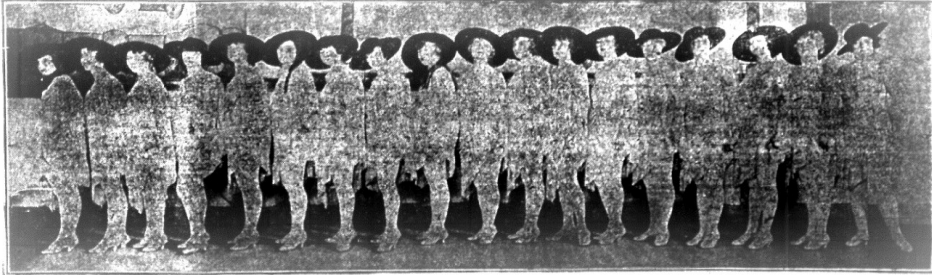
This time, however, some of this talk was generated by local newsmen who had previously refrained from editorial comment during Lumberton's earlier censorship debates. To avoid being perceived as directly attacking the local ministers driving this latest censorship initiative, the Robesonian instead offered up sarcastic critiques of what soon amounted to a municipal farce. Debates among local censors concerning the show and its advertisements elicited particularly giddy reports when a rehearsal was staged specifically for the all-male board by the show's bewildering, and frankly somewhat bewildered, performers:

Lumberton Opera House
Just One Night, Monday, March 17th

Event of the Season--The Talk of Lumberton is "Oh! Sammy!"

Donald Fairbanks presents brilliant
Musical Comedy of Youth. Direction
of Geo. E. Wintz.

"OH! SAMMY!"



Bevies of Bewildering Broadway Blond and Brunette Beauties

| | | | |
|------------------|-----------|---|--|
| 35 People | 35 | HEAR THESE SONGS: | "Oh! Sammy!" is the best musical comedy that brains, quality and money can produce, and one of the best shows here this season. |
| 21 Songs | 21 | "Belgian Rose," "Gay Parade," "Oh Sammy," "N'Everything," "Snafus," "Hindustan," "Siren Song," "Tickled Toe," "Egyptian Love," "Ja Da Ja Da," "Navy Bring Them Back." | SMARTEST OF MUSICAL COMEDIES |
| 2 Acts | 2 | | |
| 7 Scenes | 7 | | |

A \$2.00 Show for the first time at these **PRICES \$1.50-\$1.00-75-50** Seats on Sale Pope Drug Co.

Figure 5.3: Advertisement for *Oh! Sammy!*⁷⁷

One by one the stage fairies paced before the astonished eyes of the censors, fearfully and wonderfully arrayed (the fairies, not the censors), and then the censors retired to make up their verdict.⁷⁸

Tongue planted firmly in cheek, the Robesonian reporter depicting the contretemps disparaged the censor board's ineffectual attempt to arrive at an *actionable* costuming consensus.

One censor was for requiring that all dresses must reach to the ankle; another thought that maybe two or three inches, maybe four inches, according to the style of architecture, might be allowed above the ankle; and so it went until conflicting views resulted in the compromise verdict that all skirts must extend as low as to the knees, [and] that moderation must be observed in costume and kick and word, et cetera.⁷⁹

As the board struggled to articulate a precise and acceptable skirt-length standard, its members fell back upon useless generalizations, thereby leaving the troupe's performers (and its seamstresses) entirely uncertain as to how they should proceed.

By neglecting to provide clear and specific interpretive standards with which to define “moderation,” the board’s members effectively transferred the responsibility for adjudicating and implementing acceptable standards governing the show’s costumes, dialogue, and other on-stage activities back to the performers themselves. Challenged with intuiting precisely what the board meant by “moderation” without risking the show’s cancellation in the event that their interpretations fail to please, the performers also struggled to reach a consensus on what this non-articulated propriety standard actually required of them. Unfortunately, and despite the fact that extraordinary “violence evidently had to be done to some skirts to get them down far enough,” the troupe had become so preoccupied with preserving “moderation” that from perspective of its audience, their show had resulted in an utterly “dull, stale, flat, and unprofitable”⁸⁰ experience.

In the Robesonian’s view, the show’s female performers could not be held responsible for the show’s failure and instead blamed the uncertain and tentative position in which they had been placed:

And that is why the stage charmers could not charm—not because their skirts were lengthened by order of censors but because they were in leading-strings and knew not when they might overstep the invisible barrier that the watchful censors had set up; and they knew the censors were out there before the footlights ready to give the word if they did not do just so.⁸¹

Again avoiding charges of criticizing local ministers for having essentially neutered the show, the Robesonian’s editorialists instead belittled the members of the censor board:

And so the board of censors functioned wisely and well and their fame will go abroad through the land and it will no doubt be many a day before another so-called musical comedy of the “Oh! Sammy!” class dares subject itself, individually and collectively, to its rigors.⁸²

As an indication of the newspaper's growing contempt for permitting censors only to view unexpurgated performances, a subsequent editorial noted that there had been "a waiting list of applicants for positions on the local board of censors," since during the *Oh! Sammy!* rehearsal "one censor rashly remarked that he was going to resign." Local wags chuckled that instead of avoiding the typical drudgery of civic committee work, the town's "men have been falling all over themselves" to fill anticipated vacancies on the censor board.⁸³

After the *Oh! Sammy!* debacle, the Robesonian adopted a position critical of all attempts to establish either theatrical or film censorship. However, it never pointed out that local censorship advocates typically branded stage shows or motion pictures as immoral based solely on the content of their advertising, rather than on first-hand observations of actual performances or exhibitions. In fact, local ministers appeared more concerned about the potential offensiveness of titillating images than about tantalizing or salacious text. Roughly a month after the *Oh! Sammy!* fracas, a large Robesonian print ad for the film *Salome* failed to elicit any public commentary, even though the ad for the film, which featured a notorious screen siren, Theda Bara, characterized Bara as a "Sorceress Supreme" cast in the role of "The Python of Palestine: Sinuous, Sleek, Seductive," a figure who "Twined Herself About Strong Men and Crushed Them, Heart, Soul and Body."⁸⁴ How was it that these *Salome* advertisements escaped the censure of local clergymen apparently unperturbed as to how or why "Seven Veils Fell From Her and Yet She Danced?" How did this poster-based account of a woman made "...as of wax,/With a heart of stone,/With mouth and eyes and nostrils wide/That twitched, dilated, thrilled—and lied" manage to elude public censure? Local moral guardians appear to have been less concerned about the potential moral corruption of the town's educated classes than about the possibility of unlettered

individuals or groups interpreting images depicting interpersonal violence or sexual aggression as a public endorsement of those behaviors. Social reformers may also have feared that while impressionable children might not recognize the suggestiveness of advertising copy, they were more likely to be provoked by image-based representations of prohibited or immoral activities.

Yet the attacks of religious conservatives on motion-picture advertising were at least partly disingenuous and often hypocritically self-serving. Though film advertisements remained as close as many of them ever came to experiencing an actual motion-picture exhibition, their vociferous reaction to film ads disguised a largely unspoken set of misgivings that lurked beneath the surface of their public rhetoric. Simply put, religious conservatives viewed motion-picture exhibitions as a dangerous rival capable of appropriating some of the leisure time that had been previously directed towards religious devotion. Consider, for example, the following excerpt of an editorial letter submitted to the Robesonian by a Mrs. W. D. Shepherd in 1920:

Some say, "Oh, there is no harm in a nice moving picture show." When did you see a nice picture show? The Word of God tells us to abstain from all appearance of evil. These things have wounded and driven the Spirit of God away from the churches. Remember it is the little foxes that spoil the vine. Our vine has tender grapes. Just think how our young people are being led away and captured by the devil by these "no harm" sins, as some call them. Jesus says, Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If you love the world the love of the Father is not in you. *More folks go to the movies and less to church. There is just a small number [who] attend prayer meeting.*⁸⁵

Though presented as a kind of postscript to her extended set of Biblical metaphors, Mrs. Shepherd's concluded her lengthy and colorful diatribe with a warning that individuals who engage in the pleasures of this world in lieu of attending church services risked walking in the steps of Judas, who had sold his soul and betrayed his Savior "for a little pleasure and

gratification.”⁸⁶ Nor was Mrs. Shepherd’s a lone voice crying in the wilderness. In a letter entitled “The Sin of Pleasure” published barely a year later, Shepherd’s contemporary J. M. Fleming fretted about the alarming—and apparently increasing—disparity between church and motion-picture attendance:

If there are *twenty* members of the church in the movie show *to one* at prayer meeting it is a clear case as to the way folks ar[e] drifting. They tell us *the biggest audiences in the world are in the movies.*⁸⁷

Though Fleming seemed loath to admit it, he acknowledged that many habitual churchgoers also attended motion-picture shows. Certainly, in light of the country’s religious demographics, the film industry could not have experienced the kind of spectacular national growth it had if Christians had abstained from attending the cinema. The development and support of local exhibition venues in several Robeson towns during the 1920s would frankly have been impossible *without* their active participation in moviegoing. Of course, Fleming and Shepherd were hardly alone in accusing their fellow congregants of abandoning their devotional duties by acting, in Fleming’s terms, as “Christians who give themselves over to fashion’s delusiveness and extravagance,” and who thereby allow “Satan to put his halter on them and stake them out.”⁸⁸ As the country headed into what would become known as the “Roaring Twenties,” a decade then Americans sought to forget the scarcity and privation that had characterized the war period, regional conservative clerics in communities throughout the land commonly derided the “shallowness” of an age which they feared would result in a permanent debasement of moral standards.⁸⁹ Celebrated ministers like Bishop John C. Kilgo, the Rev. Baxter “Cyclone Mac” McClendon, and the Elder Rev. J. H. Shore among others attempted to lead an evangelical resurgence throughout the Carolinas, as they and other “old-time” preachers sponsored extended revivals that met in all seasons and all weathers.⁹⁰

Both the clergy and the local press sought to characterize revivals as events having little or nothing in common with commercial exhibitions or entertainments. Indeed, the Robesonian praised a specific Shore revival because “Mr. Shore does not indulge in any tricks or vaudeville stunts; he draws crowds by the sheer force of his earnestness and the plain Gospel he preaches with power.”⁹¹ At Shore revivals, local crowds appeared to have “increased with every service, with nothing to draw them but plain, earnest, forceful preaching that required thoughtful attention.”⁹² As Shore castigated the possible intermingling of popular entertainment with devotional services, Shore expressed a firm conviction that the former could in no way substitute for the latter. In responding to the question of “why does the church try to offer entertainments in order to catch the crowds and the masses,”⁹³ the confident Shore confidently proclaimed that “if you will give me a church set on fire with real enthusiasm I’m not afraid of the picture show or the dance hall.”⁹⁴

The brave front adopted by itinerant revivalists notwithstanding, religious conservatives concerned about the long-term threat that picture shows appeared to pose to the attendance at school- and church-sponsored events began to adopt some of the operating practices of their cinematic competitor. Large-scale revivals developed into carefully planned and executed ministerial theatricals scripted to produce specific audience responses, and they were designed to result in a series of evangelically-inspired conversion experiences. As townsfolk came to regard revivals as important social events, local newspapers reported on them as faithfully as they covered local fairs, carnivals, festivals, and the arrival of “event” films like *The Birth of a Nation* or *The King of Kings*. In combating the popularity of commercial entertainment, it appeared that fundamentalists intended to fight fire with fire, for in staging their elaborate performances to reinvigorate a flagging commitment to God’s

work on Earth, they aggressively promoted their activities through the same media as their theatrical competition: newspaper and poster-based advertisements. Additionally, news accounts tracing the whereabouts of celebrity preachers like “Cyclone Mac,” Elder Shore, and Lumberton’s own C. H. Durham along with reprints of their sermons were laid out in the *exact same physical newspaper space* in the Robesonian that previously had been devoted to motion-picture coverage!⁹⁵ Whether or not conservative preachers consciously promoted the outcome, during the late 1910s and early 1920s the schedules and previews for revivals and weekly religious services appeared directly alongside commercial entertainments in local press outlets like the Robesonian.

At that time, in fact, religious groups across the nation were migrating towards quasi-corporate entities, many of which regularly disseminated activity reports to their members and other interested parties through newsletters and extensive newspaper coverage.⁹⁶ State and national religious conferences sponsored celebrity preachers like “Cyclone Mac” in an effort to rekindle the nation’s apparently flagging spiritual commitment, and though the benefits of the movement toward centralized church marketing were more fully realized in the evangelical revival that followed the Great War, in Robeson County the seeds of that strategy had been sown on June 17th 1918, when the Robesonian published the following—rather startling—announcement:

Church Advertising

The Robesonian is carrying in this issue its first church advertising. Pastor Greaves of the First Baptist church is sanely and keenly progressive and wide awake along all lines and *he is convinced that advertising pays in church matters. And of course he is right.* Dr. Greaves knows that the Robesonian gives liberally of its space in mentioning all church news and that he could confine mention of the annual protracted meeting at his church to news matter; *but he knows that display advertising puts the matter before the public more forcibly than it could be put otherwise and that it shows the church means business in its campaign to save souls.*⁹⁷

Evidence in the article suggesting that the Robesonian now regarded churches partly as local business ventures, and therefore as revenue opportunities, came in the form of the paper's use of precisely the same tag-line trotted out to encourage prospective commercial advertisers: "Church advertising *has brought large results wherever it has been tried.*"⁹⁸ Moreover, the content and format of local church advertisements bore a distinct resemblance to motion picture-related notices, including "church event" schedules and "sneak previews" calling the reader's attention to upcoming sermons.

Using this style of advertising, as well as a close cousin the faux news story, religious conservatives co-opted the mass-media technologies used to promote the products, processes, and services of corporate America. In a sense, they embraced contemporary business practices as they struggled to beat back a rising tide of modernism that posed severe challenges to traditional orthodoxies. Spurred on by an influx of European critical thought within America's academic institutions, modernist conflicts culminated for evangelicals and fundamentalists particularly in debates over the relative merits of Darwinism and Creationism. However, evolutionary science posed but one of a number of intellectual critiques levied against the biblical texts that continued to represent the fountainhead of conservative Christian dogma. Historian Douglas Carl Abrams has argued that in order to defend the faith, the vanguard of America's religious conservatives selectively appropriated "modern mass culture" through many of the "technologies and strategies" associated with more "worldly" institutions and cultural pursuits.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, those religious leaders who "imitated mass culture" simultaneously (and perhaps naively) struggled "not to be like the world" in their attempts to "evangelize it" while joining modern business tactics,

organizational structures, and marketing theories on the one hand with the missionary fervor of late nineteenth-century conservative Christianity on the other.¹⁰⁰

What may have surprised contemporary observers was the speed with which religious leaders aligned themselves with the values and practices of American business. According to religious historian Robert Moats Miller, the extent to which American Protestants in particular adopted a largely “uncritical attitude toward the business community” during the first quarter of the twentieth century was “perhaps best illustrated by the fact that the churches paid the businessman the high compliment of emulating his techniques and jargon.”¹⁰¹ In order to “sell” religion to the masses, an objective that several leading clergymen confirmed as the “only business of the Church,”¹⁰² mainstream and fundamentalist Protestantism both began to incorporate church marketing instruction into the curricula of rising seminarians. Several denominations also implemented new Publicity Departments to employ “the most up-to-date advertising methods,” a move which again underscored organized religion’s “thoroughgoing connection to business in the era.”¹⁰³ One particularly notable figure that leveraged an extensive marketing background in an effort to depict Christ as an extraordinarily successful religious entrepreneur was former advertising executive Bruce Barton.¹⁰⁴ From 1925-26, Barton’s pseudo-biographical portrait of Jesus entitled The Man Nobody Knows led the nation in non-fiction sales and was quickly adapted for the screen (by Barton himself). The Man Nobody Knows implicitly argued that Christ’s presentation style and mode of instruction were prime examples of communication successes built upon the mass-marketing principles of simplicity and repetition. According to religious historians Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt, these qualities enabled Jesus “to

create a demand for his religious message in the same way that modern advertising agents, like Barton, were able to create new needs and desires” within consumers.¹⁰⁵

With Barton having forged an extraordinarily popular connection between modern business techniques and the central figure of Christendom, any number of Christians sublimated their former misgivings about religious advertising and “adapted the forms of mass culture but rejected the substance”¹⁰⁶ of worldly pursuits. By yoking together both business and religion disciplines, Barton’s work implied that one could simultaneously serve *and* emulate the Lord by adopting some of the principles and strategies of mass-marketing campaigns. The enormous success of The Man Nobody Knows likely also captured the attention of ministers struggling to achieve their own measure of professional success, though as a general rule North Carolina’s clerics eschewed the more radical methods embraced by several of organized religion’s new marketing programs. As recorded by Miller, these methods included in-church promotional giveaways, the deployment of steam calliopes hawking upcoming church services along downtown streets, the recruitment of pretty girls as ushers responsible for passing the weekly collection plate, and the organization of church-advertising conferences that lobbied influential ministers and laymen during promotional weekends that included cabaret outings and bathing-beauty shows.

Despite their relative marketing conservatism, North Carolina’s ministers still recognized that the “standard for religious success [had] shifted somewhat from a spiritual one to one judged by the size of budgets and buildings and the number of members and converts” in their congregations.¹⁰⁷ Church leaders even in relatively isolated or rural regions like Robeson pursued alternative promotional strategies to increase weekly attendance figures. And the room for improvement was clear, given that at the turn of the century only

one-third of the nation's population could be categorized as "official" members of a church or synagogue.¹⁰⁸ Since religious advertising was "the most popular business method adapted for promotion by the church,"¹⁰⁹ and because newspaper advertising represented the most common advertising medium in American business, the commingling of religious and commercial-leisure advertisements on identical newspaper pages merely reinforced sociologist Robert Wuthnow's assertion that modern advertising had blurred the line of demarcation "between the spiritual and material worlds."¹¹⁰

Religious attitudes, however, were not only shifting with respect to the co-opting of commercial advertising. Around the same time that the Robesonian dutifully reported on a Presbyterian synod held at Wilmington's Church of the Covenant that had adopted a motion vigorously protesting cinematic immoralities and advocating the institution of government censorship,¹¹¹ important cracks had begun to form in what had been a nearly unanimous disassociation by conservative Christians between themselves and the cinema. Just two days earlier, in fact, the Robesonian had reported on a resolution passed by the Western North Carolina Methodist Conference that encouraged "all the churches that could use them [to] secure moving picture machines for educational and recreational purposes."¹¹² Some of the religious groups that had once lobbied to limit the freedom of motion-picture operators and audiences began to sponsor their own cinematic exhibitions in attempts to reassert the primacy of churches and schools within the *both* public and private lives of their congregants. However, many moral guardians were unwilling to abandon their hope of moving beyond the previously ineffectual forms of localized censorship in their communities. Calls for statewide cinema censorship accelerated from the late-1910s into the early-1920s, and if Robeson County's earlier dalliances with censorship had amounted to

little more than temporary ministerial appeasement, one specific state representative from Robeson found himself not just caught up within a rising tide of censorship advocacy—he found himself called upon to lead the charge.

As Raleigh’s General Assembly became the epicenter of North Carolina’s latest battle over motion-picture censorship, Lycurgus Rayner Varser, a freshman senator from Robeson, became one of the movement’s key players. During the debates that raged throughout the early months of 1921 in the General Assembly concerning a censorship bill that Varser had co-sponsored, the recently elected Robesonian would find himself confronted by the same problem that had stymied local censors back home, i.e., the difficulty of establishing censorship guidelines that would satisfy all of the religious, civic, business, political, and administrative factions involved in the conflict. However, if Varser was ultimately no more successful in resolving the issue in Raleigh than he had in his home district, the unexpected reaction of North Carolina’s clerics in the wake of the bill’s eventual failure requires an extended explanation that depends partly upon an analysis of the increasingly strained relationship that developed between fundamentalist Protestants and other cinema-censorship advocates from the late-1910s to the early-1930s.¹¹³

Despite the national popularity of cinema during the First World War, the period from 1917 to 1919 was increasingly “marked by the heightened fervor of civic and religious reformers demanding legal censorship.”¹¹⁴ During this period, women’s groups regularly sponsored cinema reform bills as the continuation of a legislative agenda predating the 1920 ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. Many social reformers believed that children, whose primary caregivers were women, represented the demographic group most susceptible to the personal risks allegedly linked to excessive moviegoing.¹¹⁵ Though North Carolina’s

General Assembly had briefly contemplated introducing censorship legislation as early as 1919, the leaders of several key women's groups in 1920 drafted a bill modeled on Pennsylvania's comparatively severe censor-board statutes and lobbied for its inclusion during the next Assembly session. At the same time, their pro-censorship peers in other states were extraordinarily active, so much so that by 1922 more than sixty percent of the domestic U.S. film industry's sales occurred within territories that supported some form of cinema censorship or regulatory oversight.¹¹⁶

Reformers targeting the film industry viewed Hollywood as a morally bankrupt establishment, while their perceptions were fueled by a series of scandals involving several major industry figures including Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Wallace Reid, Fatty Arbuckle, Mabel Normand, and her director, William Dean Taylor.¹¹⁷ To many observers, the line separating immoral behaviors on and off the screen had drastically diminished. Historian Thomas P. Doherty notes that "after World War I, when Hollywood began spinning out whole film cycles devoted to the sins of wild youth, dancing daughters, straying wives, and dark seducers," the industry earned the enmity of "progressive reformers and cultural conservatives who beheld in the embryonic medium the potential for social damage and moral blight," a condition which they felt had been encouraged by Hollywood's "parade of wastrels marching in the vanguard of the Jazz Age assault on Victorian values."¹¹⁸ Determined to roll back the cultural influence of immoral entertainers and their commercial amusements, conservative reformers took aim at controlling the output of a corrupt Hollywood because, as historian John Kasson has indicated, movies represented the most popular of a series of leisure amusements that "middle-class moral guardians felt themselves to be losing control over."¹¹⁹

To reestablish their cultural authority, moral guardians and social reformers sought to transform and temper American cinema via “a characteristic progressive solution: governmental regulation and expert supervision.”¹²⁰ That January, North Carolina’s General Assembly added a new bill to its legislative calendar: SB #407, “an act relating to motion pictures, reels, stereopticon views or slides” designed to implement “a system of examination, approval, and regulation thereof” that targeted all commercial motion-picture exhibitions plus all related “banners, posters, and other like advertising matters.”¹²¹ The proposed censor system, which was to be presided over by a three-person Board of Censors appointed by the Governor, required that every film slated for commercial exhibition anywhere in the state—along with all associated marketing materials—had to receive Board approval *prior* to their public display. Charged with preventing the exhibition of films and publicity materials that contained “sacrilegious, obscene, or clearly immoral” content that might “tend to debase or corrupt the morals of persons viewing them,” the Board’s members would in turn notify local exhibitors of their decision regarding the submitted materials. In the event of Board approval, operators would be provided a certificate of approval which they were required by law to make available for public inspection at the time of exhibition, and official film trailers signifying the Board’s approval were to be incorporated (i.e., spliced) into each film or slide presentation. In the event of an on-site censorship inspection, any exhibitor unable to provide proof of the Board’s certification for either a film or its marketing materials could be forced to halt the exhibition in question and/or be required to surrender both the film and its publicity materials to the Board. Any exhibitor who violated the state’s new censorship regulations remained subject to significant fines, and repeat offenders faced possible prison sentences.¹²²

If SB #407 represented a radical departure from the state's largely toothless set of local censorship efforts, the bill's arrival in Raleigh was preceded by more than two years of dedicated lobbying by censorship advocates who had rallied behind the leadership of the State Federation of Women's Clubs.¹²³ In banding together to protect children from immoral and sacrilegious films women's groups appeared determined to extend their recent string of political successes, including prohibition, national suffrage for women, and within a North Carolina context the election of the first (though only) female representative to the General Assembly. In 1921, SB #407 represented "the most conspicuous item on the program of the North Carolina Legislative Council of Women,"¹²⁴ in part because (according to historian Alison Parker) many women's groups pursued censorship campaigns as the next step in "legitimizing women's participation in the public political sphere."¹²⁵ While reform-minded members of groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union believed in the goal of protecting children from perceived cinematic evils, Parker claims that the WCTU's advocacy of cinema censorship remained "an integral part of its justification of women's political activism."¹²⁶ Organizationally, the WCTU often allied itself with the General Federation of Women's Clubs (including North Carolina), and together the two national groups supported censorship bills in several states.¹²⁷ In addition, the Legislative Council of Women that took the lead role in spearheading SB #407 in North Carolina forged a political partnership that also included the North Carolina League of Women Voters and the state's Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs.¹²⁸

Most of the state's religious leaders also welcomed SB #407, as the memberships of the State Baptist Convention, the Presbyterian Synod, the Methodist Episcopal Conference, the Methodist Protestant Conference, and the Protestant Episcopal Conference all at least

nominally supported the bill.¹²⁹ In Henderson, the Rev. S. L. Morgan rallied local support for the bill through both newspaper essays and sermons. In fact, one of his journal entries from February 1921 recorded how the minister had “taken part in [the] fight for censorship...writing vigorously against the contemptuous opposition to our efforts by the leading picture man here, Stevenson.”¹³⁰ SB #407 supporters like Morgan expected to face a protracted fight from the film industry. Perhaps sensing that the bill’s sponsors might thereby acquire a long-term reputational liability, Assembly leaders delayed identifying SB #407’s legislative champions until well after its sessions had begun. At the conclusion of extensive discussions among the Assembly’s Democratic majority, sponsorship in the Senate fell jointly to Henderson’s experienced senator, Rufus Sidney McCain, and to freshman Robesonian L. R. Varser, whose appointment may have amounted to the payment of a political debt, specifically Varser’s seat on the Senate’s highly influential Finance Committee. This set of sponsorship appointments, by the way, meant that both of SB #407’s senatorial champions hailed from the current home districts of the Rev. C. H. Durham and the Rev. S. L. Morgan. In the months to come, McCain would speak out in favor of the bill in both the Assembly chamber and in the local press more actively than Varser, who ceded to McCain the role of public spokesman for SB #407. Indeed, accounts of the bill published in either the Robesonian or the News and Observer, the leading Raleigh newspaper, include virtually no commentary from Varser. Yet despite Varser’s phlegmatic approach, the SB #407 debate became the season’s most vigorous political confrontation, one replete with engaging rhetorical flourishes, dramatic celebrity testimony, and unexpected procedural twists.

Beginning in February, for example, capital rumormongers indicated that one of the youngest men ever elected as an Assembly representative, i.e., Shelby County favorite-son Thomas F. Dixon, Jr., might finally return to the State House after an absence of several decades in order to contest the upcoming censorship bill. The scuttlebutt regarding the peripatetic Dixon proved quite accurate. After having left Raleigh approximately thirty-five years earlier, Dixon had pursued a variety of public roles, first as a well-regarded Baptist firebrand, and later as a reasonably successful stage actor. However, both regionally and nationally Dixon's reputation had been cemented through his authorship of a number of extremely popular novels whose appeal stemmed in part from their open advocacy of the principles of white supremacy. In 1914, director David Wark Griffith, a Kentucky-born son of a former Confederate colonel, began adapting elements of the Dixon novels *The Clansman* and *The Leopard's Spots* to create cinema's first true blockbuster, *The Birth of a Nation*. Granted a twenty-five percent interest in the film's proceeds in lieu of the fee Griffith originally promised to pay him for the rights to the stage play based on *The Clansman*, Dixon joined his business partner Griffith at the end of the 1910s in a series of speaking engagements designed to defeat a number of proposed cinema-censorship bills. In fact, only a few weeks prior to Dixon's return to North Carolina, Griffith had appeared before legislative subcommittees in New York during yet another round of hotly contested censorship hearings.

SB #407's advocates had every right to be concerned about the prospect of Dixon's impending testimony. Dixon, a former Johns Hopkins classmate of the Staunton-born U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, had three years earlier successfully convinced the governor of Virginia to suppress the establishment of a state-censorship board in the Old Dominion.¹³¹

Eager to protect a cinematic partnership whose profits partly depended on the proceeds of theatrical re-releases of *The Birth of a Nation*, Dixon and Griffith employed a number of rhetorical strategies as they resisted pro-censorship arguments.¹³² Based on the severity of the provisions incorporated into SB #407, political observers correctly predicted that the film-industry would resist the bill aggressively. Hopeful that Dixon's earlier Assembly service as well as his well-established religious conservatism, his eloquence as a public speaker, his theatricality and personal flair, and his "native son" status would help to win the day, the President of the North Carolina Motion Picture Theaters Owners' Association, Percy W. Wells, convinced Dixon to speak out against SB #407, even though Dixon's partnership with Griffith (and therefore his association with Babylonian Hollywood) was public knowledge. Nevertheless, Dixon's supporters believed that his unimpeachable reputation as a defender of the Old Confederacy, a status confirmed in his novels as well as in the spectacularly popular *Birth*, would help to ensure SB #407's defeat.

Once the bill moved into what the News and Observer referred to as the "storm center" of the Assembly's 1921 session, Dixon was quickly positioned as the star witness laboring against the censorship cause. Even Dixon's critics were ruefully forced to admit that his initial testimony against the bill "glowed with the patriotic spirit" and "was splendid in its exaltation of democracy and radiant with the true Dixon fervor."¹³³ In hammering away at the bill's weaknesses, the Shelby native attempted to undercut support for SB #407 among conservative clerics by warning that the bill's designers were, in effect, claiming an authority that the Divine Himself had refused to exercise, i.e., by usurping the right of each individual to exercise his or her own judgment and free will when determining which cinema exhibitions were morally worthy of patronage, and which were not. In the wake of Dixon's

first round of testimony, the editorial board of the News and Observer (which openly favored the bill's passage) feared that the odds for SB #407's success had grown significantly longer.¹³⁴ Local observers held their breaths before Dixon's second round of testimony, this time before the Assembly's Education Subcommittee, which appeared heading towards a bare-knuckled verbal showdown between the bill's staunchest proponents and Dixon, who remained determined to scuttle the bill before its referral to the Assembly floor.

Crowds anticipating a host of verbal fireworks packed the State House and its galleries, and neither they nor the local press were disappointed by the level of drama that quickly unfolded. The same, however, could not be said for the soon-besieged Dixon. In response to Dixon's earlier testimony, the local pro-censorship press had branded Dixon a hypocrite—a former minister resorting to biblical analogies while defending his significant personal interests in cinema rather than the welfare of the general public.¹³⁵ Similar *ad hominem* attacks directed at Dixon during a joint Subcommittee hearing were marshaled by censorship advocates including Ike M. Meekins, an Eastern Carolina Republican politician and lawyer, and the Rev. Dr. Milton A. Barber, a Raleigh minister selected by the state's Episcopal Convention to lead the censorship cause before the Assembly. News accounts of the wide-ranging and relentlessly personal attacks delivered against Dixon over the two-day session reported that “the violence was entirely vocal, but it was unmistakably violence.”¹³⁶ In his testimony, Barber indicted Dixon for having departed his former Baptist ministry “for the fields of moving pictures where the pastures are greener” and excoriated both Dixon and the National Board of Review, an organization that Dixon had defended in his previous testimony, for promulgating toothless censorship standards that permitted “ruinous pictures” to proliferate in theaters across the land.¹³⁷ Partnering with Barber, Meekins conspicuously

pandered to the women's groups supporting the bill while calling upon the Assembly's delegates to provide North Carolina's "good, pure womankind" adequate "protection from this slimy filth that is flung upon the screen in every town in the State."¹³⁸ Acting very much like the solicitor he was when not serving in Raleigh, Meekins strove to undermine Dixon's credibility by dredging up old legislative records to indicate that at one point during his single term in Raleigh, then-Representative Dixon had voted *against* otherwise successful legislation that criminalized the printing of immoral or obscene material. In a rather devastating indictment, Meekins blasted the now seemingly hypocritical Dixon for having cited earlier in the day this same statute as having provided the public legislative protection from cinematic immoralities more than adequate enough to have rendered SB #407 unnecessary and superfluous.¹³⁹

If the galleries continued to favor Dixon, Meekins and Barber justifiably felt that they had bloodied Dixon enough to win the day...up until the moment when Dixon challenged Barber to identify a single morally offensive film that the minister had witnessed personally. Dixon's desperate gamble paid off, as his opponent was forced to admit that despite of his confident assertions regarding the immoral, obscene, and generally sacrilegious nature of motion pictures, he had not even seen the specific film that he'd cited earlier that day as an exemplar of the thoroughly "rotten" picture. Barber's subsequent confession that his knowledge of offensive films had been provided by the leader of one of the women's groups behind SB #407 may have damaged Barber's credibility with the virtually all-male Assembly, since the latter had spent much of the spring isolating Lillian Exum Clement, its sole female member.¹⁴⁰ Dixon then attacked Barber's testimony by suggesting that this presumed "rotten" state of motion pictures was simply a figment of Barber's overheated

imagination, rather than a valid representation of the films actually produced by the motion-picture industry. Having thus dispatched Barber, Dixon moved from personal attacks toward what he hoped would be perceived as a less subjective mode of argumentation. Insisting that no law was capable of defining on an *a priori* basis everything that a society might judge to be immoral, sacrilegious, or obscene, Dixon predicted with absolute certitude that the prevailing national censorship “itch” would rapidly pass away. He also reminded his listeners of the historical relationship between censorship and religious persecution. He also claimed constitutionally protected “free-speech” privileges for motion pictures, although Dixon knew from bitter personal experience that the courts had unequivocally disagreed with him on this point.¹⁴¹

While the heavy support of the galleries suggested that Dixon had again triumphed inside the halls of the Assembly, after three hours of acrimonious debate the Senate’s Education Subcommittee passed the censorship bill by a 7-6 vote before its House counterpart voted 14 to 10 in favor of authorizing SB #407 for submission to open floor debate within both chambers.¹⁴² Yet with the bill’s fate now in the hands of the full Assembly, Raleigh’s lawmakers faced the difficult task of crafting a law containing an executable set of standards to regulate an entertainment medium capable of featuring an enormously wide-ranging set of film content. Despite Dixon’s apparent failure, editorialists rather warily reminded their readers of the glaring local absence of either a legislative, legal, or popular consensus from which to develop an appropriate set of structures and methods to operationalize this new film-censor board. Though several opinions had been offered regarding the socio-political motives behind establishing a censor board, few contained any practicably actionable implementation proposals. On the one hand, religious conservatives

like the Rev. George DeLane of Elizabeth City pushed for stricter controls on any film exhibition that could “contravene the morality of a pure home.” Fearing that an unrestrained Hollywood represented “a blot on the governing power of the community,” DeLane warned that if the legislature failed to implement the sort of control mechanisms promised by SB #407, then “America is in danger of moral decadence.”¹⁴³ Similar sentiments were echoed by the Raleigh African-American Women’s Club, which cited the recently successful implementation of a censorship committee at a local colored theater as proof that *all* of the public was capable of supporting a bill like SB #407.¹⁴⁴ But while the RA-AWC’s comments indicated that conservative support for cinema censorship could cross racial boundaries, editorialists like Rocky Mount’s L. G. Shaffer were significantly less enamored of the “self-appointed moralists” who were “wasting their perfectly good lung power” on the cause of motion-picture censorship. Shaffer objected to the notion that pro-censorship moralizers would be authorized to act on the behalf of otherwise clear-thinking individuals who remained perfectly capable of determining for themselves which motion pictures were appropriate for public consumption. Moreover, if these people considered moviegoing to be inherently disturbing or morally perilous, Shaffer could not understand why they simply didn’t boycott cinemas while leaving free-thinkers to choose for themselves.¹⁴⁵

Other observers were disturbed by the overtly personal nature of the attacks employed during the Dixon debates, including one anonymous editorialist who noted dryly that “when the brethren of the cloth get warmed up they can say a few words from the shoulder about as well as anybody else.”¹⁴⁶ Civil libertarians tended to adopt positions similar to Shaffer’s. In encouraging state officials to resist their impulse to police personal leisure, they also criticized parents for failing to exercise proper restraint in allowing their children to attend

superfluous or unsuitable films. Yet ironically, none of the rhetoricians trading barbs across Raleigh's editorial pages discussed the fact that motion pictures had been exhibited within Raleigh churches or Sunday schools at least three times during the censorship debates, including two February screenings held in local Methodist churches and a January 26th church exhibition that was held with the explicit cooperation of several national children's organizations along with the National Association of the Motion-Picture Industry to raise funds for European Relief charities.¹⁴⁷

As long days of legislative tussling dragged on into weeks, the bill's fate remained doubtful even among devoted supporters like Mrs. Henry Perry, the Social Service Chairman of the N.C. Federation of Women's Clubs who had supplied the Rev. Dr. Barber with his insights into "rotten" pictures. Fearful of the bill's dilution due to floor compromises and/or its postponement due to a lack of political will, Perry implored the state's Christian men and women to encourage their Assembly representatives to resist any and all attempts by SB #407 opponents to "pick flaws in the bill and thus cause the matter to be postponed for two years."¹⁴⁸ Based on newspaper accounts that chronicled the bill's slow movement through various House and Senate committees and predicted that the final vote might be uncomfortably close in the House, Perry's concerns were fully justified. For according to unnamed sources, state legislators were struggling to achieve consensus on several key operational issues for SB #407, including whether or not to delimit the independent powers extended to the board's members; to mandate which board activities were to occur locally and which were to be performed centrally; to determine the type of films (including news, current event, and religious films) that would be exempted either partially or fully from

ensorship oversight; and to agree whether or not motion-picture advertisements published in newspapers would remain subject to board oversight.

Due to these and other thorny issues, SB #407 appeared destined to be denied a floor vote before an unexpected event steeled the resolve of SB #407's advocates, when foolishly and without warning the manager of one of Raleigh's two leading theaters incurred the wrath of the entire local religious community by perpetrating a personal assault on the Rev. Dr. Barber. In failing to follow the more judicious lead of his cross-town theater competitor, who in an approach similar to that adopted years earlier by Walter Wishart had refused to engage publicly in censorship debates,¹⁴⁹ Superba Theatre manager R. G. Allen ill-advisedly sought to embarrass and discredit Dr. Barber along with specific members of the minister's family. Allen's badly conceived, poorly timed, and wholly classless salvo enraged local churchgoers, galvanized the Raleigh and North Carolina Baptist communities, prompted one Episcopal minister to announce an immediate boycott of all Raleigh theaters, and inflamed pro-censorship advocates during the several crucial weeks when the fate of SB #407 would be decided.

Allen's most egregious offense occurred during a Superba show on the evening of February 23, when he authorized a slide to be projected in his theater questioning "the fitness of a preacher whose daughter goes to Saturday night dances 'half naked' and comes home Sunday morning...to act as a censor of moving pictures."¹⁵⁰ In the aftermath of Allen's shocking editorializing, vituperative church leaders swiftly, serially, and unrelentingly condemned Allen, his theater, and the motion-picture industry for what they perceived amounted to the defamation of Barber and his family. Allen unsuccessfully attempted to deflect criticism by claiming that his differences with Barber were "the result of malice on

account of a quarrel with a neighbor over ten cents” (i.e., the price of theater admission). But this conflation of honest disagreement with what Barber’s supporters viewed as an image signifying financial greed earned at the cost of public morality only led to further excoriations of Allen for having perpetrated “a malicious attack through an exhibition on the screen of the Superba Theatre, [one] casting serious reflection on [Barber’s] innocent young daughter.”¹⁵¹ To the dismay of SB #407 opponents, the local Baptist community that had been generally silent on the censorship debate, perhaps out of a respect for Dixon’s former ministerial service, rallied to support the Episcopalian rector of Raleigh’s Christ Church by roundly complimenting Barber for his “leadership of the sentiment of this community for securing a censorship of the moving picture business in the State.”¹⁵² Allen’s defense simply offered to censorship advocates additional evidence of a key charge leveled at North Carolina theater owners as well as Dixon during the latter’s testimony, namely that the film industry had failed to address public concerns regarding film content while it privileged the profitability of its theaters; indeed, one local bishop urged that aggressive action be taken in the wake of Allen’s gaffe to combat “the selfish greed of those who would degrade the morals and manners of our people for the sake of gain.”¹⁵³

One week after his initial adversarial misstep, Allen attempted to quell the anger he had incited by projecting a different slide within his theater—a slide offering a public apology to Barber. Yet the reputational damage appeared to be irreparable, both for Allen and the film industry, when the following day the Senate passed SB #407 by a vote of 28 to 19. The margin of victory was, perhaps thanks to Allen, significantly larger than the bill’s single-vote escape from committee. To many political observers, it appeared that a moral reckoning was at hand, with Allen as the cinema’s most locally notorious scapegoat. While

insisting upon the incorporation within SB #407 of a provision specifically banning “sacrilegious” material, as he addressed the full chamber Senator Burgwyn of Northumberland County “took occasion to pronounce R. G. Allen, proprietor of [the] Superba Theatre of Raleigh, as ‘beneath the contempt of a respectable dog.’”¹⁵⁴ Though it had been roundly admired at the time, Dixon’s testimony was revisited and criticized for having been suffused with too much economic self-interest, and some commentators condemned Dixon *in absentia* for having defended “the common interest of a few who want money, and commercialize education, morals, and religion to get it.”¹⁵⁵ In a simultaneous revisionist turn, Barber received glowing belated reviews for having stoutly challenged the redoubtable Dixon.

In short, Raleigh was abuzz with censorship fever, and expressions of the righteous anger incited by Allen fairly littered newspaper editorial pages with calls for additional censorship initiatives targeting stage theaters, carnivals, fairs, literature, and the press, while at least one moral guardian took advantage of the prevailing climate to propose statutes requiring a minimum length for women’s dresses.¹⁵⁶ Beneath the public rhetoric, however, lengthy House negotiations hinted that Dixon, Allen and their supporters might, in fact, prevail, especially once the Subcommittee on Education reversed itself twice in the same week and refused to send the bill to a floor vote after its failure to come to agreement on key operational issues. Time was on the side of SB #407’s opponents. Since the state’s constitution mandated that the Assembly complete all business within sixty days of the session’s opening, the bill’s opponents introduced a series of key procedural delays including a requirement that the proposed bill be sent out for reprinting and redistribution to each member of the legislature. Though public reprisals continued against Allen in spite of his

having projected a second public apology to Barber on his theater screen, as well as having delivered a hand-written apology to the minister's house, the House galleries gathered in anticipation of a floor vote remained unaware that interim vote-tallies and other cloakroom negotiations intimated that a floor vote of SB #407 would fail. Once the sixty-day session threshold arrived, Assembly representatives could leave town without the possibility of their being legally compelled to return to cast their votes. Newspaper evidence suggests that some delegates departed the House chamber on several occasions specifically to deny a quorum call prior to bringing SB #407 to a vote. As time grew short, the bill's prospects became increasingly clouded. Finally, a full week after the Senate had passed its version of the bill, the House members voted, in a move that reportedly caused the face of one of the bill's most-committed proponents to go "white for the first time in the session," to table SB #407 after a brief ten-minute discussion. Subsequently, the House decided by a vote of 45 to 38 against a motion to reconsider the bill's tabling.¹⁵⁷ In the end, Dixon and Allen had narrowly triumphed.

To observers struggling in the wake of SB #407's tabling to understand precisely why North Carolina narrowly avoided becoming by 1922 the eighth state to implement a motion-picture censor board, local news accounts and editorials offered little comfort to SB #407 advocates by reporting that Raleigh's legislators were stymied by the challenge of elaborating a set of objective criteria capable of consistently identifying immoral, obscene, or sacrilegious cinema and advertising content.¹⁵⁸ Some Assembly members also objected to delegating the legal authority to determine sacrilegiousness to a censor board, or to any other legislative authority for that matter, as they preferred to leave matters of moral interpretation and/or questions of religious orthodoxy in the hands of ecclesiasts or, if necessary, the courts.

After tabling SB #407, the Assembly voted during its closing session to strengthen laws already in place to prevent the exhibition of “any obscene or clearly immoral picture, poster, or such like material on any screen or billboard.”¹⁵⁹ The News and Observer regretted that the Assembly’s actions “in effect...leave[s] censorship to the courts,” thereby delegating the responsibility for initiating legal proceedings against operators who either exhibited inappropriate films or engaged in immoral exhibition practices to a “public free to call judicial attention to infractions through affidavits,” rather than a public working in conjunction with a dedicated censorship agent.¹⁶⁰ The final vote by the members of the House and Senate to strengthen existing censorship regulations represented a symbolical nod in the direction of the pro-censorship coalition without resorting to the implementation of a central censor office. This move may have signaled a preliminary agreement by House leaders to forego the submission of bills similar to SB #407 in the next Assembly session.¹⁶¹ While the News and Observer neglected to mention it, the House’s members had ultimately agreed with Dixon’s claim that sufficient laws were already in place to deal with cinematic immoralities without the need for an additional regulatory body. As such, the legislature’s actions punted the issue back to the courts, which would continue to be called upon to define and interpret obscenity standards if and when local guardians sought judicial relief against morally offensive shows or advertisements.

For Varser, the defeat of SB #407 marked one of only two bills to fail in his young legislative career out of the fifty he sponsored or co-sponsored that session, though his experience as a member of Lumberton’s deadlocked censor board in 1917 during the *Where Are My Children?* controversy should have prefigured the eventual defeat of SB #407 for him. Moreover, were he a faithful a reader of the Robesonian during his stay in Raleigh,

Varser would have understood that not everyone in his hometown actually favored his bill. As the Robesonian had delighted in belittling earlier local censorship efforts, the paper also enthusiastically criticized SB #407 in “Let’s Censor the Whole Works,” an editorial that roundly indicted a bill that “seems broad enough for censors acting under it to make the movie diet as dull, stale, flat, and uninteresting as a tract on how to freeze icebergs.”¹⁶² It also satirically questioned the likelihood of the Solomonic transformation through which an “appointment to a place on the proposed board of censors immediately cloaks a member with all the wisdom of the ages,” so that “a censor will be able to tell at a glance whether the lowbrowed herd should see what the censors have seen. Very fine,” opined the Robesonian, whose editorialist wondered precisely how far these censorial intrusions would be permitted to go into the lives of private citizens. For surely...

...if the solons pass that bill they should by all means go further and appoint other boards clothed with wisdom and high and mighty powers to tell the folks what they shall wear, what they shall eat, what they shall read and which side of the bed they shall get up out of mornings ...

Or, rather, since the powers of the movie censors are going to be limited to what the public shall not see, let the other boards make it unlawful to read certain books, to wear certain styles, etcetera [...leaving it...] entirely possible that the literary board might rule Shakespeare out, and maybe rule out the Bible.¹⁶³

Once Allen had stirred up a clerical hornet’s nest, the Robesonian abandoned this scornful tone in favor of a more dispassionate and objective critical strategy. After acknowledging that the “movies have come to stay, as even advocates of censorship admit,” the newspaper predicted that in short order the film producers “will right themselves,” and therefore the imposition of permanent governmental oversight represented an overreaction to what the newspaper regarded as one symptom of a temporary outbreak of post-war moral laxity.¹⁶⁴

The Robesonian also insisted that “state censorship would prove a farce, just as local

ensorship has proved a farce,” and for many of the same reasons.¹⁶⁵ Noting that “you can scarcely find three people who will agree about the merits of a book or a play,” the paper asserted that since “what one sees is determined by what is back of one’s eyes as well as by what is in front,”¹⁶⁶ the difficulty of establishing universal standards of morality would almost certainly continue to derail censorship initiatives.

Considering that only a handful of states implemented censor boards in 1921—even though that over seventy-five percent (or thirty-seven out of forty-eight) of the nation’s state legislatures considered film censorship proposals that year—the narrow failure of SB #407 in North Carolina may seem today to represent a rather unremarkable historical event. What remains surprising, however, and what requires further interrogation, is why conservative ministers in Robeson and other local communities tended to abandon the cause of cinematic censorship in the wake of such a narrow legislative defeat. Indeed, the margin of that defeat begs the question as to why 1921’s legislative *cause célèbre* appears not to have been reintroduced into subsequent General Assembly sessions. Perhaps more significantly, local newspaper scans suggest that ministerial rhetoric condemning motion-picture immorality largely disappeared as the new decade progressed. What factors help to explain why so many of these formerly enthusiastic proponents of motion-picture censorship abandoned this once-popular rallying point in the larger effort to stem the tide of Jazz Age immorality from rolling across the Main Streets of small-town America? Though much of the scholarship tracing the decline in the 1930s of Protestant-sponsored censorship initiatives that were crowded out in favor of Hollywood’s alliance with the Legion of Decency tends to focus upon censorship activism in the Northeast and Midwest, these accounts do little to explain the growing reticence of one-time censorship advocates in the largely non-Catholic South in the

1920s and 1930s. However, by examining specific events in and around Robeson County, this study will offer several explanations that may account for the increasing censorial detachment of Southern Protestants.

Film-censorship scholars including Francis Couvares, Richard Maltby, and Stephen Vaughn have usefully articulated how and why the once-dominant influence of American Protestantism on state and federal censorship efforts during the 1910s and 1920s was eventually superseded by a Catholic-affiliated initiative in the early-1930s. Historian Frank Walsh has argued that Hollywood's alliance with the Legion of Decency effectively marginalized those reformers whose activities had lent prior censorship movements "a distinctly Protestant cast in the early decades of the twentieth century."¹⁶⁷ Walsh claims that the film industry preferred to continue its policy of self-regulation via a new alliance with a Catholic reform group because the Legion's spiritual and policy leaders usually disagreed with legislating solutions to perceived social problems due to a "distrust of government interference in moral issues" and a "belief that censorship was counterproductive because it publicized evil films that might disappear if left alone."¹⁶⁸ To industry leaders like the MPPDA's Will Hays, a figure determined to prevent the imposition of external regulatory oversight yet frustrated by years of courting Protestant leaders who often continued to support a bewildering array of censor boards and censorship proposals, the vastly more centralized and predictable Legion represented a superior regulatory partner.

