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MOVIE THEATERS IN THE MAINTENANCE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES IN KANSAS

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ABSTRACT—The population of rural towns in the Great Plains is generally declining. Between 1980 and 1990, over two-thirds of the 105 counties in Kansas lost population. The towns have been struggling with economic and demographic changes. In a number of Kansas towns, residents organized to save or refurbish their theaters. In this study I gathered information on the outcome of these activities from municipalities in Kansas in which a movie theater is owned by the town, the Chamber of Commerce, or a community group. Economic impact, fund raising activities, and volunteerism connected with the theater were explored. The results show that the theaters contributed to community pride, while suggesting neutral to positive economic impact. The various strategies used to acquire, renovate, and maintain the theaters provide ideas for rural community development elsewhere.

Introduction

Where to take your date on a Saturday night is probably near the bottom of the list of America's problems, unless you are fifteen years old in a small town in western Kansas. Small Kansas towns, of course, can be wonderful places. Senator Bob Dole noted the positive features of an upbringing in Russell during his 1996 presidential campaign. What Dole did not mention is that much of small town and rural Kansas has been in decline. Between 1980 and 1990 approximately two-thirds of Kansas counties lost population (Table 1).

Towns in the Plains states often confront problems familiar to industrial cities in the east—a depressed core, declining property values, and population loss. Local businesses struggle with a limited customer base, and they go under as people drive fifty or sixty miles to the regional shopping centers or large discount stores. Storefronts stand vacant, and the wide streets are empty of activity.

TABLE 1

THE 1980 AND 1990 POPULATION OF THE COUNTIES AND TOWNS
 IN KANSAS THAT HAVE COMMUNITY OWNED MOVIE THEATERS.¹

	1980	1990	% Change
Chautauqua County	5016	4407	-12.2%
Sedan (Gregg)	1547	1306	-15.6%
Cheyenne County	3678	3243	-11.8%
St. Francis (Cheyenne)	1610	1495	-7.1%
Comanche County	2554	2313	-9.4%
Coldwater (Chief)	n.a.	939	
Decatur County	4509	4021	-10.8%
Oberlin (Sunflower)	2387	2197	-8.0%
Hamilton County	2514	2388	-5.0%
Syracuse (Northrup)	1654	1606	-2.9%
Jewell County	5241	4251	-18.9%