The movement towards a newer Catholic alliance in combination with the resigned withdrawal of Protestant censorship advocates implies that Christian interdenominational rivalries may have played a role in this shift. It is entirely possible that these were a factor in regions of the country featured significant Catholic populations. In addition, Steven Vaughn

has argued that film industry leadership agreed to implement the largely Catholic-authored Production Code in 1930 partly because of the church's influence on key Wall Street financiers. Since many Catholic leaders deemed as failures the industry's previous self-regulatory attempts implemented in conjunction with the generally Protestant-affiliated reform groups courted by Will Hays, the primary architect of the Production Code, an influential Jesuit author named the Rev. Daniel A. Lord, viewed the new code as "an opportunity to read morality and decency into mass recreation."¹⁶⁹

Yet any extension to the American South of this admittedly over-simplified narrative of Catholic versus Protestant censorship domination encounters at least two significant problems.¹⁷⁰ The first stems from the overwhelming numerical dominance of Protestantism in virtually all Southern locales. Southern Protestant leaders continued to wield a lion's share of the social and political influence in the region throughout the twentieth century. The second involves a critical temporal gap in this narrative of Catholic ascendancy to censorial partnership. While most historical accounts of the increasing Catholic influence on censorship usually focus upon activities that began in the late 1920s,¹⁷¹ these accounts tend to ignore the middle 1920s, or the point by which, at least according to intensive scans of Robeson County newspapers, fervent early-decade Protestant censorship activism had sharply declined. While the scholarly analyses performed to date help to explain why Hollywood abandoned Protestant-affiliated pre-Code censorship in favor of a new Legion alliance, evidence from Robeson County newspapers and from the journals of the Rev. S. L. Morgan suggests that a different narrative arc is needed to account for this larger shift in Southern censorship advocacy. During the 1920s, the need of Southern religious conservatives to address specific social and political challenges soon pushed their previous

cinematic concerns to the side, in part because significant uncertainty existed as to whether or not moviegoing was an inherently sinful act. At the same time, thorny congregational and theological disputes required local ministers to pick their social and leisure battles carefully, lest a reputation for overzealousness or inflexibility alienated their support base among parish elders, deacons, and well-to-do congregants. Finally, social interventions like SB #407 ran counter to evangelical and fundamentalist preferences for avoiding the imposition of governmental regulations designed to control personal behaviors. Taking all of these factors into account, what remains perhaps most surprising about the historical relationship between cinema-censorship initiatives and Southern religious conservatives is neither the fact that the latter rallied around measures like SB #407 in 1921, nor that their expressions of public interest in censorship waned so rapidly in the wake of SB #407's defeat. Instead, what remains surprising is that so many of them supported censorship legislation in the first place.

In beginning an in-depth examination of their motives regarding cinema censorship, it is important to note that Southern Protestant leaders rarely acted in lockstep with what Richard Maltby has characterized as the more liberal Protestant leaders in the North and Midwest who aligned themselves with numerous social reforms including several unsuccessful calls for national motion-picture regulation during the 1920s.¹⁷² Instead, clerically supported initiatives in the South were heavily influenced by the single largest Protestant organization in the nation, the Southern Baptist Convention, a confederation whose members tended to advocate a conservative, fundamentalist, and often markedly evangelical form of American Protestantism. Did denominational differences influence which religious leaders would or would not be likely to support cinema censorship? Yes, certainly. But in the South, the key denominational rivalry that helps to explain why

ministerial advocacy of cinema censorship largely disappeared in Robeson (and elsewhere) after the failure of SB #407 and similar bills did pit Catholics versus Protestants. Rather, it involved profound interdenominational differences between the reform-minded Northern Protestants who tended to ally themselves with the goals and methods of Social Christianity and the more conservative evangelical Southern Protestants who did not.

As they vigorously defended the separation of church and state, fundamentalist Protestants distrusted legislated political solutions to moral problems, even those solution aggressively pursued by Protestant reformers acting under the auspices of Social Christianity. Evangelicals in particular often considered the pursuit of social reforms as a set of activities that distracted an individual from his or her most important tasks, which involved the establishment and maintenance of a personal relationship with God as well as the active dissemination of God's Word—some of the same reasons which informed their objections to, for example, excessive moviegoing. However well-intentioned reform movements might be, they could put souls at risk by redirecting a congregant's energies away from the specific priorities that were believed more directly to lead to one's eternal salvation. Religious historian John Lee Eighmy has indicated that while Southern Baptists might occasionally engage in a popular or broad-based response to a given social problem instead of focusing on "the salvation of souls and the aggrandizement of church institutions," they remained extremely "selective about their new concerns and commitments, emphasizing such causes as prohibition and the separation of church and state."¹⁷³ Therefore, while the political agenda of Southern Baptists occasionally considered "the legislation, or control, of personal morality extended into the public arena," concerted social action typically only occurred on those issues for which Baptists leaders could readily reach a consensus, as with "Sabbath conduct,

temperance, legalized gambling, and obscenity,” even though the latter remained definitionally problematic in Lumberton in 1914, 1917, and 1919 and in Raleigh in 1921.¹⁷⁴ While Baptists determined that Prohibition was worthy of their organizational support in order to limit the corrosive influence of alcohol on innocent family members, for example, even as large numbers of Baptists considered dancing and motion-picture attendance as entirely censurable offenses, many Baptist leaders remained wary of devoting political capital to institute a legislative ban against morally uncertain leisure practices. Furthermore, Eighmy maintains that Southern Baptists hesitated to sanction state-imposed controls on personal vices because these externally imposed controls interfered with the free exercise of an individual’s conscience, will, and congregational duty to live a demonstrably Christian life.¹⁷⁵

In particular, the requirement to protect the operation of free will from unnecessary constraints deterred fundamentalists from the collective pursuit of secular remedies for what many perceived to be strictly personal vices. Religious historian Rufus Spain has suggested that even as Baptists and other evangelicals strongly encouraged their neighbors, friends, and family to conform to strict codes of personal conduct, these codes were intended to be adopted individually and monitored internally within the community of the faithful. They were neither intended to be imposed by governmental fiat nor policed by law-enforcement officials.¹⁷⁶ Devout evangelicals had a firm understanding of what their earthly mission involved. The pursuit of Social Christianity or other social reforms was optional, but the saving of souls by spreading the Good News to the uninitiated was not.¹⁷⁷ In addition, Baptists per Spain hesitated to venture into regulatory waters because “in matters of government and polity they were strict congregationalists and rigid adherents to the principle

of separation of church and state.”¹⁷⁸ Naturally, this separation did not prevent Baptists from severely reacting to those legislative or judicial decisions which they perceived as infringements upon their core religious beliefs, as when they aggressively protested during the 1920s against what they perceived as an encroachment on their exclusive right to administer matters of religious education once public school resources were allocated to teach evolutionism. Therefore, since Baptists tended to respect the rule of law and generally acquiesced in the face of the decisions rendered by state and federal political processes, they may have considered a revisiting of SB #407 in 1923 as inappropriate.¹⁷⁹ In other words, SB #407’s defeat represented an expression of the will of the people, at least as that will had been interpreted by the General Assembly, among a community that stoutly defended a line dividing ecclesiastical concerns from matters adjudicated by the state.¹⁸⁰

Any potential appetite among Southern fundamentalists for collectively revisiting SB #407 would also have been blunted by a lack of consensus concerning the precise level of moral hazard involved in moviegoing. Southern censorship advocates could cite few if any examples locally of many of the most compelling cinematic dangers cited by urban reformers. For example, tragedies tied to a young person’s excessively admiration or emulation of morally suspect screen behaviors were extremely rare, and the difficulty of engaging in anonymous moviegoing in rural communities diminished the immediacy and the threat of the horrifying white-slavery and child-kidnapping narratives leveraged by metropolitan reformers. More significant, however, was the fact that during the 1920s the relative importance of cinema censorship in the South diminished as a set of political, social and doctrinal challenges began to assail religious conservatism. On an organizational level, troublesome institutional quandaries began to multiply, including the ongoing financing of

rising church administration and operations costs; interdenominational debates over the propriety of women deacons; intersectional rivalries between Protestant confederations; socio-political disharmony linked to theological debates concerning the relationship between Christian doctrine and the pursuit of social justice, including the philosophical contradictions inherent in the deployment of Jim Crow by the members of a religious community founded upon a shared belief in the value of every human soul; and incompatibilities between religious and scientific doctrine largely resulting from the debate over creationism. Indeed, this final issue placed members of North Carolina's Baptist community directly into conflict with other Southern Protestant groups when the Southern Baptist Convention censured William Louis Poteat, the influential and well-respected President of Wake Forest College, for reiterating his academic commitment to evolutionism.¹⁸¹

While mainline Protestants outside the South actively pursued Social Christianity reforms, Southern Protestants took a more conservative approach towards challenging the forces that had helped to motivate those Social Christian reforms. According to Rufus Spain, a common conservative Southerner's response to modernity's encroachments was to deny "that the forces of society presented any threat to their faith;" consequently, many Southern Protestants simply "reaffirmed their orthodoxy and clung to the form and substance of the old-time religion."¹⁸² Moreover, when pressed to act publicly, Southern Protestants preferred to implement local or regional solutions considered appropriate to their relatively homogeneous, rural, and agri-centric environment. Since several of the problems that had incited Social Christian reforms, including industrialization, foreign immigration, and the rapid development of large urban centers, tended not to impact the South as thoroughly as the North, many Southern Baptists saw little reason to engage in Social Christianity movements.

Instead, they believed that “the old-time gospel was still adequate for the rural South.”¹⁸³ Southern Baptists along with many other Southern Protestants remained suspicious of most ideas and movements—even Social Christianity—that had originated in or were particularly popular in the North,¹⁸⁴ and their determination to continue to chart a more regional course led them to eschew broad social reforms in favor of grounding change locally, preferably through the adoption of a rigorous personal asceticism rooted in Biblical interpretations of moral behavior.

Interdenominational rivalries also blunted interest in censorship reform, particularly among Southern Baptists. As the Hays Office reached out to religious organization in its attempts to forestall state and federal censorship, it had often targeted middle-of-the road, reform-conscious Protestant sects common in major metropolitan areas rather than targeting the more evangelically oriented groups in the rural South.¹⁸⁵ Only relatively weak ties existed between the Southern Baptist Convention and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, the largest of Hays’ Protestant allies. Moreover, no significant evangelical church conference appears to have interacted regularly with Hays’s Committee on Public Relations. In fact, when the SBC refused in 1951 to join in an alliance with the FCC’s successor, the National Council of Churches, it was merely extending a precedent set in 1915, when according to Baptist historian Albert Henry Newman the SBC elected to remain “aloof” from the FCC because “a large proportion of [the SBC’s] constituents are unalterably opposed to the principles of fellowship on which it [the FCC] was founded.”¹⁸⁶ Evangelicals also ignored in the early-1930s calls from other Protestant leaders willing to join Catholic and Jewish organizations in pursuing more aggressive film-decency campaigns.¹⁸⁷

As the decade progressed, however, many American Protestants were feeling marginalized by recent developments in cinema regulation. As film censor Jack Vizzard later recalled, though mainline Protestant groups eagerly participated in the MPPDA- and Production Code-era cinema oversight groups whose principals, including Will Hays, Jason Joy, Francis Harmon and Geoff Shurlock, maintained a sterling reputations as devoted and practicing Protestants, by 1936 many Protestant groups had begun disengaging themselves from the cinema censorship cause.¹⁸⁸ That year, Pope Pius XI issued a papal encyclical entitled *Vigilanti Cura* in which the Pope, who was willing to “grant that much in [motion pictures] teaches a good moral lesson,” sadly regretted that “more and more they are tending to the opposite result.”¹⁸⁹ Therefore, despite “the immense amount of good that the motion picture can effect,” Pius XI argued that “the evil spirit, so active in this world, wishes to pervert this instrument for some impious purpose,” and therefore the time had come “for public opinion to support wholeheartedly and effectively every legitimate effort to purify the films and keep them clean; to improve them and increase their usefulness.”¹⁹⁰ According to Vizzard, since *Vigilanti Cura* provided an *ex post facto* justification for the three-year old Legion of Decency’s championing of cinema censorship, upon its issuance “in a nonce, Protestant interest melted away.”¹⁹¹ While he remained the head of the MPPDA until 1945, in 1934 Hays appointed an Irish Catholic aide named Joseph Ignatius Breen to head the organization’s Production Code Administration. Breen served as the chief enforcer of the Production Code, a position which positioned Breen as perhaps the most powerful film censor in the nation’s history for the next twenty years.

Beyond the increasing involvement of Catholics in motion-picture censorship, another factor diminishing the interest of Southern religious leaders pursuing censorship

solutions was the increasingly difficult financial burden faced by ministers like the Rev. S. L. Morgan. Significantly, Morgan's journal entry announcing the failure of SB #407 linked that disappointing moral defeat with ongoing economic challenges.¹⁹² Regretfully noting that "today we learn of defeat of [the] bill in legislature to establish censorship of motion pictures—passed by Senate" but not the House, Morgan noted that this legislative failure reflected other pressing denominational reverses: "Isabelle is depressed over it, with so many other evidences that the tide is strong against our cause." Adjacent diary entries suggest that the "cause" in question was the ambitious, five-year national campaign undertaken by U. S. Baptists to fund a tremendous increase in religious-education programs, overseas missionary efforts, and local faith-based initiatives. Launched in 1919 during a period of immediate post-war prosperity and enthusiasm, the Seventy-Five Million Campaign by the early 1920s had foundered so badly that church leaders like Morgan had grown both embarrassed and alarmed that the prospect of so public a failure of institutional resolve might call into serious question the dedication of American Baptists to their faith. Besides being pressured to maintain steady contributions to the Seventy-Five Million Campaign, many church leaders were already overburdened with covering the expenses of an ill-timed church-building initiative. After having been forced to defer all significant construction efforts during the war due to a general shortage of fuel and building supplies, congregational leaders often found themselves being forced to choose between either providing funds to badly needed local church maintenance or construction projects or to the Seventy-Five Million Campaign. Despite the best efforts of passionate and dedicated leaders like Morgan, most congregations were unable to meet their campaign contribution targets, and in the end the

Seventy-Five Million Campaign only netted approximately two-thirds of its original fundraising goal.¹⁹³

Even ministers whose churches were financially secure, however, sensed that due to the cinema's rare ability to inject a sense of novelty into the monotonous rhythms of small-town life, their advocacy of cinema censorship could locally prove to be both impractical and unpopular. In rural communities, in fact, the very same demographic groups universally cited as the greatest potential beneficiaries of cinema censorship (i.e., children and young adults) were virtually starved for novelty and for environments in which they could escape the watchful eyes of their parents and teachers. Most organized small-town leisure events were often sponsored by or held directly within wholly familiar domestic, school, and church environments. Reviews of local newspapers indicate that by the time of SB #407's eventual defeat, Lumberton youngsters lacked access to a single local library, museum, or public park. Meetings of scout troops, Bible study groups, and 4H clubs met in private homes, local schools, and church facilities, while adolescent social organizations like the Baptist Young People's Union failed to provide alternative recreational facilities in a county where young adults had no access to the commercial entertainment venues, such as amusement parks, roller rinks, dance halls, pool halls, and saloons available in metropolitan areas. Outside of motion-picture exhibitions, annual fairs and carnivals represented Robeson's most significant non-domestic entertainment opportunities, but they tended to be visited by entire families or were branded off limits by parents who distrusted them. Though young people devoted many leisure hours outside of the home engaging in after-school clubs, academic competitions, sports teams, and "Little" theater companies, these activities tended to be chaperoned events. Naturally, weekend leisure hours tended to be reserved for spiritual and

family obligations. In short, picture shows were a rare source of novelty in small towns. Yet since pulpit-thumpers left administration of motion-picture censorship to elected public officials,¹⁹⁴ the latter often refused to pursue or enforce cinema censorship aggressively for fear of constraining the most regularly available, non-domestic, and commercial-leisure novelty source in communities that had often waited years—and in many cases decades—for a picture show to arrive. Since clerics recognized the risks of offending popular opinion while potentially subjecting themselves to political rebuffs by attacking local cinemas, many eventually decided that their political and moral capital could be better spent elsewhere.

In time, religious leaders aware of the importance of motion-picture entertainment to their local communities began to look for a way to leverage the cinema's popularity to confront some of their deepest concerns about the state of local churchgoing. Sensing a precipitous decline in the cultural influence of (as well as the levels of attendance within) community churches, the members of the approximately 30 Protestant denominations founded in 1919 the Interchurch World Movement (IWM). Aggressively supported financially by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the IWM undertook a structured evaluation of what the organization feared to be an impending crisis in rural American churchgoing. While the project's leaders eventually attributed the crisis to the proliferation of smaller and less efficient churches, a phenomenon that the IWM's administrators termed "over-churching,"¹⁹⁵ they adopted within the study several socio-analytical and survey-based approaches to determine to what extent churches operated as a central social institution in roughly a thousand rural communities. The study concluded that most rural populations so severely lacked non-domestic leisure alternatives that they were, in effect, socially starved.¹⁹⁶ Taking its cues from the IWM study results, the Institute of Social and Religious Research (ISRR) in

1922 conducted a subsequent church survey that rated the presence of motion-picture equipment within a church or its associated school facilities to be characteristic of “an up-to-date country church.”¹⁹⁷ Though its calls for additional institutional consolidation to address over-churching went unheeded, the ISRR encouraged religious organizations to incorporate the cinema directly into church and/or school facilities in order to reduce the social starvation of younger church members.¹⁹⁸

The IWM and ISRR’s progressive stance towards cinematic entertainment was far from unique. A number of mainline Catholic and Protestant leaders considered adopting a more accommodating position relative to public amusements as an affirmation of the doctrine that “the individual conscience and personal discernment of the believer” remained the most appropriate pair of mechanisms to regulate social behaviors.¹⁹⁹ Additionally, since the earliest days of cinema exhibitions some industry and religious leaders had together debated how best to put motion pictures to spiritual use. Religious and cinema historian Terry Lindvall has demonstrated how these debates represented one of the several important steps on the road to the religious adoption of films, steps which occurred even as dedicated motion-picture exhibitions were first establishing themselves in Robeson County.²⁰⁰ In 1910, for example, Willis Elliot Reynolds of *Moving Picture World* noted that no fewer than fifty Philadelphia churches either owned their own movie-projection equipment or had contracted with exhibitors to provide films to be projected in conjunction with religious services.²⁰¹ A year later, K. S. Hover of *Motography* claimed that church-based cinematic exhibitions were “recognized now as a part of the weapons that are to be turned against unrighteousness, loose living and immorality.” He likewise suggested that “the motion picture has actually become a part of the equipment of the up-to-date church”—a component as “necessary” to religious

services as a church organ or pews.²⁰² Moreover, cinema historian William Romanowski has argued that the use of biblically-oriented films in schools as early as 1912 and in churches or Sunday-schools between 1908 and 1915 helped pave the way for the American middle-class's acceptance of motion pictures.²⁰³

During the first several decades of American moviegoing, in fact, enough clerics were willing to co-opt "wholesome" films for use in congregational services that by 1923 roughly fifteen-thousand church and/or related school organizations relied on motion pictures to pursue their good work.²⁰⁴ But as some religious leaders adopted cinema technologies relatively quickly, many more lamented conservative Christianity's apparently diminished capacity to structure and regulate the social activities of small-town communities, where local residents had been distracted from the true call of spreading the Gospel by an incursion of "cheap" amusements. The Rev. S. L. Morgan, for instance, took years to overcome his initial ambivalence about the cinema before considering whether or not motion pictures might serve a useful congregational function. Indeed, the journal entries explaining why Morgan left Henderson behind for a new posting in Ramseur/Franklinville less than a year after the failure of SB #407 demonstrate the extent to which Morgan was professionally troubled by the apparently inverse relationship which existed between moviegoing and personal piety. To be fair, Morgan's departure from Henderson had been prompted in part by the disenchantment of moderate deacons who had grown tired of Morgan's devotional zeal. While searching for his next appointment, Morgan struggled to decide between a few alternatives, one of which involved relocating to the town of Ramseur, a Randolph County venue located ten miles east of Asheboro near the center of the state. Though Ramseur represented an awkward fit for Morgan both personally and professionally, its deacons had

extended him a competitive financial offer. Still, Morgan sensed that the Ramseur congregation was unlikely to demonstrate his preferred levels of volunteerism and devotional commitment. He also worried that the small and insular mill town would provide the nearly fifty-year old Morgan, and more specifically his growing children, with few useful social opportunities. In spite of these reservations, Morgan rather surprisingly chose to accept the Ramseur posting. What remains symbolically important about that choice within the context of this study is Morgan's characterization of Ramseur as a town which, unlike Henderson, was desirable because of its "absence of the atmosphere of the movies and high society."²⁰⁵ In other words, motion-picture availability represented to Morgan a public signifier of superfluous local distractions. In the end, Morgan moved his family out of Henderson to take up his new dual-posting in Ramseur and nearby Franklinville because it appeared that, at least in these communities, "school and church are the central interests of the people."²⁰⁶

Even after the disappointment represented of SB #407's defeat, Morgan refused to surrender to the encroachments of modernity without a protracted fight. In Morgan's view, the stakes were as high as could be imagined, namely the salvation of the souls of his congregants. In his editorials, Morgan indicted Hollywood for its eagerness to produce films that featured all too liberal and frequent displays of human flesh, abandoned women, whore houses, gambling, robberies, personal assaults, suicides, and profane or vulgar language.²⁰⁷ However, Morgan himself had employed emotionally wrenching projected images in order to recruit volunteers for Baptist missionary work through his use of stereopticon displays highlighting scenes of overseas suffering. Furthermore, if Morgan worried publically about the psychological "dulling effect" of frequent theater attendance by children who came to admire "cheap wit" and lost interest in all non-cinematic entertainments, his journals indicate

a greater concern that his congregation's interest in religious education, devotional practice, and church attendance was rapidly dwindling. These prospects could no longer be ignored. Even as Morgan criticized parents for allowing "the moving pictures, the comic papers, and the frothy literature of our day, which the children cannot escape...[to]...subvert the ideals of our generation," and though he insisted that "the thoughtful parent will notice that the boy that goes regularly to the moving picture show loses his interest in his books, the Sunday school lesson, or the sermon," Morgan began to face a difficult choice.²⁰⁸

While many of his fellow Baptist leaders continued grimly and unsuccessfully to police popular leisure activities "through admonition, reproof, and, as a final resort, church discipline," Morgan sought out a middle ground from which to revitalize devotionalism by leveraging the drawing-card capability of motion-picture exhibitions.²⁰⁹ The key to understanding Morgan's eventual willingness to embrace cinema technology depends upon an analysis of the term Morgan regularly employed to castigate motion pictures: *frivolous*, an epithet used by Morgan to indicate a self-indulgent and/or carefree activity. To evangelicals, frivolity was hardly a laughing matter, for if engaging in frivolous activities did not necessarily involve sinfulness, frivolity could readily degenerate into immorality and depravity when its pursuit became obsessive. In his journals, Morgan noted his admiration for other preachers who took a strong stance against frivolity, and he reserved his most unbridled criticisms for those instances in which frivolity interfered with religious observance. In an entry recorded a week after he himself had hosted a stereopticon lecture securing volunteers for overseas missionary work, Morgan lauded evangelist Raymond Browning, a recent visitor who "believes in real sanctification and holds up high ideals, and is unsparing in denouncing and ridiculing all sin and frivolity—dancing, cards, movies,

etc.”²¹⁰ In addition, near the end of his relatively short tenure in Ramseur, Morgan attended a revival meeting hosted by the members of his own church that Morgan eventually learned was to feature a multi-segment choral program involving roughly 125 local students. Though Morgan vainly tried to convince the elders of the church to eliminate the choral program, they refused to do so even after Morgan reminded them that several other conservative ministers would be in attendance. Deeply disappointed, Morgan sank into a professional despair while viewing a program which, from Morgan’s perspective, wholly distracted the revival audience from meeting’s goal of generating individual conversions.

I had learned it was frivolous & [guest speaker] Clarke & I called [the] deacons to warn them, but they felt helpless & would not interfere. It brought [a] vast crowd to see a show—light songs, lusty yells, jokes, playing *Dixie* & *Yankee Doodle* on combs—all greeted with applause. [After only a brief sermon] children filed out each with [a] sucker in his mouth, or blowing up a bladder. I felt disgraced & indignant...

Nothing has more served to make me feel helpless—my ideals too high—we are almost without sympathizers and supporters. Conviction became clear I am out of place & cannot stay long. Clarke once lived here & preached forcefully, but the woman [i.e., the choral program’s organizer] and the show held the center of the stage.²¹¹

For Morgan, a spectacle involving balloons, lollipops, and a round or two of *Yankee Doodle* on a comb might represent perfectly harmless entertainment, at least within the context of the State Fair or the circus—events that he had treated his own family to. But as an evangelical minister, he was furious that (in his terms) the “show” and “frivolity” had been permitted to divert attention from the goals of religious observance, especially in events sponsored by his own church.²¹²

A well-known evangelical contemporary of Morgan’s, the Rev. Reuben Archer Torrey, believed that “frivolous amusements cluttered the soul and robbed it of its pleasure of god and power in prayer,” and in his attacks on his congregants’ “attendance at theaters”

Torrey insisted that moviegoing “crowded out devotion to God” by “substituting faithfulness with self-indulgence.”²¹³ Fundamentalists like Morgan and Torrey had inherited their spiritual disdain for frivolous or worldly amusements from an early American Puritanism whose “strict followers...could no more tolerate frivolity than heresy.”²¹⁴ During his advocacy of SB #407, in fact, Morgan had commented on the apparent interracial unity that existed between blacks and whites concerning cinematic immoralities. Claiming that “Negroes, both intellectuals and urban masses, shared an indifference to the cinema,” Morgan noted that because of “their deep puritan fundamentalist roots, black churches eschewed film as needless frivolity.”²¹⁵

At other points, however, Morgan’s journals indicate that while often frivolous, commercial amusements were not necessarily a sin; indeed, how could they be, as Morgan had occasionally attended “high-class” films himself and had recommended *The Birth of a Nation* and *Ben Hur* to friends and family alike? For Morgan, it was the over-indulgence of motion pictures—and more critically, their indiscriminate expansion into inappropriate venues or events—that remained severely problematical. Therefore, while he would likely have agreed with the celebrated economist Simon Patten, who claimed in 1909 that “all institutions of this world have a tendency to lead us away from God and His service,” Morgan would have disagreed with Patten’s conclusion that this “fact *alone* should be reason enough for every Christian parent not to allow his or her children to visit these places” of public amusement.²¹⁶ Once states like North Carolina defeated a host of cinema-censorship proposals in 1921, even pro-censorship clerics began to recognize that the explosive growth of motion pictures combined with an apparent lack of legislative will to regulate them meant that films were here to stay in spite of the urgency of the rhetoric directed at them. In fact, by

the mid-1920s the motion-picture industry ranked as one of the country's five largest business enterprises, one that boasted of roughly twenty million customers per day.²¹⁷ By 1930, the country's moviegoing population appears to have tripled, such that on average nearly half of the nation's population attended at least one cinema exhibition a week.²¹⁸ To the ongoing frustration of Morgan and his peers, of course, this ratio far exceeded that of weekly church-going.²¹⁹

Morgan eventually concluded that drastic measures were needed to bolster churchgoing. However, Morgan appeared not to perceive an inherent contradiction between his serial denunciations of worldly amusements (along with his lobbying of governmental officials to establish a state censor board) and the latest set of plans he had drawn up for incorporating cinema exhibitions within church and church-related spaces. Morgan likely rationalized that if local, state, and national officials were unwilling to monitor and control an industry whose claims of "self-regulation" had resulted in no appreciable reduction in cinematic immoralities, then one improvement potentially involved having at least some film exhibitions administered by religious personnel or their designates. To Morgan, moving cinema exhibitions directly into schools and, if necessary, into its churches seemed a viable alternative to a moviegoing lacking moral oversight. As a result, roughly ten months after the defeat of SB #407 Morgan set out a new proposal in a speech entitled "The Partnership of Parents and Teachers," which indicated Morgan's intention to minimize cinematic immorality and to restore devotional participation by repositioning schools, churches, and Sunday schools as "the social center of the community."²²⁰ Since schools for Morgan represented the most appropriate venues in which "to put on popular extension lectures, lyceum courses, [and] good moving pictures, etc.," he proposed "indirectly" co-opting

cinematic entertainment “to turn the eyes of the community to the school and the work of education;” however, he also indicated that he was open to using films strategically within devotional services.²²¹ Morgan admitted to hoping that once previously unsupervised exhibitions were replaced by a sufficient quantity of exhibitions in controlled and overtly educational settings, then the allure of commercial exhibitions would radically diminish for students. In other words, he naively predicted that students would abandon picture shows altogether once their offerings were no longer considered a clear alternative to school or church activities—and he confidently assured his audience that “in such an atmosphere our children will catch fire, and will forget moving pictures and other frivolities in large measure, and will become earnest students” again.²²²

Given that Since Morgan’s journals mention neither the speech nor the public’s reaction to it, Morgan may never have presented it to the local PTA. Still, in precisely the same way that excessive moviegoing complaints represented a social phenomenon most readily observable at the *local* level, Morgan’s proposal was more philosophically aligned with the highly decentralized and local orientation of Southern Baptist solutions to perceived social problems, as opposed to the broader national proposals advocated by Social Christian reformers. These differing methodological approaches mirrored some of the considerable differences that informed multiple sectarian responses to modernity within American Protestantism. For evangelical historian James Davison Hunter, “the chief source of Protestantism’s century-long identity crisis” involved the considerable difficulties encountered when attempting to reconcile conservative Christian dogma with the social, technological, and philosophical transformations that had enabled the modernization of an American culture that had become the target of progressive reform initiatives.²²³ Besieged

by a host of internal and external pressures challenging many of its traditional belief systems, American Protestantism underwent a broad schism resulting in both a liberal/modernist wing that attempted actively to engage with “the new and emerging realities of twentieth-century experience,” and a more conservative/fundamentalist wing that “sought to resist the cultural pressures of the emerging secular order...through a deliberate effort to reassert and defend the theological boundaries of the historic faith.”²²⁴ However, it is an oversimplification to insist or assume that all Protestant leaders and the members of their congregations fell exclusively into either a modernist or anti-modernist camp. It seems equally likely that figures like the Rev. S. L. Morgan, even though he clearly inclined towards the conservative/fundamentalist pole, at times seemed willing to straddle the Protestant divide as they responded to modern change-agents like cinema technology and other commercial amusements. Moreover, even if it were the case (as Romanowski argues) that most clerics understood that “participation in the world of urban entertainment was a visible display of integration into modern American life,”²²⁵ the responses of conservative Christians to motion pictures and moviegoing were neither unilateral nor entirely predictable.

In fact, controversies concerning cinematic morality continued well after the onset of Hollywood’s Golden Age, and the propriety of engaging in moviegoing remained for decades a significant source of disagreement in many religious communities. In 1951, for example, a survey of evangelical college students reported that nearly fifty percent of survey respondents believed that attending a “Hollywood-style” film represented—without exception—an immoral act.²²⁶ A former President of the National Association of Evangelicals, Stephen Paine, was reported six years later as having insisted “categorically that ‘we [i.e., evangelicals] don’t attend movies.’” Paine’s position was echoed in 1970 by

Carl McClain, whose Morals and the Movies maintained that “evangelicals do not patronize the movies.”²²⁷ Given several late twentieth-century attempts by the Christian Film and Television Commission, the Dove Foundation, and the American Family Association to manage and/or to improve the moral content of commercial films, even as Christian fundamentalists have extensively embraced moving-image technologies including both television and film as part of a neo-evangelical movement seeking to “combine the biblical orthodoxy of fundamentalism and the cultural calling of evangelicalism [...while serving...] as moral guardians of American culture,”²²⁸ it is clear that many conservative Christian leaders continue to inherit the legacy of personal asceticism that has informed cinema censorship efforts since the early days of motion pictures.²²⁹

Of course, just as early twentieth-century fundamentalists like Bob Jones Sr., the founder of Bob Jones College (now University), bitterly complained that the “picture shows” that he feared might be extended to, and thereby ruin, the Sabbath continued to represent just one of the several “urban evils” that ought to be shunned by all right-thinking Christians,²³⁰ a number of moderate *as well as* conservative Christian leaders—including Jones himself—considered deploying various cinema strategies to reestablish the centrality of religious belief and religious institutions in the daily lives of their congregants.²³¹ In his specific attempt to yoke together old-time religious devotion and modern leisure technology, the Rev. S. L. Morgan and others like him at least tentatively explored the possibility of bridging the liberal/conservative Protestant divide by redeploying a quintessentially modern amusement within spaces aligned with moral and religious instruction. Within that process, Morgan’s vacillation between favoring and censoring the cinema validates Hunter’s assertion that during the confrontation between modernity and old-time religion “a sort of bargaining takes

place between the two, which can result in possibilities such as mutual accommodation, mutual permutation, or even symbiotic growth.”²³² In borrowing a useful phrase from Barbara Klinger’s study of non-theatrical cinema, Morgan hoped that church and school-based exhibitions might “constitute a break with the quality and mesmerizing power of cinema in the motion picture theater,”²³³ one that optimally would redirect a congregant’s gaze from earthbound celluloid images towards a more tantalizing vision: the pursuit of eternal salvation.

Despite the best intentions of potential risk-takers like Morgan, a host of religious conservatives continued to abjure picture-show attendance for years as one step in their program of maintaining the “inviolability of their behavioral norms.”²³⁴ Since moviegoing continued to remain a morally problematic enterprise for many of Robeson County’s religious conservatives, it can be difficult in hindsight to imagine how any of the county’s exhibitors or their operations managed to survive at all. It is quite likely, in fact, that religious misgivings depressed local audience sizes for years, and thereby contributed to the decades-long inability of most Robeson communities to support more than a single theater. Nevertheless, since that the theaters which did survive could not have done so without significant and, given local religious demographics, almost exclusively Protestant patronage, then local religious accommodations must not only have been possible but commonplace. As an example, while Jesse Oxendine could not recall a single instance in which his own mother deigned to attend the local picture show, i.e., the county’s only Indian-managed movie theater (and a theater managed by her very own husband) due to the force of her religious beliefs, Jesse could also fondly recall the numerous instances in which an influential local

Baptist minister, the Rev. L. W. Jacobs, might surreptitiously pop into the Pembroke Theatre to catch up on his favorite Western film heroes.²³⁵

Ultimately, neither evangelicals nor fundamentalists prevented the spread of moviegoing in Robeson County. Less than two decades after the defeat of SB #407, each of Robeson's seven largest communities supported at least one commercial theater. What this chapter's case studies of the interactions between religious leaders, theater operators, and local moviegoers have demonstrated with respect to motion-picture censorship during that period dovetails with the narrative arc that Michael Lienesch and others have documented when describing American Protestantism's "Great Reversal."²³⁶ As a religio-political realignment lasting from roughly 1900 to 1930, the Great Reversal involved the steady retreat of evangelical Christians from progressive social reforms in favor of defending their fundamental doctrines, beliefs, and traditions from what they perceived as more obvious and pressing threats to these doctrines, beliefs, and traditions. The most notable of these threats involved the wider dissemination of scientifically based theories of human evolution within American schools. In addition, during the latter 1920s many evangelicals who once spearheaded censorship efforts in Robeson, Raleigh, and elsewhere in North Carolina rechanneled their political capital towards defeating the Presidential bid of former New York Governor Alfred E. Smith, whose Catholic background, pro-immigrant reputation, and anti-prohibition sympathies alienated many voters in the rural South. Indeed, Smith's reputation became so regionally unpalatable that even running as a Democrat in a South that had remained solidly united against the Republican Party since the days of Reconstruction, Smith lost nearly half of the states that once constituted the Confederacy to Herbert Hoover.²³⁷ During the same decade in which historian Leo Ribuffo claims "the full-fledged Christian

right” first came into its own in America, cinema censorship initiatives simply gave way to the more important contests located in Dayton in 1925 and at the polls in 1928.²³⁸ In responding as they did to the failure of SB #407 and similar measures, the South’s Christian Right pursued during the Great Reversal “a fairly predictable pattern of activism followed by [a period of] relative quietude” which continued throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s.²³⁹ As the years passed and additional Main Street theaters managed to feature cinematic novelties, America’s religious leaders faced the necessity of deciding which social causes to pursue aggressively, and which to leave alone. As the Jazz Age progressed, conservative Southern Protestants elected to abandon their formerly public campaigns to regulate or control what many considered to be only a relatively frivolous leisure activity, and instead they devoted themselves to defeating the significantly more discomfiting spectres of Evolutionism and Presidential Papistry.

ENDNOTES

¹ Francis G. Couvares, "Introduction: Hollywood, Censorship, and American Culture," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 521.

² From Allen, "Decentering Historical Audience Studies: A Modest Proposal," 27.

³ For a fuller account of the Lumberton debate over *Where Are My Children?*, see local news items from the *Robesonian* (11-Jan-1917, including the advertisement describing the film's theme on p. 10); "At the Lyric," *Ibid.* (15-Jan-1917, p. 1); and "'Board of Censors' Tied on *Where are My Children* and Town Fathers Pass It," *Ibid.* (18-Jan-1917, p. 4). *Where Are My Children?* was considered a scandalous film in many communities. Loosely based on events surrounding early birth-control activist Margaret Higgins Sanger, the 1916 release was banned by the Pennsylvania censor board even though the National Board of Review had approved it for adult-only exhibitions. Few of the film's critics seemed capable of overcoming their presumption of the film's immorality to notice either its overt sentimentalism or its *anti*-abortion message.

⁴ Originally published in *Ibid.* (15-Jan-1917, p. 8).

⁵ See "Alleged Immoral Pictures Denounced From Pulpit" in *Ibid.* (22-Jan-1917, p. 5), as well as an untitled news item published in *Ibid.* (15-Mar-1917, p. 1).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See Morgan, S. L. *Papers*. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Southern Manuscript Collection: Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Morgan's opinions and actions relative to motion pictures and to moviegoing have been reconstructed from his personal papers, especially his diaries and a set of non-annotated writings published in local newspapers over the course of his ministry. Most of the items cited in this chapter come from his Volumes 1-4 of his diary. Finally, note that (as discussed in Chapter II) it is possible that this unnamed Henderson exhibitor was none other than John Poythress, an early though unsuccessful Lumberton exhibitor.

⁸ This concession rarely occurred in Morgan's "professional" writings, though it occasionally appeared in his diaries.

⁹ Unfortunately, all of the diary entries recorded in this chapter, as well most of his published articles that had been pasted into notebooks without accompanying publication data, are impossible to date with any precision. Relatively few of the diary entries, for instance, have dates provided for them.

¹⁰ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, *Papers*, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹¹ *Ibid.* In the aftermath of extensive public outrage over the film, Morgan argued that because "depraved taste everywhere clamors for such pictures and the moving picture men cater more or less to the depraved taste," then local moral guardians were fully justified in pursuing motion-picture censorship to ensure "that no moving picture [operation] does business long without presenting pictures which are fit for the eye." At the time the United Society for Christian Endeavor, a national Christian organization boasting of roughly four million members, helped to lead the charge to suppress exhibitions of the Johnson-Jeffries fight film. See Barack Y. Orbach, "The Johnson-Jeffries Fight 100 Years Thence: The Johnson-Jeffries Fight and Censorship of Black Supremacy," *Journal of Law and Liberty* 5 (2010).

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Namely Justice Henry A. McKinnon, quoted from personal correspondence with the author in the fall of 2001. See Judge Henry A McKinnon, “Personal Interviews and Correspondence,” (October through November 2001).

¹⁴ Durham was hardly Robeson’s only conservative figurehead; however, local pulpits tended to be manned by fundamentalist clerics. In fact, during CBS news correspondent and Lumberton native Drew Levinson’s screening of the film *Lasting Impressions*, a documentary on the history of the Jewish community in Robeson County, Levinson remarked that “if North Carolina is the Bible Belt, then Robeson County must be the belt buckle.” Levinson’s lecture accompanied a 12-Sep-2006 exhibition of *Lasting Impressions* held at the Sonia Haynes Stone Center on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁵ The table was never installed, despite the hope of the hotel management’s that this new feature would help attract additional overnight business travelers.

¹⁶ “This important principle underlies every discourse concerning the movie theaters and the film industry.” See Putnam, *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater*, 6.

¹⁷ The film industry’s alliances with different Christian religious institutions are discussed at length in Francis Couvares, “Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code” and Richard Maltby, “*The King of Kings* and the Czar of All the Rushes.”

¹⁸ Some of the articles expressing disappointment that Lumberton still lacked a large theater which appeared in the *Robesonian* prior to the arrival of the Carolina Theatre included “Theatre for Lumberton” (4-Apr-1927, p. 4), which complained that the “people of Lumberton and near-by rural communities and towns in Robeson and adjoining counties go to other towns to see plays and big film productions that cannot be accommodated in Lumberton.” They also included “Theatre Plan Meets with Approval and Obstacle” (Ibid., 7-Apr-1927, p.4), which complained of the inadequacy of local theatres to accommodate large-scale road shows; “Fast-Growing Town” (Ibid., 2-Jun-1927, p. 4), which argued that “no other...enterprise is so much needed in Lumberton” as a large theater; and “Lumberton’s New Theatre” (Ibid., 18-Jun-1927, p. 4), which noted that while “Lumberton has keenly felt the need” for a large theater for several years, the town “had gone about as far as it could go without an adequate amusement house” when compared to “Bennettsville, Fayetteville and other places [that] have for several years drawn considerable patronage from Robeson county and from other adjoining counties much more conveniently located with reference to Lumberton.”

¹⁹ For example, when the “Robeson County Development Edition” of Ibid. (29-Jan-1923, p.1) proceeded to list the “manifold advantages” of Lumberton, the editor’s regretfully noted that the town did not yet include a “large road show theater.”

²⁰ Though the Catholic Wishart continued to work in motion-picture exhibition through the 1930s, he never appears to have expressed any opinion in print about the role played by the Legion of Decency.

²¹ See a local “Red Springs News” item originally published in the *Robesonian* whose opening begins “Too much movies and too little work is probably the main cause of a bold robbery committed last Tuesday night by two young white boys living near town...” (9-Oct-1919, p. 1).

²² Paul S. Moore, *Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun*, The SUNY Series, Horizons of Cinema (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 79.

²³ See F. Andrew Hanssen, “Revenue-Sharing in Movie Exhibition and the Arrival of Sound,” (2002), <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb5814/is_3_40/ai_n28929617/pg_5/?tag=mantle_skin;content>.

²⁴ Richard Maltby, “The Production Code and the Hays Office,” *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, ed. Tino Balio, vol. 5, History of the American Cinema (New York: Scribner, 1993), 42.

²⁵ “Local and Personal Department,” Robesonian (19-Feb-1901, p. 3).

²⁶ “Moving Picture Shows Again—The Truman Quartette,” Ibid. (28-Jul-1910, p. 1).

²⁷ “Board of Censorship Appointed,” Ibid. (8-Oct-1914, p.5).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid. (3-Jun-1912, p. 5).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Quoted in “Once Proud in its Heyday, City’s Opera House Dies,” Ibid. (11-Oct-1966, p. 6). While locals had expressed their objections to naughty or near-naughty posters since Wishart’s earliest days at the Pastime, most of these objectionable posters were not motion-pictures advertisements, but rather advertisements for stage plays held at the Opera House. For instance, see “At the Opera House—A Bum Play and a Good One” from Ibid. (25-Jan-1912, p. 5).

³³ “An Appeal to Parents,” Ibid. (30-Mar-1914, p. 1).

³⁴ “Movies and Tobacco,” Ibid. (20-Apr-1914, p. 3).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “They must pass upon all shows and see to it that nothing objectionable is presented here. Mayor White says he is determined that trashy shows shall not be put on in Lumberton while he is mayor.” Reported in “Board of Censorship Appointed,” Ibid. (8-Oct-1914, p. 5).

³⁷ See “Magnificent Pictures—’Protea’ Next Monday” from Ibid. (26-Mar-1914, p. 1).

³⁸ In a strange coincidence, Durham’s unanimous election as President of North Carolina’s State Baptist Convention was reported within days of the opening of Wishart’s Pastime Theater in Ibid. (7-Dec-1911, p. 1). However, Durham spent a significant amount of time attending to convention business across the state for the next several years. He appears not to have focused his attention on the Pastime until after Walter Wishart had departed Lumberton and he himself had returned from Winston-Salem.

³⁹ Moore, Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Fun, 34-5.

⁴⁰ A forerunner of the National Council of Churches, the FCC was an early interdenominational alliance of more than thirty Protestant sects representing more than eighteen million U.S. residents. Founded in 1908, the FCC was an early supporter of government-sponsored film censorship and was regularly courted by Will Hays and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. See Francis G. Couvares, “Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code,” American Quarterly 44 (1992). For his part, McConoughey had been commissioned by the FCC to study the possible use of motion pictures, an effort which resulted in his 1916 treatise Motion Pictures in Religious and Educational Work: With Practical Suggestions for their Use.

⁴¹ Moore, Now Playing: Early Moviegoing and the Regulation of Film, 126-7. The FCC was also one of the founding members of the New York-based National Board of Censorship in 1909.

⁴² Eventually, most of Morgan’s professional career transpired in North Carolina towns outside of Robeson, including extended pastorships in Burlington, Henderson, Ramseur/Franklinville, Smithfield and Creedmoor.

⁴³ Morgan's critiques of public amusements included a set of editorials condemning the 1917 Vance County fair for its more unsavory elements. However, Morgan ultimately withheld them from publication due to promises by the fair's organizers to provide a "cleaner" set of midway content in 1918, according to a series of undated diary entries and editorial drafts available in the S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

⁴⁴ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The Wilson administration imposed a significant financial burden on the film industry. Through a combination of flat weekly-operations fees, charges levied per foot of film stock exhibited, and a ten-percent surcharge on tickets costing more than ten cents, the government hoped to raise sixty-million dollars through amusement taxes in 1917, the bulk of which was expected to come from motion-picture exhibitions. See "Final Action on War Tax Bill by Congress," *Robesonian* (4-Oct-1917, p. 8). In 1918, this annual target was raised by two-thirds to one-hundred million dollars, as reported in "War Revenue Bill Passed by House," Ibid. (23-Sep-1918, p. 1). As unpopular as these taxes would have been in Robeson County, Lumberton business leader Angus W. McLean was a member of the War Finance Corporation board from 1918-1922 and served as Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the Treasury in 1920 and 1921.

⁴⁷ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

⁴⁸ Ibid. In the same entry, Morgan recounts also attending "a third great picture on invitation of the manager—"The Kaiser," a film commonly exhibited (including, at roughly the same time, in Lumberton) during military fund-raisers, war-bond rallies, and relief efforts raising funds or supplies for the Red Cross.

⁴⁹ Ibid. The film in question, Rupert Julian's *The Kaiser, The Beast of Berlin* (1918), was a wartime fundraising staple, and within months of Morgan's screening the film was also featured in liberty-bond rallies and Red Cross relief-initiatives in Lumberton theaters. Note that the emphasis in the quotation comes directly from Morgan.

⁵⁰ As discussed in Grieveson, *Policing Cinema*, 208-9.

⁵¹ See "With Soldiers on Border," *Robesonian* (1-May-1916, p. 8).

⁵² "*The Battle Cry of Peace* drew large crowds to the Pastime theatre here Monday and Tuesday. It is seven reels of stirring pictures that grip one and make a profound impression. The danger to the United States may be exaggerated, but there is nothing exaggerated about the need for a sensible degree of preparedness and about the preaching of the doctrine that the best way to insure peace is at all times to be prepared for war." Untitled editorial, Ibid. (4-May-1916, p. 4).

⁵³ See the advertisement from Ibid. (6-Sep-1917, p. 8).

⁵⁴ See the unnamed editorial comment from Ibid. (25-Feb-1918, p. 4).

⁵⁵ "Pershing's Crusaders Coming," Ibid. (2-Sep-1918, p. 5).

⁵⁶ "War Exhibit Train," Ibid. (7-Oct-1918, p. 1).

⁵⁷ For local coverage of the wartime movie taxes, see "Final Action on War Tax Bill By Congress," Ibid. (4-Oct-1917, p. 8); "War Tax Toll on American Pocketbook," (8-Oct-1917, p. 3); a series of "At the Pastime" articles published in Ibid (22-Oct-1917, p. 5; 25-Oct-1917, p. 5; 29-Oct-1917, p. 5; and 28-Jan-1918, p. 5); and "More Taxes on Theaters," Ibid. (23-Sep-1918, p. 1).

⁵⁸ "May Close Amusement Houses—Governor Advises Citizens to Go into Woods and Cut," Ibid. (20-Dec-1917, p. 5).

⁵⁹ “At the Pastime,” Ibid. (14-Nov-1918, p. 5). The armistice ending military conflicts on the Western Front had been signed three days earlier.

⁶⁰ Maud Thomas, Away Down Home: A History of Robeson County, North Carolina (Lumberton, NC: Delmar, distributed by Historic Robeson, Inc., 1982), 241.

⁶¹ Lawrence, The State of Robeson, 143.

⁶² Ibid., p. 142.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 141-2.

⁶⁴ Terry Lindvall, “Religion and Film: Part I (History and Criticism),” Communication Research Trends 23.4 (2004): 11.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pages 1 and 11.

⁶⁶ Rufus B. Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 198.

⁶⁷ “Protest Against Indecent Billborad [sic] Pictures,” Robesonian (17-Feb-1919, p. 1).

⁶⁸ For stories relating to the creation of the 1919 censor board, see “Protest Against Indecent Billboard Pictures, Ibid. (17-Feb-1919, p. 1); “Licensed Indecencies,” Ibid. (24-Feb-1919, p. 1); “Local News and Briefs,” Ibid. (24-Feb-1919, p. 1.); and “Board of Censor Named,” Ibid. (27-Feb-1919, p. 1). For excerpts relating to the *Oh! Sammy!* controversy, see the show’s advertisement in Ibid. (10-Mar-1919, p. 8), plus ““Oh! Sammy!’ Expurgated by Board of Censors,” Ibid. (20-Mar-1919, p. 1) and “Local News and Briefs,” Ibid. (27-Mar-1919, p. 1).

⁶⁹ “Protest Against Indecent Billborad [sic] Pictures,” Ibid. (17-Feb-1919, p. 1).

⁷⁰ Originally published in Ibid. (10-Feb-1919, p. 4)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Licensed Indecencies,” Ibid. (24-Feb-1919, p. 1).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Untitled news item, Ibid. (24-Feb-1919, p. 1).

⁷⁶ “Board of Censor Named,” Ibid. (27-Feb-1919, p. 1).

⁷⁷ *Oh! Sammy!* advertisement, Ibid. (10-Mar-1919, p. 8).

⁷⁸ ““Oh! Sammy!’ Expurgated by Board of Censors,” Ibid. (20-Mar-1919, p. 1).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Untitled editorial in Ibid. (24-Mar-1919, p. 4).

⁸⁴ See the ad for “Salome” in Ibid. (28-Apr-1919, p. 8).

⁸⁵ See “Judas Sold His Christ for Thirty Pieces of Silver,” Ibid. (29-Mar-1920, p. 7 [author’s emphasis added]).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ “The Sin of Pleasure,” Ibid. (26-Sep-1921, p. 7 [author’s emphasis added]).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ In a 1917 local Lumberton revival, Bishop John C. Kilgo—who was elevated in 1894 to the presidency of Trinity College, later Duke University—criticized the current “age of shallow thinking and wickedness” and simultaneously attacked the encroachments of quasi-business methods that attempted to develop a “slogvanized faith” during an era of religious sensibilities over dependent on the “substitution of move-ments [sic] and organization” rather than on “the compelling love of Jesus Christ.” See “Sermons by Bishop Kilgo: God Laughs at this Age,” Ibid. (8-Mar-1917, p. 8). A few years later, Methodist Episcopal Elder J. H. Shore similarly indicted the era in local services by branding it as “an age of shallow conviction as to the facts of sin, salvation and God.” See “Old-Time Revival Sermon Last Night,” Ibid. (30-Mar-1922, p. 1). Note that both Kilgo and Shore specifically identified the popularity of motion-pictures as an indication of the shallowness of the age. Indeed, Shore worried that it was possible to “take a 20-cent picture show and put Shakespeare out of business in any town.” Ibid. In response to Shore’s sermons, the editors of the Robesonian wondered whether or not the large crowds Shore himself attracted might prove to “be an indication that the tide is turning towards the church again after the indifference and mad rush after pleasure that has caused such a falling off in church attendance during the last year or so?” See “Has the Tide Set the Other Way,” Ibid. (3-Apr-1922, p. 4).

⁹⁰ As an example, see “Old-Time Revival Sermon Last Night,” Ibid. (30-Mar-1922, p. 1).

⁹¹ “Has the Tide Set the Other Way?,” Ibid. (3-Apr-1922, p. 4).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Shore may have been referring tangentially to the Western N.C. Methodist Conference’s advocacy eighteen months earlier of offering film exhibitions within religious services. See “Western N.C. Methodist Conference,” Ibid. (28-Oct-1920, p. 8).

⁹⁴ “Twenty-Six Children Joined Church Sunday,” Ibid. (3-Apr-1922, p. 5).

⁹⁵ In fact, theatrical and religious news items were allotted the bulk of the non-advertising space located on page 5 of the Robesonian. Newspapers in Norfolk, Virginia also relegated advertisements for motion pictures and religious services to the same page. See Terry Lindvall, “Sundays in Norfolk: Toward a Protestant Utopia through Film Exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1906-1926,” Going to the Movies: The Social and Cultural Experiences of Hollywood’s Spectators, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 83.

⁹⁶ A topic discussed at length in the first chapter of Robert Moats Miller, American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

⁹⁷ “Church Advertising,” Robesonian (17-Jun-1918, p. 4 [author’s emphasis added]). Note that Pastor Greaves had been a vocal participant in the censor board controversy initiated seventeen months earlier that had responded to advertisements for the film *Where Are My Children?*

⁹⁸ Ibid. [author's italics added].

⁹⁹ See Douglas Carl Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xii.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ See Miller, American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939, 18-27.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰³ See Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-40, 12. In addition, according to Terry Lindvall the religious adoption of modern advertising methods in the mid-1910s had been encouraged by the development of a Commission on Church Advertising and Publicity, which pronounced it a "sin to preach to empty pews when proper advertising will fill the churches." Terry Lindvall, The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 159.

¹⁰⁴ No relation to Bruce Barton, a Lumbee community leader discussed in Chapter VI.

¹⁰⁵ See Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, The Religious History of America, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 237-8. For a portrait of Barton as a kind of "evangelical advertiser," see also Edrene S. Montgomery, "Bruce Barton's "The Man Nobody Knows:" A Popular Advertising Illusion," Journal of Popular Culture 19.3 (1985): 21-34.

¹⁰⁶ Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Per Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940, 18.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Gaustad and Schmidt, The Religious History of America, 279. However, according to statistics cited in Hancock's 1935 sociological study of Robeson, the county's "official" percentage of the total population that represented identifiable active church members stood at 48.3% (pp. 95-6), a significantly higher percentage than that noted by Gaustad and Schmidt. Therefore, opportunities for local growth in Robeson would have been limited—at least relative to the national average.

¹⁰⁹ See Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940, 27.

¹¹⁰ As quoted by Abrams. Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹¹ "Synod Wants Movie Censorship," Robesonian (30-Oct-1920, p. 3).

¹¹² "Western N. C. Methodist Conference," Ibid. (28-Oct-1920, p. 8).

¹¹³ The following account of events in Raleigh relies primarily on news stories of the 1921 General Assembly session that were recorded from January through March in Raleigh's News and Observer, (Raleigh, NC: Ashe, Gatling & Co., et. al.).

¹¹⁴ See Feldman, The National Board of Censorship (Review) of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922, 133.

¹¹⁵ Presumed medical risks included eye strain, dulled sensibilities, general torpor, and respiratory difficulties resulting from exposure to poorly ventilated and/or smoke-filled picture shows. In behavioral terms, excessive moviegoing was linked (somewhat unconvincingly) to cases of juvenile delinquency, petty crime, anti-social behavior, and, in the most extreme case, might expose un-chaperoned young women in darkly lit spaces to the risk of being kidnapped by "white slavery" rings.

¹¹⁶ Maltby, “The Production Code and the Hays Office,” 42.

¹¹⁷ Who knows what might have happened in Raleigh had the Arbuckle scandal broken *prior* to the end of the legislative session that spring, given the extent to which Arbuckle became an overnight pariah and a lightning rod for the moral criticism broadly directed at Hollywood. Indeed, according to Stephen Vaughn, “when a woman died in 1921 after a Labor Day weekend party featuring bootleg liquor in the San Francisco hotel room of Roscoe ‘Fatty’ Arbuckle, the comedian became ‘a symbol of everything objectionable’ about Hollywood” (41). As recorded in Stephen Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” Journal of American History 77.1 (1990).

¹¹⁸ Doherty, Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934, 6. Based on an informal review of the film advertisements that appeared in Raleigh papers during the censorship debate, it appears that Charles Feldman’s contention by the early 1920s “films of sex and sin filled theater seats” (as reported in Doherty 159) was not far from the truth. Doherty’s useful account of the road to the Production Code identifies 1921 as the high-water mark for the nation’s motion-picture censorship battles. Taking their cues for responding to this national scandal from organized baseball, whose owners installed former Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis as commissioner to restore the game’s credibility after the Black Sox scandal in 1919-1920, Hollywood executives nominated former Postmaster General and Republican National Committee Chairman Will H. Hays to head the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), an organization whose principal (albeit non-publicized) mission would be to resist the imposition of additional legislative restraints upon the industry. Hays and his team had their hands full, since by 1922 a total of eight states had implemented official censorship structures: Pennsylvania, Kansas, Ohio, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Virginia and Florida. After having served for many years as a Production Code-era censor, Jack Vizzard estimated that at least ninety additional municipal censor boards were operating prior to the industry-wide adoption of the Production Code in the early 1930s. See Jack Vizzard, See No Evil: Life inside a Hollywood Censor (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 37. In order to roll back the tide of state censorship, Hays executed a series of programs designed to minimize public concerns regarding film content through cinema-production standards unofficially variously referred to as the “Thirteen Points,” the “Formula,” and the “Dont’s and Be Careful’s.” Hays touted the effectiveness of these self-imposed policies to a broad confederation of social, educational, commercial and religious groups courted through the “Open Door” policy of the MPPDA’s Committee on Public Relations. See Frank Walsh, Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 24-30. For an additional yet useful study of the Production Code itself, see Chapter 1 of the University of Michigan doctoral thesis produced by John Alan Sargent, “Self-Regulation: The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930-1961,” Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1963.

¹¹⁹ John F. Kasson, Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century, American Century Series. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 101.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ North Carolina State Legislature. An Act Relating to Motion Pictures. Raleigh: General Assembly, 1921. [Copy courtesy of the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.]

¹²² To add insult to injury, movie exhibitors were required to resubmit films and advertisements that the Board had approved previously for other exhibitors, and the bill’s language suggested that they would be required to pay a duplicate set of certification fees—fees which were expected to fund the censorship office so well that some political observers suspected that the new Board might turn a tidy annual profit for the state.

¹²³ Women may have been more involved in censorship advocacy than men partly because women, as more regular churchgoers, may have been more willing to pursue social changes advocated by the clergy. Unfortunately, the statistics supporting this hypothesis remain rather elusive. While at least four U.S. Census efforts prior to 1950 collected statistical data on reported church affiliations, the data appears not to have been divisible along gender lines. Nevertheless, data collected during retrospective a study that consisted partly of

surveys of U.S. residents responding to inquiries into their weekly childhood churchgoing habits has enabled Laurence Iannaccone to conclude that as far back as 1925, more women attended church on a regular basis than men in the United States. Though his report summary does not contain the raw data produced by the surveys, Iannaccone reports that the data indicates that since at least the mid-1920s “attendance rates have consistently been significantly higher for women, blacks, people living in the South, Catholics, and people married to others of the same religion” (18) than for other citizens. See Laurence R. Iannaccone, Looking Backward: A Cross-National Study of Religious Trends (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University, 2003).

¹²⁴ See “Busiest Day is Senate Prospect,” News and Observer (1-Mar-1921, p. 13).

¹²⁵ Alison M. Parker, “Mothering the Movies: Women Reformers and Popular Culture,” Movie Censorship and American Culture, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1996), 78.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ As North Carolina representatives debated the merits of SB 407, for instance, local newspapers reported on a similar legislative tussle in New Hampshire, whose contested censorship proposal drew its grass-roots support from that state’s Federation of Women’s Clubs, League of Women Voters, Parent-Teachers Association, and WCTU organizations.

¹²⁸ “Women’s Group Calls for Censorship,” News and Observer (1-Jan-1921, p. 1).

¹²⁹ “Men Behind Movement Too,” *Ibid.* (11-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹³⁰ In fact, Morgan actively inserted himself in the debate in part because his ire was up against Stevenson—a not uncommon occurrence according to Morgan’s diaries, which indicate an appetite for crusading locally against those specific individuals (including several theater operators) who the minister regarded as public miscreants.

¹³¹ However, Virginia eventually reversed course and proceeded to institute such a board by 1922—as did New York, despite Griffith’s best efforts to the contrary.

¹³² J. Douglas Smith, “Patrolling the Boundaries of Race: Motion Picture Censorship and Jim Crow in Virginia, 1922-1932,” Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 21.3 (2001): 276-77.

¹³³ “Where Tom Dixon Lost Out,” News and Observer (23-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹³⁴ Per “State to Confine Revenues Wholly to Income Taxes,” *Ibid.* (21-Feb-1921, pp. 1-2). The fact that the editors of the Robesonian objected to the 1921 bill—despite Varner’s involvement—while Raleigh’s central news organ publicly supported it indicates that editorial opposition was never guaranteed to cinema censorship initiatives. As John Sargent reported of a similar campaign to establish a censor board in Massachusetts in 1922, only 92% of that state’s press organizations lined up to oppose motion-picture censorship. In other words, not all newspapers opposed cinema censorship even in the former cradle of American liberty. See Sargent, “Self-Regulation: The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930-1961,” 20-1. Perhaps due to the fact that the Supreme Court’s 1915 ruling in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* specifically exempted motion pictures from the “free speech” protections generally afforded to artists and to the press, some editors who may otherwise have been predisposed to object to any and all censorship initiatives (for fear that challenges to any First Amendment protection might soon pave the way for editorial censorship) could feel more comfortable remaining vocal supporters of cinema censorship.

¹³⁵ While film historian Lary May has characterized Dixon as a former Baptist minister who “quit the clergy for the ‘wider pulpit’ of popular art,” Dixon hotly protested a similar charge during the debates in Raleigh. See Lary May, Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 80.

¹³⁶ See “Author, Preacher and Lawyer Takes Gloves Off in Debate,” News and Observer (24-Feb-1921, pp. 1-2).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* In his attack, Barber compared a set of relatively moderate censorship recommendations rendered by the National Board of Review to the significantly more rigorous judgments of the Pennsylvania state censor board that served as the model for SB #407. In addition, Barber argued that the National Board and its members lacked the stern moral fibre required for effective censorship—with the obvious implication being that the was true of Dixon.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* Note that roughly two decades earlier, similar rhetoric had been employed in the service of a post-Reconstruction white supremacy campaign designed both to purge North Carolina’s state and local governments of African American officeholders and to disenfranchise black voters.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Along these lines, it is interesting to note that the state of North Carolina did not vote in favor of the Nineteenth Amendment until May 1971— more than half a century after the amendment had acquired enough state votes to be ratified as the law of the land. Only Mississippi, which finally ratified the amendment in 1984, took longer than North Carolina to pass the amendment. Both states had originally voted against the amendment in 1920. In fact, each of the last nine states to approve the amendment (all after 1940) lay south of the Mason-Dixon line.

¹⁴¹ James Skinner has also noted that Dixon actively participated in the debates over First Amendment protection for motion pictures, a protection which the Supreme Court specifically refused to extend in its 1915 *Mutual* decision. Instead, the court ruled that motion pictures were “a business pure and simple,” and through inflammatory language that would continue to motivate censorship advocates for several generations, the Court warned that motion pictures, if left unregulated, remained “capable of evil because of their attractiveness and their manner of exhibition.” See James M. Skinner, The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993), 4. In addition, for a brief but useful summary of the *Mutual* decision, see Koszarski, An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928, 198-201.

¹⁴² That spring, neither Dixon nor Griffith managed to prevent the passage of censorship bills in either the North Carolina or New York Senates; in addition, the New York bill was passed by both houses of the state legislature and was subsequently signed into law. See Feldman, The National Board of Censorship (Review) of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922, 187-91.

¹⁴³ See “Motion Picture Censorship,” News and Observer (24-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ See “The Censorship Matter,” *Ibid.* (25-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ See the News and Observer news items titled “Save a Life By Going to Movies,” *Ibid.* (26-Jan-1921, p. 5) and “See the Movies on January 26th,” *Ibid.* (14-Jan-1921, p. 5). For local accounts of the European Relief effort and other church-based exhibitions in Raleigh, see “Interest Aroused in School Program,” *Ibid.* (13-Feb-1921, p. 24) and “Will Exhibit Pictures at Central Methodist,” *Ibid.* (3-Feb-1921, p. 12). Note that the NAMPI, whose concerted efforts to resist legislated censorship failed to prevent the authorization of the New York censor board, was succeeded by the MPPDA headed by Will Hays.

¹⁴⁸ See “The Censorship Matter,” *Ibid.* (25-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹⁴⁹ Instead, the resourceful manager simply provided complimentary theater passes to out-of-town representatives living in Raleigh for the duration of the Assembly.

¹⁵⁰ See “Raleigh Churches Condemn Slide at Movie Theater,” News and Observer (28-Feb-1921, p. 1).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² See “Raleigh Baptist Boycott,” Ibid. (28-Feb-1921, p. 1). Barber served as leader of Raleigh’s Christ Church from 1908 to 1935.

¹⁵³ See “Bishop Cheshire Advocates Moving Picture Censorship,” Ibid. (1-Mar-1921, p. 4).

¹⁵⁴ See “Senate Passes Censorship Bill on Second Reading,” Ibid. (2-Mar-1921, p. 3).

¹⁵⁵ See “That Censorship Bill” and “Urges Picture Censorship,” Ibid. (2-Mar-1921, p. 4).

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ See “Censorship Bill is Defeated after 10-Minute Battle,” Ibid. (8-Mar-1921, p. 1).

¹⁵⁸ John Alan Sargent’s 1963 dissertation regarding the Production Code contains a useful summary of the difficulties faced by advocates of regulated censorship. The included charges of unconstitutional infringement upon individual rights, the difficulty of identifying standards for immorality or obscenity, disagreements over the appropriate qualifications for censor board members and administrators, and the fact that (as was true in North Carolina) most state laws outlawing other forms of obscenity presumably extended to motion pictures as well. See Sargent, “Self-Regulation: The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930-1961,” 2.

¹⁵⁹ See “Final Session Legislature Sees New Laws Written,” News and Observer (9-Mar-1921, p. 1).

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Although local and state women’s clubs vowed to re-introduce the bill in the session scheduled to open in early 1923 (see “State Federation Notes,” Ibid. (13-Mar-1921, p. 18), no such bill was passed in that session, nor does any bill resembling SB #407 appear to have been actively considered for inclusion on the legislative docket.

¹⁶² The Robesonian (21-Feb-1921, p. 4).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ “A wave of immorality is one of the evils that stalks in the wake of every war. The world war was the most gigantic upheaval the world has ever known and its backlash is felt in every community on the globe. Wherefore the Robesonian believes that those who are manifesting so much pessimism on account of some glaring instances of immorality should be of good cheer and believe that this wave will pass, as it surely will.” “W’ats’ matter, Lumberton,” Ibid. (13-Oct-1919, p. 6).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Walsh, Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry, 10.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pages 20 and 31.

¹⁶⁹ In addition, Lord hoped that “the follower of any religion, or any man of decent feeling or conviction” would acknowledge the virtues of the new code. However, the practical efficacy of the Production Code was only realized with its endorsement by the Legion of Decency. Reported in Vaughn, “Morality and Entertainment: The Origins of the Motion Picture Production Code,” pages 60 and 64.

¹⁷⁰ For a useful study of “mainstream Protestant churches [...and other...] groups whose social morality was a secularized or ‘progressive’ version of Protestant values,” see Couvares, “Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code,” 587. For a reiteration of the role played by mainstream (rather than evangelical or fundamentalist) Protestant groups in early film censorship, consider the inherent comparison in Maltby’s characterization of the reform-minded Federated Council of Churches of Christ in America, a “loose umbrella organization for Protestant denominations” whose “social policies were broadly liberal, to the extent that it frequently came under attack” of members of the “conservative and fundamentalist clergy.” Quoted in Richard Maltby, “*The King of Kings* and the Czar of All the Rushes,” Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era, ed. Matthew Bernstein, Rutgers Depth of Field Series (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 60-86. In particular, see pp. 76-9 for a discussion of the FCC. In contrast to assumptions regarding the quasi-hegemonic influence of the Legion of Decency’s film recommendations on actual moviegoing behavior, however, Gregory Black has cast significant doubt on the actual gate impact of the League’s recommendations—even among Catholic audiences. Furthermore, Black argues that the Catholic Church did not necessarily fare better than Protestants in reaching consensus about what represented acceptable film content. See Gregory D. Black, “Changing Perceptions of the Movies: American Catholics Debate Film Censorship,” Hollywood Spectatorship: Changing Perceptions of Cinema Audiences, eds. Melvyn Stokes, Richard Maltby and British Film Institute. (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

¹⁷¹ For example, James Skinner’s The Cross and the Cinema, an extended study of Catholic involvement in motion-picture censorship, foregrounds Catholic engagement during the development of Hollywood’s Production Code Administration in the early 1930s. James M. Skinner, The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970 (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1993).

¹⁷² See Richard Maltby, ““To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book”: Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934,” American Quarterly 44.4, Special Issue: Hollywood, Censorship, and American Culture (Dec., 1992), Maltby, “The Production Code and the Hays Office,” and Maltby, “*The King of Kings* and the Czar of All the Rushes.”

¹⁷³ Quoted from John Lee Eighmy and Samuel S. Hill, Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 203.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900, 297.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ For an excellent introduction to the Southern “Evangelical Belt” and its relationship to larger social reform movements, see Paul Harvey, “At Ease in Zion, Uneasy in Babylon: White Evangelicals,” Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005). Alternatively, for an extended account of the minority of Southern Baptists who did advocate the pursuit of the “Social Gospel,” see Eighmy and Hill, Churches in Cultural Captivity: A History of the Social Attitudes of Southern Baptists.

¹⁷⁸ Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900, 6.

¹⁷⁹ In part because “Baptists believed in the divine origin of civil government, and in the obligation of citizens, especially Christians, to submit to its authority,” Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁸⁰ According to Charles Reagan Wilson, “the Baptist commitment to separation of church and state (which had been a foundational belief from early sectarian days), the concern for the spirituality of the church, and otherworldly preaching still militated against ready involvement in many public issues.” See Charles Reagan Wilson and Mark Silk, eds., Religion and Public Life in the South: In the Evangelical Mode (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 16.

¹⁸¹ In the 1920s, Poteat and other moderates successfully campaigned against legal prohibitions against the teaching of evolutionary science in North Carolina classrooms. A friend of Poteat, the Rev. S. L. Morgan remained faithful to Poteat’s cause in part because Morgan, his periodic flirtations with motion-picture censorship notwithstanding, did not believe in the appropriateness of legislative solutions to matters of faith or orthodoxy.

¹⁸² Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900, vii.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Of course, evangelical Protestant interest in motion-picture censorship did not completely disappear. In 1992, Ted Baehr’s Christian Film and Television Commission advocated the implementation of a thinly veiled reworking of several portions of the old Hollywood Production Code. See Walsh, Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry, 3.

¹⁸⁶ The cool relations that existed between the SBC and the FCC are further described in Albert Henry Newman, A History of the Baptist Churches in the United States, 6th, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 536.

¹⁸⁷ Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life, 154-5. Ruth Inglis, too, has verified that some Protestant and Jewish groups “did not hesitate to cooperate with the Catholics in the Legion of Decency campaign of 1934.” See Ruth A. Inglis and Commission on Freedom of the Press., Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1947), 181.

¹⁸⁸ Even in the early 1930s, for example, the influential Episcopalian weekly newspaper *The Churchman* was still leading the fight for motion-picture regulation. See Lamar T. Beman, Selected Articles on Censorship of the Theater and Moving Pictures (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1931), 8.

¹⁸⁹ As quoted in Skinner, The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970, v.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Vizzard, See No Evil: Life inside a Hollywood Censor, 49.

¹⁹² Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹⁹³ For a helpful summary of the campaign, see James J. Thompson, Tried as by Fire: Southern Baptists and the Religious Controversies of the 1920s (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1982), 195-9.

¹⁹⁴ Lindvall, The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925, 99.

¹⁹⁵ See James H. Madison, “Reformers and the Rural Church, 1900-1950,” Protestantism and Social Christianity, ed. Martin E. Marty (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 234-57.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 249.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life, 44-5.

²⁰⁰ See Lindvall, The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925. Lindvall's study includes commentaries by both film-industry and religious figures re: the appropriate role (if any) of motion pictures in religious communities.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰³ Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life.

²⁰⁴ Abrams, Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940, 96.

²⁰⁵ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

²⁰⁶ Unfortunately, the posting turned out to be such a poor fit for Morgan and his family that they remained in Ramseur only fifteen months before moving on to Smithfield.

²⁰⁷ To be clear, Morgan does not claim in either his journals or his editorials to have seen these sorts of films himself. Rather, his descriptions of them (summarized here) incorporated ills commonly reported in many Christian-affiliated pro-censorship publications.

²⁰⁸ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

²⁰⁹ Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900, 198.

²¹⁰ Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² After Morgan's feelings of disgrace and indignation deepened in his last six months in Ramseur, he resigned his post. Upon his departure, he provided to the town's church elders a "review of my pastor[ship] and cause of leaving after only 15 months" in which he cited two primary disappointments in seeking a change of venue: First, a congregation-wide "blight," by which Morgan meant a lack of strong religious feeling demonstrated within the congregation, that had been too profound for Morgan to "rally them" out of. Second, his conviction that though he steadfastly "stood for moral issues," there were "none would stand with me" against immorality among the rest of the congregation. In his review, Morgan took advantage of the opportunity to once again to blast "the Hasford revival disgrace" by "frankly saying her [the choral leader's] program was mortifying to me." Morgan also insisted that a letter which he had sent to the choral leader "reproving her for her program" was used subsequently by her to "foment disaffection and strife" against him among influential church members, though from Morgan's perspective the letter represented "a successful effort to set myself right & partly undo the evil of [the] program." Undated diary entries from S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

²¹³ As summarized in Lindvall, The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925, 105.

²¹⁴ Romanowski, Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life, 42. Indeed, in the dogmatic dismissal of the things "of this world" that potentially distracted the faithful from their efforts to

secure salvation, nineteenth-century evangelicals so condemned the cinema's precursor, i.e., the stage theater, that by at least one estimate nearly three out of every four Americans believed that theater attendance was sinful in and of itself. Summarized from *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²¹⁵ Recorded in Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 124.

²¹⁶ Author's emphasis added. See Lindvall, *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925*, 27.

²¹⁷ Only the nation's agricultural, transportation, oil and steel industries generated more annual sales revenue than the motion-picture industry.

²¹⁸ See Smith, "Patrolling the Boundaries of Race: Motion Picture Censorship and Jim Crow in Virginia, 1922-1932," 274.

²¹⁹ As noted earlier, Gaustad and Schmidt estimated that at the turn of the century approximately one third of the nation's population consisted of official members of either a church or synagogue. See Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 279.

²²⁰ An unpublished copy of the speech is available in the S. L. Morgan, Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ See James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²²⁵ As quoted in Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, 26.

²²⁶ Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, 58.

²²⁷ Both sources quoted from Lloyd Billingsley, *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film*, Turning Point Christian Worldview Series. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1989), 17.

²²⁸ Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*, 53-4.

²²⁹ Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*, 51. In attempting to explain why many Christian theologians objected so vociferously to the theater and to its close cousin, the motion picture, Romanowski traced clerical denunciations of theatricals to an early-Christian Rome whose circus spectacles were denounced as examples of debauched paganism (*Pop Culture Wars* 37). Alternatively, Billingsley points to the influence of the second-century theologian and Christian apologist Tertullian, whose teachings "rejected the dramatic form as inherently evil." Billingsley, *The Seductive Image: A Christian Critique of the World of Film*, 18. More recently, Hunter has claimed that "it is difficult to overemphasize the importance of these [ascetic] notions to Evangelical faith in the twentieth-century. For the better part of a century, the word *worldly* has been a symbol having immediate and universal meaning for conservative Protestants. Anything that was defined as worldly was understood to be tainted by moral impurity. It was the opposite of Christian virtue" (*American Evangelicalism* 57).

²³⁰ See Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*, 69.

²³¹ For that matter, Bob Jones College operated its own weekly picture show at least as early as 1928. Indeed, Douglas Abrams claims that, Jones “was perhaps the first to use silent film as a tool for mass evangelism.” Yet quite ironically, the 1925 film *The Unbeatable Game*, a film that Jones both produced and starred in, was subject to significant censoring at the hands of the Pennsylvania censor board. Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*, 97.

²³² See James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 11.

²³³ See Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, 3.

²³⁴ See Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*, 57.

²³⁵ Per Jesse Oxendine, “Personal Interview with a Former Camera Operator at the Pembroke Theatre,” (Charlotte, NC: October 2006).

²³⁶ Michael Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 4.

²³⁷ These factors led, in part, to Smith’s nomination of Sen. Joseph Robinson of Arkansas as his vice-presidential running mate.

²³⁸ As quoted in Lienesch, *Redeeming America: Piety and Politics in the New Christian Right*, 4.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER VI

SUBJECT MINORITIES: NON-WHITE MOVIEGOING IN ROBESON COUNTY.¹

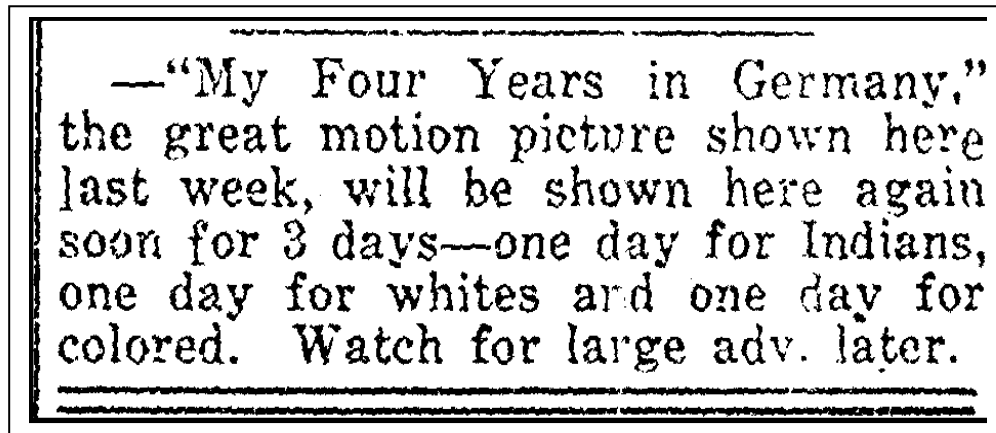


Figure 6.1: A typically “Robesonian” film advertisement.²

As theater owners and operators throughout North Carolina withstood any number of challenges from religious conservatives and local moral guardians, individual exhibitors struggled to overcome a difficult business problem: namely, that the principal good offered to their customers remained a relatively undifferentiated commodity. Barring exceptional circumstances, any film projected in one operator’s theater was essentially the same product when exhibited in a rival theater. Though different pricing ladders and the proximity of a theater to dense residential or retail centers represented potentially critical success factors for most theaters, exhibitors seeking a local competitive edge often undertook extensive facility improvement projects. Towards the end of the (traditionally defined) nickelodeon period, big-city entrepreneurs began constructing enormous lathe-and-plaster “picture palaces” to entice customers to look beyond the venues located closest to home and work in favor of “destination” theaters staffed by ranks of customer-service personnel whose attentions

accorded cinemagoing the sort of cache typically reserved for high-society functions. Across the nation, many theater owner-operators engaged teams of theater architects, interior designers, and construction gangs to create enormous spectatorial venues replete with balconies and loge boxes, salons and smoking rooms, expansive foyers and broad staircases, and even gilded restrooms. Due to the density of theaters in intensively competitive metropolitan markets, big-city theater owners strove to impart a more patrician patina upon the experience of consuming commoditized mass-amusements.³

None of the cinema facilities that hosted Robeson County audiences ever approached the grandeur or magnificence of premier metropolitan venues, as exhibitors in smaller towns with populations incapable of supporting more than a single theater had little or no incentive to invest heavily in facility differentiation. Yet if for several decades Robesonian exhibitors did indeed engage in a string of facility upgrades, many of these modifications and/or reconstructions served a distinctly different purpose than the goals commonly motivating theatrical entrepreneurs in midtown Manhattan. The history of moviegoing in Robeson County leaves little doubt that the configuration of theater facilities *did* matter greatly to local audiences. However, many of Robeson's most significant theater-construction efforts were designed either to discourage non-white attendance or to limit the form and accessibility of non-white moviegoing through the physical implementation of "race-management" structures. The resulting exhibition sites represented a public architectural enunciation of racial codes that structured building frameworks in accordance with local social hierarchies. At the same time, Robeson's theater-development patterns testify to the eagerness of cinema operators to increase their often meager revenues by accommodating traditionally non-

privileged customer segments—so long as the participation of the latter did not offend the ethnic sensibilities of a site’s most-favored patrons.

As cultural signifiers, the Robeson County theaters created within the context of local tri-racial demographics were not entirely unique structures, as several of Robeson’s other monolithic public structures (including its courthouse, old-age home, and prison) possessed similar architectural features. Yet if many of the occupants of these non-theatrical venues attended them involuntarily, moviegoing theoretically amounted to the voluntary leisure pursuit of cinematic pleasure. But for Robeson’s non-white audiences, this pursuit almost always occurred within a framework of physical and psychological obstructions that limited their freedom of movement and simultaneously altered at least some of the meanings derived by non-white moviegoers in particular from a given moviegoing experience. It is likely that the presence of non-white moviegoers may have impacted the experiences of many white patrons, too, albeit in markedly different ways. Over several decades, Robeson’s operators had embarked upon a series of interim spatial reconfigurations which transformed race-specific movie houses, as the occasional midnight “race” shows offered in white theaters gave way to multi-racial sites that required all non-white groups to share a single segregated balcony. Since these proved unpalatable to a large number of potential moviegoers, by the mid-to-late 1930s local operators had settled upon a typically Robesonian solution: the “three-entrance” theater, a fully tri-segregated theater that physically divided specific facility components to accommodate blacks, Indians, and whites inside an environment that constituted a form of American moviegoing tripartheid.⁴ Since the separate-but-unequal moviegoing experiences generated in these venues almost always privileged white patrons at the expense of African and Native American moviegoers, non-white audiences and county

entrepreneurs periodically attempted to create theaters that better reflected their social aspirations. The results were decidedly mixed. The repeated failures of Robeson's "colored" or African American theaters resulted in the universal relegation of black audiences to the worst seats in any county exhibition hall. This consignment mirrored the social, economic, and political positioning of African Americans across the region during most of the twentieth century. Alternatively, more favorable demographic conditions in a specific geographic location enabled local Indians to challenge the standard racial division of Southern theatrical space. In staking their claim during the Jim Crow era to an extraordinary level of social equality, a pair of Pembroke-based theater operators re-architected local cinematic space by dividing their seating facilities into zones of "black" vs. "non-black"—rather than "white" vs. "non-white"—patrons. Consequently, in both symbolic and real terms Indians and whites simultaneously occupied an identical public space.

This chapter recounts both the widespread development of tri-segregated theaters in Robeson County and a more discrete set of initiatives by non-whites to fashion alternatives to these overtly discriminatory spaces. In doing so, it seeks to move beyond Manichean accounts of Jim Crow segregation by demonstrating the ways in which the long reshaping of Robeson's moviegoing topographies resulted in the nearly universal marginalization by 1940 of not one but two sets of local non-white sub-populations. While Robeson's "three entrance" theaters sought to maintain the exclusive social hegemony of local whites, theaters in Pembroke offered hope to Indians desiring co-equal treatment with whites and an improving of their relative social station; however, these goals were accomplished largely through an intentional distancing of themselves from African Americans, with whom their social relations remained strained despite the common socio-political disadvantages plaguing

both groups). As a case study, Robesonian moviegoing suggests the need for film historians consciously to adopt multi-racial and multi-ethnic perspectives within historical exhibition studies, given that multiple ethnic groups living within a handful of miles from each other faced distinctly different segregationist treatments.

Furthermore, this chapter offers a rare glimpse into some of the conditions faced by early Indian moviegoers. Despite the frequency with which Indians appeared on the silver screen—Indians tended to be portrayed by non-Indian actors—cinema studies has thus far been relatively silent about the experiences of early Native American moviegoers. As the largest Native American group east of the Mississippi, Robeson’s Lumbee Indian community has intrigued cultural historians because of the ways in which their presence complicates biracial accounts of Southern Jim Crowism. As an “interstitial” group determined to maintain a distinct ethnic identity within a segregated South, Robeson’s Indians so markedly influenced the shape of the Robesonian moviegoing as to confirm ethnographer Karen Blu’s assertion that “if Southern racial ideology appears rigid and unyielding, its workings are far more flexible and complicated than has generally been acknowledged.”⁵ For while it is true that whites assigned punitive racial categories upon Indians in Robeson, it is also true that Indians took measured steps to co-opt race as part of an overall strategy for maintaining in the midst of a tri-racial region their own distinct group identity. In the case of moviegoing, local Indians found a specific leisure opportunity for engaging in what Lumbee historian Malinda Maynor Lowery has characterized as their concerted effort “to look beyond kin and settlement identification to institutionalize race and assert their tribal identity.”⁶ Even if in most socio-political circumstances Indians “operated within the constraints of white attitudes about the racial hierarchy and, to a certain extent, had to determine their social boundaries

according to what whites were willing to accept,”⁷ Pembroke moviegoers challenged these boundaries and found them to be at least somewhat malleable under specific demographic conditions.

Tri-segregated Theatre Development in Robeson County

The relationship between theaters and racial segregation had been established long before the late nineteenth-century advances that resulted in motion-picture technology. In the antebellum South, most stage theaters simply forbade non-white attendance, and while the Civil Rights Act of 1875 provided a legal foundation for reintegrating theaters (including, presumably, their eventual picture-show successors), the act was soon declared unconstitutional.⁸ According to historian John Hope Franklin, as Reconstruction-era racism eventually introduced a host of segregationist facilities whereby “Negroes and whites in the South and in parts of the North lived in separate worlds, and the apparatus for keeping the worlds separate was elaborate and complex.”⁹ Over time, even as a series of social, legal, economic and municipal restrictions continued to represent the most powerful enablers of segregation, Southern motion-picture exhibitors and their staffs were regularly called upon to act (in Franklin’s terms) as “auxiliary guardians of the system of racial separation.”¹⁰

Initially, Robeson’s early exhibition sites simply excluded non-white patrons, thereby allowing their operators to avoid investing the capital necessary to outfit segregated venues and/or incurring the potential reputational risk of simultaneously serving whites and non-whites. Since only a small fraction of the county’s non-white residents lived in Robeson’s white-dominated towns until well into the 1930s, local demographic factors enabled county operators to delay for decades the possibility of alienating their core white audiences through the prospect of their sharing a darkened theater space with either black or Indian patrons.¹¹

But if local white businessmen had denied “front door” access to Robeson’s non-whites long before the arrival of motion pictures—a practice that would continue unabated for most of the century¹²—even the most prejudicial local business owner could not ignore the fact that most of the county’s potential customer base was non-white. Therefore, despite the increasing rigidification of Jim Crow, some of Robeson’s early exhibitors took partial steps to accommodate a growing non-white population potentially capable of supplying untapped revenues to businesses typically operated on razor-thin margins.

In fact, the managers of Robeson’s first semi-permanent exhibition site took a set of discrete steps intended to service non-white patronage. Published six months after the Lumberton Lyceum Bureau was formed in 1908 to manage the Lumberton Opera House, the following local newspaper item confirmed Robeson’s preoccupation with preventing uncontrolled race-mixing within public venues. Introduced into the Opera House to serve while simultaneously to marginalize non-white patrons, these facilities included the multiple sets of galleries, staircases, partitions, and entryways that would dominate Robesonian theater modifications for generations to come:

“Improvements at the Opera House”

Improvements are being made at the opera house which will add greatly to the comfort and safety of its patrons. A stairway will be built to the room on the left of the entrance and from this room an entrance for colored people will be cut to Elm street [sic]. Another stairway will be built to the gallery, making four stairways in the front of the house, which will provide better means of entrance and exit and will also provide for complete separation of the races...¹³

Once combined with the fact that virtually no Indians lived in the immediate vicinity of Lumberton, the “double” versus “triple” nature of these entry/exit modifications suggests that black-white segregation remained the focus of the Opera House’s early remodeling efforts.¹⁴ Certainly, many local whites saw little if any reason to distinguish between blacks and

Indians as distinct racial groups; consequently, many early sets of theatrical modifications the rhetoric accompanying them tended to be bilaterally oriented in a segregated South that privileged whites. As clarified by F. X. LeBeau in his first public announcement to county moviegoers upon after taking over as manager of the Lumberton Star Theatre in 1915, LeBeau considered his theater's competitive advantages to include the fact that "none except white people will be admitted" in the newly re-opened site.¹⁵

While the changes at the Opera House may have addressed that particular site's most pressing "raced-body management"¹⁶ issue in 1908, a single set of non-white facilities was insufficient by half to provide for a complete separation of the races in Robeson County. Furthermore, the policing of bi- or tri-racial segregation depended on the ability of local operators to determine the racial identity of their prospective patrons. In Robeson, making such a determination could be fraught with error, for despite North Carolina's century-long prohibition against interracial marriages, the members of all three of the region's principal ethnic groups had intermingled for generations. Public facility managers found it particularly challenging to identify with just a glance the members of Robeson's Native American population, in part because Robeson's Indians often possessed a wide variety of physical features and/or colorings that could confound racial stereotypes dependent upon the interpretation of bodily phenotypes. Local racial tensions also stemmed from the fact that Indians tended to rely upon a complex network of kinship ties to determine their ethnic identity, and they objected to racial classification systems dependent upon phenotypes and/or blood quantum.¹⁷ Indians felt themselves particularly demeaned by reductive and/or restrictive racial labels, most notably by the region-specific derogative "Croatan" or "Cro," and therefore in order to avoid the possibility of being ethnically mislabeled in a potentially

humiliating exchange at a theater box office, for instance, many Indians simply refused to attend cinematic exhibitions.¹⁸

As locally privileged patrons, Robeson's whites fully expected that a theater's staff would both segregate them from non-whites and would police their facilities to prevent instances of racially transgressive seating. However, Robeson's earliest exhibitors probably—and to some extent, illogically—spent significantly more time considering how best to manage local Indian patronage than they did deciding how to manage African American patrons. Blacks tended to frequent white theaters more often than Indians because they lived nearer to town centers and because they were more willing to serve as day- or contract-laborers than Indian farm workers, and therefore they may more commonly have had at least some cash on hand.¹⁹ Conversely, the resolve of Indians to protect their position in the area's cultural hierarchy prompted them to protest publicly against segregationist treatment more often than local African Americans appear to have done.²⁰ Due to the fact that Indians tended to balk at being relegated to “non-white” spaces requiring them to share public facilities co-equally with blacks, their resistance eventually resulted in tri-racial accommodations within several facilities throughout the county.²¹

Since many exhibitors preferred to avoid the expense and/or the social complication of developing fully tri-racial facilities, and as such forced all non-whites to share a single segregated space, these bi-segregated facilities could offend Indians to the point of public protest, to threats of Indian boycotts, and in exceptional cases, to implicit threats of violence.²² Yet any multi-racial venue presented an exhibitor with a host of recurring structural and operational challenges. For even if a given venue could be partitioned to provide distinct seating locations separated by physical barriers such as wooden barricades,

chicken wire, and curtains,²³ any expansion effort designed to chase the tantalizing prospect of Indian patronage had to confront the following questions: Where would Indians be “placed?” What kind of facilities would be made available to them relative to white and black patrons? And perhaps most critically, what would the response to that placement be among the members of each distinct ethnic group?

Lumberton’s theater owners were not alone in having to confront the complexities of tri-racial operations, particularly since (as noted in Chapter IV) an increasing number of Robeson communities had grown large enough to support theaters of their own during the 1920s and 1930s. Local Native American growth combined with a slow expansion of Indians into more populated villages and towns spurred on the public expression of Indian discontent about black co-location in old-age homes, bus and train terminals, prisons, and, as America entered into World War II, in both local and national military bases.²⁴ By the end of the 1930s, contemporary sociologist Guy Benton Johnson had observed that Robeson’s Indian community was determined to resist either real or perceived attempts to push them below “the middle caste in this triracial society.”²⁵ While acknowledging that the “keystone in this [local caste system] is, of course, the white man’s determination not to accept the Indian as his equal and, as far as possible, to put him into the same category as the Negro,” Johnson viewed movie houses as particularly visible symbols of local racial ideology as he noted that “if he [an Indian] attends a theatre, he has to choose between one which provides a three-way segregation and one which seats him with Negroes.”²⁶ Certainly, neither outcome satisfied most local Indians.

This is not to suggest that moviegoing had been an active site of local ethnic contestation since the arrival of cinema exhibitions in Robeson. In fact, practical

opportunities for non-whites to attend cinematic exhibitions were only introduced more than a decade after they had become available to Robeson's white population. While Robeson's tripartite theaters generally developed during the 1930s, the co-location of Indians and blacks in local theaters had been widely effected by the early 1920s when segregated balconies began to spring up across the region. Whenever practical, segregated balconies were designed to prevent non-whites from accessing a given theater's (white) auditorium as well as its concession stands and rest-room facilities. Though most of Robeson picture shows lacked balconies when they opened (see Figure 6.2), balconies became a common feature during the 1920s and 1930s as local operators, even those managing the Lumberton Carolina, attempted to gate receipts via non-white patronage. For example, despite the fact that the Carolina operated as a strictly "whites-only" facility when it opened in 1928,²⁷ the building's North or Fourth Street entrance (as well as its accompanying, soon-to-be segregated staircase) were called upon to accommodate non-whites in the 1930s.

| <u>Venue</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Specific Features</u> |
|--|-------------|---|
| Lumberton: Opera House | 1908 | Incorporates segregated stairways and galleries. |
| St. Pauls: Grand Theatre | 1921 | Ownership debates balcony addition as early as 1921. Subsequent Grand site possibly adds a balcony as early as 1924, though non-white patronage not confirmable until 1933. |
| Lumberton: Pastime Theatre | 1926 | Introduced a 140-seat balcony as part of a major renovation and site expansion. |
| Bladenboro | 1926/7 | Balcony space available in Bladenboro’s New Lyric Theater by 1927, and possibly in the “Old” Lyric circa 1926. |
| Lumberton: Carolina Theatre | 1928 | Balcony and staircase facilities available for segregated use available in 1928, but not used to segregate non-whites, who were not initially admitted to the Carolina. However, the Carolina becomes tri-segregated at least as early as 1931. |
| Laurinburg | 1930s | Both of Scotland County’s nearby Laurinburg theaters possess balconies by the middle of the decade, if not sooner. |
| Red Springs: The “New” Red Springs Theatre | 1932 | While an earlier Red Springs site may have included a balcony, the “New” Red Springs Theatre (1932) certainly did. |
| Fairmont: Capitol Theatre | 1934 | The earliest confirmation date for the Capitol’s balcony. |
| Fair Bluff: Scotty Theatre | 1937 | “Colored” balcony space had been incorporated into nearby Columbus County’s Scotty Theatre from the site’s inception. |
| Rowland: Rowland Theatre | 1937 | Tri-segregated balcony in place from inception. |
| Lumberton: Riverside Theatre | 1939 | Tri-segregated balcony in place from inception. |
| Maxton: Maxton Theatre | 1939 | Balcony—possibly bi- rather than tri-segregated—in place from theater inception. |

Figure 6.2: Regional balcony-development timeline. *Summary:* By 1940, no theater operating in or near Robeson that advertised in the Robesonian had failed to incorporate a segregated balcony.

Once black and Indian patrons were admitted to the Carolina, its internal partitions enforced differential moviegoing experiences. The following photograph (Figure 6.3) provides a stage-center view of the theater’s auditorium and balcony. The theater’s black

and Indian patrons were seated in the two sections located to the left of the balcony's center aisle.

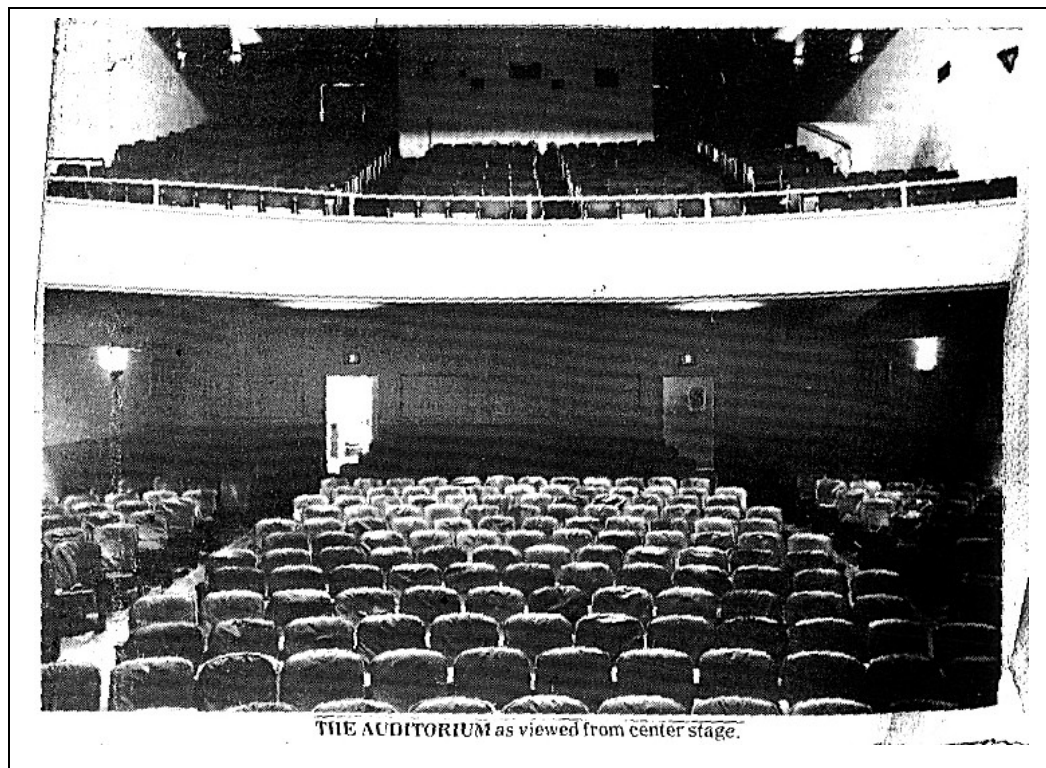


Figure 6.3: Undated newspaper photo of Carolina Theatre balcony showing right-hand (i.e., white) balcony staircase leading down to the rest of the main theatre.

These subsections were partitioned one from another, and an additional barricade near the center balcony aisle prevented non-white access to the theater's white balcony sections located to the right. The staircase along the balcony's far right wall (whose entrance is visible beneath the light fixtures located at top right) led white patrons down to the theater's mezzanine, lounge and lobby areas. However, non-whites were forced to queue up outside the theater's non-white entrance (Figure 6.4) before climbing a segregated staircase (Figure 6.5) to enter the balcony via a segregated doorway (Figure 6.6). An additional first-floor auditorium door (not pictured) leading to this stairwell remained locked from the outside in order to deny non-white access to the theater's main exhibition space. At the same time, patrons seated in the auditorium could employ this door as an emergency exit, even if in

doing so they would have bottlenecked the only point of egress readily available to the balcony's non-white patrons. Both Indians and blacks were required to share a segregated staircase and balcony, even though these facilities forced the co-location of two ethnic groups that preferred to avoid each other in public.²⁸ Note that while it is likely that the Carolina's non-white balcony section pictured above did not initially separate blacks from Indians, it was in time divided into two distinct sub-compartments by wooden partitions and/or other barrier materials.



Figure 6.4: Exterior photo of Carolina Theatre's "North" or segregated door. Photograph taken by the author (October 2001).



Figure 6.5: Interior view of the Carolina Theatre's segregated stairwell. Photograph taken by the author (October 2001).

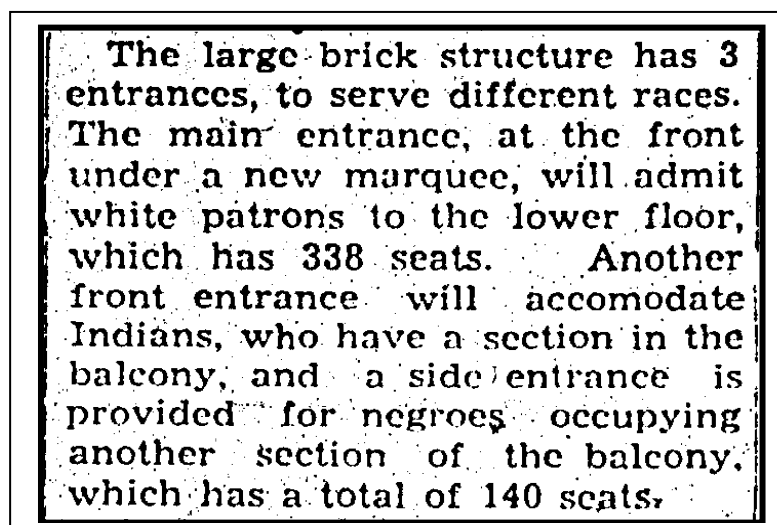


Figure 6.6: Interior view of the colored and Indian seating areas within the Carolina Theatre, including a view of the balcony door through which they accessed the segregated “North Door” staircase. Photograph taken by the author (October 2001).

Several members of the Carolina’s exhibition staff, though most commonly its “colored and Indian” balcony manager, Walter Wishart, along with the venue’s front-entrance cashier and ticket-taker, were charged with ensuring that non-white patrons did not occupy the theater’s main lobby, auditorium, and comfort facilities. But since the Carolina did not possess multiple ticket booths and entrances that likewise divided blacks and Indians from one another, it was not a fully tri-segregated facility. In other words, even the grandest theater in Robeson still did not quite measure up to the standard of tri-segregation that had been envisioned for the county’s public facilities at least as early as 1908, i.e., when the old Opera House was first modified in the hope of providing for the “complete separation of the races.”

Robeson's exhibitors would soon take the next logical steps to provide for complete racial separation all the way from the sidewalk to the seats, and while Robeson's tri-racial theater development would eventually culminate in the opening of Lumberton's Riverside Theater in 1939, county exhibitors had begun to move rapidly in the direction of implementing a form of American moviegoing tripartheid by the mid-1930s. In fact, Ernest Hancock's sociological study reported by 1935 that "the theatre at Red Springs has separate seating arrangements for the whites, Indians, and Negroes," and if the theater's manager acknowledged "that some of the Indians objected to this arrangement at first," Hancock reported that "more are beginning to attend."²⁹ Within two years, additional developments had resulted in a decidedly Robesonian structure, the "New" Red Springs Theatre, whose 475 seats were distributed across an auditorium and a pair of balcony compartments. Moreover, all three moviegoing compartments were accessed by separate entrances.³⁰

Developments in Red Springs briefly preceded similar events in Rowland. In 1937, the owners of the county's newest site proudly boasted of the Rowland's key structural features:



The large brick structure has 3 entrances, to serve different races. The main entrance, at the front under a new marquee, will admit white patrons to the lower floor, which has 338 seats. Another front entrance will accommodate Indians, who have a section in the balcony, and a side entrance is provided for negroes occupying another section of the balcony, which has a total of 140 seats.

Figure 6.7: Confirmation of Rowland Theatre's seating configuration.³¹

ROWLAND THEATRE



Rowland, N. C.
OPEN MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1st

Figure 6.8: All three of the Rowland Theatre's race-specific entrances are visible: Under the marquee (white), to the left of the two standing figures (black), and just to the right of marquee and adjacent to next building (Indian).³²

With their multiple entrances *and* staircases, the theaters in Red Springs and Rowland surpassed the Carolina Theatre's segregation standard by further reducing the likelihood of

non-white group interactions.³³ While the Rowland Theatre shuttled two non-white groups up through separate balconies via race-specific entrances and staircases, the theater continued the local pattern of allocating more than twice as many seats to white patrons than non-whites. However, the theaters in Rowland and Red Springs both fully segregated the region's two subject minorities *only after* blacks and Indians had purchased their tickets. Therefore, since single ticket booths still exposed all patrons (including whites) to potential race mixing, Robeson County theater operators faced up to the prospect of offering the last facility modification that remained: to provide each race with its own dedicated ticket booth.

Completed in April 1939, Lumberton's Riverside Theatre was, as longtime Lumberton lawyer John Wishart Campbell recalled, a facility specifically "designed for this town."³⁴ Opening Day newspapers recorded that "[t]he downstairs of the theatre building will seat approximately 500 patrons, with a gallery on the west side...to seat approximately 250 colored patrons and a gallery on the east side to seat approximately 250 Indians." These stories also confirmed the theater's unusual set of triple ticket booths.³⁵ To confirm the methodology regarding how Riverside patrons were expected to access the facility, the theater's management published several print ads over the next two months to delineate the correct entrance/ticket booth combinations to be used by each local ethnic group. In addition, the Riverside's operators began to include tri-segregated ticket-pricing ladders within their newspaper advertisements for the first time in Robeson County history (Figure 6.9).

POOR TOPPER!

He's in trouble again... with the same looney ghost who wrapped herself in ectoplasm and put him in a fog in "Topper". Go along with them on another joyous journey of zany hilarity... with every roaring laugh as broad as the Atlantic!

TOPPER TAKES A TRIP

CONSTANCE BENNETT - ROLAND YOUNG

BILLIE BURKE
VERGER TERROALS
ALEXANDER DARG

ALAN TESSERA
FRANKLIN PENNINGTON
MR. ATLAS

ADMISSION PRICES

| | | |
|----------|----------|----------|
| Matinee: | Adults | 20 Cents |
| | Children | 10 Cents |
| Nights: | Adults | 25 Cents |
| | Children | 10 Cents |
| Indians: | Adults | 15 Cents |
| | Children | 10 Cents |
| Colored: | Adults | 15 Cents |
| | Children | 10 Cents |

Figure 6.9: Riverside advertisement with race-tiered ticket prices.³⁶

Even so, the theater's management subsequently found it necessary to remind all patrons of the house's human traffic-control policies through the notices (recreated below) that periodically accompanied the site's daily newspaper ads.

“The Main Auditorium Is For The Exclusive Use Of Our White Patrons At All Times...

The Indian Entrance Is To The Right Of The Theatre, And The Colored Entrance Is To The Left.”

Whether or not it was because out-of-town attendees unfamiliar with the rules of the house were expected to join the growing post-harvest crowds that fall, or perhaps because non-whites had begun to encroach upon the theater’s main entrance and auditorium, the formatting of these notices quite literally “capitalized” the Riverside’s pattern of raced-body management.³⁷

Despite apparently occasional lapses in the flow of audience members, the Riverside’s three-entrance venue finally delivered on the Lumberton Lyceum Bureau’s three-decades-old promise of effecting a “complete separation of the races,” at least as that separation had come to be defined in Robeson County. By the mid-1930s, tripartheid institutions represented a distinct Robesonian pattern—and a construct no less symbolized by the structure of the county’s movie theaters than by the triple sets of lavatories and drinking fountains incorporated within the county courthouse. As tri-segregation was extended to those public spaces in which members of all three races might meet, venues like the Carolina and the Red Springs Theatre were socio-spatially restructured to conform to local racial ideology, while others like the Rowland and the Riverside had extended that ideology to its logical conclusion from their inception. Given the extent to which Robesonian exhibitors elected to absorb the cost of extending racial segregation to a third ethnic subgroup instead of relaxing or challenging segregationist practices on the basis of these clearly demonstrable

expenses, Robeson's tri-racial theater development poses a dispiriting challenge to cinema histories that depict motion-picture venues as sites in which minority audiences successfully resisted cultural elision. Mary Carbine's exceptional study "The Finest Outside the Loop: Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928," for example, recounts several sets of moviegoing activities through which black Chicagoans variously co-opted a definitionally "white" exhibition space, challenged the white commercial dominance of the film industry, and incorporated key elements and tropes of African-American culture into an exhibition experience all their own.³⁸ Yet Chicago and Lumberton represented (and indeed still represent) two significantly different ethnic landscapes. Though Carbine's Chicago narrative raises the possibility of cinema exhibitions as spaces of cultural resistance, the hard truth was that by 1940 virtually all of Robeson's social events and/or public facilities—from churches and schools to cafes and barbershops; from old-age homes and prison camps to retail shops and county fairs; from medical and dental clinics to segregated cemeteries and community burial grounds; from police and health service personnel to libraries and sports clubs; from public restrooms and telephone directories to 4H and home-demonstrations clubs; and from PTA and Memorial Day committees to beauty pageants and classified ads—all were segregated, in fact *tri*-segregated, within Robeson County.³⁹

Nonetheless, if the cultural resistance described by Carbine was inevitably less likely to occur in Robeson than in a city whose several African American theaters were supported by a large and relatively prosperous black population within an identifiably black business and social district, local resistance to the hegemony of white moviegoing was not an entirely unheard of phenomenon in Robeson County, though most of the alternatives to tri-segregated theaters that did develop tended to be short-lived affairs. By the late-1930s, certainly, tri-

segregated theaters dominated the Robesonian moviegoing landscape, thereby validating theater historian Mary Valentine's claim that although movie theaters represented "a separate architectural type, distinguished by program, emphasis, imagery, and history," they could also be "read as an architectural type" both "rooted in popular culture" and imbued "with its own symbolic program."⁴⁰ If so, in what ways (if any) did Robeson's alternative theaters offer Native or African American moviegoers a chance to escape the restrictions normally imposed upon them in white venues? Furthermore, what symbolic or cultural insights into the nature of local racial or ethnic tensions in Robeson County can be found by examining the experiences of non-white patrons in and around its theaters?

Robeson County's Black and Indian Moviegoing Alternatives

Robeson's blacks and Indians did attend commercial motion-picture exhibitions, and often in considerable numbers. Lawyer John Wishart Campbell, whose office windows overlooked both the Carolina Theatre's main and segregated entrances for many years, recalled that non-white audiences often packed the sidewalk outside the theater's North Door.⁴¹ In addition to attending increasingly tri-segregated theaters, Robeson's non-white patrons faced a few opportunities to attend generally short-lived theaters offering an alternative to the unrelenting discrimination that characterized white venues. In these sites, some of which were owned and/or managed by non-whites, the standard regional pattern of tri-segregated seating was either bypassed or realigned in ways that provided a temporary respite from the rigorous social alienation enforced by the racial *status quo* embedded in the layout of most Robeson theaters.

Among local efforts to establish non-white sites, attempts to develop a colored theater long predated the arrival Indian theaters. Unfortunately, this and similar efforts resulted in a handful of very short-lived colored theater operations. The failure to establish local a black theater meant that with the exception of certain government-sponsored film exhibitions, virtually none of Robeson's exhibitions permitted African-American moviegoers to view motion pictures from anything except a segregated balcony until well after the passage of Civil Rights-era legislation in the early-1960s. Once Native Americans became involved in local theater management, however, they proved significantly more successful in establishing viable, long-term sites. From the late-1930s onwards, Robeson's Indian theatres defied the county-wide standards and structures of tri-segregation. Yet none of these alternative theaters (neither black nor Indian) represented fully integrated sites. Moreover, while black patrons were permitted into Indian theaters, Indians were unlikely to have attended the area's short-lived black theaters for the same reasons that caused them to refuse to attend films in balcony spaces designated elsewhere throughout the South as "colored" balconies, i.e., balconies shared by all non-white patrons simultaneously. Just as Robeson's local vernacular did not categorize Indians as "colored,"⁴² Indians avoided engaging in activities that implied even a passive acceptance of this specific racial label.

Consequently, although the advent of segregated theater balconies in Robeson attracted a sizable African-American patronage, these facilities generally failed to garner a concurrent Indian trade; indeed, when pressed on the matter, John Wishart Campbell could not recall witnessing Indian patrons ever queuing up outside the Carolina Theatre's North Door. In all likelihood, the co-location of Indians and blacks within a single colored balcony occurred less frequently than operators in Robeson had hoped. If and when it did occur, it

probably did so only on Saturdays, since the economic dependence of Native Americans on farm work rarely afforded Indians more than a once-a-week trip to town.⁴³ Even as the distances separating Robeson's white from non-white residential areas began to shrink, moviegoing remained an inherently town-based event. By 1930, forty-five percent of Lumberton Township's African American population lived close enough to town to be included in Lumberton's city census totals. At the same time, the county's Indian population continued to expand just as collapsing agricultural prices during the Great Depression drove many farm residents closer to regional town centers. Indians particularly gathered in the vicinity of Pembroke, though difficult economic circumstances there often served to swell the numbers of Lumbee émigrés in industrial centers located in Michigan (Detroit), Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) and Maryland (Baltimore) capable of offering regular wages.⁴⁴ Though most of Robeson's black and white town residents had adopted a largely "out of sight, out of mind" attitude towards the county's commonly farm-based Indians, as Indians pressed closer to town the county's overall percentage of African American residents was significantly decreasing. Many of Robeson's African Americans joined the millions of other Southern blacks in what became known as the "Great Migration," a period when Southern blacks simultaneously fled from the hostilities of Jim Crow and pursued more dependable employment opportunities elsewhere.⁴⁵ As the population disparity between Indians and blacks narrowed even as the county's population total continued to grow, a growth due in part to a marked increase in the growth rates of Robeson's Indian communities, the possibility for interracial conflicts breaking out in and around shared public spaces increased accordingly.

Still, the ethnic animosities simmering beneath the surface among the mixed crowds of Saturday moviegoers in towns like Lumberton rarely degenerated into open racial violence

in part because specific facilities had been designed to keep whites separate from non-whites and, when possible, to separate each non-white group from the other. Non-tri-segregated theaters were largely boycotted by Native Americans who, in so doing, largely ceded all of the non-white space in Robeson's bi-segregated balcony theaters to those African Americans who more commonly engaged in Robesonian moviegoing earlier than Indians thanks to their residential proximity to towns. But blacks also desired an alternative to the second-class citizenship imposed on them through their relegation to the worst seats in every local theater or exhibition hall. Certainly, their placement in colored balconies that inevitably overlooked a theater's main auditorium simply reinforced a black audience's awareness of its non-privileged status, for while blacks could not help but notice the white occupants whose more privileged seats stood in ranks across the auditorium below, most whites could readily ignore the out-of-sight occupants of segregated balconies. In fact, cinemagoing rarely amounted to an easy or casual leisure option for non-white moviegoers, whose in-theater experiences were defined by a host of physical, psychological, and symbolic barriers or constraints whose imposition and/or maintenance of undesirable group identities likely blunted non-white moviegoing appetites for decades throughout Robeson.

In light of these circumstances, it seems unfortunate that so many cinema and/or theatrical historians have tended to adopt the perspective of white spectators. The nostalgic tone that suffuses many studies of early exhibition sites or of Golden-Age theaters fails to reflect the historical perspective of millions of non-white patrons.⁴⁶ Any proposition put to the elder members of Robeson's black and Indian communities to suggest that cinemagoing enabled individuals to participate in American culture freely, equally, and unfettered by external social constraints, or that motion-picture theaters represented a common public space in which the

alienations of modern life could temporarily be relieved, would probably rank as a gross exaggerations and, perhaps, as an utterly alien and untenable assertion.

Consider, for example, the following summary of the socio-cultural function of cinematic space:

The motion picture palace, the most radiant development in the history of what might be considered the first *mass* medium, was actually an attempt to provide its patrons with a sense of individuality. With their large staffs of handsome ushers and cute concession-stand girls, whose job it was to pamper individual filmgoers, the movie palace allowed otherwise overworked, unappreciated, and alienated individuals to feel like they were “somebody.”⁴⁷

The history of moviegoing in Robeson County indicates that if cinema viewing may have temporarily offered some patrons a vision of the possibly of rising above one’s social station, the conditions of moviegoing itself offered constant reminders to non-whites of the extent to which they had been socially marginalized. In light of the experiences of non-white moviegoers in Robeson, cinema-studies practitioners would do well to avoid the temptation of allowing nostalgic sentimentalism to gloss over otherwise shameful and habitual exhibition episodes and practices. Even today, few non-white audience members have forgotten the sense of shame, frustration, anger, and resentment they experienced while attending Jim Crow moviegoing. For that matter, several potential interviewees politely declined to recount their moviegoing experiences for inclusion in this study out of their conviction that the spiritual and psychological toll of segregation can only be fully comprehended by those who have been previously subjected to it. Other Robesonians indicated a disenchantment with rehashing the county’s segregationist past, and they doubt the capacity of historians or other scholars emotional to comprehend how profoundly Jim Crow balconies symbolized—as much as any other civic facility, public impediment, or legislative statute—precisely what it mean to live on the wrong side of the color bar.

Nevertheless, exceptions to standard segregationist practices could and did occur during the Jim Crow era, and at times these included the non-white sponsorship, management, or operation of alternative cinemas. In fact, the early boast of the Star Theatre's F. X. LeBeau that only white people would be admitted into his theater probably represents an indirect reference to at least one early theater in Lumberton that provided an improved non-white cinemagoing opportunity. In all likelihood, what LeBeau was probably referring to in 1915 was the "A-Mus-U" Theater, a local exhibition site intended to serve Lumberton's "colored" population.⁴⁸ Opened in September 1914, the A-Mus-U was operated by a pair of white businessmen, Grover Pope and L. Jones, who had located their balcony-less theater in a building formerly housing Pedneau's automotive garage.⁴⁹ The A-Mus-U represented an extraordinarily rare business venture, a "colored" enterprise situated at the southern end of Lumberton's central business district, and though the theater lay directly north of the African-American neighborhoods located immediately below the county's principal east-west rail line, it also sat just a few strides away from the Lumberton Cotton Mill building, i.e., the headquarters for some of Lumberton's most influential businessmen and their most successful commercial enterprises.⁵⁰

Possibly because the proximity of a non-white business venture perched on the "right" side of the tracks came to offend local white sensibilities, the A-Mus-U had relocated by mid-October to the northern-most corner of a small building located immediately south of the Seaboard line in a small space adjacent to the local express office.⁵¹ In all likelihood, the theater failed soon thereafter. But the fact that the A-Mus-U generated several front-page news briefs at a time when virtually no businesses catering to blacks merited newspaper attention of any kind suggests that the theater had incited an unusual level of local interest.

After the A-Mus-U closed, however, Robeson's blacks appear to have lacked access to any local moviegoing options for the next four years, as Lumberton's segregated Opera House no longer housed a projector and the Pastime still lacked a balcony. Though anecdotal evidence indicates that the Pastime periodically sponsored "owl" shows for blacks, presumably on an after-hours basis, these shows were never advertised in local newspapers.⁵² However, shortly before deciding to leave Lumberton permanently in the fall of 1919, businessman Hyman H. Anderson, Walter Wishart's successor as the dual-proprietor of the Pastime Theatre and the Lumberton Opera House, agreed to convert the latter into a "colored" theater.⁵³ While Anderson's theater probably represented the first instance of black patrons being permitted to sit without constraint in a formerly white venue's auditorium, the Opera House's unnamed colored theater managed to operate for no more than a few months. Local black moviegoers were again denied access to a moviegoing venue of their own once the former Opera House building was sold prior to its conversion into a local inn.

In optimistically overlooking the previous failures of the A-Mus-U and the Opera House sites while embarking upon a third attempt to establish a local colored picture show, enterprising African-American resident Charley Morrissey briefly attracted front-page coverage for his intention to establish "a picture and vaudeville house for colored people" in the former "Bland Hotel" site.⁵⁴ Situated within Lumberton's predominantly black residential district in the neighborhood locally referred to as "the Bottom," Morrissey's theater almost certainly represented the first theater with a non-white operator in the county's history—and its last until approximately 1940. Though the lack of subsequent news coverage pertaining to Morrissey's venture—not even of its opening or closing—may represent another instance of the white enforcement of public black invisibility, it is equally

likely (particularly in light of the level of coverage accorded the A-Mus-U) that Morrissey's project simply never came to fruition.⁵⁵

In contrast to the comparative freedom offered black patrons in colored venues, Robeson's white theater managers generally prohibited non-whites from attending their theaters at all until the advent of bi- and tri-segregated theaters. While African-American audiences were frustrated by their relegation to these second-class moviegoing opportunities, no new colored theater arrived in Robeson until a quarter-century after the early attempts made by Pope/Jones, Anderson, and Morrissey, when at the end of 1945 William Murphy Bowman, the son of one of the founders of the Carolina Theatre, purchased a lot located along the Fairmont Road, the principal thoroughfare passing through the Bottom from Lumberton on the way to Fairmont. On it, Bowman and his wife backed the construction a brick building roughly ten yards wide, twenty-five feet high, and thirty yards long, which they soon equipped and opened as a colored picture show. It remains unclear whether the Bowmans developed their theater in the hope of taking advantage of postwar economic prosperity, or perhaps because attendance within the county's tripartite balconies suggested a pent-up demand for more (and particularly, for less segregated) black moviegoing venues—including for African American veterans returning from the European and Pacific fronts. However, there is no question that the new house was an immediate hit with local black audiences.⁵⁶

But what began as a promising non-white moviegoing option, however, soon became entangled in a set of legal actions that effectively shuttered the Bowman operation. In short, a lengthy series of suits and countersuits was initiated because the Bowman property sat underneath the maintenance easement of an electric utility company whose high-voltage

power lines passed directly above the theater. Concerned that the new structure would inhibit line maintenance, and determined to avoid potentially catastrophic liability in the event that a broken line would set fire to a crowded movie house, the Carolina Power and Light Company sued the Bowmans and aggressively pursued the theater's closure. After the courts rapidly ordered a temporary injunction to close the site pending the outcome of the plaintiff's suit, charges and countercharges oscillated between local and state courtrooms for years before an out-of-court settlement was eventually reached. As part of the agreement, the building that housed Robeson's most successful—and last known—colored theater was demolished after apparently having served its constituency for less than a year.⁵⁷

In contrast to many southern (and some northern) towns whose colored theatres represented a viable alternative to segregated white venues, the brief and generally unsuccessful experiments with colored venues in Robeson demonstrate the difficulties of establishing and sustaining exhibition facilities offering non-white patrons something other than “separate but (un)equal” moviegoing. Furthermore, even in the wake of civil-rights successes, there is reason to suspect that many of the Southern theaters in operation prior to the early 1960s never subsequently permitted black and/or Indian patrons to sit alongside whites, particularly given the rate at which exhibitors shuttered aging downtown theaters in favor of strip-mall “twin” and “quad” cinemas by the 1960s and 1970s. The net result for local African Americans was that moviegoing remained a segregated activity during the entire first three generations of Robeson County exhibitions.⁵⁸ Though the role played by movie theaters to help police racial boundaries during Jim Crow remains axiomatic among the population of aging generations of non-white moviegoers who were denied equal access within white theaters, the implications of Jim Crow restrictions can be staggering when

considered within the broader context of Cinema and Cultural Studies. Though additional research is required to determine the degree to which these limited non-white moviegoing opportunities available in Robeson County mirrored moviegoing conditions in small-town America, it is quite possible that most of the films produced from the beginning of commercial cinema until the mid-to-late 1930s (and perhaps not until after World War II) went largely unseen by non-whites. Since many of these films were never theatrically re-released or subsequently broadcast on television, and since well over half of the films ever produced prior to 1950 no longer exist in any form,⁵⁹ then it is possible to conclude that these films tended not to be incorporated into the cultural heritage of non-white communities, except possibly as one of the many cultural opportunities denied to their members.

There were, of course, cases in which a relatively small group of non-white patrons did manage to watch at least some of these films from seats other than those stationed within a segregated balcony by “passing” into the main auditorium of local theaters. Given that Indians tended to live well outside of Robeson’s incorporated towns, and as such were less familiar to, for example, Lumberton ticket takers, quite a few members of Robeson’s Indian community were especially well-positioned to pass into white theaters alongside white patrons. But since physiognomic phenotype sets could vary widely among Robeson Indians, and because their lack of personal familiarity with local theater staffs could result in potentially embarrassing cases of mistaken racial identity, all Robeson exhibitors hoping to determine a patron’s racial status based strictly on visual clues faced the very real prospect of making problematic social-identification errors. Given that racial sensitivities ran high in Robeson, such errors could lead to a series of vocal protests and/or recriminations directed at theater managers or staff operating specific segregation zones. Protests could also be lodged

by patrons within the theater who judged nearby audience members to be occupying racially inappropriate seats. However, while it is likely that at least some of the county's African Americans passed into Robeson theaters, Indians appear to have been much more successful, so much so that the managers of Lumberton's Riverside Theatre took the highly unusual step of hiring "an Indian youngster to point out 'his people' to the manager, so that race-based seating violations could be avoided."⁶⁰

Nevertheless, any non-whites who considered passing into white theaters were confronted by an additional psychological burden, i.e., the burden of denying their racial or ethnic identity. Evidence suggests that for some non-whites their passing activities resulted in long-lasting emotional scars.⁶¹ Thus, whether non-whites attempted to "pass" into a white theater, or instead accepted their assigned yet segregated seats, moviegoing rarely represented for blacks and Indians the relatively simple and largely conscience-free leisure option that it did for whites, since engaging in non-white moviegoing amounted either to an act of racial resistance or an at-least-temporary acquiescence to the impositions of Jim Crow. Nor were non-white patrons the only parties who confronted race-inflected moviegoing challenges. Exhibitors, of course, struggled to construct or remodel facilities at least minimally acceptable to whites and non-whites alike, and each day they were being called upon to perform perhaps hundreds of on-the-spot racial classifications each day before responding, if necessary, to the difficulties caused by racial classification errors. If today, a half-century after court challenges began dismantling the legal foundations of segregation, virtually all Robesonians remain extremely sensitive either to committing or being the subject of racial or ethnic mislabeling, one can only imagine the tensions coalescing around motion-picture houses when an individual's ethnic identity delimited his or her set of

permissible public actions. While the nation's institutions of higher learning continue to expose the contingent nature of those identities, and though increasing numbers of Americans are willing to concur with Southern social historian Joel Williamson's claim that "there are, essentially, no such things as 'black' people or 'white' people," it is entirely possible today to underestimate the force of the indignity and the social discomfort experienced not only by those who attempted to police segregated audiences in circumstances where "the overlapping of physical traits between the so-called races is so great that it is impossible to define a certain line to divide one group from another,"⁶² but also among those who may have attempted to confound detection as an individual seeking to violate the contemporary boundaries of race through passing.

In Robeson, generations of interracial liaisons had resulted in kinship relations much more ethnically entangled than many a resident was willing to admit. In retrospect, one of the most disheartening aspects of Robesonian moviegoing was the energy and expense dedicated to preserving a set of theoretical racial divisions that could not neatly be superimposed upon the actual local population. Ironically, while the Riverside's decision to charge an Indian boy with the responsibility for correcting racial misidentifications effectively punted the issue of policing race to a child member of the site's most problematic minority group, it simultaneously reconfirmed the Indian conception of social identity by leaving the process of determining Indian identity within the hands of Indians themselves.⁶³ Without significant knowledge of a given patron's family background, no theater staffer could be expected to determine every patron's racial identity simply on the basis of reading a customer's physical or facial features. Just a few years prior to the opening of the Riverside Theatre, in fact, visiting graduate student Ernest Hancock was stunned by the wide variety of local facial

phenotypes In Robeson County. While observing pupils at local segregated schools that had been administered specifically to admit only Indian children, Hancock noted⁶⁴ that “among a dozen or more pupils in one of their schools one may see a swarthy Indian boy, who, judging from general appearance, might have been taken from the Indian reservation in the western part of the State. Beside him may be seen a slender girl somewhat lighter in color with straight black hair and near the perfect type of the true Indian. A third student may be a pretty girl with blue eyes and flaxen hair, who could pass as white among a company of English girls of the flapper type”...all of this despite the fact that interracial marriage had been illegal in North Carolina for four generations prior to his observations. Yet in maintaining a kind of perverse ignorance regarding the actual local conditions of race, Robeson’s exhibitors clung to a fantasy, i.e., to a racial essentialism that, from the perspective of historian I. A. Newby, acknowledged racial identity as “the transcendent fact of life,” and which insisted that racial segregation was both a practical and naturalistic result of a human nature “fixed by heredity and immune to environment.”⁶⁵

The local racial hierarchy accepted as gospel by most white Robesonians attempted to maintain an impassable social barrier between whites and non-whites, even though it ignored the fact that non-whites could and did occasionally pass as white. Nonetheless, significant doubt exists as to how much (and what kind of) emotional satisfaction (if any) was experienced by those who flouted local ethnic conventions while passing. Even if an unexpectedly high number of Robeson’s non-whites possessed the physical feature-set to support passing, many non-whites regarded segregated theaters with a contempt similar to that of noted African-American scholar John Hope Franklin’s parents, who quite simply refused to attend segregated theaters or any other segregated amusements. The adventurous

young Franklin, on the other hand, willingly attended segregated concerts and musical recitals while growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma. At the end of an extraordinary career marked by significant civil-rights successes, however, the elder Franklin looked back with shame on his early acquiescence to the indignities of segregation.⁶⁶ Instead, in adulthood Franklin came to regard all movie houses, music halls, and other facilities requiring “the back stairway or the freight elevator” as ineluctable symbols of the corrupting influence of racial dogma within American society, and regardless of the entertainments that they offered, Franklin came to regard the act of attending them to be indistinguishable from “the badges of inferiority” that helped to support the “racial degradation that sprang up in every sector of American life.”⁶⁷

Although Franklin’s childhood was spent outside of the segregated South, his comments regarding segregated exhibition spaces would have resonated strongly in the mind of a young black Arkansas moviegoer, Andrew Rowan, who during the 1950s and 1960s despised being “consigned to the balcony” and a theater’s “upper reaches...because of race.” Recalling with a simultaneous sense of envy and “incredible sadness” the light-skinned blacks who passed into white theaters in order “to ease their racial humiliation,” Rowan recognized that, passing or no passing, all colored moviegoing experiences offered those who engaged in them a burdensome combination of “pleasure and pain.”⁶⁸ To Rowan, only the demise of theatrical segregation could finally relieve non-whites of “the complex drama of seating prerogatives and knowing one’s place,” thereby allowing them instead to experience motion pictures as “what they always should have been, a vehicle for transport into worlds known and unknown.”⁶⁹

Rowan's awareness of how the "wondrous worlds unleashed in the dark were *always marred* by the dark reality of separation"⁷⁰ indicates that moviegoing as a social practice resulted in a distinctly different set of experiences and interpretive outcomes for Robeson's blacks and Indians than it did for the county's white audiences. While Mary Carbine, for example, has indicated that cinemas in Chicago offered racially performative alternatives for the densely clustered and relatively prosperous African American audiences residing within that specific urban metropolis,⁷¹ a large portion of the American moviegoing landscape required non-white patrons public acquiescence to painful racial labels. Therefore, for many non-whites the prospect of regularly attending motion-picture exhibitions remained socially and economically incomprehensible.⁷² In addition, the disparity between white and non-white income levels⁷³ so severely restricted the possibility of habitual non-white moviegoing that, even if one ignores the relative scarcity of non-white theater seats and dismisses the underlying social tension surrounding all multiracial gatherings in Robeson County, there is reason to believe that most of Robeson's non-white population, which is to say *the majority of the county's entire population*, either rarely or never engaged in moviegoing during the itinerant, nickelodeon, and silent-cinema eras. Furthermore, the virtual non-existence of local colored theaters suggests that Robeson's black residents had no access to the films featuring the work of early and groundbreaking African-American actors, directors, and cinematographers, since their films tended to circulate within the South's colored theater circuit.⁷⁴ Finally, due to the restricted access afforded non-whites within the Lumberton Carolina, Robeson's only "picture palace"—and a site whose toilets, lounges, smokers, and concession stands remained off-limits to black and Indian patrons—it is possible that few if any non-white patrons locally experienced the full range of picture-palace comforts until the advent of the Civil Rights era.

Therefore, despite the claim made by each of the white senior citizens interviewed during this study, each of whom maintained that “everyone” went to the movies in Robeson County from the 1930s through the 1950s, over that same period most of the county’s residents either did not, could not, or simply chose not to attend motion-picture exhibitions for a number of reasons, though the most limiting of these remained tied to the influence of local racial identities and the maintenance of social hierarchies. Non-white Robesonians who refused to attend films except on an unequal footing with whites were not the only members of a national non-white community that shared similar objections to segregated moviegoing. From the perspective of the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, for example, whose long tenure as president of Morehouse College began just as Lumberton’s Riverside Theatre was opening, and an educator whose career included mentoring (and later eulogizing) his most famous student, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the matter was quite simple: “I wouldn’t go to a segregated theater to see Jesus Christ himself.”⁷⁵ Moreover, Mays would almost certainly have disagreed with cinema historian Kevin Corbett’s claim that during World War II “the movie theater came to represent the absolute center of American cultural life.”⁷⁶ While this may have been the case for (at least some of) white America, the evidence currently available indicates that for several decades roughly two-thirds of Robeson’s population would have been unlikely to consider a local movie house as representing an institution even remotely central to their cultural lives; rather, they were more likely to resent theaters for the social humiliations they imposed via their segregationist policies and as a result of the shameful treatment often accorded non-whites who attempted to attend them.

In Lumberton’s oft-muddy side streets, for example, non-whites queuing up in front of the Carolina Theatre’s segregated entrance were heavily criticized by whites determined to

vent their displeasure that some primarily “white” facilities were expected to be shared with local blacks and Indians. During the spring and early summer of 1937, a series of letters centered upon North Door crowds erupted into a set of rhetorical broadsides splashed across the editorial pages of the Robesonian after local white resident H. L. Riddle bitterly complained about “the parking of Negroes on the sidewalks along 4th street.”⁷⁷ Temporarily ignoring the fact that the Carolina vigorously separated blacks, Indians, and whites from one another inside the theater, Riddle offered in an editorial titled “The Negro and Fourth Street” a thinly veiled warning to the community about the prospect of imminent racial violence breaking out beside the Carolina’s segregated entrance. Insisting that “I know of no worse a breeding place in Robeson county for a race riot than this same 4th street” sidewalk, Riddle proclaimed that local “negroes should be made to either keep walking or else stand on the edge of the sidewalk [...before...] some hot-headed white man and negro will tangle up there some day and start something that will cost more to stop than the picture show or merchants of 4th street can make in 50 years.” Critical of presumably avaricious theater operators who had intentionally looked past this potentially explosive zone of racial confluence, Riddle argued that “the profit realized by the theatre in my opinion does not justify the risk of having the colored race dominate the entire sidewalk at and near the colored entrance,” and in closing the intransigent Riddle insisted that the Town Board take immediate action “for the good and welfare of both the white and black race.”⁷⁸

Though the Carolina’s managers and Lumberton’s town fathers appeared intended to ignore Riddle’s rant, for the next several weeks his claims incited a flurry of editorials and Letters to the Editor, several of which agreed that the Theatre and the Town Hall should come together to provide a vestibule or designated waiting-area for blacks outside the

Carolina. The debate reflected a strong undercurrent of local white antipathy against the sharing of public space with members of non-white racial groups. However, while Lumberton's leaders chose in 1937 to ignore calls for erecting additional segregationist facilities outside an already tri-segregated theater, the precedent had been set nearly twenty years earlier for municipal agencies to agree to the partitioning of public facilities in order to manage the flow of Robeson's subject minorities through other local exhibitions. Indeed, regional and state officials had long since initiated a program that leveraged the mass appeal of motion-picture exhibitions to serve two specific purposes: to alleviate the social impoverishment of rural residents by providing inexpensive mass entertainments to isolated communities throughout the state, and to invigorate a set of flagging educational and public health initiatives that had floundered in their attempts to effect desired behavioral changes among rural residents. The efforts of several institutions seeking to accomplish these goals had taken the form of Community Service Picture exhibitions.

Organized in 1916, Community Service Picture programs (or CSPs) were spearheaded by North Carolina's Bureau of Community Service (BCS), which recruited additional support from the North Carolina Departments of Education, Agriculture, and Health to form an alliance with independent civic organizations and local school districts to exhibit motion pictures to rural audiences. School district administrators were charged with identifying which local facilities would host the exhibitions as they locally administered the program in conjunction with BCS officials. While the original CSP charter had charged the program with improving the "moral conditions" of rural communities, the program also represented a critical element in the state's campaign to reduce teen-pregnancy and venereal-disease rates by sponsoring educational sessions seeking to lure in sizable audiences with the

prospect of engaging in “wholesome” sports, recreation, and club activities along with “lectures, debates, musicals, [and other] entertainments.”⁷⁹ In their earliest form, CSP exhibitions usually combined lantern-slide shows and community entertainment programs with health and agricultural lectures held in rural schools and churches. Although the program’s inaugural season in 1916 bypassed Robeson entirely, state officials were so encouraged by the program—and especially by the unexpected attendance figures generated in the exhibitions featuring the organization’s single motion-picture projector—that in 1917 they convinced the General Assembly to fund an even more ambitious CSP program designed “to Improve the Social and Educational Conditions of Rural Communities through a series of entertainments varying in number and cost, consisting of moving pictures selected for their entertaining and educational value.”⁸⁰

In spite of the program’s promising start, BCS officials were expanding rural exhibitions at a time when state and national advocates were calling for the imposition of motion-picture censorship boards. North Carolina legislators fully expected the program’s administrators to ensure that inappropriate film content would not be introduced into CSPs. As a result, program officials decided to avoid the potential risk of engaging in film-exchange contracts to source film content similar to the deliveries provided to commercial operators. Instead, they purchased copies of a number of CSP films outright while they also sought to develop an internal exchange to distribute new and recycled film content throughout the entire CSP circuit. The BCS worked to procure additional films recommended by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction for their use in exhibitions that were delivered via portable projectors mounted on specially equipped vehicles capable of travelling to select rural communities scattered across the state.⁸¹ After an initial

screening by members of the North Carolina Board of Education, individual film reels were combined by the BCS into standard six-reel programs generally consisting of two dramatic or historical reels, two educational reels targeting various agricultural or public health-related improvements, and two comedy shorts. Though the General Assembly underwrote most of the program's initial capital expenditures, CSP shows also levied on-site ticket fees generally less than those charged at commercial theaters in order to defray some of the program's ongoing expenses. Each approximately ninety-minute film exhibition was supplemented by a half-hour discussion typically led by local and state health officials, BCS staffers, or farm-demonstration personnel, at least one of whom attended each CSP event at the ten local sites selected to host CSPs within each participating county. Since most counties picked local schools that often lacked auditorium facilities as CSP sites, BCS staffers regularly projected films onto makeshift screens rigged inside classrooms or onto otherwise suitable interior or exterior walls.

Despite these constraints, CSP shows rapidly expanded, and during its 1918 campaign the circuit was expanded into two of the counties adjacent to Robeson.⁸² That year, CSP personnel staged 420 exhibitions serving a total "paid" audience of 43,559 rural North Carolinians.⁸³ Even if these figures failed to count the many youngsters judged too young to be charged an admission fee, CSP officials felt that the calculated average attendance of roughly 100 patrons per show fully justified an additional and significant program expansion because everyone involved freely admitted that perhaps no other state-sponsored county service program had as consistently reached so many rural residents. Indeed, in a year during which many of the state's commercial theaters had been shuttered for months to limit the damage caused by the century's most severe outbreak of influenza,

the number of attendees who paid their way into North Carolina's CSP shows equaled approximately eighty percent of the total population of Robeson County.

However, when CSP officials expanded the program to Robeson County in 1919, they quickly realized that the facilities selected to host the county's shows were operated within three separate race-specific school districts.⁸⁴ Extending CSP shows within the tri-segregated context of Robeson meant that of the ten locally selected CSP sites, one (Union Chapel) would be tasked with targeting local Indians while another (Shannon) was chosen to accommodate the county's black residents.⁸⁵ Despite the fact that the field notes of BCS staffers boasted that "the picture program gives definite purpose and a strong drawing force for the community meetings, thus bringing together regularly all the people of the community and so furnishing numerous and unrivalled opportunities for presentation and discussion of community projects and problems,"⁸⁶ the local segregation requirements in Robeson County utterly confounded the possibility of discussing community-wide issues among audiences truly representative of the community's racial constituencies. In addition, for CSP staffers forced to share a set of eight camera-mounted trucks collectively containing 150 reels of film across exhibitions serving thousands of North Carolinians who may never have stepped inside an actual movie theater, their visits Robeson required them to sub-divide their resources three ways in order to conform to the local pattern of tri-segregation. Though many of the twenty-six counties that hosted CSP exhibitions in 1919 provided the BCS a distinct set of facilities to segregate black from white patrons, and despite the presence of (admittedly) smaller Indian communities in Hoke, Sampson, and other counties also served by CSPs, only in Robeson County were BCS staffers required to create a tri-segregated CSP mini-circuit.

In spite of—or perhaps specifically because of—their tri-segregated format, Robeson’s CSP shows appear to have been remarkably popular. Beginning in 1919, the program’s two-year swing through Robeson resulted in 286 local exhibitions whose aggregate paid-attendance of 29,296 patrons amounted to more than half the county’s federal census total in 1920.⁸⁷ Equally stunned by the program’s continuing growth and thrilled with its capacity to draw significant crowds, state officials scrambled to acquire fresh (albeit pre-screened) CSP film content through an affiliation with the National Academy of Visual Instruction, a consortium of state Universities and Departments of Education that often acted as an advisory group for film purchases. Thanks to additional capital injections from the state, the BCS had positioned itself by 1920 to rotate nearly two dozen film-projection vehicles throughout the state. Yet in order to keep up with an ever-increasing demand for CSP shows, it rented additional projectors from film exchanges and temporarily installed them in particularly popular CSP exhibition sites. Consequently, in the two years following the program’s first major expansion in 1918 the BCS successfully conducted a total of 4,250 CSP exhibitions serving approximately 425,000 rural North Carolina moviegoers.⁸⁸

Cinema historians such as Barbara Klinger have categorized CSP programs as instances of “non-theatrical”⁸⁹ cinema exhibition. Generally ignored by the Hollywood press and unincorporated within its weekly box-office figures, the CSP exhibitions offered in North Carolina deserve the attention of historians, sociologists, and film scholars for at least two reasons. First, CSP shows introduced moviegoing to thousands of rural residents without access to a local theater on at least a semi-regular basis. Second, the ready acquiescence of CSP staffers to implement simultaneously state-sponsored and tri-segregated shows in Robeson provides additional case-study evidence confirming the extent to which

local socio-cultural factors could further delimit or redefine the boundaries of public space within the larger framework of Jim Crow segregation. Indeed, the fact that local expectations effected a tripartite division of CSP projection and staffing capabilities in Robeson (see Figure 6.10) reaffirms Klinger's contention that "thinking about the reception of films in such 'nondedicated' locales is key to grasping the depth and breadth of cinema's social circulation and cultural function."⁹⁰

FREE ! | SPECIAL | FREE !
ANNOUNCEMENT

By Unanimous Endorsement and Vote of County Commissioners, and Through Concerted Co-Operation of Robeson County Cotton Mill Owners.

Extended Two Weeks!

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| MONDAY, OCTOBER 18. Centenary. | FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22 East Lumberton Cotton Mill, Lumberton. | WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27. Prospect, (Indian) |
| TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19 Purvis. | SATURDAY, OCTOBER 23. Jennings Cotton Mill, Lumberton. | THURSDAY, OCTOBER 28 Rennert. |
| THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21 National Cotton Mill, Lumberton. | SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24. St. Pauls Cotton Mill, St. Pauls. | FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29 Jimmy Dial's (Indian) |
| | | SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30 Lumberton (Colored) |

U. S. GOVERNMENT'S

Marvelous Educational

SOCIAL HYGIENE EXHIBITION

Auspices U. S. Public Health Service, American Social Hygiene Association, North Carolina State Board of Health.

WONDER PRODUCING MOVING PICTURES!

Never Before Seen in Robeson County

Free Books! For Men, for Boys, for Girls, for Women, for Parents, for All. Get one.

SEPARATE MEETINGS FOR WHITE, INDIAN AND COLORED

TWICE DAILY! Afternoons, 3:30 p. m. Women Only
 Evenings, 8:00 p. m. Men Only

LOOK FOR THE BANNER!
See the Social Hygiene Field Car!

Figure 6.10: Tri-segregated CSP exhibition schedule published in the Robesonian (21-Oct-1920, p. 4). Note that some CSP shows were segregated by gender as well as by race.

Given the general absence of non-white theaters in Robeson, the county's non-white moviegoers were probably limited to a single exhibition option, namely Community Service Pictures, from late-1919 until well into the mid-1920s. Though CSPs served a multi-racial county, no individual CSP shows appear to have been multi-racial events. In fact, throughout their approximately decade-long run Robeson's CSP exhibitions were publicized through small weekly newspaper advertisements whose parenthesized racial markers (e.g. "colored" and "Indian") effectively amounted to the county's non-white exhibition schedule.

Additionally, newspaper evidence indicates that non-white CSP attendees also expected to attend tri-segregated facilities, and at times fully insisted upon them. For instance, two weeks after the initial announcement of Robeson's CSP exhibition sites, a Letter to the Editor entitled "Union Chapel is Indian" claimed that inaccurate racial coding of CSP announcements might lead to socially undesirable, and potentially to violent, outcomes. Under the mistaken impression that Union Chapel had been labeled as a "Negro" site, the letter's author warned that "...if the show will be expecting to show for coloreds *they better not come*. I hope the mistake will be corrected *before* it comes."⁹¹

Ongoing tensions over the potential co-location of blacks and Indians extended well beyond Union Chapel-based CSP shows, particularly at a time when Indians had begun more aggressively to pursue improvements in the public facilities and social opportunities that were made available to them. As the local economic importance of Indians in conjunction with the Indian percentage of the county's total population rose during the 1930s, the moviegoing grievances of Indians had extended to complaints forwarded to the manager of the theater closest to Pembroke, the Red Springs Theatre, about the relegation of Native Americans there to a segregated (albeit tri-segregated) balcony.⁹² Though the introduction of tri-

segregated balconies marginally improved Indian moviegoing satisfaction, at least one local Indian demonstrated both the disdain the disdain with which Indians regarded bi-racial or “non-white” balconies and the immanent desire of Robeson’s Indians to claim a moviegoing space all their own.

In 1926, the operators of the Pastime Theatre finally added a 140-seat balcony to their site, even though these same managers could not have foreseen that within two years their theater would be doomed to operating infrequently as a “second run” operation for more than twenty years after the opulent, two-and-a-half story Carolina Theatre opened just a few blocks to the southeast. During one of the Pastime’s periodic “re-openings,” its managers in 1934 advertised a special—and locally unprecedented—seating re-configuration had established a “balcony of 100 seats exclusively for Indians.”⁹³



The **PASTIME** Theatre
"The Family Theatre"
Opens SATURDAY, August 18th
Admission Prices: Children 10c, Adults 20c
Showing first run pictures . . . A few outstanding
Photoplays will be shown second run.
FOR SATURDAY, AUGUST 18th
Tom Tyler in "TRACY RIDES"
PLUS GOOD SHORT SUBJECTS
Balcony of 100 seats exclusively for Indians.

Figure 6.11: Pastime Theatre’s “Indian” Balcony advertisement (1934).⁹⁴

Nevertheless, a few weeks later a slightly modified advertisement indicated that a significant seating-policy reversal had again reconfigured the Pastime's balcony—but this time as “colored” space.



Figure 6.12: Revised Pastime Theatre “Colored” Balcony advertisement.⁹⁵

Precisely what contributed to this sudden policy shift remains unclear, though it is possible that the theater intended to divide the balcony space temporally between blacks and Indians on different days of the week. According to Ernest Hancock’s mid-1930s county study, only six of the county’s 12,405 Indians lived in the immediate vicinity of Lumberton. Since it would have been impractical to expect that local Indians could have provided the Pastime with a steady weekday trade, its managers may have intended to maximize Indian attendance on Saturdays, or when out-of-towners were most likely to visit Lumberton. For if it were the true that Indians and blacks could not readily coexist in the same balcony space, then

redirecting its weekday orientation from “Indian” to “colored” would have made more economic sense.⁹⁶

Whatever the intentions of the Pastime’s managers may have been, the following fairly remarkable Letter to the Editor was published in the Robesonian two weeks after the modified-balcony ads had announced a balcony realignment favoring local blacks:

I was in Lumberton with some other Indians recently and we went to the show at the Pastime theatre, which was opened some time ago as a theatre for the white and Indian people and no one else, but now negroes are allowed in the indian department. We are not going in there anymore. The theatre was working up a good trade with Indian people, but we do not want to be mixed up with the negroes. We couldn’t even get in that afternoon, for the house was running over with negroes.

We have to work on the farm all through the week and could come to the show only on Saturday, when many of the negroes are in town all week and could go any time they get ready. We don’t have to club up with Negroes and we don’t have to go to the show at all. We won’t go in there any more as long as the negroes are allowed to go. I hope you can print this.

Yours truly, Hansel Holmes.⁹⁷

Holmes’ willingness to risk reprisals or public censure for submitting a racially inflammatory editorial to a white-owned newspaper underscores the depth of the resentment Indians could feel due to their lack of non-segregated moviegoing options. Though the Robesonian likely published Holmes’ letter (1) because it conformed to local white stereotypes about the frequency of violence breaking out between local blacks and Indians, and (2) because it helped to perpetuate interracial antagonisms between the very groups that whites needed to divide in order to forestall the creation of a non-white political majority, the frustrations expressed in Holmes’ letter were shared by Indians angered by the second-class treatment that continued to confront them in local theaters. This and similar public-venue treatments left deep emotional scars on those suffering from what Lumbee historian Brenda Dial Deese has categorized as the intentional “segregation and overt discrimination” that continued to be

directed at Robeson's non-whites well beyond the 1960s and 1970s. According to Deese, members of the Lumbee community typically resigned themselves into an acceptance of the proposition that "there were places where young Indians just did not go,"⁹⁸ while the oral histories Deese collected offer several instances of Indian frustration and anger lingering long after dissatisfying local moviegoing experiences. Influential Indian educator Purnell Swett, for example, never forgot that he had been forced to "swallow my pride and [sit] upstairs" at a white theater, and he vowed never again to subject himself to it.⁹⁹ Decades after the fact a second lifelong Native American advocate and local Lumbee leader, Bruce Barton, frankly admitted his "undisguised anger" at the "age-old racism and discrimination" practiced in venues like the Carolina Theatre. To Barton, these sites subjected Indians to discriminatory experiences so shameful and humiliating that "even today I feel almost like killing someone when I think about it."¹⁰⁰

As noted in Brewton Berry's account of the daily living conditions of several commonly multi-ethnic "mestizo"¹⁰¹ groups, Lumbees were not alone in their resentment of the second-class treatment afforded them in segregated theaters. However, this resentment was founded partially on the determination of Indians to resist the prevailing assumption among whites that Indians represented a mixed-race group more closely linked both genetically and culturally to African Americans than to whites. For example, according to Berry the "Guineas," i.e., a West Virginia-based group descended from a mixture of white, Indian and African American ancestors that tended to self-identify as Indian, strongly objected to being required "to occupy the segregated seats in local movie theaters" because the action socially equated them with Negroes.¹⁰² Within a number of mixed-race groups possessing as varied a phenotype set as Lumbees, Berry documented more than a few

instances of Indians “passing” regularly into white theaters. In fact, some Indians including the members of South Carolina’s “Brass Ankle” clan preferred to travel significant distances in order to attend drive-in theaters at night rather than patronize local white theaters because, as one local mail carrier explained, “when it’s dark and all, they can get by as white.”¹⁰³

However, none of the communities profiled by Berry appear to have developed tri-segregated theaters, and since theatrical segregation co-locating Indians with African Americans often infuriated Indians, Berry noted that most of the latter simply refused to frequent theaters which placed them at a social disadvantage. For example, when asked whether or not he had viewed a popular recent film, one of Berry’s subjects explained his reasons for boycotting motion pictures generally:

I don’t go to the movies. They make us Indians sit upstairs with niggers. Balcony is divided by a rail—niggers on one side, Indians on the other. I don’t mind sittin’ next to niggers, but I don’t like the idea of being put on a lower plane. This is the only town I’ve ever been in where I am told to take a back seat because I was an Indian. I wouldn’t go to the movies if they would give me a free ticket.”¹⁰⁴

Robeson’s Indians also avoided white theaters, though for that matter they tended to avoid white towns for similar reasons. When in town, Indians attempted diligently to avoid contact with local whites and, most especially, with local blacks.¹⁰⁵ Yet Indian moviegoing opportunities were about to expand significantly only a few short years after H. L. Riddle had scurrilously castigated Lumberton’s black moviegoers and Hansel Holmes had rejected co-location with blacks in the Pastime’s balcony. The increasing economic prosperity and social influence of local Indians was re-affirmed during the 1930s thanks to the symbolically resonant re-configuration of a theater located in Pembroke, North Carolina. Though the town of Pembroke had grown relatively slowly during the first decades of the new century, the preponderance of Indian settlements dotting the greater Pembroke region meant that as early

as 1910, fully eighty-three percent of the residents within greater Pembroke Township were Indian.¹⁰⁶ If by 1910 Indians represented only 12% of Robeson's total population, their consistently positive population growth rates during a period of significant black emigration had nearly doubled that figure by 1940 to 22%. During the 1930s, local Native American activism resulted in several important civil victories, including the approval of a legislative petition enabling Robeson County's Indians to vote more directly for Indian candidates in local governmental elections.¹⁰⁷ By 1937, or the year in which they finally reacquired the right to serve on local juries, Indians had also begun to change the landscape of Pembroke's commercial infrastructure through an initiative which Lumbees hoped would lead to a more "comfortable" (i.e., a more socially acceptable) moviegoing option.

One of the most unexpected factors in the development of the first picture show operated in the most densely populated Indian community located east of the Mississippi was that the Pembroke Theatre was neither built nor initially managed by Native Americans.¹⁰⁸ Rather, the theater was originally developed by local white businessmen working in cooperation with the Pates Supply Company, a firm that had managed for decades a series of trading posts, general stores, hardware stores, and agricultural supply depots in the swamp-cut region situated halfway between Lumberton and Maxton. Cinema development represented an odd choice for Pates, and the reasons why Pembroke's largest commercial enterprise chose to support local entrepreneurs in developing a local movie house remain a mystery. However, since it controlled virtually all of the property surrounding the most important rail intersection in the county (see Figure 6.13), Pates may have anticipated an economic windfall from a theater situated alongside rail links that simultaneously reduced the transportation burden of visiting moviegoers as well as theater staffers needing to travel to

film distributors in Charlotte, Atlanta, and the Northeast. Given its long history in Pembroke, Pates certainly would have understood that no in-town theater could survive without a significant amount of Indian patronage, though perhaps the greatest uncertainty facing the new operation was whether or not Indians would patronize a local theater at all. With the exception of CSPs, for that matter, no regular commercial exhibitions appear to have occurred within Pembroke since a series of film screenings had been held in the auditorium of the Indian Normal School during the autumns of 1926 and 1927.¹⁰⁹

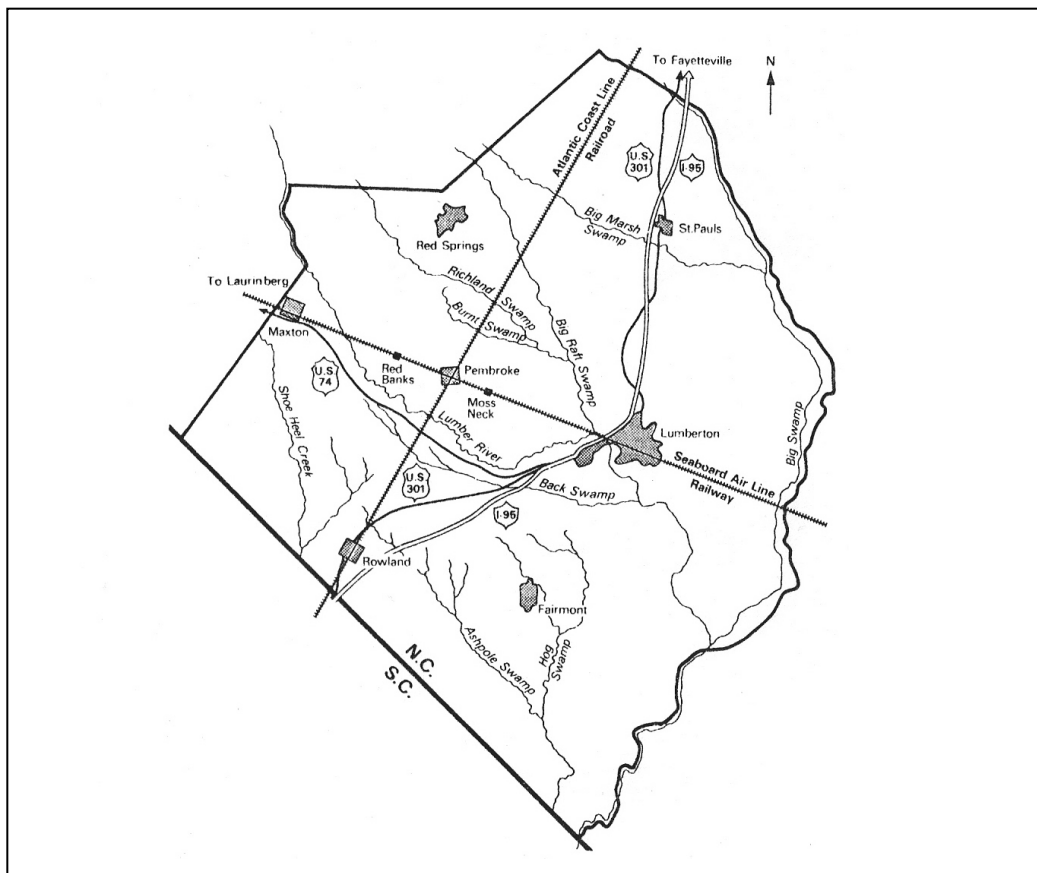


Figure 6.13: Map featuring Robeson County's principal regional rail lines.¹¹⁰

Undeterred, principal shareholder R. H. Livermore encouraged the Pates group to permit the development of a motion-picture facility in a two-story building fronting the primary east-west thoroughfare passing through central Pembroke. In April 1937, Pates leased the site to the Rogers Brothers, a pair of white siblings who outfitted the theater's

interior, acquired its projectors, and arranged for film its deliveries.¹¹¹ In short order, the Rogers' new venue began to offer film exhibitions in Pembroke six days a week; however, the site only changed its programs every other day, presumably in an attempt to keep its start-up costs low. For reasons that remain unknown, within a few months the Pembroke experienced its first managerial shake-up. By November, its managership had been transferred to an experienced theater-operator named Charles Tucker, who had worked in the tri-segregated Red Springs Theatre for the past seven years.

The austerity of Tucker's largely unadorned new posting may have suggested to the site's new manager that he had committed a retrograde career move. A relatively small theater seating approximately 275 patrons, the Pembroke featured relatively crude environmental controls. Each winter, the site's projectionists tended a pair of coal-fired, pot-bellied stoves located near the front of the Pembroke's auditorium. During the summer, its stifling temperatures were relieved only marginally by a large fan stationed near the stage.¹¹² The Pembroke's seats were neither particularly comfortable nor spacious, and while the auditorium's wooden seats were padded, the Pembroke's balcony seats were not. The general austerity of the site was only partially relieved by a street-front which featured a glass-enclosed ticket booth seated between two plain-painted walls usually spattered with a hodgepodge of movie posters and advertisements. The short marquee extending several feet over the sidewalk offered the patrons who lined up outside the venue's separate entry and exit doors very little protection from the elements, while a third door located to the right of the main entrance opened onto a stairwell leading upstairs to a small balcony containing roughly two-dozen seats located to the right of the theater's projection booth. Staring

outward towards the Pembroke's motion-picture screen, the theater's balcony looked down upon a twin-aisled auditorium that contained no segregated partitions or barricades.

Tucker's experience operating a tri-segregated theater, however, left him ill-prepared to manage a site whose success critically depended upon satisfying the preferences of Native American moviegoers. Indians, who had been shunted to a tri-segregated balcony in Tucker's previous theater, claimed the right to sit beside white patrons in the Pembroke Theatre's main auditorium, even though no other venue in contemporary Robesonian exhibition permitted the direct intermingling of white and non-white patrons. Indians also tended to avoid sitting in the Pembroke's balcony, for though it bore no placards or signs to confirm the fact, the theater's balcony had been designated by white and Indian consent as the theater's sole seating location for African American patrons. According Jesse Oxendine, "it was just understood" that blacks were to be relegated to the Pembroke's balcony, and the theater's managers appear neither to have considered seating blacks alongside white and Indians patrons in the theater's main hall, or of seating each racial group within one of the site's three auditorium sections. No documents currently available indicate that African Americans ever protested publicly against their universal relegation to balconies in Robeson's theaters, and according to Oxendine they quietly accepted the segregated conditions offered to them in the Pembroke Theatre.¹¹³ Yet to the surprise of the theater's first white operators, the same could not be said of local Indians, who bristled at attempts to restrict their movements in the Pembroke. Moreover, the theater's original seating policies quickly resulted in Indian dissention, as demonstrated in the following excerpt of an interview with early theater employee Elizabeth Stubbs:

We seldom have any trouble at the picture show here. The Negroes sit in the balcony, the Indians in the right and middle sections [...and...] the whites in the left section.

A white girl takes up tickets at the door where whites and a part of the Indians enter and an Indian boy takes up tickets at the door where the Negroes and the Indians enter.

Mr. Rogers, the owner, always reserves the last row of the white section for himself.¹¹⁴ One of the men who are laying the telephone wires here and who made a lot of friends among the Indians went into the show and sat down on the back row. Some of his Indians chums came in, saw him over there and went over to join him.

Mr. Rogers immediately went over and told them they would have to get over on the Indian side because they were in his seat. They got mad and said they wouldn't do it, but when Mr. Rogers insisted they replied that if they couldn't sit where they wanted to they would [leave] and they got up and left.

On the outside [of the theater] they mobbed up in front of the show and began telling on the streets that the whites were discriminating against Indians in the movie.¹¹⁵

The precise response of the Pembroke Theatre's white managers to these charges of segregationist behavior remains unknown; nonetheless, both the Rogers Brothers and their successor Tucker departed the Pembroke after relatively brief tenures. Their next Pembroke Theatre manager was James C. Oxendine, a local Indian businessman (and eventual Pembroke mayor) who relaxed the racial divisions imposed by white managers on the Pembroke's main floor, thereby transforming under Indian stewardship the Pembroke's bi-racially segregated auditorium into a non-segregated space allowing whites and Indians to freely commingle. According to Oxendine's son Jesse, this arrangement did not elicit formal objections from the theater's white patrons, in all likelihood because Indian boycotts would effectively have shuttered the theater and forced local whites to travel roughly ten or fifteen miles to another "white" theater. Furthermore, whites may have decided not to protest Indian co-location because according to Jesse Oxendine, Indians and whites tended to self-segregate within the auditorium. However, there can be little doubt that either Pates or the combined local white and Indian populations of Pembroke would have tolerated the theater had it become a fully integrated facility. Despite the relative freedom Indians exercised on the

main floor of the Pembroke, they too shunted blacks to the poorest seats available—an outcome that held true in every Robeson theater.

Within the context of local racial hierarchies, however, the Native American managers and patrons of Pembroke theaters had adopted segregationist tactics that created for Indians a socially progressive form of cinematic space. Indians understood that the profoundest fear of the county's white power-base was a political and social alliance between blacks and Indians, and therefore in certain social situations (and in particular, during events patronized by significant number of Indians) whites tended to promote Indians socially at the expense of blacks. A small number of key public facilities remained bi- rather than tri- racially segregated, including the local bus and train depots outfitted with what amounted to “black” and “non-black” waiting rooms. Whenever possible, Pembroke's Indians followed this alternative bi-racial model and did so again by inverting the standard racial hierarchy applied to a Robesonian theater balcony, which while formulated elsewhere as “non-white” space was reconfigured in Pembroke as “black only” space. In addition, the universally “white only” theater auditorium was restructured in Pembroke as a “non black” space simultaneously serving white and Indian patrons.

Both of these moves confirm the general pattern of African American “hypersegregation,” which according to urban-sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton remained the fundamental consequence of twentieth-century American race prejudice.¹¹⁶ Nonetheless, the re-architecting of Jim Crow space specifically within Pembroke theaters represented a missed opportunity to implement racially identical moviegoing conditions within the center of a tri-racial community. Yet regardless of their shared daily experience as victims of Jim Crow, Robeson's Indians engaged in a re-mapping of the boundaries of

segregation that intentionally relegated blacks to bottom-rung status. This action, however, begs the question as to why it would have seemed necessary to Indians to join whites in subjecting blacks to the most aggressive form of segregation possible within an Indian-operated theater?

While a number of potential factors exist for the denial of black access to Pembroke theater auditoriums, none of them indicate that Robeson's Indians viewed African Americans any more sympathetically than did the county's dominant white community. The inversion of cinematic segregation offered local Indians an opportunity to reverse, in a small yet symbolically resonant way, a series of indignities that they believed originally stemmed from their assignment to a proscriptive racial category which limited Native American prospects due to the close association of Indians with African Americans. As part of a series of amendments to the North Carolina constitution in 1835, the state denied voting and several other key civil rights to all non-white residents. These amendments may have relegated Indians to the status of "free people of color," but Indians remained "free" largely in name only, since the designation's elimination of their ability to affect political change substantially diminished their economic and social opportunities. For more than a century, Indians effectively remained dispossessed of the civil and social rights that remained available to whites, who they blamed as the principal architects of white supremacy. However, they also partially blamed the African American community that most observers agreed had been the primary target of the state's legislated racial discrimination. In that sense, Indians unfairly resented blacks for the development of a binary form of segregation whose conflation of Indian-ness with black-ness had been given constitutional currency in North Carolina.

The contemporary social grievances of Indians against African Americans were partially documented by Guy Benton Johnson,¹¹⁷ a social anthropologist who in the summer of 1948 moved his family into temporary quarters in Pembroke to embark upon a study that local newspapers credited as representing the first extensive sociological research performed within the Lumbee community.¹¹⁸ According to Johnson's field notes, "blood prejudice" formed the basis of local Indian intermediacy, while the local segregation patterns founded upon "the racial exclusiveness of the white people" had been fully informed by the "doctrines of white supremacy and Negro inferiority" along with an accompanying "race snobbishness."¹¹⁹ Discriminatory practices aimed at marginalizing blacks were occasionally relaxed to enable Indians to occupy an "intermediate position" in a region where whites socially ranked Indians higher than blacks.¹²⁰ Johnson observed that in those situations in which tripartite accommodations proved impractical, the resulting bi-racial solutions that left Indians "classed at the bottom" with local blacks infuriated Indians upset at having been subjected to black co-location without their consent. Johnson also understood that Indians, who remained "all rural" while engaging in "relatively few contacts with whites" were determined to avoid situations in which verbal or other conflicts could arise over their relative social status. As such, Johnson fully anticipated that their placement within local movie houses would remain a bone of contention among Robeson Indians. In fact, Johnson's first published work concerning the social status of Robeson Indians included references to the less-than-fully-satisfactory experiences of Indians at a local theater, almost certainly the Red Springs Theatre, whose separate black and Indian balconies represented for Johnson an unmistakable signpost on the road to the institutionalization of tri-racial segregation. Aware of the "tendency of whites to separate [the] Indian in [the] same way as Negroes but always

giving [the] Indian a little better of it,” Johnson understood “the theatre seating arrangements at Red Springs,” in fact, to be “symbolic of the whole situation.”¹²¹

By early 1937, or the same year that the Pembroke Theatre opened, one of Johnson’s Indian “informants”¹²² had summarized for Johnson what the sociologist came to view as the general consensus among Robeson’s Indians about the restrictions imposed by racial difference in local affairs: “We are really white, that’s what we are. But the white people treat us mean—try to treat us just like they do colored people.”¹²³ Convinced that Indians tended to “despise Negroes, and have a sort of dualistic attitude towards Whites,” Johnson recognized that just as “whites draw a line between themselves and the Indians and Negroes,” Robeson’s “Indians draw a line between themselves and the Negroes.” For even if Indians “are not permitted equality with Whites,” they doggedly continued to “refuse to accept the status of Negroes.”¹²⁴ Johnson’s writings also indicate his belief that the aspiration of Robeson’s Indians to achieve greater social equality with whites required them to avoid any association with “blackness,” thereby resulting in the condition that “among Indians nothing is more taboo than to suggest they possess either Negro social or physical traits.”¹²⁵

These sentiments, of course, failed to endear Indians to local blacks, who remained fully conscious not only of the fact that Indians had avoided the experience of slavery that had been inflicted upon many African Americans, but also that a few of Robeson’s Native Americans had themselves been owners of black slaves. Once Indians were constitutionally redesignated as “people of color,” they refused to send their children to the only educational alternative available to white schools, i.e., to state-supported black schools, even though by doing so Indians effectively boycotted formal educational opportunities for their children for

several generations until the establishment of an infrastructure to train Indians to teach in Indian-specific schools. From the perspective of African Americans, Indians had blamed them unfairly for the imposition of a cultural hierarchy that restricted Indian economic and cultural advancement. At the same time, they commonly resented Indians for the latter's propensity for "taking on airs," a coded phrase regularly occurring in Johnson's field notes that reflected the disdain with which African Americans regarded those Indians whose behavior suggested a belief in the inherent cultural superiority of Indians to blacks. In Johnson's view, Robeson's blacks also quietly envied the willingness of Indians publicly to pursue concessions from whites in order to improve their relative social position.

In contrast to Johnson's generally white perspective, however, it is unlikely that Indians actually wished they were white. Rather, they largely viewed themselves as a distinct social group that desired a social, political, and economic status no less privileged than that accorded to other regional ethnic groups.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, Johnson's account of the mutual antipathy that existed between a large number of Robeson's black and Indian residents helps to explain why non-whites avoided moviegoing experiences involving bi-segregated facilities. Moreover, attending a white theater under white-imposed conditions required non-whites publicly to acknowledge the existence of the despised racial identities whose limitations they sought to reject. Such an acknowledgement was made all the more humiliating by the fact that segregated moviegoing at least minimally required the tacit acceptance of such labels within full view of the region's *other* Others. Under these circumstances, the development of Pembroke-based theatres certainly resulted in the first set of local moviegoing facilities that were socially palatable for Indians.¹²⁷ The seating precedent set by the Pembroke Theatre, namely the inversion of "black vs. non-black" balcony

space, was repeated in October 1947 when Pembroke's second movie house, the 300-seat Westside Theatre, opened one decade after the Pembroke. Still, if the Westside's balcony and seating configuration largely mirrored those of the Pembroke Theatre, the Westside differed from the Pembroke in at least one important respect: while the latter had been initially opened and operated by whites, the former was owned and operated by Indians from the time of its inception.¹²⁸

Even so, Pembroke's theaters did not represent the only local institution through which Robeson's Indians sought to distance themselves from African Americans—and from mixed-blood Indians considered a little too African American for local tastes. While it has been widely reported that blacks, Indians, and whites attended separate school systems in Robeson County, scholars have often overlooked the fact that the county's Indians participate in the systematic denial of the requests of families also claiming an Indian heritage to attend local Indian schools. Beginning in the mid-1910s, the members of a group of families referred to as “Smiling” Indians,¹²⁹ most of whom had emigrated into Robeson from South Carolina, were required both by school administrators and by the local court system to send their children to a *fourth* Robeson County school system. Smiling children were refused the permission to enroll in county Indian schools largely due to racial prejudice based on the assumption that the bloodlines of Smiling families involved too extensive an intermingling of African and Native American forebears. Contemporary court testimony indicates that though Smiling petitioners strove to distance themselves from their African American heritage by stressing their Indian kinship relationships, they failed to convince school officials to permit their children to enter Indian facilities that were widely considered to be superior both to local black and Smiling schools. In this case, non-white racial prejudice helped for several decades to create and sustain a *fourth* distinct racial

sub-group in Robeson County.¹³⁰ Though it is unclear where Smilings would have been required to sit in Pembroke theaters, their treatment regarding school assignments confirmed, no less strongly than did the relegation of blacks to Pembroke's segregated balconies, Gerald Sider's assertion that formulations of ethnicity amid multiple sets of minority groups usually involve "expressions of the historically developing logic of domination based upon difference and distance," and given the intermediate position of Indians in Robeson County, these expressions could both be "imposed from above and claimed from below."¹³¹

Consequently, the development of tri-segregated theaters in Robeson County along with the inverted balcony standards implemented in Indian theaters attest to the corrosive racial dynamics that shaped Robesonian moviegoing. And though cinema histories sensitive to race have tended to incorporate a bi-racial (i.e., black/white) perspective, Robesonian moviegoing provides ample evidence to demonstrate that multiple subordinated groups could and did face distinctly different moviegoing experiences within theaters located roughly ten miles apart. Robesonian moviegoing additionally confirms the fact that historically discriminatory moviegoing practices were not implemented exclusively by white businessmen, theater operators, or audiences. Indians viewed moviegoing as a kind of public space within which to stake their claim for an improved social status. In the wake of the Westside Theatre's opening, Pembroke's status as the smallest Robeson community—by far—simultaneously to support two theaters reflected the determination of Indians to expand the set of racially de-stigmatized public venues available to them. Whether or not the pattern of Robeson's tri-segregated occurred elsewhere within the United States is currently unknown, though Brewton Berry's account of an unnamed Carolina town whose Saturday afternoon theatrical conditions mirrored the conditions in and around the Pembroke Theatre (right down to the

popcorn machine located outside the theater) at least suggests that venues like the Pembroke and the Westside may not necessarily have been completely unique:

At two o'clock the movie opened its doors. Negroes bought their popcorn along with the others, but they purchased their tickets and entered the theater by the side door, and sat in the balcony. Whites and mestizos entered by the front door, and sat downstairs.¹³²

Even so, these alternatives to purely “white” moviegoing indicate that, at least in some Southern communities, non-whites now and then “certainly seemed to enjoy the status of whites.” Yet even Berry believed, as Pembroke’s balconies clearly demonstrated, that at some point “everybody, I am convinced, draws the color line somewhere.”¹³³

Therefore, while James Brooks has encouraged his ethno-historiographic peers to seek out Native and African American “archives and field sites in the hope of recovering moments of alliance between these victims of Euro-American expansion,” Pembroke’s theaters alternatively represented precisely the sites that for Brooks embodied some of the “less heartening moments in the relationship” between blacks and Indians.¹³⁴ Even if one accepts the claim of Lumbee historians Adolph Dial and David Eliades that the modern Lumbee experience has fundamentally involved the continuing “struggle to gain acceptance as Indians, to escape the effects of discriminatory laws and to join the mainstream of society as first-class citizens,”¹³⁵ it is difficult to deny that Indians seated in Pembroke’s theaters temporarily managed to discard a specific local signifier of second-class citizenship by perpetuating a pattern of discriminatory treatment directed at African Americans. Thus, even in Pembroke theaters the Woodwardian thesis held: individual human choices were responsible for the creation, perpetuation, and manipulation of systems of racial categorization and racial discrimination. In the post-Reconstruction South, where “it was not yet an accepted corollary that the subordinates had to be totally segregated and needlessly humiliated by a thousand daily reminders of their

subordination...there were still real choices to be made, and [though] alternatives to the course eventually pursued with such single-minded unanimity and unquestioning conformity were still available,”¹³⁶ in Robeson these choices did not allow for the placement of African Americans on an equal social footing with whites and, in some cases, with Indians. In addition, Robeson’s Native American theaters particularly support Brooks’ contention that “while we know well that racial boundary-setting...loomed large in imposing artificial divisions over the reality of ethnic and racial intermixture, we must also come to terms with the role of hybrid peoples...in the assertion and continuing construction of ethnic and racial difference.”¹³⁷ By transgressively re-architecting previously “non-white” balconies into “black-only” spaces, Pembroke’s theaters partially challenged the power structures set into place by Robeson’s white community. Yet Karen Blu’s hypothesis that “so far, improvements within each non-White community *generally* have not been perceived as having been made at the expense of the other” requires at least some qualification in light of the circumstances surrounding Pembroke moviegoing.¹³⁸

Finally, this case study of Pembroke moviegoing verifies ethnohistorian Laura Lovett’s claim that while “Lumbees resisted their own categorization as ‘colored,’” they did not necessarily “question the system that maintained a racial hierarchy of ‘white’ over ‘colored.’” Consequently, “Lumbees were seen by their African American neighbors as trying to disassociate” themselves, and were thereby “viewed as complicit in the discriminatory effects of segregation.”¹³⁹ So although Pembroke moviegoing represented a mildly aggressive movement by Indians in the direction of greater social equality, it simultaneously sabotaged its potential to encourage broader and more equitable local reforms by virtue of its exclusivity. Nevertheless, Pembroke moviegoing offers a clear demonstration of Tiya Miles’s ethnohistoric prediction that when “we look at African American history and Native American history side-by-side rather

than in isolation, we will see the edges where those histories meet and begin to comprehend a fuller and more fascinating picture” of specific interactions that will enable scholars and community leaders to foster a “greater understanding of the histories of both groups.”¹⁴⁰

In pursuing such an understanding, it will be important neither to engage in fulsome praise of the way in which Robeson’s Indians established a zone of relative white-Indian egalitarianism in Pembroke theaters, nor to criticize overmuch their failure to effect a more thorough level of theater integration a quarter of a century before the U.S. government forced the hand of exhibition segregationists. Even if it is true that Pembroke moviegoing represented a case in which one social reform opportunity was taken while another was missed, cinema historian Janet Staiger has instructed her fellow historians to “avoid correlating political effectivity” with moviegoing transgressivity; rather, Staiger recommends that we consider each episode “as a whole—within its historical context and its historical consequences” prior to making “any kind of evaluative claims about whether the meanings are progressive or conservative. And for whom.”¹⁴¹ For even as some exceptions to local, regional, and national patterns of segregation did occur in Pembroke theaters, the discriminatory pressures that targeted all non-whites continued to dominate the Robeson County moviegoing landscape and usually precluded the outcome desired by many film-industry leaders who hoped to base the cinema’s “appeal on the promise of transporting their audiences beyond the here and now of their daily lives.”¹⁴² For how complete could the transportation from the conditions of everyday life have been when viewed from the perspective of those who occupied a bi- or tri-segregated balcony?

In addition, it is critical to bear in mind that admission to almost all of Robeson’s theaters could be instantly and easily denied to any and all non-white patrons. The managers of

Robeson's segregated theaters could and did close their doors to blacks and Indians during civic-sponsored events, for example, especially in those cases when an audience was expected to consist of an unusually high concentration of women, children, or young adults. In April of 1940, the High Point College Dramatic Club scheduled its performance of a stage show titled *The Milky Way* at Lumberton's Carolina Theatre. Since the show's profits were intended to help fund the local (all-white) high-school band, the members of the Lumberton Merchants Association responsible for selling the show's tickets targeted white youngsters and their parents. As a consequence of that marketing strategy, several newspaper stories promoting the show carefully mentioned temporary modifications to the theater's seating policies: "the side entrance to the theatre will be closed that night, and all balcony seats will be sold along with the downstairs seats, with the entire attendance handled through the main entrance."¹⁴³ In other words, blacks and Indians had effectively been banned from the event, while their usual seats were offered instead to standing-room, and all-white, crowds.

Though few of Lumberton's Indian or black residents likely objected publicly to their exclusion from this specific fundraiser, the fact remains that the choice of whether to attend the program or not had been denied to them. Furthermore, this denial could be repeated even if an evening's entertainment content featured them, their neighbors, and their entire home town. During the latter years of the Great Depression, a Lexington photographer-turned-documentarian named H. Lee Waters produced and exhibited dozens of silent films featuring the daily activities of the residents of small-to-medium sized towns scattered across several Southern states.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Waters' "Movies of Local People," for which Waters selected as "his subject...the texture of daily life for average people," remained the breadth of town activities and local scenes that he captured on film.¹⁴⁵ To

maximize his potential gate receipts, Waters filmed images of as many residents (including non-white residents) as he reasonably could at work, school, church, and at play. A meticulous record-keeper, Waters maintained an exhibition logbook that records the attendance figures stemming from two Robeson County shows.¹⁴⁶ The first of these occurred in Red Springs in April 1938, while Waters' Lumberton film was exhibited two days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in late-1941.¹⁴⁷ Yet at a time when the theaters in both towns were fully tri-segregated, these records indicate that neither the Red Springs nor Lumberton exhibitions were viewed by non-white patrons. In fact, though twenty-eight percent of Waters' logbook records include gate figures for "colored" attendees, the Robeson entries include no such figures. In addition, since the attendance figures at both Robeson exhibitions either closely approached or exceeded the aggregate gate capacities of the theaters in which they occurred, and due to the fact that the figures in Waters' account book indicate that each theater's balcony operated at or near its capacity without differentiating between white and non-white patron totals, the inescapable conclusion is that in Lumberton, whose residents had lobbied for years to see their town on film,¹⁴⁸ the local white demand to see the Waters film exceeded the number of seats available to whites who could be accommodated within the theater's standard segregated configuration. In both towns, therefore, it seems that the surplus of white patrons was shifted to the balcony without any consideration being given to the fact that the Lumberton film certainly (and the Red Springs film probably) contained scenes featuring many of the town's non-whites.¹⁴⁹

Clearly, even fully tri-segregated facilities could abandon their established seating policies to favor white audiences, and if circumstances required it, theater managers could simply shutter a theater's non-white entrance.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, despite the exception that

Pembroke theaters represented to the universal rule of black and Indian subordination in Robeson, the standard pattern of discrimination defining most local moviegoing sites through 1950 was even advertised within pages of the Pembroke Progress, one of several hometown Robeson newspapers that had been incorporated into a regional news circuit. Although the Progress at one time was edited by an Indian—in fact by Lew Barton, Bruce Barton’s father—both of the Bartons were doubtless discouraged to learn that the newspaper serving one of the country’s most densely populated Indian communities partly funded itself through advertisements that had been purchased by Robeson’s tri-segregated theaters (see Figure 6.14).

RIVERSIDE
THEATRE

SATURDAY LATE SHOW 9:50
MONDAY - TUESDAY
THE WORLD'S GREATEST LOVE STORY

Becomes a Great Motion Picture!



Hedy Lamarr as Delilah



Victor Mature as Samson



George Sanders as The Sasan



Angela Lansbury as Samaria



Henry Wilcoxon as Abiur



see treacherous Delilah betray the man she loves!
see Samson kill a lion with his bare hands!



Cecil B. DeMille's Masterpiece
Samson and Delilah
Color by TECHNICOLOR
Starring
HEDY LAMARR · VICTOR MATURE · GEORGE SANDERS
ANGELA LANSBURY · HENRY WILCOXON
Produced and Directed by Cecil B. DeMille
A Paramount Picture

| | | |
|----------------------------------|------|------------------|
| Admission This Attraction | | |
| ADULT | | |
| Matinee | 60c | Indian & Colored |
| Night | 1.00 | 50c All Day |
| Children 25c All Times | | |
| These Prices Include Federal Tax | | |

Figure 6.14: Tri-segregated ticket-pricing ladder originally published in the [Pembroke Progress](#).¹⁵¹

Their discouragement would have been familiar to anthropologist and social historian Gerald Sider. After having worked for decades among Robeson's Native and African American residents, Sider concluded that the daily lived experience of Robeson's non-whites had long involved "a range of ordinary, ongoing, and inescapable struggles over the changing ways ethnicity is used to shape different kinds of lives at the local level and in society at

large.”¹⁵² Without dismissing the importance of ethnic identity in developing local inequities in relative social, political, and economic power, Sider believes that for racial repression to be effective and sustainable it must be expressed systematically through “the usually more slowly changing forms of humiliation and degradation that are so crucial to the perpetuation of domination and exploitation.”¹⁵³ In Robeson, those forms included moviegoing within racially discriminatory motion-picture theaters. Such sites both perpetuated Jim Crow prejudices and inflicted a shameful burden on non-white victims who, in their powerless frustration, generally hesitated to articulate the burdens of their experiences to outsiders.

During one of his many visits to Robeson, Sider engaged in a late-night conversation with a Lumbee friend in Robeson—a conversation that Sider understood, even while it was occurring, contained a set of intimate confidences that would inform his efforts to improve the social and political conditions of Robeson’s subject minorities for years to come:

The conversation began, actually, between several Indian men in the dooryard of the church, just after the [voter registration] meeting; it was about where to buy a car, where you might find a good price and also respect from the dealer. Back in his kitchen, with just the two of us there, he wanted to talk more about this—and not just talk with me, but this time *to* me.

For several hours, long into the night, he tried to describe, often with tears in his eyes, a lifetime of juggling: leaving his wife and children out in the hot car upon some pretext or another, to go into an unfamiliar store alone so that his kids or his wife would not hear him called “boy,” or his wife “auntie.” And he told me that they “really” knew why they were left in the car, but they didn’t say or ask. Countless incidents: a whole adult lifetime, trying to shield his family and himself, preserving their dignity and their humanity—and doing so with some success, while everyone also knew the pretexts and knew why. A whole lifetime of struggle and negotiation, relentlessly necessary...¹⁵⁴

Sider’s poignant set of remembrances suggest a need to temper any “hindsight” criticisms of those Indians who preferred to stroll freely through the front door of the Pembroke Theatre than to queue outside the Carolina Theatre’s North Door. They also help to explain why

Lumberton's black community eagerly flocked to a new "colored" theater only a year before Jackie Robinson challenged professional baseball's color barrier and only two years before Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981 required the integration of the nation's armed forces, including its military units, bases, schools, neighborhoods, and (presumably) its military picture shows. These rare non-white moviegoing alternatives documented within this chapter provided blacks and Indians a chance to enjoy a cinema free from the domineering glances of white patrons and with little chance of engaging in tense or embarrassing encounters either with whites or with the members of the region's other subject minority.¹⁵⁵ Given that these alternatives were so infrequently available, what may be the most remarkable legacy of non-white moviegoing in Robeson County is neither the hesitancy of non-whites passively to accept discriminatory treatment in local theaters, nor the fact that on rare occasions individuals like Hansel Holmes steeled themselves to protest the unsatisfactory treatment non-whites received in bi- or tri-segregated venues. Rather, the wonder is that non-white moviegoers were willing to attend them at all.

ENDNOTES

¹ For a previous account of the development of tri-racial theaters in Robeson County, see McKenna, "Tri-Racial Theaters in Robeson County, North Carolina, 1896-1940," 175-81. This chapter has expanded that initial discussion to consider the experiences of Robeson's Indian and black moviegoers more broadly. Its account of moviegoing in Pembroke represents wholly new material.

² Originally published the Robesonian (29-Aug-1918, p. 1).

³ For a useful account of the development of picture palaces, see Naylor, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy. In addition, see Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of the Movie Palace, Da Capo Paperback (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), and Ave Pildas and Lucinda Smith, Movie Palaces (New York: C. N. Potter: distributed by Crown Publishers, 1980).

⁴ In this study, the term "tripartheid" does not only serve as a homonym for "tripartite," meaning divided into three parts. The term is also consciously used to recall the system of racial separatism structuring life in South Africa during the rule of apartheid. Certainly, this is not the first work of scholarship to tie Jim Crowism to South African apartheid. C. Vann Woodward's account of "The Man on the Cliff" in The Strange Career of Jim Crow begins with the recollections of an Englishman named Maurice Evans, who lived in South Africa at the time of the First World War. According to Woodward, Evans' own study of Southern U.S. race relations had "found conditions in the South 'strikingly similar' to those he had left behind at home" (111). In noting that the "separation of the races in all social matters...is as distinct in South Africa as in the Southern states," Evans identified theatres as one of the key public facilities that had excluded non-whites in both his adopted homeland and in the American South, where Evans sensed that "the very conditions I had left were reproduced before my eyes, the thousands of miles melted away, and Africa was before me" (Ibid). However, the fact that the dominant factions in both the Southern U.S. and in South Africa operated according to general assumptions of white supremacy did not result in identical social processes and "forms of racial discrimination;" rather (according to historian George Fredrickson) each region engaged in "trends that were similar in general direction but surprisingly variable in rate of development, ideological expression, and institutional embodiment." George M. Fredrickson, White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), xix. It is not clear if any South African theaters that were potentially subject to audiences composed of four racial subgroups (i.e., Blacks, Coloreds, Indians and Whites) were ever as extensively modified as theaters in Robeson. Without question, racial segregation in south Africa severely limited the movements of non-whites—not only in public, but also in a more overtly "domestic" sense; indeed, Fredrickson has argued that the residential relegation of native Africans to homeland states or townships meant that Africans living near "European" cities like Johannesburg would "be treated as temporary and provisional sojourners in the white areas" (245). As such, the need to develop tri- or quadric-racial facilities may have been deemed both undesirable and unnecessary. Theaters were, of course, segregated in South Africa during the apartheid era, and though no physical description of those segregated theaters has been included in Keyan Tomaselli's study of South African cinema, that work has verified the existence of such venues. See Keyan G. Tomaselli, The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film (Brooklyn: Smyrna Press, 1988).

⁵ Karen I. Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xii. The characterization of Lumbees as an "interstitial" people may have originated with sociologist Guy Benton Johnson, who viewed Robeson's Indians as "exceptions to the rigid biracial system in the South." See Guy Benton Johnson, "Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community," American Sociological Review 4.4 (1939): 516.

⁶ Lowery, Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South: Race, Identity, and the Making of a Nation, 22.

⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸ The act included a provision that all persons regardless of race be ensured the “full and equal enjoyment” of theaters. However, the act was only reluctantly enforced, and was rather quickly overturned as an unconstitutional breach of state sovereignty. See John Hope Franklin, Race and History: Selected Essays 1938-1988 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 116-31.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹¹ See Appendix I for a breakdown of urban-rural demographics and racial trends in Robeson, as well as a contextualization of Robeson’s Native American population within the South and the nation more generally.

¹² Growing up a Lumbee in mid-century, Ruth Dial Woods recalled many examples of the “Whites Only” signs in the windows of Robeson County businesses. See Ruth Dial Woods, “Growing up Red: The Lumbee Experience,” Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001, pages 20 and 115. Whenever possible, non-whites preferred to shop at non-white merchants in order to avoid the second-class treatment afforded them in white institutions that, if they served non-whites at all, usually did so in demeaning ways. According to one late-1930s sociological study of the county, an Indian “is supposed not to enter a white man’s front door. He is not addressed as ‘mister’ by white people and if he attends a theatre, he has to choose between one which provides a three-way segregation and one which seats him with Negroes. There is not an eating place in the county which permits him to enter the front door and eat with the white people. In numerous subtle ways, by glances, gestures, and intonations, he is reminded by whites and Negroes of the unmentionable stigma which attaches to him.” See Johnson, “Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community,” 519. However, as the legal foundations of Jim Crow began falling, overt racial prejudice was replaced by self-segregation throughout much of the county. During her first visiting to Robeson County in the late 1960s, for example, Karen Blu noted that “the most conspicuous evidence of segregation had disappeared after legal segregation was declared unconstitutional. Gone were the three separate seating areas in a Robeson movie theater, the three sets of drinking fountains and rest rooms, and the separate waiting areas in bus and train stations. On the other hand, there was still de facto segregation in most churches, schools, voluntary organizations, restaurants, and personal service businesses. Barber shops, beauty salons, and funeral parlors still rarely had clients of more than one race, and even bootleggers (those who make and/or sell non-tax-paid alcoholic beverages) generally sold their products to people of a single race.” Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 23.

¹³ See “Improvements at the Opera House,” Robesonian (18-Sep-1908, p. 3).

¹⁴ For that matter, Karen Blu has noted that as late as 1970, Lumberton’s population included only 342 Indian residents—or 2.2% of the town’s total population—while its 4,128 black residents accounted for approximately 27% (Lumbee Problem 13).

¹⁵ From the Robesonian (29-Nov-1915, p. 5). The implication of LeBeau’s statement suggested that the Star’s local competitor, the Pastime, may have admitted non-white patrons—unless he was referring to the Opera House. Yet is unclear at what point the Pastime first admitted non-whites. For example, months prior to LeBeau’s announcement, the Pastime co-sponsored a public health initiative which, in order to reduce mosquito infestations locally, offered free movie tickets to boys who collected a certain number of tin cans. However, a second advertisement in the newspaper subsequently clarified the eligibility requirements: tickets would be provided to “white” boys only. See *Ibid.* (14-Jun-1915, p. 5). Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that the Pastime admitted non-whites at that time (other than perhaps to temporally segregated “midnight” shows) since the theater would not possess a balcony for another eleven years.

¹⁶ The term “raced-body management” represents the author’s categorization of the social imperative informing the actions of public facility operators who either attempted or were required simultaneously to accommodate the members of multiple racial groups. In managing the flow of patrons into and out of their facilities, theater operators would have been expected by whites (and in many cases, by other minority) patrons to prevent instances of undesired social intercourse between the members of different ethnic groups. The pattern of racial

separatism that these operators implemented required costly architectural reconfigurations as well as the hiring of functionaries like Walter Wishart at the Carolina Theatre and a local Indian boy hired at the Riverside Theatre (discussed below). They were charged with ensuring that non-whites, for example, entered theaters through segregated facilities and sat only in the specific areas that had been assigned to the members of their race.

¹⁷ Instead, Lumbee identity is a social construction. As Lumbee ethnologist Karen Blu has argued, the foundation of Lumbee-ness within the Lumbee community has been founded upon a network of family ties, a shared sense of an identifiable home region (i.e., several counties in southeastern North Carolina), and a group consensus as to who is Lumbee and who is not.

¹⁸ Naturally, confusions could and did arise regarding the placement of Indian, black and sometimes even white patrons whose ethnic identities were incorrectly noted by theater staffers. Judge Henry A. McKinnon, Jr. recalled that during his “high school days, ca. 1935-39, I had spent most of the summer at the beach and was deeply tanned. I went to the Carolina [Theatre] for an afternoon show, and the lady cashier directed me to the [colored/Indian-specific] door. Fortunately, I was with my classmate, Russell Beam, Jr., son of [Carolina co-founder] Dr. Beam, and he vouched for me to get into the white section.” See “Leftovers,” a set of personal e-mail exchanges between Henry A. McKinnon and Christopher McKenna dated 1-Nov-2001. After McKinnon had married the daughter of Dr. E. L. Bowman, another of the Carolina’s co-founders, it is unlikely that he encountered any difficulty securing a seat in the theater’s main auditorium.

¹⁹ According to Ernest Hancock’s mid-1930’s sociological study of Robeson, “Indians are reluctant to do the industrial work commonly assigned to Negroes. Consequently few Indians are doing any public work other than farm labor.” See Ernest Dewey Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina,” Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1935, 59. Additionally, during a series of local Lumbee studies conducted by Hancock’s thesis advisor, Dr. Guy B. Johnson, Johnson noted that throughout Robeson the Indian “economic outlook is greatly restricted because [an Indian] will not engage in various menial tasks which negroes engage in. His ideal is to own a farm and be his own master. With the exception of a handful of teachers, preachers, and small shopkeepers, the Indians are all farmers.” Johnson, “Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community,” 521. Agricultural cycles tended to keep most farmers relatively cash poor for most of the year.

²⁰ Contemporary ethnographic studies of Robeson County (including those of Johnson and Hancock) characterize Indians as the “variable” element within the region’s set of socio-political, economic, and spatial topographies. Though local whites often considered Indians to be particularly “touchy” or “moody,” Indian sensibilities were, in fact, more inclined to protest discriminatory treatment while defending the superior social and cultural placement accorded to Indians by whites relative to the positioning of local blacks.

²¹ Including the county’s old-age home and prison camp, as discussed on a number of occasions in Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina.” In some cases, whites and Indians shared a single segregated public facility while blacks were relegated to clearly inferior quarters. Such was the case for many years in Lumberton’s bus terminal, which in the 1920s operated only with “White” and “Colored” waiting rooms (see the Robesonian, 9-Oct-1922, p. 1). This pattern was repeated in the new bus terminal opened in 1937 (Ibid., 19-Mar-1937, pages 1 and 4). Indians usually preferred white co-location to black co-location in public facilities, and tended to air their grievances publicly when the black co-location was imposed upon them. For example, after the new Robeson prison camp opened in 1932, for a time whites and Indians shared space in a then bi-segregated facility. The front-page news story that reported how “it is likely that white and Indian prisoners will use the same quarters as they do elsewhere” (Ibid., 18-Apr-1932, pages 1 and 5) referred implicitly to the sort of co-location of whites and Indians in train station waiting-rooms that had been noted by Hancock (119). However, several years later the camp reversed its original configuration by co-locating Indians with blacks. Subsequent Indian protests were carried to the local Highway Chairman, Frank Dunlap, and successfully argued that black co-location violated both common custom and official policy. “Dunlap said yesterday that he was unaware that it [i.e., Indian/black co-location] was strictly contrary to prison regulations and that he would see to it that the two races were properly segregated in the future” (Ibid., 16-May-1938, p. 4). Other facilities—such as the county’s home for the aged and infirm (opened in 1924)—had also

been fully tri-segregated (see Hancock 75), including the county courthouse in Lumberton, which would eventually install six bathrooms and three water fountains to accommodate local whites, Indians and blacks.

²² As in the case of the Union Chapel CSP show (1919), the squabble over the Pastime Theatre balcony (1934), and Indian dissent in the Pembroke Theatre (in the late 1930s). All of these episodes are discussed in greater detail below.

²³ Undated news clippings previously stored in the offices of the Carolina Civic Center alleged the use of all of these distinctive barricade materials. Several of them have also been referred to anecdotally in oral histories. Unfortunately, these Civic Center files were either lost or misplaced during one of the several site renovations and changes in facility management that have occurred in the site since 2001 (i.e., when the author first examined them). However, at least one additional documented account of these barriers still exists. According to an article published by Robesonian reporter Julie Bush at the time of the Carolina's restoration in 1985, "the [historical] seating arrangements did have one drawback—they reflected the social and racial biases of the time. According to Theater Manager Keith Hight, both blacks and Indians had to use separate entrances from whites. They also bought their tickets from separate booths. Once they went up the side stairs to the balcony, they were greeted with another barrier. A wall about four and a half feet tall and five inches thick ran down the middle of the balcony seating. Blacks sat on one side and Indians on the other. Except for special midnight shows, only whites were allowed to sit on the main floor." Robesonian (16-Jun-1985, page 2D).

²⁴ In point of fact, Indians had petitioned to be recognized as members of a separate racial category (partly to avoid black co-location) ever since the First World War. See *Ibid.* (22-Apr-1918, p. 4). Perhaps in response to pressure from Angus W. McLean, a future North Carolina governor and a member of the War Finance Corporation, the War Department reluctantly agreed to house Lumbees as a separate unit both at home and overseas. *Ibid.* (31-Oct-1918, p. 1).

²⁵ See Johnson, "Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community," 521.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ As confirmed by an early Carolina Theatre usher. See Townsend, "Personal Interview."

²⁸ This was not universally true. By the late 1930s, some church groups attempted to sponsor multiracial events, as when a colored Baptist church offered a set of musical (presumably gospel) performances in a tobacco warehouse that featured reserved seating sections for whites and for Indians. See the Robesonian (7-May-1937, p. 8). Some musical performances held in the local courthouse also occasionally featured seats for two or more racial groups beginning in the middle 1920s. See *Ibid.* (16-Apr-1925 and 26-Nov 1925, both news items located on p. 1).

²⁹ Hancock, "A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina," 101.

³⁰ Robesonian (29-Nov-1937, Section 5, p.5).

³¹ *Ibid.* (29-Oct-1937, p.7).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³³ For additional descriptions of the Rowland Theatre, see "Rowland Theatre to Open Monday," *Ibid.* (29-Oct-1937, p. 8); "Rowland Theatre Packs 'Em In For Opening Program," *Ibid.* (3-Nov-1937, p. 6); and "New Theatre for Rowland Opens," *Ibid.* (29-Nov-1937, *Historical, Agricultural and Industrial Edition*, Section 3, p. 1).

³⁴ As his name indicates, Campbell was a member of Robeson's Wishart clan, though a distant and later-generation cousin of Mr. C. Courtesy of John Wishart Campbell, "Personal Interview," (Lumberton, NC: October 2001).

³⁵ For additional details on the development of the Riverside Theatre, see “Carlyle Property Is Purchased for a New Theatre Site,” Robesonian (12-Dec-1938, p. 1); “Riverside Theatre To Open New Building Here Tonight,” Ibid. (3-Apr-1939, pages 1 and 6); and the Riverside Theatre advertisements located in Ibid. (3-Apr-1939, p. 3).

³⁶ See Ibid. (3-Apr-1939, p.3). Note that the advertisement’s hierarchical placement of white, Indian, and black (“colored”) audience member prices mirrored the view held by most local whites that Indians were superior to blacks, and that whites were superior to both non-white groups. However, while a common reduced ticket price reflected the inferiority of all adult black and Indian (balcony) seats, it is curious to note that children were expected to pay the same to enter the Riverside regardless of their racial group.

³⁷ For example, see the Riverside’s “Special Notice” advertisement published in Ibid. (11-Sep-1939, p. 2).

³⁸ Mary Carbine, ““The Finest Outside the Loop:” Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago’s Black Metropolis, 1905-1928,” Camera Obscura 23, Special Issue, Popular Culture and Reception Studies (1990).

³⁹ Newspaper scans of local news items and classified ads indicate that every one of the social organizations mentioned above had been triply divided along ethnic lines, while all of the public facilities or services listed served the members of each of the region’s racial groups either serially, or within a tri-segregated facility or structure.

⁴⁰ Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theatre, Starring S. Charles Lee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 3.

⁴¹ As per Campbell, “Personal Interview.”

⁴² Indeed, local newspapers would regularly print retractions when the specific racial labels for local non-whites (typically “black/Negro” or “Indian”) had been misapplied.

⁴³ As verified in the writings of Hansel Holmes, Maud Thomas, Guy Benton Johnson and Ruth Dial Woods, among others, as well as in interviews with Jesse Oxendine.

⁴⁴ As part of what Karen Blu and other Lumbee scholars have referred to as the Lumbee “diaspora.” See Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 248.

⁴⁵ As noted in Appendix I, the relative percentage of the county’s African-American population fell from 43 to 33 percent from 1910 to 1940, while the county’s percentage of Indians residents relative to its total population rose from 12 to 22 percent over the same period.

⁴⁶ Examples include Hall, The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of the Movie Palace, John Margolies and Emily Margolin Gwathmey, Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun, 1st ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1991), Ina Rae Hark, ed., Exhibition, the Film Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), Pildas and Smith, Movie Palaces, Putnam, Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater, and Sharp, The Picture Palace and Other Buildings for the Movies.

⁴⁷ From Corbett, “The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and Beyond the Substitution Effect.”

⁴⁸ As recorded in the Robesonian (3-Sep-1914, p. 1).

⁴⁹ While it remains unclear whether or not Pope and Jones’s new venue had an official business relationship with Walter Wishart’s Pastime or Opera House operations, it is possible that the A-Mus-U’s camera equipment had been either leased or borrowed from an Opera House that had ceased exhibiting motion pictures at roughly the same time.

⁵⁰ As recorded in the Robesonian (20-Aug-1914, p. 1).

⁵¹ As recorded in *Ibid.* (19-Oct-1914, p. 1). In fact, the second A-Mus-U site, known locally as the French-Allen building, was eventually donated to a local historical preservation group, Historic Robeson, Incorporated. It is entirely possible that the Historic Robeson organization is unaware that a space that has since been incorporated into a local museum briefly housed a “colored” picture-show.

⁵² “Owl” shows and other temporal theater segregations have been mentioned by Maud Thomas in her account of Robeson’s historical leisure practices. Unfortunately, her work fails to identify either the names of the local theaters that hosted these shows or the times/dates when they typically occurred. See Thomas, *Away Down Home: A History of Robeson County, North Carolina*, 249-50.

⁵³ See untitled local news items in the Robesonian (23-June-1919 and 11-Sep-1919, p. 1).

⁵⁴ As recorded in *Ibid.* (18-Dec-1919, p. 1). The precise location of the Bland Hotel is currently unknown.

⁵⁵ However, Morrissey’s involvement in motion-pictures did end in 1919. He eventually served as an original custodian in Lumberton’s Carolina Theatre, and was probably the theater’s first black employee. Whether or not Morrissey’s efforts to implement his own theater were successful, his efforts appear never to have been recorded in a local black news outlet, since Hancock’s 1935 county study noted that “it appears that neither the Indians nor Negroes of Robeson County has ever published a newspaper” (Hancock 92). In addition, the research efforts undertaken by the author have failed to identify a non-white newspaper published in Robeson during the period covered by this study.

⁵⁶ As confirmed in the author’s correspondence with Judge Henry A. McKinnon, Jr. dating from October and November 2001.

⁵⁷ Little if any evidence suggests that racial prejudice played a role in CP&L’s legal actions. Moreover, while a host of court records contain the broad details of the case, not a single court report sheds any light into either the quantitative or qualitative aspects of the theater’s operation; indeed, none actually mention the theater’s name. The bulk of the case summary provided has been based both on court records and on personal correspondence between the author and Judge McKinnon, a long-time Robeson County historian who was a member of the law firm that represented Bowman in the CP&L suits as well as Bowman’s brother-in-law. For additional information on the case (as it was originally reported in the local press), see the Robesonian (5-Mar-1948, p. 1).

⁵⁸ However, there was one other potential opportunity for white/ non-white co-location: the drive-in theater. According to Jesse Oxendine, at least some drive-ins in the area did permit whites and Indians (and presumably blacks) to view films on a relatively equal footing. However, the scarcity of automobiles among non-whites would have severely limited black and Indian attendance at drive-ins. Other anecdotal evidence suggests that most drive-ins either relegated non-white vehicles to a segregated parking area or simply refused to admit cars with non-white passengers.

⁵⁹ Sponsored by filmmaker Martin Scorsese and a host of governmental, commercial, university and museum-based archives, the Film Foundation also estimates that, whether due to fires, accidents, general neglect, film stock recycling programs, or simple chemical decomposition, over ninety percent of all films made before 1929 no longer exist. See Film Foundation, Film Preservation, The Film Foundation, Available: <http://www.film-foundation.org/common/11004/aboutAboutUs.cfm?clientID=11004&ThisPage=AboutUs&sid=2&ssid=5>, 03-Sep-2010.

⁶⁰ As reported in Karen I. Blu, ““We People:” Understanding Lumbee Indian Identity in a Tri-Racial Situation,” Dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972, 135-6.

⁶¹ For example, on at least one occasion Ruth Dial Woods “passed” into the main auditorium of a local white theater. Woods admits that she never forgot the shame and self-recrimination of having taken this action, and felt herself briefly reliving both of these emotions each time she subsequently passed the theater building. See Woods, “Growing up Red: The Lumbee Experience,” pages 88 and 115-6. Those who engaged in passing did not necessarily believe in racial integration as much as they sought to avoid the social stigmas associated with their race. For instance, law professor and racial historian Daniel Sharfstein’s account of three African-American families whose members passed as white for several generations indicates that while those who “passed” were constantly challenged by “living with such ambiguity, they continued to believe in racial difference and ordered their worlds around it” (11). Daniel J. Sharfstein, The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

⁶² From Joel Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 522.

⁶³ Blu’s initial formulation of Lumbee identity as a social construction that involved a group judgment among Lumbees as to who is and is not a Lumbee was expanded to include a host of additional cultural and behavioral factors in Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People.

⁶⁴ Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina,” 117. Similar commentary from Blu confirms that “anyone attempting to identify racial affiliation in Robeson County solely on the basis of physical appearance” would be confronted by “an enormous variety of physical types in all races, particularly among Indians. Indians may vary in skin color from very light to quite dark, and other features considered to be racial markers also vary widely. Eye color ranges from blue to hazel to dark brown; hair texture from straight to wavy to very curly and even kinky; hair color from blond to brown to black; and nose shape from aquiline to relatively flat and broad. These features occur in dozens of different combinations.” See Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 27.

⁶⁵ See I. A. Newby, ed., The Development of Segregationist Thought (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1968), 2.

⁶⁶ Franklin, Race and History: Selected Essays 1938-1988, 280-1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁶⁸ As recorded in Margolies and Gwathmey, Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun, 33.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* [author’s emphasis added].

⁷¹ See Carbine, ““The Finest Outside the Loop:” Motion Picture Exhibition in Chicago’s Black Metropolis, 1905-1928.”

⁷² As suggested in the work of Lumbee scholar Brenda Dial Deese, “Ordinary People: Untucking Oral Teachings, Traditions, and Stories of Southeastern (Southeastern) Indians,” Dissertation, North Carolina State University, 2002.

⁷³ Ernest Hancock calculated that the per-capita accumulated wealth of Robeson’s Indians in 1930 stood at roughly \$108, while that of blacks stood at \$63—figures representing one-sixth and one-tenth (respectively) of contemporary measures of local white wealth. See Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina,” 53-62.

⁷⁴ These cinematic efforts would have included the films produced by the likes of Oscar Micheaux and/or the Lincoln Motion Picture Company. For an introduction to the origins of African-American film production in the United States, as well as an extended treatment of black movie houses prior to World War II, see Jacqueline

Bobo, ““The Subject Is Money:” Reconsidering the Black Film Audience as a Theoretical Paradigm,” Black American Literature Forum 25.2 (1991).

⁷⁵ See Jones, The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall and Resurrection, 59. However, a probable typographic error by Jones attributes the quote to a Benjamin “Hays.”

⁷⁶ Corbett based his claim on the role of movie houses as a central location “where people could socialize and be entertained and, thanks to patriotic films and newsreels, celebrate national unity while receiving important war-related information.” While this may have true in many communities, it is unlikely to have been the case in Robeson black or Indian communities. See Corbett, “The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and Beyond the Substitution Effect,” 23.

⁷⁷ For the full set of missives concerning the roughly six-week scandal, see the columns titled the “People’s Forum” in the Robesonian (26-Apr-1937, 10-May-1937, 19-May-1937, and 4-Jun-1937, with all articles beginning on p. 4). Note that it was *highly* unusual for debates about the relative merits of the area’s non-whites to appear in Robeson’s newspapers. The fact that several letters addressing the topic were published in such a brief span suggests that Riddle’s arguments had touched a nerve locally.

⁷⁸ To further inflame local sentiment, Riddle’s original April 26th editorial included a fictional exchange from “just one nigger to another” in which the former, after railing against all the “dam white trash bumping and shoving against us, so dat we can’t discourse in peace,” bragged about how effectively the Negro crowd was shoving white pedestrians into the muddy street. Nevertheless, Riddle’s staunchest editorial opposition came from none other than Walter S. Wishart, whose May 19th rejoinder blasted Riddle’s original letter, particularly its use of pidgin Negro speech, as “such rot.” Maintaining that no other section of the state could boast of “a finer class of colored people than can be found here,” Wishart called upon more level-headed subscribers to ignore Riddle’s outburst and suggested that Riddle’s invective simply represented a tempest in a teapot. It is worth noting that in his response to Riddle, Wishart veered the closest he ever did in his long series of Robesonian submissions to expressing outright anger or disgust at the actions or words of another.

⁷⁹ As per the Annual Report of Organized and Registered Communities in North Carolina: 1916, (Raleigh, NC: State Bureau of Community Service, 1916), 1-4.

⁸⁰ The following program summary comes from the Report of Bureau of Community Service: 1917-18, (Raleigh, NC: Bureau of Community Service, 1917-18), 1-5. Note that the CSP program also sponsored the production of “county progress” films to demonstrate what officials had agreed upon as representative of the state’s “best” and “worst” agricultural and health-improvement practices. Available for demonstration as needed by local BCS exhibitors, these films in some ways resembled the “films of local people” popularized by Lexington-based filmmaker H. Lee Waters fifteen years later.

⁸¹ In point of fact, the CSP shows were implemented through use of a “social hygiene field car” modeled on military field cars used in France in World War I. Carrying projection equipment, a power source, posters, handouts, books, and pamphlets, etc., CSP field-car exhibitions promoted the benefits of improved health and hygiene via films targeting ills common to agricultural communities, including dysentery, pellagra, venereal disease, and the boll weevil. For interesting details of the shows and their projection equipment, see the following newspaper articles: “Community Service Pictures” (editorial), Robesonian (18-Mar-1920, p. 4); “Free Health Campaign in Robeson,” Ibid. (13-Sep-1920, p. 1); “Health Campaign Among Colored Folks,” Ibid. (7-Oct-1920, p. 5); “Community Service Play Hours,” Ibid. (27-Feb-1922, p. 8); and “Community Meetings,” Ibid. (13-Apr-1922, p. 9).

⁸² Specifically, into Sampson and Hoke counties.

⁸³ As reported in the Biennial Report of Bureau of Community Service: 1918-1919 and 1919-1920, (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Bureau of Community Service, 1918-1920).

⁸⁴ See the Robesonian (1-Sep-1919, p. 1).

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Additional BCS field notes can be found in the Biennial Report of Bureau of Community Service: 1918-1919 and 1919-1920, 1-10.

⁸⁷ BCS program data available in the Biennial Report of Bureau of Community Service: 1918-1919 and 1919-1920, 1-10.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Non-theatrical exhibitions are the subject of Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁹¹ Author's italics added. Signed only in the name of "Indian Union Chapel," and presumably written by a local Native American, the letter appeared in the Robesonian (15-Sep-1919, p. 8). However, the following day the paper's editor noted in frustration that "some one got excited over the supposed statement [...] that a moving picture show 'for colored' people would be held at Union Chapel." The editor correctly pointed out that the original "news item distinctly classified Union Chapel as Indian." What remains striking about the correction today is not that the editor seemed surprised by needing to clarify the correct racial classification of a state-sponsored film exhibition, but rather that he regarded the act of defending his staffers for following the paper's race-coding procedures as a common (and necessary) job task.

⁹² As reported in Hancock, "A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina," 101.

⁹³ For the reopening of the Pastime, see untitled "local news" items in the Robesonian (12-Jul-1934, p. 1 and 19-Jul-1934, p. 8), as well as "Pastime Theatre Opens Saturday," Ibid. (16-Aug-1934, p. 8).

⁹⁴ Ibid. (16-Aug-1934, p. 8).

⁹⁵ Ibid. (13-Sep-1934, p. 8).

⁹⁶ Testimony concerning Indian antipathy towards sitting with blacks in theaters includes sociologist Guy Johnson's observations that under those conditions, Indians were fully prepared to forego cinemagoing altogether, and preferred to act "in such a way that the unpleasant reality [of co-equal treatment with blacks] is negated" by staying away from "theatres where [the] only choice is to sit with Negroes." See Johnson, "Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community," 521.

⁹⁷ Holmes' letter to the Robesonian (1-Oct-1934, p. 4) was titled "Indians Crowded Out of Pastime Theatre."

⁹⁸ Deese, "Ordinary People: Untucking Oral Teachings, Traditions, and Stories of Souteastern (Southeastern) Indians," 6.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁰¹ Berry's preferred term for mixed-race identity.

¹⁰² See Brewton Berry, Almost White (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 22.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Even Lumberton's streets were subjected to a process of wary self-segregation. According to Hancock, "the most satisfying form of recreation for Negroes and Indians, in particular, is that of 'hanging around town' on Saturday afternoon and night. Perhaps no better opportunity is offered to study the varied types and attitudes of Indians and Negroes in Robeson County than that by parking on the street in one of the towns on Saturday afternoon and night." Yet while "all three races in the county may be seen constantly strolling in small groups from one end of the street to the other and back again, they are rarely seen in each other's company." In addition, on those rare occasions when invitations to social or civic entertainments were extended to non-whites, as "when itinerant shows and other forms of entertainment come to the towns," Hancock noted that "special days and nights are set aside for Indians and Negroes" to attend them. See Hancock, "A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina," 101.

¹⁰⁶ Despite the fact that many of Robeson's Indians remained scattered across a relatively isolated territory served by poor roads and featuring swampy terrain, the town of Pembroke only included approximately 800 inhabitants by 1940. In 1940, however, over 16,000 Indians called Robeson County "home," and most of them lived in the vicinity of Pembroke, which they traveled through much more frequently than other "white" towns. [See Appendix I for additional information concerning the local Native American population in Robeson County from 1910 until 1940.]

¹⁰⁷ A right that had been denied to Robeson's Indians since 1917. See Malinda M. Maynor, "Native American Identity in the Segregated South: The Indians of Robeson County, North Carolina, 1872-1956," Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005, 18.

¹⁰⁸ The following history of the Pembroke Theatre has been summarized from personal interviews and subsequent follow-up correspondence between the author and Jesse Oxendine, the son of J. C. Oxendine, a respected leader in the greater Pembroke area who also served as the Pembroke's first Indian manager. Jesse himself worked for several years as a Pembroke-area projectionist at both the Pembroke and Westside Theatres. See Oxendine, "Personal Interview with a Former Camera Operator at the Pembroke Theatre." Jesse's account has been supplemented with brief news items linked to the theater published in the Robesonian. However, since these news snippets (often no more than a single sentence) merely serve to establish a timeline corroborating Jesse's narrative, they have not been cited here.

¹⁰⁹ See the Robesonian (29-Aug-1927 and 6-Oct-1927, p. 1). The temporary theater had been established in the college's central "Old Main" building, a site whose initial state funding had been procured several years earlier by none other than L. R. Varser. In providing shows two or three evenings a week, the "Pocahontas Theatre" housed exhibitions "given by the State for the benefit of benefit of the Indians." As such, they may have been an extension of (or successor to) the Community Service Pictures that had visited Pembroke previously. While the Croatan Indian Normal School had been founded initially to facilitate the instruction of Indian teachers to staff local Indian schools, it would develop into Pembroke State College and, later, would be incorporated into the UNC system as the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

¹¹⁰ Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 10.

¹¹¹ A curious note on film deliveries: according to Jesse Oxendine, the theater's film canisters were brought to Pembroke (and subsequently returned to Charlotte) by the same individual charged with delivering Pembroke its daily supply of newspapers.

¹¹² Note that audience members sitting furthest away from the stoves and fan, i.e., the theater's balcony patrons, received the least amount of environmental relief. As was true of most of the businesses in downtown Pembroke, the theater also did not feature any public toilet facilities.

¹¹³ Indeed, neither Jesse Oxendine nor Elizabeth Stubbs (a Johnson interviewee who served as a ticket-taker in the theater's early years) could recall a racial conflict that involved black patrons breaking out at the theater.

¹¹⁴ For what purpose Rogers kept one row free of patrons remains unclear. It is possible that Rogers may have wanted a space reserved for himself to duck into after attending to box-office concerns or other business matters. He may also have reserved the seats for members of his family or for special, non-ticketed invitees. Given Stubbs' "sectioned" description of the auditorium floor layout, it does not appear that this row was intended to serve as a buffer between white and Indian seating.

¹¹⁵ Excerpted from Guy Benton Johnson's unnumbered and unpublished manuscript papers, the Stubbs interview may be located in the manuscript section entitled "Field Notes," sub-section "Theater."

¹¹⁶ For Massey and Denton, one consequence of the government-led desegregation of public-spaces in the 1970s that included theaters was a reconstitution of that prejudice spatially via the *de facto* urban-ghettoization of African Americans. Yet what became true for Massey and Denton about national residential patterns was always true within Robeson's movie spaces: "The end result [wa]s that blacks remain[ed] the most spatially isolated population in U.S. history." See Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 114.

¹¹⁷ Johnson's career highlights include his co-authorship (with W.E.B. DuBois) of the Encyclopedia of the Negro, as well as his founding the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina.

¹¹⁸ See the Robesonian (9-Aug-1948, p. 6). The paper may have been unaware of Johnson's longstanding interest in Robeson's Indians. Johnson had previously served as a member of Ernest Hancock's thesis committee in 1935, and had published a sociological account of the "personality" of Robeson Indians in 1939. See Johnson, "Personality in a White-Indian-Negro Community."

¹¹⁹ From Johnson's unnumbered field notes.

¹²⁰ As John Hope Franklin has noted, under Jim Crow "few if any whites placed them [i.e., Indians] on the same degraded level with blacks." Franklin, Race and History: Selected Essays 1938-1988, 338.

¹²¹ From Johnson's unnumbered field notes.

¹²² Ibid. "Informant" was Johnson's term for an interview subject who preferred anonymity.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ This final quotation comes from Johnson's "An Institutional Sketch of the Robeson County Indian Community," an unpublished manuscript that likely resulted from his 1948 Pembroke study. In it, Johnson stressed the importance evaluating Indian institutions "in the light of (1) the [Indian] striving to be acceptable in the eyes of the larger society," and "(2) [Indian] fear of degradation through Negroism." See Guy Benton Johnson Papers, Chapel Hill, NC.

¹²⁶ Long-time Lumbee leader Lew Barton explained the rationale for Indian resistance to African-American associations imposed upon them in the following way: "Throughout our history, white people have been trying to solve Robeson's Indian problem by denying the existence of the Indians" and "have been trying to make us black, or lump us in with blacks in the category of 'non-white.' We resent this. We are not black. We are not simply non-white. We are Indians and we are Lumbees." See Frye Gaillard, "The Lumbees Fight Back: A Struggle for Identity," News and Observer 11-Jul-1971.

¹²⁷ Conversely, theaters outside of Pembroke remained significantly more popular with blacks than they did with Indians, part because the Pembroke contained so few seats for blacks.

¹²⁸ Per Jesse Oxendine, the Westside was built by local Indian businessman named Clifton Sampson on a plot of land that had previously housed Sampson's grocery store. Sampson redeployed his property to erect a theater on it that was initially managed by Eugene Chavis, another local Indian. Note that while Oxendine could recall both Indians and whites who had served as projectionists in each of the two Pembroke theaters, he could not remember a single instance in which an African American had been offered a projectionist's position in either site.

¹²⁹ A prominent local family name within the group.

¹³⁰ Johnson's unpublished notes include several treatments of the Smiling Indian situation. See also Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 175-81. The Smiling group's battles to gain and/or maintain access to local Indian schools continued for approximately fifty years.

¹³¹ Gerald M. Sider, Living Indian Histories: Lumbee and Tuscarora People in North Carolina / Gerald Sider : with a New Preface by the Author (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 74-80. According to Sider's account of the Smiling school controversy, after local courts initially agreed that Smilings were Indians and should be permitted to attend local Indian schools, Lumbee representatives pressured Robeson County school officials to implement separate schools to accommodate the Smilings. Though Smilings were eventually assimilated into Lumbee schools in the mid-1960s, Karen Blu has noted that even if Lumbees "tend[ed] to accept the Smilings as Indians," they historically tended "to rank them below Lumbees and above Blacks." See Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 21.

¹³² Berry, Almost White, 78. However, since Berry reports that Indians in this particular community patronized the town's white barber shops and attended white schools, it is highly unlikely that he was describing Pembroke.

¹³³ *Ibid.* At least two other accounts by Berry of mestizo groups recall moviegoing conditions in Pembroke. For instance, some Indians in Person County appear to have been treated similar to whites, since "long ago [they] were accorded the privilege of eating in white restaurants, riding in white railway coaches, attending white movies, and voting in lily-white primaries" (160). Berry indicates that Person's white community did not force the imposition of stricter facility segregation because the few Indians in the area did not "pose so formidable a threat to the white man's status" as would have been true in Robeson. Yet in the bulk of his study, Berry tended to characterize the freedom of Indian moviegoers within a given community as a key marker of their relative social freedom. Along these lines, Berry's account of Indians in Hawkinsville, Georgia indicates a mixed-race community living with freedoms unheard-of anywhere in Robeson County except in Pembroke theaters. Namely, Hawkinsville Indians were able to drink from a white water fountain, to be served in a white barber shop, and to "sit downstairs at the movie house—not in the balcony" (177).

¹³⁴ Brooks, ed., Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America, 5.

¹³⁵ See Adolph L. Dial and David K. Eliades, The Only Land I Know: A History of the Lumbee Indians (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), xiv.

¹³⁶ Woodward, The Strange Career of Jim Crow, 44.

¹³⁷ Brooks, ed., Confounding the Color Line: The Indian-Black Experience in North America, 7.

¹³⁸ Author's emphasis added. See Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 76.

¹³⁹ See Laura L. Lovett, "'African and Cherokee by Choice:' Race and Resistance under Legalized Segregation," Confounding the Color Line, ed. James Brooks (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 213.

¹⁴⁰ Per Tiya Miles, "Uncle Tom Was an Indian: Tracing the Red in Black Slavery," Confounding the Color Line, ed. James Brooks (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 139.

¹⁴¹ Janet Staiger, Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 55.

¹⁴² From the “Introduction” to Hark, ed., Exhibition, the Film Reader, 12.

¹⁴³ See the article entitled “Merchants Association to Sponsor Play at Carolina By College Group” published in the Robesonian (9-Apr-1940, p. 1).

¹⁴⁴ See Tom Whiteside and H. Lee Waters, The Cameraman Has Visited Our Town, videocassette /, T. Whiteside], [Durham, NC (512 Watts St. #2), 1989.

¹⁴⁵ See Robert Andrew Jackson, “Fade in, Crossroads: The Southern Cinema, 1890-1940,” Dissertation, University of Virginia, 2008, 89-95.

¹⁴⁶ The book currently resides in the H. Lee Waters Special Collection at Duke University’s Perkins Library. See H. Lee Waters, “H. Lee Waters Collection, 1920-2005 and Undated (Bulk 1930-1949),” (Special Library Collections, Perkins Library, Duke University).

¹⁴⁷ Though no known copy remains of Waters’ Red Springs film, copies of his Lumberton film still exist, including one in the possession of the author. Like many Waters films, it includes scenes of school, church, domestic and commercial settings that feature both white and non-white residents.

¹⁴⁸ As discussed in Chapter III.

¹⁴⁹ Moreover, the eventual archival of Waters’ films (first within his Lexington studio, and later within University special collections) suggests that relatively few non-whites may ever have viewed Waters’ remarkable chronicle of Depression-era life. This outcome remains all the more disappointing because Waters’ films offer scenes in which older Robesonians—white, black, and Indian alike—can recognize family members who had been captured on film for the first, and possibly only, time.

¹⁵⁰ However, not all civic- or merchant-sponsored events shut out non-white attendees. Exceptions included a series sponsored by the Robesonian and local merchants in the late 1930s that targeted homemakers through the presentation of a series of “home economics” films. These three-day, “Star in My Kitchen” exhibitions combined films with stage-demonstrations and were “entirely free to every woman in the county,” including “Indians and negroes.” Nevertheless, non-whites were reminded to occupy their “customary” balcony seats when attending these exhibitions. See “Motion Picture Cooking School Opens Wednesday” in the Robesonian (18-Apr-1938, pages 1 and 4).

¹⁵¹ As originally published in *Ibid.* (1-Jun-1950, p. 6).

¹⁵² Gerald M. Sider, Lumbee Indian Histories: Race, Ethnicity, and Indian Identity in the Southern United States (Cambridge England ; New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xvi.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Sider, Living Indian Histories: Lumbee and Tuscarora People in North Carolina / Gerald Sider ; with a New Preface by the Author, 26-7.

¹⁵⁵ In recounting the degree to which blacks and Indians kept to themselves, Ruth Dial Woods could not recall ever sitting in a class with a black student until she attended college in the mid-1950s. See Woods, “Growing up Red: The Lumbee Experience,” 88-9. According to Woods’ account, Lumbees preferred to maintain “isolated and separate” social networks in which children “had no ‘sociation’ with white people and black people who lived in the community” (110). This confirms Karen Blu’s observation that “most Indians simply refuse to put themselves in [segregated] situations, and for the most part continue to avoid the White and Black

public places” because they “did not care to face possible insults and inferior treatment in White establishments” and “did not want to be subject to tensions and embarrassment” resulting from those patronage conditions. See Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 136.

CHAPTER VII

WHO WILL MOURN THE CAROLINA THEATRE? CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE LEGACIES OF ROBESONIAN MOVIEGOING.

We don't watch movies the way we used to—in part because the facilities that introduced generations of moviegoers to cinematic entertainment no longer exist. During November 2011, the centenary month of Robeson's first dedicated picture show (and an anniversary overlooked by the Robesonian's entertainment reporters), the lights remained off within the converted storefront that once housed Walter Wishart's Pastime Theatre. For more than sixty years, no films have been exhibited in a site which, after housing a woman's clothing store and a wig shop for many years, represents today just one of the many tenantless commercial spaces or empty lots that formerly hosted Robeson's Main Street theaters. For that matter, downtown moviegoing has almost completely disappeared in Robeson, as the county's once-thriving central commercial and cultural districts continue their decades-long decline.

None of the venues that supported the transition of moviegoing into a widely available leisure practice still operate as dedicated movie theaters, and many of these former exhibition sites have become architectural eyesores within Robeson's downtown landscapes. A few one-time theaters continue to linger on as a kind of negative space, as remains true of Fairmont's "New" Capitol Theatre, whose 2006 demolition left a gaping, mid-block hole in central Fairmont (see Figure 7.1). In 2007, the Lumberton building in which Morris Legendre developed the



Figure 7.1: Gap representing the former site of Fairmont’s “New” Capitol Theatre. Photograph taken by the author (March 2009).

thousand-seat Riverside Theatre was razed and replaced by a dirt-and-gravel lot to provide extra parking spaces for visitors to the County Courthouse district located a few hundred feet to the east. The buildings that once housed Lumberton’s Opera House, the Pembroke Theatre, and Lumberton’s A-Mus-U Theatre all have long since been demolished. Of the former theater buildings that do remain, the one-time Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric site on Elm Street in Lumberton has changed hands several times over the past decade, and few if any downtown pedestrians would guess that the site once housed a World War I-era movie house. In Red Springs and St. Pauls, former theatrical venues have been subjected to adaptive commercial reuse. As a result, those sites no more resemble historic theaters than do the

facilities that once housed the Maxton Theatre, the Westside Theatre in Pembroke, or the Rowland Theatre (see Figure 7.4), each of which has been boarded up, redeployed as warehouse storage space, or abandoned.



Figure 7.2: Former site of the Rowland Theatre. Photograph taken by the author (March 2009).

Currently, all but one of the former theater sites that once served moviegoers in downtown Lumberton has either been bulldozed (i.e., the A-Mus-U, the Opera House, and the Riverside), shuttered (i.e., the Pastime), reused as a commercial space (i.e., the Lumbee/Star/Arcade/Lyric), or incorporated into a local museum (specifically, a short-lived colored theater that served as the second iteration of the A-Mus-U; see Figure 7.3).

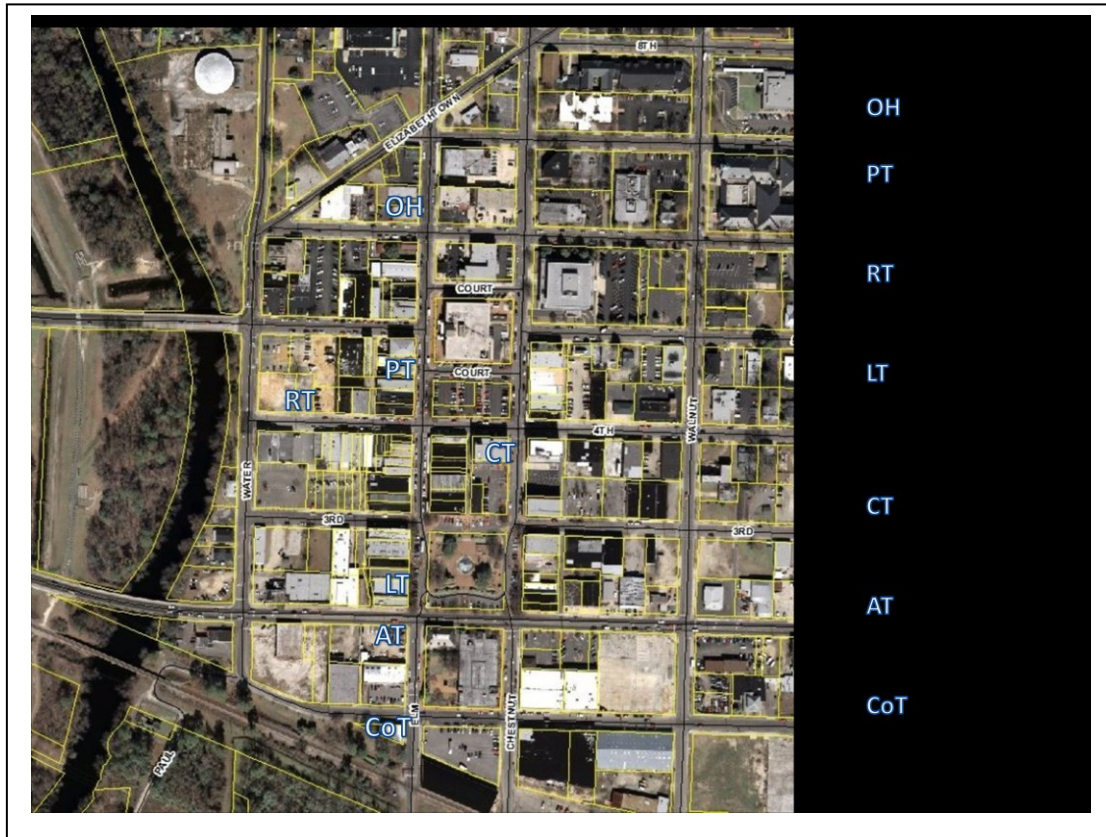


Figure 7.3: Aerial Overview of Theatre Sites in Historic Downtown Lumberton.¹

Today, only one of Robeson's historic theaters remains an active exhibition site: Lumberton's Carolina Theatre (see Figure 7.4). As the last of Robeson's early movie house, the Carolina Theatre does not simply hearken back to the golden age of downtown moviegoing in Robeson. It also carries a series of conflicting legacies based upon the services that it either did or did not extend to distinct local sub-populations. Certainly, the site has changed markedly since the days when Walter Wishart managed the flow of black and Indian moviegoers in and out of the theater's North Door. Closed in the mid-1970s, the Carolina no longer regularly exhibited motion pictures for more than thirty years; indeed, for most of that period the theater possessed no functioning projection equipment. Yet after roughly a decade of protracted community volunteerism and local investment, the theater was reopened by a non-profit foundation charged with managing the day-to-day operations of

a site owned and partially funded by the town of Lumberton. The collaborative efforts of Carolina volunteers, foundation advocates, and local civic officials resulted in the 1985 reopening of a newly rechristened facility. Operating sporadically since then, the Carolina Civic Center recently began once again to provide semi-regular motion-picture exhibitions to local residents in a move which complements the Civic Center’s mission of serving as the premier performing-arts facility in Robeson County.



Figure 7.4: Former site of the Lumberton Carolina Theatre (now redeployed as the Carolina Civic Center). Photograph taken by the author (November 2001).²

While the Carolina Theatre’s original founders never enjoyed the financial benefits of a “public-private” partnership while developing their theater, they would have recognized the interest shown by the local City Council in encouraging the development of a beautiful and large-scale performance venue situated in downtown Lumberton. By 1927, municipal leaders

had come to recognize that the community's failure to replace the Opera House in the wake of the latter's 1919 closure had deprived Lumberton of anything resembling a sizable theatrical performance space. Members of Robeson's business community began keenly to regret the loss of potential retail crowds generated before and after stage performances observable in other towns. They understood that without an Opera House replacement, stage attractions bypassed Lumberton—and indeed all of Robeson—in favor of Hamlet's Opera House, Fayetteville's War Department Theatre, and Bennettsville's Garden Theatre, each of which extensively advertised in the Robesonian and all of which could be reached relatively easily either by train or in autos traversing regional road systems that included the newly completed Wildcat Highway.³ Although the town's political leaders craved the prestige that an elegant local exhibition site might generate, they hesitated to commit public funds to develop an alternative to the county's small, cramped, smoky, and poorly ventilated storefront theaters.⁴ Yet by 1927, local moviegoers also had begun to outgrow the Pastime, and though the theater had faithfully served local residents for fifteen years, it had never been particularly suited to staging non-cinematic entertainment. In addition, as other Robeson communities began to implement their own picture shows in the 1920s, the ability to host live entertainments as well as motion pictures remained a distinguishing factor for premier exhibition facilities across the region. In 1926, the Pastime had undergone a major renovation that finally implemented balcony seats and expanded the theater's stage and fly-tower facilities, perhaps with an eye towards positioning the Pastime as an Opera House replacement.⁵ However, these improvements failed to attract the larger road-show productions circulating through nearby regional centers like Hamlet, Fayetteville and Bennettsville.

Consequently, in the midst of a general building boom that had spread across the county by 1927, several of Lumberton's civic and business leaders pondered proposals to finance a "new opera house" designed to attract prestigious traveling shows, thereby burnishing Lumberton's reputation as a "first-rate" town.⁶ Once a series of Chamber of Commerce meetings and newspaper publicity campaigns failed to convince Lumberton officials to contribute funds towards the development of a new Opera House, a group of private investors stepped forward. Led by two physicians, Drs. Russell S. Beam and Earle L. Bowman, this investment group (which included Messers. K. M. Barnes, R. R. Pittman, J. A. Sharpe, J. L. Stephens, H. E. Stacy, F. P. Gray, J. Dickson, Angus W. McLean, Q. T. Williams and E. A. Thompson) quickly founded the Lumberton Theatre Corporation. Directors Barnes, Stephens and Sharpe joined Beam and Bowman on the LTC's Building Committee, which subsequently entered into a contract with architect Stiles S. Dixon of Fayetteville to design an as-yet unnamed hall to be situated upon a series of contiguous lots previously acquired by members of the LTC along the southeast corner of the intersection of Fourth and Chestnut Streets in downtown Lumberton. On September 19, 1927, the Committee members participated in the groundbreaking ceremony for what would become a sixty-six-and-a-half by one-hundred foot facility located on property that in years past had hosted a blacksmith's shop, laundry, filling station, and fruit stand.

Construction costs for the newly christened Carolina Theatre soon escalated rapidly, and its initial price tag of forty-thousand dollars proved wildly optimistic. Overruns in both base construction and interior furnishing costs quickly accumulated, and by the time the Carolina opened in the summer of 1928, local newspaper estimates of the venue's total developmental expense ranged from one-hundred-and-fifty to two-hundred thousand dollars.

Nevertheless, local residents considered the overages as money well spent, for after marveling at the theater's stately exterior and its beautifully appointed sets of auditorium, balcony, mezzanine, and comfort facilities, they judged the Carolina (not without some justification) to be the finest exhibition hall located between Charlotte and Wilmington. Constructed in nine months, the Carolina's impressive neo-classical structure was composed of brick, limestone, concrete, and plaster materials anchored upon a rugged, multi-story steel frame. The theater's architectural and aesthetic grandeur instantly surpassed all of the county's stone-and-mortar facilities, including all of Robeson's many houses of worship. Style, comfort, and luxury characterized a regional picture-palace incorporating many of the flourishes found in larger metropolitan venues—one of which, a regal stone carving centered above the main entrance marquee, announced the building's primary function (see Figure 7.5). Terra cotta sculptures as well as a series of revival-style cornices,

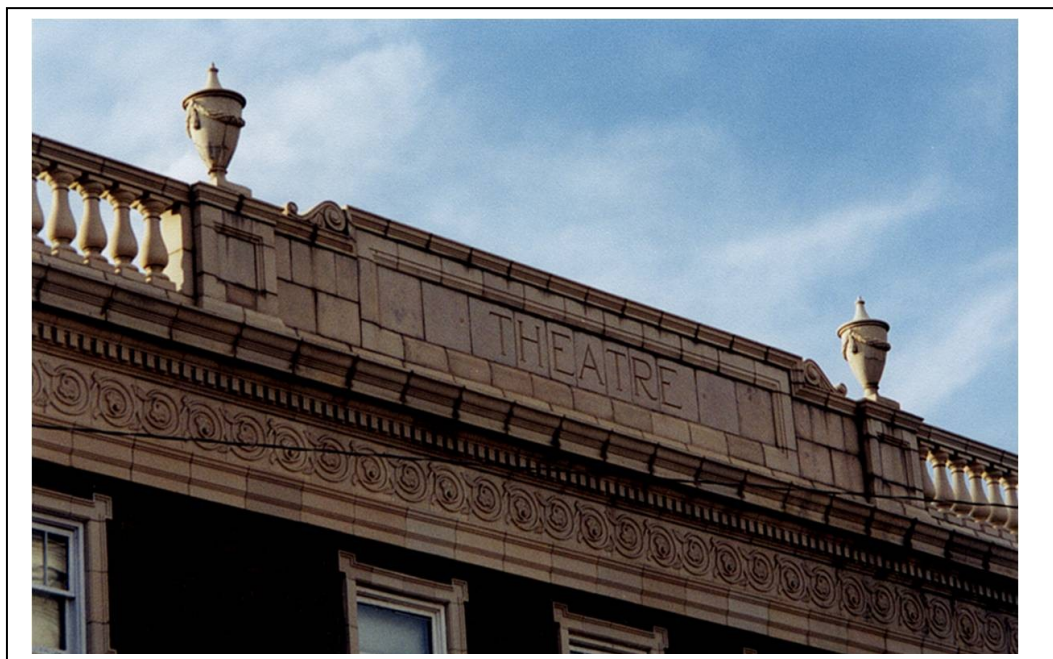


Figure 7.5: Engraved frontispiece of the Carolina Theatre. Photograph taken by the author (March 2009).

quoins, pilasters, plinths, balustrades, and parapets accented the theater's stately façade. Patrons entering the set of double doors opening onto Chestnut Street encountered several

locally novel facilities, including a ticket booth that was eventually embedded directly within the theater's front wall and a large lobby offering access to an adjacent ladies' lounge. The lobby also served to buffer patrons sitting in the theater's auditorium from the acoustic distractions emanating from Lumberton's busiest downtown streets. Once seated inside the Carolina's spacious exhibition hall, moviegoers faced an expansive, thirty-five by twenty-five foot stage surmounted by a two-story gilded proscenium arch that framed the green and red curtains concealing the theater's golden-fibre projection screen. Interior architectural flourishes included intricate plaster moldings and walnut carvings spaced at regular intervals along the hall's curved walls, while a rosette chandelier featuring massed-strings of white, orange and red lights accented the earthy and warm combination of rose, green, brown, and bronze tints scattered throughout an auditorium within which ranks of red-and-black cushioned seats were mounted atop a broad crimson carpet. A massive Geneva pipe-organ stood adjacent to the orchestra pit that fronted the Carolina's stage.⁷ Originally, music generated from the twelve-and-a-half thousand dollar organ either singly or in combination with musicians seated inside the orchestra pit accompanied motion pictures produced and released during the silent film era. Soon after the theater's June 18th opening, however, the Carolina's organ and orchestra pit were relegated to servicing civic events and traveling road shows as the "talking picture" revolution began to transform cinematic exhibitions nationally. Within nine months of the Carolina's opening, in fact, the First-National/Warner Brothers film *The Barker* proceeded to smash all of the county's previous box-office records as Robeson's first "talkie," even though the film (originally recorded as a silent feature) only included several segments of spoken dialogue.⁸

By June 1928, the Carolina had immediately relegated all other theaters in Robeson to second-class status based on its seating capacity, spaciousness, internal comfort facilities, decorative appointments, and robust infrastructure. Reportedly capable of seating six-hundred patrons, the theater's main auditorium rested upon a large poured-concrete foundation that also supported a raised stage as well as the orchestra pit and pipe-organ.⁹ The Carolina's second story included a mezzanine featuring a men's lounge that sat behind and underneath a balcony capable of seating an additional three-hundred patrons.¹⁰ The theater boasted the largest support staff of any Robeson venue, and its first manager was none other than J. W. Griffin, who had managed the nearby Pastime since 1920.¹¹ Griffin developed an inaugural program whose elements, sandwiched though they were between a raft of congratulatory speeches, included a musical overture, a novelty film with dual orchestral and organ accompaniment, a *Krazy Kat* cartoon, and the silent feature film *We Americans*, a nine-reeled, World War I-era immigrant drama produced by Universal Pictures. Opening Night tickets were expensive: auditorium seats cost forty-cents that night, twice as much as a Carolina balcony seat and more than twice the cost of an adult movie ticket anywhere else in Robeson.¹² The high costs borne by the Carolina's patrons were partly justified by the number of support staffers serving the Opening Night audience that evening. In addition to Griffin, the theater's employees included the first Carolina projectionist, B. T. Sutton, who had served as the Pastime's projectionist prior to moving over to the Carolina's newer (and reportedly fireproof) projection booth. Patrons who purchased their tickets from Sutton's wife were quickly met by greeter Will Crumpton, who accepted their tickets and passed them off to a pair of green-uniformed ushers, Ned Boone and J. D. Melvin, Jr. Rounding out the Carolina's staff were Miss Allie Bird McKinnon, who served as the

theater's organist, and janitor and handyman Charley Morrissey, the staff's only non-white (in Morrissey's case, its only African American) member.¹³

The Carolina Theatre quickly developed into a Lumberton landmark. For decades, it represented the cornerstone of commercial leisure in Robeson County.¹⁴ Though citizens of all ages passed through its doors, the Carolina held a special place in the imaginations of local children, many of whom earned free tickets by collecting a sufficient quantity of tin cans, aluminum scraps, or bottle caps during public-health initiatives and/or local recycling drives. On Saturdays, dozens of children would eventually park their bikes in a metal rack outside the theater's box office to attend matinee shows lasting all afternoon. While local musicians dreamed of operating the Carolina's thunderous pipe-organ, many teenaged and adult couples flocked to the theater on Friday and Saturday nights to attend late shows that ended just before midnight with the hopes of engaging in a surreptitious kiss while viewing films featuring their favorite romantic screen idols. Though restrictive block-booking contracts forced Carolina audiences to view a large number of pedestrian or relatively forgettable films, the site also hosted several highly anticipated and heavily advertised "event" films. These included lavish productions like *Grand Hotel* and *Gone with the Wind*, both of which required advanced ticket purchases (in 1932 and 1940, respectively), as well as films starring local favorites like Will Rogers in *Steamboat Round the Bend*, a 1935 feature from John Ford whose gate receipts surpassed those of any motion-picture exhibited in Robeson prior to *Gone with the Wind*.¹⁵

While the Carolina's managers quickly narrowed its programming capabilities to focus on motion-pictures rather than stage shows, managerial changes were common occurrences at the site, possibly because of the managerial rotations favored by the

companies that operated the theater on behalf of the LTC.¹⁶ By mid-century, the Carolina manager's post had been filled by a succession of individuals including Griffin, E. R. Medd, J. L. Lancaster, B. C. Talley, Carlyle Biggs, J. B. Jones, Roy Champion, and Edwin Pettett, each of whom supervised periodic upgrades to the theater's sound, screen and projection facilities. Partly through their efforts, the Carolina survived the darkest days of the Great Depression, and despite a large number of theater closings during the 1930s due to drastic reductions in film attendance figures and profits nationally,¹⁷ the Carolina remained open for audiences seeking a brief respite from challenging economic conditions. Though the motion-picture industry was never recession-proof, the principal theaters operating in Lumberton, Red Springs and St. Pauls prior to the Depression's onset survived its darkest days,¹⁸ and by the end of the 1930s several local theater structures were expanded and/or new facilities created in Fairmont, Rowland, Pembroke, Maxton and Red Springs. This spate of local renovation and construction culminated in 1939 with the arrival of the Carolina's most aggressive and long-lasting Lumberton competitor, the Riverside Theatre, a site which boasted—at one-thousand patrons—the largest seating capacity of any county theater.¹⁹ Yet if by 1940 the Carolina no longer represented Robeson's largest theater, it remained by far Robeson's most elegant venue. After an additional series of renovations early that year, Lumberton Mayor E. M. Johnson proclaimed February 5th as "Carolina Theatre Day," both to mark the theater's "grand reopening" and to recognize the Carolina for its years of faithful service to the Lumberton community.²⁰

Though it withstood the challenges posed by the Riverside to remain the county's flagship theater for several decades more, the Carolina eventually succumbed to the forces dooming many of the nation's premier theaters during the last few decades of the twentieth

century.²¹ Its decline and eventual closure was hardly unique. While most of Robeson's historic theaters for decades amounted to visible public symbols confirming the commercial and cultural vigor of their respective communities, their steady decline paralleled the steady devitalization of downtown centers in communities throughout both Robeson and the United States. During the latter half of the twentieth century, almost all of Robeson's downtown commercial retailers, including its grocery stores, pharmacies, dry-goods stores, clothiers, banks, and theaters, finally relocated to suburban shopping or strip malls located several miles from the county's historic commercial centers.²² By the mid-1970s, the operators of downtown Lumberton's Riverside and Carolina Theatres shuttered their venues in the face of dwindling operating margins in a fate shared by thousands of national theater operators who either shuttered, commercially reused, or demolished these now unprofitable ventures.²³ Over the last half century, however, many communities have struggled to preserve their historic theater buildings of their perceived architectural and cultural significance.²⁴ Consequently, while "most of the grand old movie houses from the golden era are long gone, a proud few still remain, cherished, saved, and restored" to operate within their communities through "new uses: as live theaters, performing arts centers, and concert halls."²⁵

How is it that the Carolina Theatre has survived as an exhibition space when all of the county's other historic theaters did not? Accounts of the theater's history published in the Robesonian indicate that *The Green Hornet* was the last film shown in the Carolina before the site's commercial-exhibition operations ended in 1975.²⁶ Due to the theater's size and prime location in a commercial district targeted for urban renewal, the Carolina was slated for demolition soon after it closed in an effort to provide for additional downtown parking spaces.²⁷ In response to this extremely unpopular proposal, white community leaders

influenced by their memories of childhood visits to the Carolina banded together in a series of initiatives to save the theater. In addition to providing an extraordinary amount of volunteer labor put to work restoring the theater's interior to its original condition, the influential residents and business leaders who organized the forerunner of what became the Carolina Civic Center Foundation heavily lobbied city, county and state officials for financial assistance. To ensure the legacy of their restoration initiatives, the Carolina's supporters moved in 1981 to protect the theater from demolition through its inclusion in the National Historic Register (Figure 7.6). They also initiated private fundraising campaigns of their own to offset the cost of expensive infrastructural renovations. In time, a critical mass of civic leaders, several of whom were active Carolina preservationists, agreed to allocate some of the proceeds of a local hotel tax to help fund the Carolina's restoration and to assist with its ongoing maintenance costs.²⁸

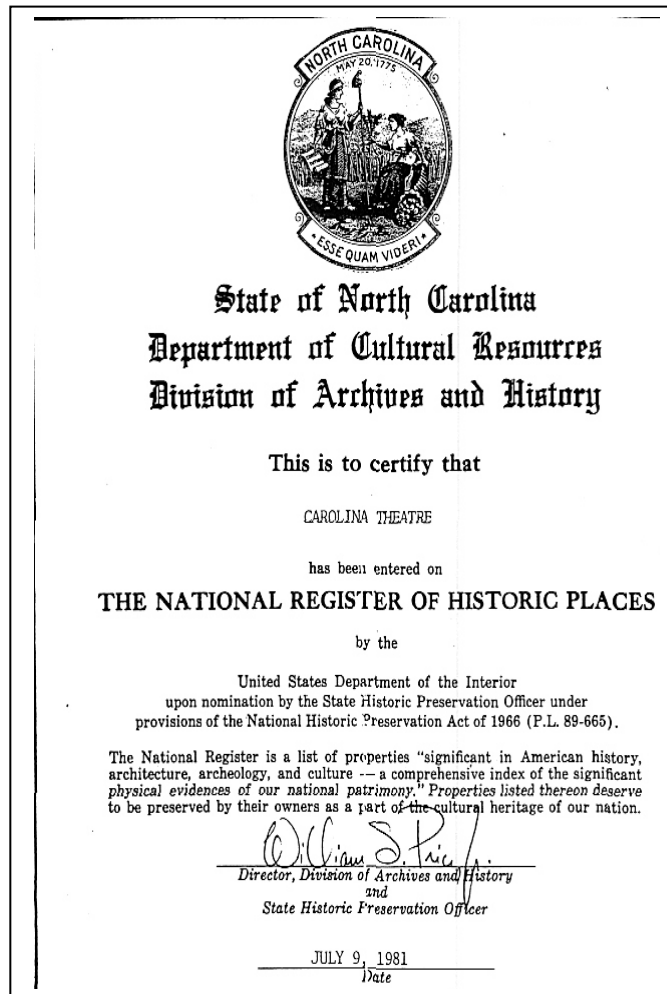


Figure 7.6: Photocopy of the Carolina Theatre's Historic Register certificate.²⁹

After years of painstaking labor often supplied free of charge by private citizens, regional artisans and local businesses, the Carolina Civic Center opened on June 18th 1985, or fifty-seven years to the day that Griffin, Bowman, and Beam had first thrown back the doors of the Carolina Theatre. Yet instead of offering motion-picture entertainment to its newest set of audiences, the Civic Center focused on hosting low-overhead shows often featuring local amateur or semi-professional performers. It also staged multiple performances by local community and/or children's theater groups as part of the Carolina's new mission to serve Robeson as a Performing Arts center. The site's non-commercial

orientation initially satisfied the expectations of Lumberton officials and Chamber of Commerce members of who, after having agreed to allocate public funds to keep the Center afloat, viewed the site as a potential foundational element in the revitalization of an historic district whose economic core had been ravaged by a series of permanent reductions in the region's industrial and manufacturing base.

However, despite having been a *cause célèbre* in the years preceding and immediately following the Civic Center's 1985 rededication, the Carolina eventually appeared to a number of local officials and business leaders to represent an additional and unwonted economic pressure further depressing Lumberton's municipal finances—a pressure exacerbated by the fact that the restored exhibition hall's performances rarely fired the imaginations of local residents. As the twentieth century came to a close, the local newspaper retrospectives that had been faithfully and annually published on the anniversary of the once-proud Carolina's Grand Reopening began failing to appear.³⁰ At the same time, some municipal officials had begun openly to criticize the site for having (in their opinion) failed to generate a significant economic or cultural benefit for the local Lumberton community.

Whether or not the theater had failed to live up to its economic or cultural promise, it is clear that its transition to performing-art (rather than motion-picture exhibition) venue remained a difficult transition. In its latest incarnation, the former Carolina Theatre's economic prospects were no longer almost exclusively dependent upon the success of its commercial film exhibitions. From the mid-1980s to the early-2000s, live performances, usually local talent shows, musical performances, Little Theater and/or children's shows, dominated the venue's programming, and during this period the former picture palace almost

never exhibited films. Yet if the Civic Center no longer screened contemporary films due to the staffing, operating, maintenance, and film-rental costs that would be incurred in a return to full-time commercial exhibition,³¹ many Carolina supporters expressed their hope that the theater would once again provide motion-picture entertainment on at least a semi-regular basis. During several years of additional structural upgrades, backstage overhauls, and long-deferred maintenance projects undertaken in the mid-to-late 2000s, the Carolina was finally equipped with new video projection equipment. In keeping with the Carolina management's directive to offer low-cost and/or high-margin productions, however, the non-profit Center quickly concluded that it could support a return to moviegoing only through screenings of "classic," previously released, or other inexpensively sourced film fare. By September 2009, thanks to the incorporation of DVD and "streaming" video capabilities channeled through a new projection and sound console, the Carolina had been positioned to revive periodic cinema exhibitions in downtown Lumberton.

While the Carolina's recent film-exhibition revival represents a partial return to the theater's historical programming roots, it remains but one of several initiatives designed to expand the Carolina's programming capabilities in the hope of establishing a more diversified revenue stream. Perhaps as a response to the ubiquitous availability of non-theatrical, personal, and/or home-based cinema-viewing devices (not to mention the abundance of current film releases exhibited in suburban multiplexes), the Carolina's managers have attempted to reposition their site as a socially inclusive performing-arts venue to a younger and more ethnically diverse set of local audiences than those that typically attended the Carolina during the 1940s or 50s. Nevertheless, the Civic Center's expansion beyond its core performing-arts mission through the reintroduction of cinematic exhibition

represents one of many signs indicating that the Carolina's long-term survival remains highly uncertain. The combination of residential suburbanization, a broad-based retail flight from historic downtown centers, and the aging of the local white elite that saved the Carolina from urban-renewal initiatives in the 1980s (and whose members rarely visit what they now perceive to be a largely deserted downtown neighborhood after dark) has radically reduced both the size and frequency of crowds attending the Carolina. Not even contemporary screenings of special "event" films like *Gone with the Wind*, a Selznick production that required local moviegoers to purchase their tickets at least a week in advance when it first arrived in April 1940,³² appear capable of attracting more than a few dozen patrons at a time to the Carolina.³³

Considering the cost of maintaining an historic landmark facility more than eighty years old, the Carolina Civic Center's directors understand that a few film screenings a month will not help the venue to remain solvent. Given that the Carolina typically sponsors only a handful of live events, exhibitions, or non-cinematic performances per month, the Center's financial prospects remain precarious despite management's resourcefulness in keeping the site's operational costs as low as possible (for example, through the recent installation of an "intelligent" heating system). Financially, the Carolina continues to struggle to sustain itself even though a significant portion of the site's annual operating budget comes from taxes levied by the town of Lumberton. Moreover, the town of Lumberton not only owns the Carolina's building as well as the land it sits upon, but it also co-signed a federal loan taken out by the Civic Center's foundation in the mid-2000s to modernize the theater's infrastructure. As a result, the Carolina needs to generate revenue in excess of its annual operating expenses to help pay down the loan's principal and interest.

Joint loan servicing has tied the site even further to a greater Lumberton community that reluctantly agreed to bear the brunt of federal loan payments through the continuing allocation of hotel-tax and utility pole-revenues, even though several decades of support has led some civic and business groups to reach the limit of their Carolina-funding tolerance.

In ways similar to peer communities that have also reclaimed local historic theaters via public/non-profit partnerships, the Carolina Civic Center Foundation, the residents of Lumberton, and Lumberton city officials have been engaged particularly in the last decade in an ongoing and occasionally contentious debate concerning how (and whether) the former Carolina Theatre will or should continue to serve the public. In particular, evidence from the federal loan-approval debates in late-2006 indicate that the commitment necessary to continue to fund the Carolina for roughly forty years in order to relieve this additional loan debt has been imperiled not only by the economic distress facing the greater Robeson community, but also by the Carolina's legacy as a segregated institution. The site's current managers are aware that changes in local demographic, political, and socio-economic power structures in the years after the Carolina's initial 1985 restoration may well threaten the Carolina's long-term viability, particularly since the social, economic and political influence of former Carolina champions has waned significantly. No longer can the site rely heavily on the efforts of active and influential supporters like Alan Sugar, the operator of a longtime Lumberton men's clothier and president of the initial Civic Center Foundation; Helen Sharpe, who as the wife of a former Robesonian editor penned numerous articles to promote the theater's restoration while serving as the vice-president of the initial Center Foundation; and Hector MacLean, a local attorney, banker, railroad president, Lumberton mayor, state senator, and son of former North Carolina Governor Angus W. McLean. In the last several decades, in

fact, a significant number of African American and Native American residents have occupied important public offices in Lumberton, including positions in the County Clerk's office and half of the current seats on the Lumberton City Council. To Robeson's increasingly politically organized non-white community, it is possible that the Carolina no longer represents—and given the second-class treatment imposed upon their parents and grandparents at the original Carolina, quite possibly never represented—a “focal point of civic pride”³⁴ worth tens of thousands of dollars in annual public funds.

During the early 2000s, the managers of the Civic Center were confronted with a difficult truth: their venue was becoming imperiled partly because most of Robeson's population had been subjected to discriminatory treatment at the Carolina. At a time when the municipal budget was under intense scrutiny from each of the county's principal demographic groups, local enthusiasm for the county's performing arts center was primarily restricted to white residents. As a reflection of local political change, the Carolina's management specifically broadened the Civic Center's cultural mission to include social and/or ethnic groups that faced discriminatory treatment in the theater. However, events surrounding the site's diamond jubilee in 2003 seemed to confirm the growing perception of local politicians that non-whites rarely patronized the Civic Center.

Due to the efforts of then-Civic Center Director Angela Carter, the climax of the Carolina's seventy-fifth anniversary season involved the North Carolina Theatre Company's rendition of director Paul Ferguson's stage adaptation of *Good Ol' Girls*, a musical based upon a series of stories featuring Southern women written by a pair of well-respected North Carolina authors, Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle.³⁵ During her remarks prior to the anniversary evening's performance, McCorkle recalled as a native Lumbertonian having

spent many childhood Saturdays watching film exhibitions at the Carolina Theatre, whose projectors at one time were operated by members of the McCorkle family. Although the anniversary show doubtless attracted Carolina patrons who felt a strong sense of nostalgia about the proud old theater, as the evening's patrons filed into the Carolina's auditorium, two audience composition factors were undeniable. First, the generation responsible for resurrecting the theater in the mid-1980s had aged significantly. Second, the individuals who still appeared personally invested in the theater and who wished to celebrate the theater's long history were almost exclusively members of Robeson's white middle- and upper-classes. Despite the inclusion of a local Lumbee representative named Woody Sampson on the Civic Center's Board of Directors, it appeared to this author that out of the approximately 300 persons situated within the theater that evening, only a single non-white individual could be clearly identified—namely, the sole African American performer in the *Good Ol' Girls* cast.³⁶

Since its revival in 1985, the Carolina Civic Center has never discouraged non-whites from attending a site that had effaced the obvious physical vestiges of the racial discrimination that had been practiced in the theater. During the Carolina's seventy-fifth anniversary season, for instance, the theater's North Door remained in use, but only as a fire exit equally available to all patrons. Furthermore, during the *Good Ol' Girls* performance a number of patrons sat in the Carolina's balcony, but by choice rather than by proscription. The only seats in the hall not made available on a first-come, first-served basis were a handful of front-row spaces reserved for particularly vigorous and generous Civic Center advocates. Yet even as the Carolina Civic Center intended to welcome both white and non-white patrons, the latter's absence at the anniversary show helped to validate Director

Carter's claim to the author a few months earlier that non-whites were still "getting over their comfort issue with this building."³⁷

Continuing conflicts over Carolina funding a few years after the seventy-fifth anniversary show suggests that this "comfort" issue continues to influence contemporary non-whites in Robeson, for whom it makes little difference that the former Carolina Theatre was, unlike local schools or other civic services during the Jim Crow era, an entertainment facility unfunded by taxpayer dollars, and a site whose operators claimed the proprietary right to deny entrance to or to erect internal barriers to prevent equal access within what legally amounted to a private (albeit commercial) space.³⁸ To non-whites, the "private" designation that spatial theorists Marcel Hénaff and Tracy Strong have suggested theoretically entitled proprietors the right to limit access to and within their establishments never fully justified the discrimination perpetuated in the sort of public accommodations specifically targeted by civil rights legislation.³⁹ Although private-space rights presumably granted the right to constrain or exclude non-white groups while granting full and free access to whites within the Carolina Theatre, non-white moviegoers like Bruce Barton and Purnell Swett expected that their purchase of a full-priced ticket should have transferred to them the right to occupy the theater on an equal footing with whites. When it did not, they bitterly resented the resulting differential treatment, refused to patronize the Carolina, and held an understandable grudge against the site for the rest of their lives.

Furthermore, non-white patrons understood that the Carolina's policies were designed to limit non-white participation in the site's *most distinctly public aspects* through their relegation to a balcony that denied their direct observation by white patrons who (as a result) could deny having occupied either the same physical or symbolic space with the county's

less-privileged ethnic groups. The irony of the visual elision of non-whites within the Carolina Theatre is that this elision was attempted in, of all places, a theater, since according to Hénaff and Strong all public space is inherently “theatrical, in that it is a place [in] which [one] is seen and shows oneself to others.”⁴⁰ By refusing to acknowledge non-whites in the Carolina, whites helped to prevent the establishment of potentially “transitive” social relationships within the space. As was the case during lunch counter sit-ins, such relationships were established when the members of a disenfranchised group publicly demonstrated their intent to occupy, on an equal basis, the very public spaces that enfranchised groups typically denied them. To establish such a transitive relationship, minority groups would force members of the socially dominant group nominally controlling access to these spaces to respond to this undesired occupancy. The reactionary response of the socially dominant group represented a public acknowledgement of the now-visible intervention of non-whites into “white” space.⁴¹ However, Robeson’s three-entrance theaters locked blacks and Indians into what Hénaff and Strong would characterize as an “intransitive nonreciprocal”⁴² relationship with the dominant social group, whereby whites could continue to engage in moviegoing without publicly acknowledging the contingent viewership position of non-white audiences. Moreover, tri-racial theaters like the Carolina stifled what political sociologist Jeff Weintraub has referred to as the potential “polymorphous sociability” of public space, since it denied either the temporary or permanent traversal of established social boundaries during the simultaneous use of that space.⁴³

Based on these interpretations of public-space theory, segregated theaters in the United States—all of which operated within nominally democratic communities—subverted the egalitarianism of public space. This subversion eventually resulted in troubling political

consequences for the Carolina Civic Center, for some of Robeson's non-white residents quite distinctly remember that local white theaters did not represent "democratic" spaces, at least not as those spaces have been characterized by Hénaff and Strong, for whom the essential feature of public space requires that "all that appears in public can and must be seen and heard by all."⁴⁴ Moreover, the experiences of Robeson's non-white audiences substantiate the argument of cinema historians Martin Barker and Kate Brooks that even if "film is visual in its medium," the inherent visuality of cinema "does not mean that our encounter with it" necessarily involves "a way of seeing," nor does it generate its meanings solely through imagistic experience; instead, "it is not the medium which determines the manner of response," but rather "the place of that medium within a social and cultural circuit, and the tasks given to that medium in the life of that society"⁴⁵ that help to determine the meanings derived from cinematic participation. For at least some Robesonians, the visual or sensory impressions produced by a given film were overwhelmed by the emotional and psychological after-effects of the conditions defining their mode of spectatorship.

In light of their theater's segregationist history, Carolina supporters hoping to secure continued public funding for the site may find themselves facing stiffer political headwinds than when the theater was originally restored in the early-1980s because of the increasing diversity of influential municipal officials. Furthermore, in the evolving semiotics of urban landscapes, spaces once designed to serve specific ideological functions will continue to be subjected to a broad set of local political and social pressures as they age. As local conditions change in response to these pressures, residents may eventually question the utility of maintaining structures that either symbolize or can be viewed as representing outmoded social principles, functions, or sensibilities. Given local conditions in Robeson, it

is entirely plausible to speculate that for the county's non-white political and demographic majority, the Carolina Theatre was *never* a source of nostalgia that *ever* merited saving. As such, they may look more favorably not upon the Carolina's past, but rather to its future, when the site may be called upon at last to perform a last piece of ideological work, namely the local destruction of all public reminders of the county's discriminatory history.

Within the local context of a changing socio-political landscape, the Carolina Theatre today occupies an equivocal position. To scholars, the Carolina represents a site for investigating the ways in which rural modernization, urban revitalization, regional economic disparity, and a number of ethnic, social, and religious agendas have messily intersected. To local politicians and community boosters, its fate will be decided through a series of rhetorical negotiations over the site's cultural value, the general desirability of preserving historic Main Street architectures, and the local appetite for continuing to fund the adaptive reuse of a former commercial structure now designated for non-profit use. The Carolina's advocates view the theater as a cultural and architectural icon capable of anchoring downtown revitalization efforts, while its detractors doubt the site's economic sustainability and/or view its historic preservation as an unnecessary barrier preventing the demolition of an obsolete facility whose lot, once opened, could spur additional downtown commercial investment. Taken together, these charges and countercharges validate sociologist and spatial-theorist Henri Lefebvre's contention that *public space* remains an intrinsically *social space* subject to any number of competing claims that serve to reshape and restructure these public venues over time.⁴⁶

Consequently, for a venue variously perceived as a drain on public funds, a racial anathema, a rallying point for architectural and historical preservation, and a foundational element in stimulating the revival of a neglected downtown neighborhood, the Carolina Civic

Center remains enmeshed within a tenuous and highly contingent set of local social, economic, and political commitments and negotiations. Few individuals are more acutely aware of the uncertainties surrounding the Carolina than Richard Sceiford, who in 2011 became the longest-tenured Director in the Center's history.⁴⁷ Since his arrival in Lumberton in 2006, Sceiford has attempted to generate community interest in the site by pursuing a two-pronged marketing strategy touting the Carolina both as a regionally significant historic-preservation site, and as a performing-arts facility capable of contributing to downtown Lumberton's cultural renewal. His most intractable challenges have been political and economic. Unfortunately, the region's primary industry, i.e., agriculture, has proven incapable either of replacing the jobs and income lost by a continuing decline in the regional manufacturing base, or of significantly spurring local innovation or internal commercial growth. As a result, Robeson is no longer simply one of poorest counties in North Carolina; rather, based on recent demographic analyses indicating that nearly one-third of the county's residents live below the poverty line, Robeson now ranks as the poorest mid-sized county in the United States.⁴⁸

During an extended period of economic distress, Sceiford has faced the difficult task of funding the infrastructural renovations required for the Carolina's compliance with new public access regulations. Though originally the Carolina's structure was reshaped to accommodate the admission of non-white patronage within a triracially segregated site, these more recent modifications, which represent a logical legislative extension of the discriminatory protections within public accommodations that were established in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, have been designed to accommodate patrons suffering from physical disabilities. In their response to the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), Sceiford and his

allies applied for a rural development loan offered by the United States Department of Agriculture to acquire the funds necessary for to implement ADA-compliance.⁴⁹ However, the USDA required that its \$1.5 million-dollar, forty-year loan be co-signed by both the Center's non-profit foundation and the city of Lumberton, since the latter, which actually owns the Civic Center facility and its lot, could presumably sell these assets in order to repay the loan if the foundation alone defaulted on its obligations. Opposition from competing local interests sought to divert the annual funding which the theater continues to receive in order to scuttle the loan's approval, in part because some local officials hesitated to absorb the political cost of an additional municipal debt in the event that the Carolina does not meet its portion of the loan repayment. In fact, the city council initially voted in the fall of 2006 to deny the Center's request that it co-sign the USDA loan. However, under pressure from Sceiford and his municipal and civic allies, the council reversed its decision two months later, and with the loan secured Sceiford and his largely volunteer staff began the arduous task of cleaning and refurbishing as much of the site as possible. Professional contractors tackled the Carolina's most serious infrastructural weaknesses, including an aging air-conditioning and heating system, a non-functioning elevator, extensive water damage scarring the theater's auditorium, foundation, and load-bearing walls, several decades' worth of "deferred maintenance" items, and the reclamation of the site's decrepit and previously abandoned commercial spaces, several of which were targeted by Sceiford for subsequent reuse as theatrical "green" rooms, foundation offices, and community meeting rooms.

Beyond the major renovation expenses funded by the USDA loan, Sceiford initiated additional fundraising efforts to address other site-specific improvements designed to resolve a series of programming limitations. While the USDA loan eventually resulted in the Civic

Center's Grand Reopening in February 2009, the theater remained a performing-arts center that still lacked the capacity to screen motion pictures. Sceiford and the members of the Civic Center Foundation spearheaded private efforts that resulted in the purchase and installation of digital projection equipment and upgrades to the sound and projection consoles housed in the theater's original projection booth. By September, the Center was finally ready to resume periodic film exhibitions onto a nearly three-hundred-square-foot motion-picture screen for the first time in nearly a quarter of a century. Thanks to extensive rehabilitations of the Carolina's central lobby as well as its men's and ladies' lounges, rest rooms, and concession stands (one of which again featured a hot-buttered popcorn machine), the Carolina again offered local audiences a chance to experience at least a close approximation of what it was like to view big-screen entertainment during the 1940s and 1950s.

Nevertheless, while some Carolina supporters long for a return to daily moviegoing, the economic prospects for everyday exhibitions have hardly improved since the theater closed in the mid-1970s. Instead, Sceiford and the Center's directors hope that more diversified programming will increase the site's chances for survival by establishing a broader cultural appeal across Robeson's changing socio-cultural landscape. In fact, cultural inclusivity remains an integral component of the Center's current mission statement:

“The mission of the Carolina Civic Center is to strive to offer our town and surrounding areas a diverse cultural experience within its historical building. The mission statement of the Carolina Civic Center includes:

- Presenting culturally and racially diverse quality programming
- Providing educational opportunities and training in the fine arts
- Producing performing arts programs for the community
- Participating in downtown and community economic development and tourism.”⁵⁰

These foundational principles do not, of course, preclude an occasional return to the Carolina's moviegoing roots. In addition to evening screenings of film classics like *Gone with the Wind*, *My Fair Lady* and *Psycho*, Sceiford and his team have initiated a Friday Night "Summer Drive-In" series featuring landmark science-fiction films including *The Blob*, *It Came from Outer Space*, *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and *Forbidden Planet*. Additionally, a new generation of Lumbertonians can experience theatrical moviegoing through the Carolina's partnership with the Robeson County Library: on local teacher-workdays, the two institutions provide free film exhibitions for school-children under the age of thirteen.

Yet as a performing-arts center, the Carolina has refused to implement film as the venue's principal programming staple, and has elected instead to adopt a mixed-use programming strategy that hearkens back to the broad programming agenda pursued by George French and the members of the Lumberton Opera Company more than a century ago.⁵¹ For despite a seating capacity larger by far than any other theater in Robeson, the Carolina continues today to serve relatively small audiences attending films that most patrons have seen before, if not necessarily on the "big screen." Since the site remains highly conscious of its expense base and seeks to minimize both its fixed and variable (i.e., performance-based) expenses, Sceiford diligently pursues low-cost opportunities to offer local audiences original and/or regionally significant programming. At the same time, Sceiford has quite purposefully moved the Center beyond the set of children's programming, Little Theater productions, dance recitals and pageants that dominated the site's offerings in the decade prior to his arrival in order to tap into previously unexplored audience segments.⁵²

Sceiford has also engaged in a series of partnerships and cultural alliances to aid the Carolina in navigating the economic and political uncertainties of regional non-profit theater operations. The “Friends of the Carolina Civic Center” currently include the North Carolina Arts Council, ARTS North Carolina, the North Carolina Museums Council, the North Carolina Presenters Consortium, the League of Historic American Theaters, and the National Endowment for the Arts. To diversify the theater’s revenue sources even further, Sceiford has agreed on several occasions to rent the Carolina to local groups for their private use, as well as to groups hosting their own private or public performances in the theater. In some cases, the Center will co-sponsor these performances through a revenue-sharing agreement with the organizations renting the hall. These partnerships, in fact, have enabled the Carolina to expand into audiences that historically avoided the Carolina Theatre. For example, thanks to the Carolina’s excellent acoustics, its large seating capacity, and its full range of comfort facilities, a number of religious organizations have rented the site, including several church-affiliated gospel-music groups (one predominantly white, and the other African American).⁵³ Other religious organizations have rented the site to stage their own worship services within the former theater.⁵⁴ Additional efforts to open up the Carolina to groups who may either have felt unwelcome in the site before, and who therefore may have been otherwise unwilling to attend it today, have included a lobby and mezzanine-based exhibition featuring the work of regional artists, craftsmen, and student-artists from the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Moreover, the Carolina’s attempts to welcome non-white patrons into a formerly segregated theater have resulted in occasional site rentals by both Latino- and Native American-affiliated organizations.

However, despite these notable successes, the Carolina no longer enjoys the unanimous support of Lumberton's mayor, county attorney, town commissioners, and leading citizens. According to Sceiford, the general weekend exodus to coastal getaways and the scarcity of upscale restaurants and bars in the theater's vicinity tend to deprive the site of the regular patronage of Lumberton's most prosperous residents and business leaders, at least some of whom regard the Carolina as a tiny cultural oasis set amid a downtown dotted with pawn shops, loan offices, storefront churches, and abandoned retail spaces. A number of town leaders desperate to improve the local tax base view Lumberton's continuing investment in the Civic Center as doubly punitive, even as Sceiford and his team find themselves struggling to rally civic leaders hesitant to serve as vocal and enthusiastic members of the Center's Board of Directors at a time when the site's partial public funding remains in jeopardy. In fact, if the foundation's local tax appropriation is not renewed prior to its expiration currently scheduled for 2014, then the Carolina will likely be forced to close its door, in which case the city of Lumberton would become solely responsible for repaying the USDA loan.

While the prospect of such an outcome might theoretically motivate the city council to keep the Carolina operating for as long as possible, the theater's history as a non-inclusive space has only served to compound its financial and political uncertainty. Despite the Carolina's attempts to attract a more ethnically-inclusive audience, the site's redeployment as a performing arts center has failed to produce a groundswell of interest for an historic preservation site still resented by local blacks and Indians whose anger at the theater's historically shabby treatment of non-whites very nearly derailed the theater's revival in 2006.⁵⁵ When debates were opened as to whether or not Lumberton's officials would co-sign

the USDA loan, the eight-person city council was evenly divided between white and non-white voting members. The figure leading the charge against the loan (both initially and during its subsequent debate resubmission) was John C. Cantey, an African American council delegate whose electoral precinct included historic downtown Lumberton. Though many of Cantey's objections to the loan were expressed within the context of the deal's uncertain long-term financial risk to Lumberton, at a critical point in the debate Cantey attempted to rally the council to vote against the bill by reminding its members that only "a very small, select few" of the town's residents "have utilized the Carolina Civic Center recently." Furthermore, Cantey declared that the members of his constituency in particular remembered the Carolina "very painfully, as a segregated place, where they came and they had to sit in the balcony or on the far side" of the theater's set of internal barricades.⁵⁶

Though Cantey had been born just a few years prior to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, his rhetorical strategy included a direct emotional appeal to a local non-white community whose recollections of segregation still remain fresh. Nevertheless, certain local observers heavily criticized Cantey for pursuing it. After one particularly contentious session, Cantey's race-specific objections seemed to irritate the editors of the Robesonian. As loan supporters, they openly expressed their disappointment that "for whatever reason, Cantey felt obliged to recall the Civic Center's Jim Crow history, when blacks and American Indians were banished to the balcony to watch the movie that was playing at what was then the Carolina Theatre." From the Robesonian's point of view, Cantey's appeal to history bore little meaning within the current debate, for "the more relevant point is that the Carolina Civic Center's doors, when they open again, will open wide, and welcome whoever comes to enjoy the entertainment it provides."⁵⁷ Yet both the tone and content of the editorial

criticizing Cantey suggest that its author either missed the point of Cantey's objection, or purposely ignored the historical context that led Cantey and his constituents to refuse to view the impending rebirth of the Carolina as a triumph for cultural inclusivity. Rather indifferently, the paper noted that as for attending future Carolina events, "Cantey argues that few of his constituents, and they are mostly black, will do so. That is their choice to make."⁵⁸ In other words, the editorialist seemed unconcerned that the Carolina might begin to operate as a now-voluntarily segregated space, even though this same author openly celebrated the impending restoration of an institution whose new cultural mission had been grounded in the principles of diversity, openness, and universal access.

The failure of the Robesonian to acknowledge the enduring impact of local segregated experiences indicates that the town's cultural memories appear to have been bifurcated by the indignities of Jim Crow. Moreover, the paper failed to acknowledge the political reality that Cantey's appeal had an excellent chance of succeeding. His acquisition of a single non-white vote out of the three non-white council members who voted to approve the loan would likely have scuttled the Carolina's restoration for at least several years, and possibly longer. Since the eventual loan vote was deadlocked at four votes apiece, the council's tie-breaking procedures permitted the deciding vote to be cast by Lumberton's elderly (white) mayor, who quickly resolved the issue in favor of the Carolina.⁵⁹

The Cantey episode demonstrates that even as many of Robeson's non-white residents seek to deny, belittle, or ignore the racial bitterness associated with once-segregated public facilities, for many others the painful memories linger on. The anger, shame and resentment that prevented local minority leaders like Purnell Swett and Bruce Barton from attending the Carolina even after the theater was integrated were hardly restricted to

educators and civil-rights activists in Robeson County alone. According to Howard Clement, an African American civic leader who protested against the segregated seating policies implemented in Durham, North Carolina's own Carolina Theatre during the early 1960s, the legacy of segregation continued to taint theaters in the eyes of Durham's black community for more than half a century. In referring to an accomplished cousin of his who had been denied access to a Durham Carolina event due to the color of her skin, Clement recalled that "she never forgot that, even though she became a county commissioner, well respected in the community, [and] chairman of the Board of Education...That slight. That offense. She never forgot."⁶⁰ Similar misgivings have been carried forward through oral histories to generations of residents who never personally climbed the final flight of stairs leading to the Durham Carolina's second (i.e., its Negro) balcony, and the failure of segregated businesses like the Durham Carolina, a site subjected to several years of public protest advocating the theater's desegregation, to change their racial policies voluntarily soon earned those locations the lasting contempt of non-white residents.⁶¹ The eventual integration of these sites appears to have done little to absolve them of their legacy of social inequity. For example, because some members "of Durham's African American community continue to resent the past at the theater," Janna Jones has alleged that these unresolved cultural misgivings still represent "a wound that needs healing."⁶² According to Jones, simply ignoring such a wound represents an inadequate social response. In Jones' view, even though "it is difficult to know exactly how to [heal] that [wound], it is clear that the story of the theater's segregation and ultimate integration has not been forgotten by some people who live in Durham;" therefore, in order to diminish the bitterness of that history among non-whites, Jones argues that this same history "should be[come] part of the theater's discursive past."⁶³

Based on her study of theater preservation efforts in several Southern cities, Jones maintains that ongoing theater-preservation initiatives have been compromised *both* by the enduring memories of racial discrimination practiced in these sites *and* by the refusal of most preservation groups to memorialize the historical experiences of the non-privileged patrons who unequally attended these sites. Jones has expressed her gratitude to those theater preservationist sites that have recognized the importance of acknowledging segregation. These include the Tampa Theatre, a Florida venue that does not hesitate to educate youngsters about the theater's former hostility to non-whites; in fact, the Tampa staff's treatment of the subject inspired Jones to initiate her own extensive picture-palace review after having toured the site.⁶⁴ Jones also found the tour guides at Memphis' Orpheum Theatre willing to discuss the site's segregated balconies, staircases and ticket booths to those touring the facility.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, officially sanctioned discursive reminders of moviegoing discrimination remain exceptions to the general rule of theater preservationists to sidestep the issue of memorializing segregation. Though the managers of restored theaters commonly cite inadequate volunteerism and insufficient funding as reasons for discursively ignoring the role that these facilities played in the history of racial oppression in America, according to Jones this choice poses a greater risk to these venues than the possibility of alienating patrons potentially tired of public discussions of historical race relations.⁶⁶ Though the reasons for eliding historical minority experiences in preserved sites likely range from guilt over the imposition of racial discrimination to a stubborn desire to perpetuate age-old racial prejudices, some historical theaters may be forced to close their doors entirely until the generations personally affected by their former discriminatory practices can no longer influence local policy-makers. Even a dedicated restoration advocate like Jones

acknowledges the possibility that landscape historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson may have been correct in claiming that, contrary to the wishes of those otherwise committed to architectural preservation, there may need “to be (in our new concept of history) an interim death or rejection before there can be renewal and reform. The old order has to die before there can be a born-again landscape.”⁶⁷

There is no way to know for certain whether or not an attempt by the Carolina Theatre’s preservationists publicly to recognize the theater’s history of segregation—for example, through the deployment of markers or plaques in spots where discriminatory facilities once stood, or by the inclusion of references to minority experiences during theater tours—would meaningfully heal local racial wounds. Such a move might, in the view of cinema historian Barbara Klinger, serve merely to “inoculate against a more penetrating assessment of race relations” in the case of token memorializations that either offer “a vision of history in which the problems of the past are well on their way to being resolved,” or permit local residents to persist in “ignoring problems that continue to exist in the industry and in society by presenting an untroubled vision of [a] present day” racial harmony that simply does not exist.⁶⁸

Though that lack of local racial harmony prompted the development of Robeson’s tri-racial theaters eight or nine decades ago, the symbolic impact of these facilities continued long after the end of the period covered by this study. In fact, though Robeson County’s theaters were not subjected to extensive civil rights protests, they occasionally ensnared even non-Robesonians within the difficult local racial tensions that both structured and surrounded them. For example, an African American photojournalist named Alexander Rivera arrived in Lumberton in 1948 while pursuing a series of assignments for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the

National Negro Press Association. A member of naval intelligence during the war, Rivera had been selected to document civil rights abuses in the American South. Sixty years after the fact, the award-winning Rivera could still vividly recall his alarming introduction to Robeson County via its movie houses.⁶⁹ Rivera was arrested for the first time in his career by a white Lumberton police officer who discovered him photographing the Riverside Theatre's tri-segregated bathrooms, ticket booths, and balconies.⁷⁰ Protesting that his actions were perfectly legal, Rivera failed to convince the arresting officer to release him by warning the latter that Rivera's newspaper would hold the city of Lumberton responsible if the car he was travelling in was stolen or damaged during the photojournalist's time in jail. Undeterred, the officer escorted Rivera to the Chief of Police, who upon hearing the testimonies of his subordinate and Rivera redirected the former to the local courthouse for a more precise identification of the local statute(s) violated by Rivera's actions. After a lengthy consultation with a local magistrate, the officer returned to report that no such statute could be identified, and Rivera was subsequently released. However, once Rivera left Lumberton, he ever afterwards modified his work schedule in order to complete the many photographic assignments he undertook throughout Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina as early as possible each day, since his experience confronting the potentially volatile racial sensitivities in Robeson convinced him of the need to leave white towns before sunset to forestall police or residential reprisals against him as a result of his documentary pursuits.

Though the angry and overt racial tensions that Alexander Rivera faced in Lumberton six decades earlier no longer characterized interracial exchanges in Robeson by 2006, both Councilman Cantey's objections to preserving the last of Robeson's segregated movie houses and the Robesonian's haughty and unsympathetic dismissal of his claims offer more

contemporary evidence to indicate that the integration of local businesses and political institutions has hardly eliminated the county's legacy of racial discord. The need to reiterate the history of discriminatory experiences like Rivera's that were tied to historic theaters—experiences which, as in Rivera's case, never elicited an apology from local white officials—can be traced to the same set of considerations informing the memorialization of segregated moviegoing in those theaters, and as Barbara Klinger suggests, a public acknowledgment of minority moviegoing experiences may well represent a first step towards healing precisely the sort of interracial wounds that have been identified, for example, by Janna Jones.

In that sense, the Carolina Civic Center's removal of all physical traces of the theater's segregationist origins denied the Lumberton community the opportunity to debate the desirability of such memorialization within a town-owned facility. By privileging within the Carolina's restoration the freedom of movement and facility access that was historically true for white moviegoers only, the site's volunteers preserved an atmosphere of inclusivity wholly at odds with the local memories of black and Indian patrons who visited the site during its incarnation as a commercial theater. To both white and non-white residents fully aware of the ways in which moviegoing acted as a tool to perpetuate social inequities, the current restoration obscures the lived experience of Jim Crow. Alternatively, by preserving the landscapes of social injustice on a "warts and all" basis, theater preservationists can institutionalize the public's condemnation of racial injustice so that latent forms of Jim Crowism are much less likely to taint the lives of future generations. In addition, without tangible examples of society's failure to require the equal treatment of all social groups, examples ranging from Robben Island jail cells and antebellum slave pens to white luncheonette counters and partitioned cinema balconies, then educators may find it difficult

to stimulate the sort of emotional and psychological revelations available to those individuals who inhabit, even if only for a few moments, the historical facilities that simultaneously instituted and enforced second-class citizenship.

The ultimate fate of the Carolina Theatre may well be determined by the manner in which the site either acknowledges or dismisses the collective historical memories of both whites and non-whites. According to historian Joseph Rhea, our collective memories represent the “set of beliefs about the past which the nation’s citizens hold in common and publicly recognize as legitimate representations of their history.”⁷¹ Collective memories influence contemporary social action “because shared beliefs about the past provide citizens with common landmarks or examples which can be referred to when addressing the problems of the present.”⁷² Following the USDA loan debate, the Robesonian’s failure to acknowledge the less-enthusiastic perspectives of Councilman Cantey and his constituents in a sense prefigured the Carolina’s subsequent failure to incorporate a more socially inclusive cultural perspective within its latest set of preservation efforts. As a result, patrons who might have been interested in exploring the theater’s once-segregated seats, to clamber up and down race-specific staircases opening onto dusty side-streets or back-alleys, or to compare the cramped and dizzying buzzard’s roosts with the broad auditorium aisles, high-ceilinged lobby, and finely appointed smokers and other comfort facilities previously off limits to non-whites could have begun to recognize, and therefore to appreciate, the experiential differences that segregated moviegoing imposed on earlier generations. Indeed, they may come to appreciate, in a manner similar to former North Carolina Poet Laureate Fred Chappell, how an individual’s sudden immersion within a segregated space can result in a more nuanced awareness of the bittersweet experience of non-white moviegoers during the Jim Crow era.

In an essay submitted to the *North Carolina Literary Review* titled “A Curtain Rises,” Chappell reflected upon his childhood in Canton, North Carolina, a paper-mill town in the state’s western mountains located roughly fifteen miles from Asheville.⁷³ As was the case for many youngsters growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, Chappell viewed the local movie house as a kind of “wizard’s castle: here such images were presented to our eyes, such music and wild words assailed our ears, that our nerves soared and swooned and our minds were all a tumult of violence.” Each weekend’s set of films featuring cinema heroes and villains led to endlessly recreated battles that echoed through school playgrounds and reverberated across neighborhood backyards until, after a comparatively dreary school-week had passed, Chappell and his fellows could return each Saturday to venues like the Colonial Theatre, where all-day exhibitions of images on “the silver screen” succeeded again “in banishing reality”—at least for the children fortunate enough to attend them.

In time, the adolescent Chappell’s preference for Western gunfighters shifted towards adult stars like Humphrey Bogart and Lana Turner, the very figures capable of providing young adults with an idealized representation of the ways in which men and women might interact. Yet Canton’s theaters also offered Chappell an important lesson in race relations when the teenaged author attended a weekday matinee in a virtually empty Colonial. Uninspired by that day’s film offerings, Chappell left his “accustomed center aisle seat and climbed to the balcony, to the very last rows beneath the projection booth,” where he encountered a view that provoked a set of profound insights into some of the consequences of segregated life:

I’d never been here before because this was where the “colored” sat—or rather, where they were allowed to sit. From here everything looked different. The screen was far away and the actors less overpowering. The angle was different too, so that the eye did not so easily interpret two dimensions into three. From here the movie was more obviously a play of flat shadows on a flat surface, a mere rippling of light.

I watched *Neptune's Daughter* for a few desultory minutes and then, persuaded by a sober curiosity, went to the fire escape door and pushed it open. Here one was not led gently from the film back to the real world through a lobby decorated with posters and redolent with hot popcorn. Raw sunlight struck my eyes and the blab of street sounds and the roar of the paper factory swarmed my senses. Through this door the Negro patrons entered and exited and there in three rows behind me they sat at night, nearly invisible except for their eyes, patiently watching the small square of liquid shadow so far below them.

At 14, I had almost begun to understand that the reality other people endured was different from the one I endured. Now I found that the unreality they enjoyed was different from my unreality. I stepped through the door onto the rickety peeling fire escape. Now I felt differently about the movies than I had felt before. It would take another two decades before I could *see* them differently. But without realizing exactly what had happened to me, I knew my life had absorbed a change, minor but indelible.

For Chappell, even this brief immersion in the conditions of segregated moviegoing generated a nascent awareness of key differences between the lived experience of whites and non-whites. While Chappell's reminiscences can only suggest to contemporary readers some of the physical and emotional differentials of lives lived on different sides of the color bar, his account substantiates film historian Jacqueline Stewart's claim that the limited amount of surviving first-hand testimony from early non-white moviegoers requires that an historical reconstruction of these experiences "be performed creatively, by imagining what might have been in order to fill the many gaps in the historical record."⁷⁴ Given Chappell's experience, the process of reclaiming what Stewart refers to as the "lost episodes" of minority cinemagoing may well be incited by preserving a visible set of segregationist reminders in the relatively small number of former Jim Crow theaters that remain operating today. Unfortunately, opportunities for preserving segregated-moviegoing experiences appear to be diminishing—and not simply because aging theaters continue to be demolished. According to Klinger, debates concerning the preservation of objects of nostalgia including historic theaters often involve a process of selective memory exercised by those whose discourse

tends to “whitewash the past, repressing or minimizing [the] conflicts” that once divided a local community.⁷⁵ In all likelihood, Klinger might view the Carolina’s reification of an historically white moviegoing experience as analogous to the development of network television cinema portals like *American Movie Classics*, which Klinger has criticized for celebrating the motion-picture industry’s white performers, directors and studio moguls while largely ignoring the accomplishments and challenges faced by the nation’s African American filmmakers.⁷⁶

In effect, the elision of non-white moviegoing experiences within theatrical preservation efforts amounts to an experiential whitewashing that preserves the principle of non-white invisibility upon which tri-racial theater architecture was founded—an elision which represents an unanticipated and ongoing socio-cultural triumph for the original advocates of segregation. Moreover, the preclusion of non-white moviegoing narratives within site-preservation efforts may be inhibiting the kind of “memory work” carried out by cinema and cultural-memory scholar Annette Kuhn, who suggests that once collective “amnesias,” “repressions,” and “the veils of forgetfulness are drawn aside, layer upon layer of meaning and association peel away, revealing not ultimate truth, but greater understanding” of the ways in which individual and group identities have been forged through moviegoing and other image-centric experiences.⁷⁷ The stakes for effecting an historically accurate and racially balanced memorialization within shared public space remain high: according to Rhea, since collective memories tend to coalesce around churches, schools, and other community institutions, and since these sites “exert enormous influence over the public perception of the past,” then “one way to demean a group is to deny the value of its history” by excluding that history from public view within these spaces.⁷⁸

Indeed, it is possible that one of the factors underlying the reticence of Cantey's constituents to support the Carolina's renovation in 2006 was the site's failure to acknowledge the historical experiences of non-white moviegoers since its 1985 restoration. That refusal may pay undesirable political dividends to the Civic Center, particularly since the recent USDA loan debate suggested that ongoing theater funding in Lumberton may remain bound up with what urban sociologist Dolores Hayden has characterized as a "coming to terms with ethnic history in the [built] landscape," one that "requires engaging with such bitter experiences, as well as the indifference and denial surrounding them" in order to revitalize a community's public spaces.⁷⁹ The Robesonian's response to Cantey suggests that a confluence of bitterness, indifference, and/or denial may continue to position the Carolina Theatre as (using Hayden's terms) "contested terrain,"⁸⁰ and since the political authority to maintain or to shutter the Carolina lies in the hands of the representatives elected by the local sub-populations historically discriminated against within and without the theater, the Carolina's advocates may well face a future outcome that would have been unthinkable in 1985.

As an illustration of the resentment induced by discriminatory public and/or commercial spaces, Hayden offers an excerpt from African American author and social critic James Baldwin's essay "A Talk For Teachers." In it, Baldwin expressed the frustration he felt passing through city streets and shops in which a society's privileged "people walk about as though they owned where they are—and indeed they do," while those excluded from them "know—you know instinctively—that none of this is for you. You know before you are told. And who is it for and who is paying for it. And why isn't it for you."⁸¹ What was true for Baldwin as he strolled along Park Avenue may well have been true (and may, in some instances, still appear to be true) for non-whites passing the Carolina Theatre. The decision which a primarily non-white

electorate makes concerning future public funding for the Civic Center will represent an important piece of evidence regarding both the persistence of racial memory and the prospects for interracial reconciliation in Robeson, and in that sense, the theater's survival may well depend upon precisely whose historical experiences are (and are not) memorialized inside the Carolina. In the wake of her analyses into "the politics of place construction,"⁸² Hayden has called upon urban preservationists who have tended to focus on restoring churches, government buildings, and architecturally-distinctive private homes to extend their efforts into additional space types to achieve a more "socially inclusive urban landscape history."⁸³ Hayden's insistence that "restoring significant shared meanings for many neglected urban spaces... involves claiming the entire urban cultural landscape as an important part of American history,"⁸⁴ along with her conviction that the best way for contemporary scholars to re-imagine neglected historical experience is to immerse themselves within restorations of the very physical structures in which these experiences occurred,⁸⁵ suggests that a re-incorporation of at least some of the physical artifacts that institutionalized racial discrimination in Robeson's first and only picture palace—and its last remaining downtown theater—is in order.

Consequently, in order to facilitate the kind of socio-cultural awareness experienced by Chappell and advocated by Jones and Hayden, the Carolina Civic Center should abandon its pursuit of an historically (and exclusively) white moviegoing experience by preserving at least one of the barricades used to segregate the Carolina's balcony, by taping or painting markers on the floor where additional barricades formerly stood, and by erecting plaques outside the theater's North Door and stairwell to describe their former segregationist function. These actions would preclude the kind of cultural white-washing described by Klinger and would shield the theater from charges that its preservation demeans local Native and African

Americans by refusing to acknowledge the site's complete set of historical moviegoing experiences. These changes would also encourage the imaginative historical recreations both advocated by Stewart and experienced by this author during a self-directed tour of the Carolina in 2001. At that time, though the curtains, chain-link fencing, chicken-wire, and other barriers that at one time divided the theater's balcony had long since been removed, the joists that were yet embedded within the balcony's plaster and woodwork—joists that formerly held the hasps of ropes barring non-whites from accessing the theater's lounges, rest rooms, and lobby—offered silent testimony to the theater's segregated past. Even today, patrons like Chappell willing to sit as far back as the Carolina's projection booth notice that the theater's proscenium arch interferes with their sightlines and distracts them from the images that play across a screen seemingly much smaller and dimmer than the one viewed by patrons seated in the auditorium far below. Therefore, if the socio-cultural awareness achieved by Chappell half a century ago remains possible in the Carolina among visitors acutely aware of the site's segregationist history, that same understanding could be facilitated for other patrons much more easily through the incorporation of segregated memorials within the site.

Yet if the Carolina Theatre retains the potential to illuminate both the history and the aggressiveness of Jim Crow-era segregation, and if one is willing to agree that segregation remained the defining mode of modern Southern life (and extended to all aspects of Southern culture, including film culture) during most of the twentieth century, it is also necessary to acknowledge that theatrical segregation was restricted neither to the American South, nor to a single American minority group. Segregated moviegoing impacted many ethnic groups besides African Americans—including white Americans. However, domestic moviegoing studies have resulted in comparatively few accounts of the moviegoing experiences of non-

white groups other than African Americans. For example, virtually no historical moviegoing research has focused on Native American experiences, and even if it is true (as racial historian Joel Williamson has argued) that the Indian population in the United States so precipitously “diminished in numbers relative to the white population” after their removal that Indians remained “so isolated as to have only limited contact with the white population,”⁸⁶ Robeson’s history indicates that additional case studies may be able to broaden the disciplinary coverage of cinema history beyond its set of largely black/white narratives. Furthermore, there is a danger that the current set of African-American narratives may be mistakenly conflated as a close approximation of the moviegoing experiences of all ethnic minorities. However, this study’s account of Pembroke theaters demonstrates that the relationship in America between racial discrimination and moviegoing historically tended to be defined and managed locally. Therefore, it is worth asking what additional narratives of moviegoing segregation—whether narratives of ethnic resignation, resistance, accommodation, or other potentially unexpected responses—still remain open to investigation. For instance, though Robeson County remains one of the most ethnically diverse non-metropolitan regions in the United States, by at least one estimate it represents only the nation’s sixth most racially diverse community.⁸⁷ What distinctive moviegoing experiences (if any) occurred in communities one through five? Similarly, what differential moviegoing experiences were faced by Asian and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles and Chicago (respectively)⁸⁸ relative to the kind of Jim Crow moviegoing experienced by Mexican immigrants in San Antonio?⁸⁹

As was true of both Pembroke moviegoing and of Robesonian moviegoing more generally, it is possible that these investigations might provide further examples of the “counter-ideological phenomena” that Jane Gaines has urged cinema historians to investigate

“to change the versions of the world that have historically held consciousness captive.”⁹⁰ For example, additional research may enable a more thorough interrogation of the relationship between racial discrimination and moviegoing in theaters located beyond “white” central business districts—for instance, at drive-in theaters, colored theaters, and venues belonging to the so-called “chitlin’ circuit” that at one time spanned the eastern and southern United States—to determine whether these venues either permitted or encouraged transgressions against local forms of segregation. It is possible, too, that advancements in cinema technology influenced moviegoing patterns among audience segments that had been discriminated against in four-walled theaters. Did the rise of home-based cinema by the late-1980s, for example, represent a potential watershed moment for non-white film consumers? Though Barbara Klinger notes that most studies of home-based cinema foreground the perspectives of white cinephiles,⁹¹ it is worth considering whether home-based exhibition offered a more or less attractive moviegoing option for non-white consumers.

In addition, comparative historical-moviegoing studies could be expanded into regions in which the widespread availability of cinema exhibition is either a recent or still-developing phenomenon. Initial studies have reiterated the extent to which moviegoing behaviors can remain grounded in underlying cultural differences. For example, Hamid Naficy’s investigation into “third-world” cinema spectatorship has identified how several cross-cultural factors and influences may result in differential moviegoing experiences. In Naficy’s view, third-world audiences may well choose to resist a presumed-passive importation of cultural value sets by engaging in their own set of cultural counter-interpellations as they consume American or Western cinema.⁹² Comparative moviegoing studies culled from a range of non-domestic geographies could promote a broader understanding of how cinemagoing

impacts the development of individual and group identities, and of whether or not local moviegoers perceive the act of cinema consumption to be capable either of encouraging or inhibiting cross-cultural exchanges.

Additionally, an integrated history of the global role of cinema would enable a movement away from (for example) a largely African-American moviegoing history and towards a comparison of African versus African-American moviegoing more generally. For that matter, the mode of Robesonian segregation that locally divided three racial groups foreshadowed outcomes similar to those within the Republic of South Africa, whose official policy of apartheid from 1948 until 1994 both legally classified residents into one of four racial groups and prohibited equal access to public facilities. Keyan Tomaselli's account of the institutionalized racism perpetuated within the South African motion-picture industry describes a set of moviegoing practices and episodes that would have resonated with Robeson non-white moviegoers. In South Africa, the racial dogma that informed all of the country's political institutions produced an entire system of film production and exhibition (including film-content censorship) that was designed to prevent violations against local social codes.⁹³ In Tomaselli's view, South African film production, distribution and exhibition was designed to uphold the system of "racial capitalism" upon which South Africa's economic and social infrastructures had been based.⁹⁴ The South African political establishment, in fact, pursued some of its social and economic goals through films which sought to produce a more productive labor force by persuading the country's non-white laborers to abandon their excessive alcohol consumption. This program bore a distinct ideological resemblance to some of the Community Service Picture exhibitions offered in Robeson in the 1920s, as both represented forms of social programming targeting the laboring classes that were distributed by field unit-based projection teams and

exhibited to segregated audiences.⁹⁵ While CSP exhibitions generally touted the benefits of improved “social hygiene,” they also encouraged agricultural workers to become more productive by adopting specific farming techniques. South Africa’s encouragement of temperance among its laborers echoed North Carolinian CSP directives to reduce venereal-disease rates while simultaneously improving the health (and by implication, the productivity) of farm laborers.

However, important differences did exist between the two systems of segregated moviegoing. Though South African exhibitors were required by legislative decree to segregate their audiences, CSP officials segregated their exhibitions only according to local custom.⁹⁶ Furthermore, if all of South Africa’s theater operators were legally required to account for four racial sub-populations (i.e., whites, coloreds, Asians and blacks) until well into the 1980s,⁹⁷ South African movie houses appear not to have been modified as extensively as Robeson’s tri-racial sites, nor do they appear to have catered simultaneously to each of the region’s racial groups. Though some South African cinemas were reconfigured into multi-racial facilities during the apartheid era,⁹⁸ the seating policies that universally located whites within the main auditorium while relegating blacks and other non-white patrons to balcony seats clearly reflected the general county-wide pattern of “white” moviegoing in Robeson, but not that of Pembroke.

The possibly unexpected similarities between U.S. and South African moviegoing indicates that there is a need to reexamine moviegoing within multi-ethnic communities on both a domestic and an international basis to determine the frequency with which ethnically diverse societies implemented segregated moviegoing, as well as the patterns in which patrons were distributed. In the United States, for instance, while in Jacqueline Stewart’s view the process of

Northern migration enabled urban blacks to enjoy films in a significantly less-constrained “public context” within which they might “manage a new set of racist power relations,”⁹⁹ within Robeson County that same outcome remained possible only for the single non-white group, namely Indians, who occupied the county’s only major town in which a non-white group significantly outnumbered the members of all other ethnic groups. Yet while a distinct set of racial power relations were instituted within Pembroke theaters, they were established at the hands of Indian, rather than white, exhibitors at the sole expense of African American patrons. Accordingly, while influential cinema historians like Thomas Cripps, Mary Carbine, Jane Gaines, Charlene Register, and Jacqueline Stewart have all offered useful evaluations of the role played by moviegoing in the production, perpetuation, and/or resistance of racial identities and social hierarchies, further multi-ethnic interrogations may be necessary to provide additional evidence broadening our record of the historical relationship between individual and group identity formation, racial discrimination, and moviegoing.

In pursuing these investigations, early-moviegoing studies will likely need to focus on two evidentiary sources: oral histories and local archives. The generations of patrons who had little option than to engage in a theatrically-based form of moviegoing are dwindling rapidly. While the window of opportunity for collecting oral histories from moviegoers during the age of silent cinema has all but closed, researchers can still gather cinemagoing accounts during the Great Depression and prior to World War II. Cinema scholars and sociologists may need to place a premium on gathering the oral accounts of senior citizens from as broad a set of demographic and geographic population-sets as possible before this evidence becomes impossible to recreate, given that the alternative—written records of individual moviegoing experiences—are both extremely rare and tend to exist as unfocused

and fragmentary recollections captured within generally non-digitized sets of memoirs, diaries, and family papers stored in local manuscript collections or archives. As such, their research utility to date has been limited at best. In contrast, just as oral histories of senior citizens have provided to this study essential information that did not exist in any other identifiable document repository, they offer an opportunity to provide additional significant insights into moviegoing and the lived experience of other leisure practices prior to World War II.

While local archives can potentially offer a wealth of material for early cinema researchers, a special emphasis needs to be placed upon uncovering (if possible) the business records of early theater owners, operators, or other exhibition personnel. Relatively little is known, for example, about the day-to-day operations of regional theater chains, the largest of which encountered within this study was the Wilby-Kincey Corporation, whose exhibition practices remain unknown even though they were implemented within hundreds of communities both large and small. In 1939, Wilby-Kincey negotiated for the right to operate most of Lumberton's downtown theaters when it convinced the Carolina Theatre's owners to transfer the operational responsibilities for the Carolina and the Pastime sites that had been the province of the Anderson Theatre Company since 1930.¹⁰⁰ This operational transfer was managed through a joint partnership involving the Lumberton Theatre Corporation and North Carolina Theaters, Incorporated,¹⁰¹ an exhibition firm whose president, Herbert F. Kincey, had for many years allied his Charlotte-based theater-management group with that of Robert B. Wilby, a regional operator whose set of exhibition-site holdings was headquartered jointly in Alabama and Georgia.¹⁰² As a result of this partnership, Lumberton's most-elegant theater became but one of several dozen identically named "Carolina" theaters operating within the

Wilby-Kincey chain, which in turn operated as a subsidiary of the national Publix-Saenger chain affiliated with Paramount Pictures from roughly 1926 to 1950.¹⁰³ Despite the clear influence of chains like Wilby-Kincey on local or regional exhibition, extended studies of their operations remain scarce, and any such study of them would require access to detailed business records capable of suggesting how the increasing corporatization of theater operations may have affected the local moviegoing experience.

Other business-related archival materials retain the potential of offering important insights into early exhibition practices. Account books similar to those of H. Lee Waters,¹⁰⁴ complete sets of film-delivery contracts or schedules, theater leases and deeds, employee records and timecards, general purchase and sales records—all of these may yield useful data concerning historical exhibitions. The same may be true of architectural records, whose descriptions or diagrams of theater construction/renovation projects may assist scholars in tracing the development of segregated moviegoing facilities.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, access to digitized and therefore searchable newspaper archives would vastly reduce the time to develop moviegoing case-studies that otherwise can require months of painstaking labor to hand-screen faded and often incomplete sets of microfilm reels. Military records and oral histories gathered from retired military personnel offer yet another potentially fascinating entrée into the moviegoing history of the nation's armed-service personnel, millions of whom engaged in the relative familiarity of moviegoing at home and abroad on the hundreds of military bases that arranged for motion-picture exhibitions often held in clapboard-and-canvas facilities not far removed from active battle zones. In fact, documents uncovered during the course of this study originally published by Wilby-Kincey indicate that impromptu theaters were set up in virtually every overseas theater during World War II, usually by

individuals that had served as civilian exhibitors or camera operators.¹⁰⁶ These documents also indicate that many women, often the spouses of exhibition personnel who had drafted into the war effort, acted not only as camera operators but as home-front theater managers who had graduated from theatrical-management training sites operated during the conflict by Wilby-Kincey. Preliminary evidence from these records poses a potentially fascinating set of research questions: What was the social impact of the entry of these women into the local workforce, particularly in so public a role as that of local theater manager? How did the displacement of these women from these positions upon the war's conclusion affect local economic or social relationships? Finally, how did the exposure of returning servicemen to military training, communication protocols, organizational structures, and supply-chain methodologies affect either the practices or the conditions of local exhibition?

While any attempt to address these questions lies beyond the scope of this project, this study's account of Robesonian moviegoing has nevertheless demonstrated that a variety of socio-cultural inquiries can be conducted within the framework of historical investigations into the activities surrounding moviegoing and cinematic exhibition. Despite the difficult evidentiary challenges that still inhibit the efficient collection of local moviegoing data, the fact that sufficient evidence to support multiple local moviegoing histories pertaining to a set of rural farming communities could be gathered in this study in the first place not only serves to reiterate the local specificity of moviegoing historically, but also suggests that further studies offer the possibility of pursuing a broad spectrum of inquiries to expand our existing cinema and social histories.

As a social history of Robeson County, a history viewed through the lens of rural moviegoing, "Chasing Mr. C" indicates that early cinema development within the United States

neither followed a uniform theater-construction timeline, nor resulted in a single pattern of social interactions that framed, and were in turn framed by, cinema consumption. For more than five decades, Robeson County's exhibitors and audiences were confronted by a series of socio-cultural pressures and tensions that shaped highly contingent, yet inescapably public, leisure activities in unusual and, given the development of the "three-entrance" theater, possibly unique ways. Therefore, additional studies sensitive to the impact and timing of commercial infrastructure developments, to regional consumption patterns and economic drivers, to local occupational prospects and personal-income levels, to residential densities, community demographics, ethnic compositions, religious sensibilities, and other factors influencing local moviegoing developments will foster a more comprehensive cinema and social history, one grounded far less in the experience of metropolitan moviegoers than in the more nationally representative, yet no less historically significant, activities of small-town moviegoers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Site labels have been superimposed on an aerial view of the historic central business district in Lumberton, which runs in a north-south direction up and down Elm and Chestnut streets from 2nd to 6th streets. The photograph's left-center quadrant includes a bend of the Lumber River. Running diagonally across the lower left-hand segment is the Seaboard Air Line railroad, which connected Lumberton to a major regional depot in Hamlet (located to the west) and to the Atlantic seaboard (principally Wilmington, located to the east). Photo accessed via the ConnectWeb GIS (Global Information System) web portal. See ConnectGIS, [Aerial Map of Central Downtown Lumberton](http://www.gis.co.robeson.nc.us/ConnectGISWeb/Robeson/), Available: <http://www.gis.co.robeson.nc.us/ConnectGISWeb/Robeson/>, 29-Jan-2011.

² Note that the small white door in the bottom right-hand corner represents the former segregated entrance through which non-whites entered the Carolina.

³ The Wildcat Highway connected Lumberton to both Wilmington and to Charlotte.

⁴ Robeson's smaller theaters critically lacked the climate-control facilities that other theaters had begun to incorporate by the mid-1920s, including electric fans and (by the latter-1920s) revolutionary air-conditioning systems that had been recently invented by Willis Carrier and introduced within a number of metropolitan theaters.

⁵ However, even an expanded Pastime proved itself incapable of hosting large road-show companies. In fact, the Lumberton High School auditorium served as the town's premiere exhibition hall after the Opera House closed in 1919 until the arrival of the Carolina Theatre in 1928.

⁶ The following account of the Carolina Theatre's represents a summary of the site history published in recognition of the Carolina's seventy-fifth anniversary. See Christopher J. McKenna, "Celebrating the Carolina Theatre," [Robesonian](#) 19-Jun-2003.

⁷ The Carolina's original organ was lost more than twenty-five years ago. However, it was replaced during the Carolina's 1985 restoration with a virtually identical instrument that had been salvaged from the National Theatre in Greensboro (another former member of the Wilby-Kincey theater chain).

⁸ Newspaper accounts of the extraordinarily popular local exhibition indicate that over 1,400 patrons watched the eight-reeled, Vitaphone-sound release on opening day, and suggest that the film's arrival was "easily the most general topic of conversation in Lumberton last week." See "Local News" items originally published in the [Robesonian](#) (25-Mar-1929, p. 1).

⁹ Major renovations in 1937 added significant weight to the overall structure by expanding the formerly incomplete third story, which had housed only the theater's projection booth at the front of the theater and a fly tower at the rear. The 1937 expansion additionally increased the office space available for rent to local businesses and/or used by the members of the LTC, particularly by Dr. Bowman. The theatrical benefits of the renovation included a major expansion of the backstage area and the completion of a larger three-story fly-tower to accommodate multiple sets of screens and/or road-show backdrops.

¹⁰ As noted in the previous chapter, the Carolina opened as a "whites only" facility. The division of its balcony into white and non-white spaces probably did not occur until sometime in the early 1930s; in fact, that transformation may have coincided with the return of Walter Wishart to Lumberton, perhaps even as Wishart took up his new post as the site's "colored and Indian balcony manager."

¹¹ Griffin's tenure in Lumberton, however, was rapidly drawing to a close. Though Griffin helped to open the Carolina, he was sued by the LTC at year's end for failing to forward the rental fees he owed to the theater's shareholders as site operator, and the LTC replaced him with another manager soon thereafter.

¹² Within six weeks, the theater's prices had stabilized at either twenty-cents (auditorium) or fifteen-cents (balcony) for a child's ticket and either thirty-five cents (auditorium) or twenty-five cents (balcony) for adult tickets. In time, alternative pricing structures would differentiate between matinee and evening performances.

¹³ Morrissey's involvement with an early local colored theater has been discussed in Chapter VI.

¹⁴ The theater's comparative luxury increased two years later when the Carolina Tea Room opened within a commercial space embedded inside the facility's Fourth Street frontage. The Tea Room served refreshments to Lumberton's moviegoing elite for several years, and though prohibition remained in force during the first five years of exhibitions at the Carolina, adult patrons by the late 1930s could legally purchase a glass of beer at the Carolina Café, a probable successor to the Tea Room.

¹⁵ Rogers's death in an airplane crash four months earlier likely inflated local attendance figures, and many of the comedian's fans were turned away from standing-room exhibitions during the film's two-day visit to the Carolina (as reported in the Robesonian, 17-Dec-1935, p. 8).

¹⁶ Note that the Carolina was operated by the Anderson Brothers Theatre Company from 1930 to 1939, and thereafter as a member of the Wilby-Kincey chain. Both organizations appear to have rotated managers throughout their respective circuits as part of their ongoing training process to develop city and regional managers, rather than as itinerant managers like Walter Wishart who operated new venues on an as-needed basis until more permanent managerial arrangements could be made. Most site managers only remained at the Carolina for two years or so.

¹⁷ Estimates as to the impact of the Depression on theater profits and site closings vary, but by virtually any estimate the reductions involved were startling. According to Robert Sklar, even though the industry had recorded impressive profits in 1930, approximately one-third of the nation's theaters had closed by 1933, and over the same period, admission prices had dropped by one-third. See Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies, 161-2. Based on data collected from *Film Daily Yearbook*, cinema historian Lary May calculates that the ratio of national theater closings may have reached as high as 43% by 1931 (from 22,000 to less than 13,000 facilities), and by 1933 aggregate gross receipts had declined by more than 50% against attendance figures generated from audiences nearly 40% smaller than before the economic crisis began. Lary May, "Making the American Way: Moderne Theatres, Audiences, and the Film Industry 1929-1945," Prospects 12 (1987): 92.

¹⁸ Only the Pastime, which by the time of the Depression served as Lumberton's secondary theater, appears to have closed in Robeson during the extended economic downturn. While the Grand Theatre in St. Pauls opened and closed sporadically during the 1930s, it did as the result of fire that had badly damaged the original Grand site. A lack of available capital likely delayed its restoration, for (as noted in Chapter IV) the Grand's operators undertook several initiatives to implement temporary exhibition sites locally before repairing the theater's primary facility.

¹⁹ At the time, this seating capacity exceeded the entire population of either the towns of Rowland or Pembroke.

²⁰ However, for reasons outlined in the Chapter VI, it is unlikely that local African or Native Americans enthusiastically participated in these ceremonies—not even for a theater at least partly constructed by non-white laborers. In fact, two African American workmen named Owen Buie and Gus McCallum were seriously injured in a fall from a faulty service elevator during the Carolina's initial construction. The accident resulted in a pair of lawsuits filed against the Lumberton Theatre Corporation; eventually, these suits were settled out of court for a total of less than one-thousand dollars. See the Robesonian (8-Dec-1927, p. 1).

²¹ Had suburban flight and the decline of downtown commercial districts been insufficient to drive the Carolina out of business, it is possible that the expansion of non-theatrical film exhibition options, especially home-based exhibitions, would have done so instead. Video-cassette and digital-video-disk technologies quickened the pace of non-theatrical cinema exhibitions to such an extent that Robert Allen has estimated that home-based cinema

overtook theatrical exhibition as the most popular cinema-consumption method in the United States sometime between 1987 and 1990. Allen, "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'Family Film'," 112.

²² However, this trend appears somewhat less true in Pembroke, a town whose commercial infrastructure has grown significantly in the past decade. Even so, Pembroke's growth is most noticeable roughly a half mile or more from the former center of town and remains clustered around the grounds of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

²³ For a telling though sentimental account of the staggering decline in historical theaters, see Putnam, Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater.

²⁴ For an account of several theater preservation attempts within a specifically Southern context, see Jones, The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall and Resurrection.

²⁵ Margolies and Gwathmey, Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun, 22.

²⁶ The Robesonian (18-Jun-1985, Section D, p. 2).

²⁷ Ironically, it was eventually the newer Riverside Theatre (rather than the Carolina) that eventually provided those spaces. By 2006, the Riverside had been closed for several decades, and its former home had been gutted to house for many years the printing press of the Robesonian, whose managers finally elected to abandon the site at the end of 2005. The following spring, the site was sold to the Robeson County Board of Commissioners, which authorized the demolition of the former theater structure shortly thereafter. Today, while a few proposals have been floated locally suggesting additional site developments, the Riverside lot yet remains a dirt-and-gravel parking area.

²⁸ Lumberton currently boasts approximately twenty hotels lining both sides of the I-95 corridor. As the last major city north of South Carolina on a key north-south interstate highway, Lumberton remains a common travel stop roughly half way between New York and Florida for passengers headed in either direction.

²⁹ This document was photocopied by the author in November 2001 when it was on display in the lobby of the Carolina Civic Center.

³⁰ Were it not for the author's eleventh-hour submission of an article commemorating the Carolina to the Robesonian in 2003, the theater's seventy-fifth anniversary likely would have passed without public comment. See McKenna, "Celebrating the Carolina Theatre."

³¹ The heating and air-conditioning costs required to operate the theater six or seven days a week would likely bankrupt the Carolina.

³² For evidence concerning the advanced sales for *Gone with the Wind*'s reserved seats, see one of the several news items and advertisements contained in the 1-Apr-1940 issue of the Robesonian. Similar ads continued for several weeks thereafter.

³³ The author visited just such a sparsely attended performance of the Civil War epic at the Carolina Civic Center on 28-Jan-2011.

³⁴ Margolies and Gwathmey, Ticket to Paradise: American Movie Theaters and How We Had Fun, 22.

³⁵ The author was invited to the *Good 'Ol Girls* anniversary show by Angela Carter, at the time the Director of the Civic Center. The observations below are based on handwritten notes taken before, during, and immediately after the performance.

³⁶ Note that the female performer in question was not a resident of Robeson County.

³⁷ Angela Carter, "Personal Interview with the Director of the Carolina Civic Center," (Lumberton, NC: 13-Jun-2003).

³⁸ While all of the elderly white Robeson residents interviewed by this author regretted the segregationist nature of the Carolina's past, a few of them noted that this "private space" rationale was a common (and legally defensible) justification for the differential treatment non-whites endured at the Carolina as well as other local businesses.

³⁹ See the "Introduction" to Marcel Hénaff and Tracy B. Strong, eds., Public Space and Democracy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 1-31.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ As quoted in Lewis W. Dijkstra, "Public Spaces: A Comparative Discussion of the Criteria for Public Space," Constructions of Urban Space, ed. Ray Hutchison (Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 2000), 3.

⁴⁴ Hénaff and Strong, eds., Public Space and Democracy, 12.

⁴⁵ Martin Barker and Kate Brooks, Knowing Audiences: Judge Dredd, Its Friends, Fans, and Foes (Luton, Bedfordshire, U.K.: University of Luton Press, 1998), 136.

⁴⁶ This interpretation is based on the selections of Lefebvre's work reprinted in Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 41.

⁴⁷ Executive turnover at the Carolina Civic Center has been extraordinarily high, and the site has employed nearly a dozen different managers since 1993.

⁴⁸ As quoted in Kristin Collins, "River Seen as Lifeline for Robeson," News & Observer 27-Aug-2007. The poverty statistics quoted in Collins' article were derived from the United States Census Bureau's American Community Survey Estimates from data collected circa 2005.

⁴⁹ The following account of the process to approve the funds required to renovate the Carolina has been derived from internal Civic Center memoranda; from newspaper clippings housed at the Civic Center offices; and from conversations between Sceiford and the author. See Richard Sceiford, "Personal Interview with the Director of the Carolina Civic Center," (Lumberton, NC: 28-Jan-2011).

⁵⁰ Note that this mission statement was retrieved from the homepage of the Carolina Civic Center, Center Info, Available: <http://www.carolinaciviccenter.com/?q=node/5>, 21-May-2011.

⁵¹ This mixed-use approach also mirrors the programming strategy adopted in most of the rehabilitated historic theaters located in the six large Southern cities documented by Janna Jones. See Jones, The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall and Resurrection, 190-2.

⁵² Similar events still appear from time to time on the Carolina's performance calendar, though from the perspective of the center's management they usually represent a theater-rental opportunity, rather than a co-sponsored event. In addition, note that most of these events have been attended almost exclusively by the community's white residents.

⁵³ According to Sceiford, very few white patrons have attended African American gospel shows in the Carolina, while white gospel performances tend not to be frequented by either blacks or Indians. However, these theater rentals reflect the extent to which conservative Christian opposition both to motion pictures and to former

moviegoing venues appears has largely disappeared in Robeson. Due to the extraordinary amount of salacious and/or pornographic material accessible from computers located in homes, classrooms, and libraries, most local ministers and school officials see little reason to target Main Street theaters for censorship; indeed, it is possible that Hollywood films, which remain subject to MPAA ratings, exhibited in theatrical venues represent to religious conservatives one of the least-objectionable video mediums readily available to local residents.

⁵⁴ Indeed, a number of services held in the Carolina have been sponsored by the Vertical Church, a “portable,” regional, and distinctly evangelical Christian organization that meets in different locations throughout the Robeson/Bladen area. While affiliated with several major Southern Baptist organizations, the Vertical Church has held some of its services in theater sites besides the Carolina, including the Lumberton Cinema 4. For additional information concerning the Vertical Church, see the organization’s homepage located at <http://www.govertical.org/#/home>.

⁵⁵ The following account of the 2006 loan debate has been derived from personal interviews with Richard Sceiford; from internal memos housed in the Carolina Civic Center; and from a useful newspaper summary of the council’s debate by Roxana Ross, “Mayor Casts Tie-Breaking Vote,” Robesonian 19-Dec-2006.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ As quoted in the anonymous editorial entitled “Our View: The Show Goes On” originally published in the Robesonian (20-Dec-2006, p. 2).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ While news accounts in the Robesonian tended to credit the motion’s passage to the actions of Mayor Pennington, they unfortunately failed to incorporate any direct commentary from the non-white councilmen who voted in favor of the loan. However, the commitment made by the Civic Center Foundation to provide \$15,000 a year out of its own resources for a period of forty years to lower the town’s portion of the overall loan expense appears to have swayed just enough votes to deadlock the debate—and thereby left the motion’s denouement up to Pennington.

⁶⁰ As reported in Jones, The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall and Resurrection, 50.

⁶¹ According to Jones, “the fact that the [Durham Carolina] theater was regularly in the news during efforts to desegregate it may be one of the reasons members of Durham’s African American community have not forgotten that they were at one time allowed only in the theater’s balcony.” Ibid., p. 204.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 216.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 217-18.

⁶⁶ For Jones, whenever a “theater’s cultural past is restored, many pasts, some of them complex and unpleasant, are remembered.” Nevertheless, Jones’ investigations have indicated that, at least when it comes to issues or representations of segregation, “there is...at most theaters, a resistance to remembering.” Ibid., p. 196-7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 198.

⁶⁸ Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home, 113.

⁶⁹ The following account of the nerve-wracking afternoon Rivera spent in Lumberton is based on a personal interview with Rivera that the author conducted during a retrospective exhibition of Rivera photographs entitled

“Bearing Witness: Civil Rights Photographs of Alexander Rivera” that was held at the North Carolina Museum of History in January 2008. See Alexander M. Rivera Jr., “Personal Interview,” (Raleigh, NC: 2-Feb-2008). Notes recorded during this interview have been supplemented by an account of Rivera’s newspaper career from Kristin Collins, “Pictures Show a World in Black and White,” News & Observer 26-Jan-2008. Thankfully, Rivera’s experience in Robeson did not deter him from continuing to document social injustices, for he was inducted in 1993 into the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, North Carolina’s highest civilian honor society, to recognize his long service to the civil-rights movement.

⁷⁰ Unfortunately, extensive scans of both white and African American newspaper databases have failed to uncover either any stories or photographs generated during Rivera’s visit to Lumberton.

⁷¹ Joseph Tilden Rhea, Race Pride and the American Identity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Fred Chappell, “A Curtain Rises,” (Greenville, NC: North Carolina Literary Review, 1993). Since the copy of Chappell’s essay accessed by the author (and currently housed in the North Carolina Collection at Chapel Hill) was published in a single broadsheet, the essay excerpts quoted below contain no pagination marks.

⁷⁴ Stewart, Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity, xviii.

⁷⁵ Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home, 103.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-16.

⁷⁷ See Annette Kuhn, Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination (London: Verso, 1995), 4-6.

⁷⁸ Rhea, Race Pride and the American Identity, 2.

⁷⁹ Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 22.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁸⁶ See Williamson, The Crucible of Race: Black/White Relations in the American South since Emancipation, vii.

⁸⁷ See Cornelia Butler Flora, Jan L. Flora, Jacqueline D. Spears and Louise E. Swanson, Rural Communities: Legacy & Change (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 10-12. As a measure of the impact of the Latino influx into communities in the American South, according to the 2000 Federal Census Hispanic residents now account for approximately five percent of Robeson County’s total population. Consequently, Robeson County is becoming—like Capetown, South Africa—a quadri-racial community.

⁸⁸ These potential case studies have been suggested in Ross, Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America, 23-4.

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- ⁸⁹ As briefly noted in Abel, The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910, 146.
- ⁹⁰ Jane Gaines, "The White in the Race Movie Audience," Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema, eds. Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 63.
- ⁹¹ Klinger, Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home, 13.
- ⁹² See Hamid Naficy, "Theorizing "Third-World" Film Spectatorship," Wide Angle 18.4 (1996).
- ⁹³ Tomaselli, The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film, 11.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81-2.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54-6. For an extended account of CSP exhibitions in North Carolina, see Chapter VI.
- ⁹⁶ No specific municipal or state laws are known to have restricted or regulated multi-racial gatherings in Robeson County during the period covered within this study; instead, these constraints were the result of local custom.
- ⁹⁷ Tomaselli, The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film, 21.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁹ Stewart, Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity, 7.
- ¹⁰⁰ Lumberton's third theater, the Riverside, also opened in 1939, yet it remained part of a smaller theater chain owned by Morris Legendre, a chain exhibitor based in Summerville, South Carolina.
- ¹⁰¹ The details of the partnership between the LTC and North Carolina Theatres, Inc. were recorded within a series of corporate deeds and orders of incorporation cross-referenced under the names of those two organizations. They are currently housed in the Office of the Registrar located in the basement of the Robeson County Courthouse.
- ¹⁰² In accepting the Wilby-Kincey proposal, the LTC's principals received periodic cash payments as well as a set of family passes to the Carolina Theatre in perpetuity.
- ¹⁰³ In 1948, Paramount's operations were determined to have violated federal antitrust statutes. Due to subsequent judicial challenges, the firm was forced to divide its production and exhibition operations into separate corporate entities. While the landmark Supreme Court ruling outlawing Paramount's aggressive vertical integration as an unfair and non-competitive business practice was referred as the "Paramount Decree," its provisions affected all of the major Hollywood studios, many of which were co-defendants in the case.
- ¹⁰⁴ For an extended description of Waters' local films, see Martin L. Johnson, "Seeing Yourself as Others See You in the Films of H. Lee Waters," Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005.
- ¹⁰⁵ For an attempt to generate such an overview, an overview based on the work of architect Erle Stillwell, see Allen and (Project), Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina.
- ¹⁰⁶ See "Hello, from the Men Behind You Men," a multi-volume set of bound, mimeographed copies of Wilby-Kincey's wartime newsletters that is currently located in the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

APPENDICES.

APPENDIX I: NATIVE AMERICAN POPULATION FIGURES FOR THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES (1910 TO 1940).

OVERVIEW: This appendix compares local white, African American, and Native American demographic data collected from several United States Censuses in order to contextualize a racial mix generally distinguished (relative to other Southern communities) by the presence of a large Native American contingent. Centered in the greater Pembroke region, the Lumbee tribe represents the single largest non-reservation Indian group in the nation—a group which, according to the 1990 Federal Census, formed the bulk of a North Carolina-based Native American population that included 50% of all of the Native Americans within the United States residing east of the Mississippi River. The data synthesized within the appendix highlights specific characteristics of Robeson’s Indian demographics, including the predominantly rural nature of Indian communities as well as their significant contribution to local population growth.

Appendix I.1: General Population Data for Robeson County.¹

Lying in the eastern-third of North Carolina in a coastal plain spanning the borderlands between North and South Carolina, Robeson County represents the largest geographic county in North Carolina, and its inhabitants in 1910 were spread across approximately 950 square miles of territory. That year, the Federal Census classified 80% of the county's population as rural, while no single county town boasted a population of at least 2,500 people. In Lumberton, the Robeson County seat and the principal city of Lumberton Township, slightly less than 50% of the Township's approximately 5,000 residents actually lived in town.² As a reflection of the county's overwhelmingly rural nature, most Robesonians economically depended on farming, usually cotton or tobacco, as well as the cultivation of turpentine, timber, and livestock.

Though rurally dispersed, Robeson's population grew rapidly during the first several decades of the twentieth century, having risen 28.7% between 1900 and 1910, 5.25% between 1910 and 1920, 21.65% between 1920 and 1930, and 15.51% between 1930 and 1940. In the half-century between 1890 and 1940, Robeson's total population, as it grew from 31,483 to 76,827 residents, increased 144%. However, growth rates across each of the county's principal racial sub-populations were not identical. Partly because a significant number of African Americans left to pursue jobs in northern cities during the Great Migration that lasted from roughly 1910 to 1945, Indians represented the county's fastest-growing demographic group, and although the local Indian population may well have been under-counted in censuses prior to 1930, one local estimate nevertheless suggests that the Robeson's Indian population increased five-fold from the late-nineteenth century until 1940.³

The table below illustrates the relative change in the county’s interracial balance from 1910 to 1940. Though the totals for the county’s two largest racial groups initially dwarfed those of Indians, perhaps due to a systematic misclassification of Indians as blacks, by 1940 the disparity between Indians and the other two groups had narrowed significantly.

| Year. | White % | Black % | Indian % |
|-------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| 1910 | 45 | 43 | 12 ⁴ |
| 1920 | 47 | 37 | 16 ⁵ |
| 1930 | 47 | 34 | 19 ⁶ |
| 1940 | 45 | 33 | 22 ⁷ |

However, Indians remained closer to the land and more commonly avoided towns than local whites or blacks. According to the 1930 census, only six Indians in the entire county could be categorized as urban dwellers by virtue of their living in Lumberton, the only county town yet large enough to qualify as “urban.” Indeed, almost all of Robeson’s larger town districts represented predominantly “white” communities: the Greater Lumberton district, for example, housed 6,318 whites, yet only 2,476 blacks and 526 Indians (including the six Native American town-dwellers).⁸

In addition, though only 1.14% of the township’s Indian population actually lived in town, fully 45.4% of the township’s African Americans did (i.e., 1,123 of 2,476 residents). This disparity in black-versus-Indian town residency helps to explain why the early theater-segregation initiatives described in Chapter VI appear to have targeted the accommodation of black rather than Indian patrons. For even in areas dominated by Indians, Indians preferred living on farms outside of town. In 1910, for example, with 274 whites and 249 blacks contributing to a total population of 3,179 Pembroke residents, only 16.5% of Pembroke Township’s residents were *non-Indian*. However, even in Pembroke most of the town’s businesses were then owned and operated by whites,⁹ and relatively few Indians lived in

town.¹⁰ Still, the gross numbers of all three ethnic groups were rising, and as a result, an increasing number of non-whites began to drift either into or near by the county's larger town centers. In 1940, Lumberton Township housed 1,608 non-whites out of a total population of 5,803 residents; in other words, by 1940 nearly 28% of the township containing the region's only "urban" center consisted of non-white residents.

Appendix I.2: Native American Populations in the Southeastern United States.

Nevertheless, what these Robeson-specific figures fail to indicate alone is the significance of the county’s Native American population within a larger regional or national context. In order to understand the extent to which the experiences of the Lumbee population may have been reflected those of other Native Americans living in the Jim Crow South, it is necessary to consider the size of the various Native American groups residing in the states that composed the Southeastern Woodland Indian region,¹¹ namely West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi.¹² [Note: Due to the fact that the figures collected by Native American encyclopedist Michael Johnson include data aggregated across Kentucky and Tennessee, the state of Kentucky has also been included for the purposes of this statistical comparison.]

The calculations in the following chart have been derived from 1910 Federal Census totals as well as from per-state estimates included in Johnson’s 1990 study of Southern Woodland Indian populations:¹³

| <u>Name of State</u> | <u>1910 Estimated Indian population</u> | <u>Percentage of 1910 Regional Total</u> | <u>1990 Estimated Indian population</u> | <u>Percentage of 1990 Regional Total</u> |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Alabama | 909 | 7.88 | 2988 | 3.44 |
| Florida | 74 | 0.64 | 3131 | 3.61 |
| Georgia | 95 | 0.82 | 200 | 0.23 |
| Mississippi | 1253 | 10.86 | 5438 | 6.26 |
| North Carolina | 7851 | 68.04 | 44414 | 51.15 |
| South Carolina | 331 | 2.87 | 6400 | 7.37 |
| Kentucky & Tennessee | 450 | 3.90 | 12000 | 13.82 |
| Virginia | 539 | 4.67 | 8260 | 9.51 |
| West Virginia | 36 | 0.31 | 4000 | 4.61 |
| Census Totals: | 11538 | | 86831 | |

Though Native American historians continue to question the accuracy of the historical figures generated by both the Census Bureau and by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there is no evidence currently available to indicate that the relative percentages recorded above misstate the extraordinarily high concentration of eastern Native Americans residing in North Carolina. The figures above, which include both reservation and non-reservation Indian people, suggest that throughout the twentieth century, more Indians resided in North Carolina than in the rest of the Southeastern Woodlands region combined. In fact, the only state located east of the Mississippi that contained more Indians in 1910 than North Carolina was Wisconsin, though that exception no longer held true well before 1990, when no state east of the Mississippi hosted a larger Indian population than North Carolina.

North Carolina's significance within the context of Native American relations in the Eastern United States is a direct function of Robesonian demographics. The 30,000 Indians estimated to be living in Robeson and its adjacent counties in 1990¹⁴ account for fully 67.5% of the Indians residing in North Carolina and 34.5% of the entire Southeastern-Woodlands total. Furthermore, when dedicated moviegoing first arrived in Robeson in 1911, the regional impact of Robeson's Native American population was even more statistically dramatic, as the county's 5,895 Indians accounted for approximately 75% of the Native American population living in the state of North Carolina¹⁵ and a staggering 68% of the Indians located in the Southeastern Woodlands region. Therefore, based on regional demographic totals, it is not unreasonable to claim that the experiences of Native Americans in Robeson County throughout the mid-twentieth century represented the experiences of most of the Native Americans living in the Southeast.

ENDNOTES

¹ Census figures, unless noted otherwise, have been derived from the official United States Censuses from 1910-1940. Additional census information delineating figures broken down by specific Robeson towns occasionally were reported in the Robesonian, see “Robeson’s Census” (1-Feb-1901, p. 2); “Local News” (12-Feb-1901, p. 2); “Population of Robeson by Townships” (20-Sep-1920, p. 1); “Review of the News” (24-Apr-1940, p. 7); and “Robeson 1940 Population Set at 76,827 for 15% Increase” (14-Jun-1940, p. 1). For an estimate of the Indian population of Robeson County in 1940 (i.e., 15,000), see “Robeson County Indians Make Forward Strides; Scuffletown Makes Way for Churches and Homes” from Ibid. (23-May-1940, p. 3).

² See United States. Bureau of the Census., Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, and Mining for the United States, the States, and Principal Cities, with Supplement for North Carolina Containing Statistics for the State, Counties, Cities, and Other Divisions (Washington: Gov’t. Printing Office, 1913), 582.

³ See “Robeson County Indians Make Forward Strides; Scuffletown Makes Way for Churches and Homes,” Robesonian (23-May-1940, p. 3).

⁴ Calculated based on information contained in the United States. Bureau of the Census., Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, and Mining for the United States, the States, and Principal Cities, with Supplement for North Carolina Containing Statistics for the State, Counties, Cities, and Other Divisions. Specifically, see pages 582 and 608-9.

⁵ Calculated based on information contained in the United States. Bureau of the Census. and George B. Louis Arner, Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930 (Washington: Govt. Printing Off., 1937). See Volume III, pages 332-402 (particularly pages 358, 370 and 397).

⁶ Calculated based on information contained in the United States. Bureau of the Census., Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920 ... [Reports] (Washington: Gov’t. Printing Office, 1921). See Volume III, pages 331-402 (particularly pages 333, 358, and 397).

⁷ Ibid.

⁷ For additional information, see the United States. Bureau of the Census., Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 (Washington: Gov’t. Printing Office, 1942). See Volume II, pages 263-422 (particularly pages 268, 300, 317, 389, and 391).

⁸ Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina,” 40-1.

⁹ Hancock notes that in the early 1930’s, Indians “[did] not operate any stores in the county other than a few in Pembroke.” Hancock, “A Sociological Study of the Tri-Racial Community in Robeson County, North Carolina,” 61.

¹⁰ Karen Blu has reported that even as late as 1970, Robeson’s Indians continued to reside in predominantly rural conditions. Blu, The Lumbee Problem: The Making of an American Indian People, 21-2.

¹¹ Michael Johnson, Macmillan Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes, 2nd U.S. ed. (New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1999), 58-61.

¹² As well as Eastern Louisiana. However, since data for Louisiana cannot reliably be divided into the areas lying east and west of the Mississippi River, the state of Louisiana has been excluded from this analysis.

¹³ Totals taken from United States. Bureau of the Census., Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, and Mining for the United States, the States, and Principal Cities, with Supplement for North Carolina Containing Statistics for the State, Counties, Cities, and Other Divisions. 1990 state-by-state figures taken from Johnson’s “Appendix 3: Native Populations.” See Johnson, Macmillan Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes, 264-75. However, Johnson’s figures only include “enrolled” Indian-population figures, which can differ from state-reported (i.e., usually higher) Indian population figures (see Johnson p. 12 for an explanation of the differences in those calculations). In this case, the inclusion of non-enrolled figures would increase the size of the 1990 Indian population totals in two states—Florida and North Carolina—without significantly impacting the relative the percentages represented in the current chart regarding the weighting of Robeson County Indians within North Carolina and across the entire region.

¹⁴ Johnson, Macmillan Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes, 271.

¹⁵ Figures taken from United States. Bureau of the Census., Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910. Statistics of Population, Agriculture, Manufactures, and Mining for the United States, the States, and Principal Cities, with Supplement for North Carolina Containing Statistics for the State, Counties, Cities, and Other Divisions. In particular, see pages 82, 591 and 594. While the 1910 aggregate census figures theoretically include Chinese and Japanese population data in these per-county figures, for the purposes of this discussion it will be assumed that virtually all of the 5,895 individuals listed for Robeson were Indian, since the same census reported a total of only 82 Japanese and Chinese residents lived in the entire state of North Carolina at that time.

| Appendix II: Decade-by-Decade Theater Development | | | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|--|--|--------------------|
| Charting Schemes: Color Definitions | | | | | | |
| | <u>Red</u> | <u>Pink:</u> | <u>Yellow:</u> | <u>Lime:</u> | <u>Dark Green:</u> | |
| | No discernible 'hard-top' theaters. | No dedicated houses, but possible audience-availability via regular "Community Service Picture" exhibitions. | Documentable itinerant shows. | Dedicated venues attempted without resulting in any long-term or "steady-state" enterprises. | "Steady-state" or dedicated house-operations finally achieved. | |
| | | | | | | |
| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
| <u>Total Population of Robeson County</u> (Aggregate population, per Federal Census) | 40371 | 51945 | 54674 | 66512 | 76860 | 87769 |
| <u>"In Town" Residential Totals</u> (Across 8 largest incorporated areas) | 2999 | 7053 | 8731 | 12095 | 15157 | 21007 |
| <u>"In Town" Residential Percentage</u> (of Aggregate County Population) | 7.43% | 13.58% | 15.97% | 18.18% | 19.72% | 23.93% |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|---|--------------------|
| Lumberton | 849 | 2230 | 2691 | 4140 | 5803 | 9186 |
| | <p><u>Opera House shows:</u></p> <p>Initial show in May 1897.</p> <p>Itinerant shows through roughly 1908.</p> <p>Attempts to institute regularized picture service in the Opera House starting with Poythress (1908), DeGafferelly (1909), and McLeod (late 1909/10).</p> <p>Wishart becomes Opera House manager in the fall of 1910.</p> | <p><u>Nickelodeon Period:</u></p> <p>Pastime Theater opens in 1911.</p> <p>Lumbee/Start/Arcade/Lyric sequence from 1914-1917.</p> <p>Brief "A-Mus-U" colored theater (with white ownership), initially in Pedneau's garage space and later in the French-Allen building's north corner; duration unknown. Circa 1914.</p> <p>Brief colored theater installed in OH by Anderson company in 1919. Opera House converted to a boarding house in 1919.</p> <p>Brief colored house run by Charley Morrissey in Bland's Hotel site (circa 1919, subsequent to Anderson's OH show--and possibly using his old equipment).</p> | <p><u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u></p> <p>Carolina Theater opens in 1928, principal owners Drs. R. S. Beam and E. L. Bowman.</p> <p>Pastime adds balcony during significant 1926 expansion.</p> <p>Pastime leased to Lumberton Theatre Company (i.e. Beam/Bowman's operation) by 1929 and closes in early 1930's, to be periodically reopened as a second-run house for the next twenty years.</p> | <p><u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u></p> <p>Applicable to Lumberton, with the Carolina as the primary theater (with tri-segregated balcony).</p> <p>Pastime a second-run house (site of balcony conflicts between blacks and Indians).</p> <p>Riverside opened in 1939 (as a fully tri-segregated house).</p> | <p><u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u></p> <p>Carolina & Riverside as primary theaters.</p> <p>Pastime a second-run house operating in conjunction with the Carolina Theatre. Exits the business in 1951.</p> <p>Unnamed Black theater opened in Af-Am neighborhood (by white owners). Popular, and heavily attended circa 1945/46, but closed due to legal suit over utility-company right-of-way.</p> | |
| | <p><u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u></p> <p>1</p> <p>(Opera House)</p> <p>Note: Not counting tent shows, street fairs, etc.</p> | <p><u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u></p> <p>4</p> <p>(Lumbee, A-Mus-U, Pastime and Opera House all operating circa 1914--for whatever brief period of time when both the OH and Lumbee were showing pictures).</p> | <p><u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u></p> <p>2</p> <p>(Pastime and Carolina both operating in 1928).</p> | <p><u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u></p> <p>3</p> <p>Pastime (on/off), Carolina, and Riverside (opened in 1939).</p> | <p><u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u></p> <p>4</p> <p>(Note: "Hardtop" theaters only).</p> <p>Pastime (on/off), Carolina, Riverside, and a "Black" Theater located on the Fairmont Rd. circa 1945.</p> | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|-----------------|--|--|---|--|---|--------------------|
| Fairmont | N/A | 730 | 1000 | 1314 | 1993 | 2319 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> Initial showings unknown. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. Dixie open as early as 1915. | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in Fairmont. PTA and Legion shows in early 1920s give way to J. W. Griffin's Star Theatre in 1924, which was probably out of business by decade's end. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> Applicable in Fairmont, where "steady state" was represented by Fay Caudell's Capitol Theatre (1934), which for some time ran alongside its successor, the New Capitol, opened in 1938 (a venue that likely included a colored balcony, though the original Capitol may have as well). | <u>Eventual expansion to drive-ins (that also include Sunday shows):</u> Drive-in expansion occurred in Fairmont. In addition, the Center Theatre opens at the very tail end of the decade. | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 2 Capitol and New Capitol, both operated by Caudell, though the Old Capitol probably closed for good sometime after the New Capitol opened. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 (excluding drive-ins) Capitol Theatre continues. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|------------------|--|--|--|---|---|--------------------|
| St. Pauls | N/A | 419 | 1147 | 2080 | 1923 | 2251 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> Initial showings unknown. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. No known movie houses. | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in St. Pauls. W. A. Nutting's Lyric/Superba opened by 1921, but gone by 1923 (at the latest). Probably a brief over Stephens' drug store in early 1924. Caudell's Grand Theatre opens in summer 1924. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> True of St. Pauls, where "steady state" involved a single site, the Grand, which after passing through several temporary sites finally lands back in its refurbished original (formerly fire-damaged) site in 1935, where it is rechristened the St. Pauls Theatre. Colored balcony available as early as 1933 in one of the "post-fire" editions of the Grand. Balcony possibly existed in the St. Pauls when it originally opened. | <u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u> St. Pauls Theatre continues in operation. Drive-in expansion appears not to have occurred directly in St. Pauls directly, though several others were scattered about the county. However, the St. Pauls Theatre continues to operate. | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> Possibly 2, though probably 1. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Grand Theatre becomes the St. Pauls in 1935. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 St. Pauls Theatre continues. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|--------------------|--|---|--|--|--|--------------------|
| Red Springs | 858 | 1089 | 1018 | 1300 | 1559 | 2245 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> While initial showings remain unknown, the earliest potentially verifiable exhibition appears to have occurred at a local Masonic Fair in 1904. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. Crescent Theatre operating briefly at end of 1919. Followed (probably also briefly) by "The Pastime" in early 1920, perhaps as a replacement for the Crescent or possibly a exhibition on loan from Lumberton's Pastime Theatre (since the latter may have had extra equipment available from the failed Lyric, equipment which may have come originally from the Lumberton Opera House). | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in Red Springs. The Red Springs Theatre opened at least as early as 1925. It appears to have operated for much or all of the decade, initially operated by Mr. Lucas and subsequently by V. D. Humphrey beginning 1928. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> Also true in Red Springs, though "steady state" involved a single site, the Red Springs Theatre, which was upgraded and relocated into a new building in 1932. Eventually the RST houses a segregated balcony at least as early as 1935, and possibly earlier than that. | <u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u> Drive-in expansion appears not to have occurred directly in Red Springs, though other drive-ins were within a reasonable distance (particularly in Maxton). The Red Springs Theatre still operates throughout the decade, and is joined by the Center Theatre in early 1949. | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 The Crescent (circa 1919). | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Either the Crescent, assuming that it lasted into 1920, or the Red Springs Theatre from at least as early as 1925. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 The Red Springs Theatre is briefly renamed the "New" Red Springs in 1932. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 2 The Red Springs Theatre continues, to be joined by The Center at the tail end of the decade. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|---------------|---|--|---|---|---|--------------------|
| Maxton | 935 | 1321 | 1397 | 1386 | 1656 | 1974 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> Armory show in 1897, probably followed by periodic itinerant shows thereafter. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. At least one unnamed early house appears to have operated for short periods (with some management volatility) at the tail end of the war period. | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in Maxton. Early theater located on the second-floor storefront across the street from the Maple Shade Hotel (out of service by 1923, probably short-lived) The "Savoy Theatre" inside in the Maple Shade in operation by end of 1927--possibly opened by Mr. Lucas, formerly of the Red Springs Theatre. Probably another short-lived operation. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> Maxton's first true "steady-state" theater (opened in 1939) included a balcony, presumably for non-white patrons. Nevertheless, the Maxton Theatre was relatively small--probably no larger than the Lumberton Pastime. | <u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u> Drive-in expansion did occur in Maxton, near town plus at the Laurinburg-Maxton Air Base theater--a house which did provide Sunday afternoon shows, and did so significantly earlier than the area's drive ins (a few of which were in easy driving distance to Maxton). | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Unnamed theater, probably run first by McNair, then subsequently by Woods/Fite/Little (circa 1919). | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Either the Savoy or a storefront theater. | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Maxton Theatre (operational in 1939). | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 (excluding drive-ins) Maxton Theatre continues. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|----------------|--|--|--|---|--|--------------------|
| Rowland | 357 | 787 | 767 | 915 | 999 | 1293 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> Initial showings unknown. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in Rowland. PTA-sponsored exhibitions confirmed (between 1923 and 1928, though most likely sporadic in nature), though not in a dedicated theater facility. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> Also true in Rowland, where "steady state" was represented by the Adams's Brothers new Rowland Theatre opened in the fall of 1937 as a three-entrance theater which lacked only separate ticket booths to prevent it from achieving complete tri-segregation. | <u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u> Drive-in expansion may have occurred, though Rowland drivers also had reasonable access to drive-ins located near Fairmont and Lumberton. | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 (despite intermittent PTA shows) | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Rowland Theatre (operational in 1937) | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 (excluding drive-ins) Rowland Theatre continues. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|-----------------|--|---|---|--|--|--------------------|
| Pembroke | N/A | 258 | 329 | 524 | 783 | 1212 |
| | <u>Itinerant shows:</u> Initial showings unknown. | <u>Nickelodeon Period:</u> Never applies. At best, Pembroke only had access to segregated Community Service Picture exhibitions (as did other communities across the county) from approximately 1918 until the late 1920s. However, theaters in nearby Red Springs and Maxton may have operated briefly towards the end of the decade. | <u>Move to Picture Palaces:</u> Not applicable in Pembroke. Some early shows--almost certainly for an Indian audience only--held in the auditorium at Pembroke State College, then known as the Indian Normal School, in what was colloquially referred to as the "Pocahontas Theatre" (circa 1927). In addition, Community Service Pictures continued their regular stops in the greater Pembroke area. | <u>Steady state, leading to tri-segregated houses:</u> Also true in Pembroke, though steady state was represented by the Pembroke Theatre, opened in 1937. The Pembroke initially segregated whites and Indians in the main auditorium, while blacks were relegated to a small balcony. | <u>Additional expansion (including drive-ins, some of which exhibited on Sundays, though drive-ins have not been counted here):</u> Drive-ins available in the area, though relatively few Indian families owned automobiles. Local theater expansions included the opening of Pembroke's second hard-top theater, the Westside, in 1947. | |
| | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 0 | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 1 Pembroke Theatre (opened in 1937). | <u>Maximum concurrent house count:</u> 2 (excluding drive-ins) Pembroke and Westside Theatres. | |

| | <u>1900 Census</u> | <u>1910 Census</u> | <u>1920 Census</u> | <u>1930 Census</u> | <u>1940 Census</u> | <u>1950 Census</u> |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Parkton | N/A | 219 | 382 | 436 | 441 | 527 |
| | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | |

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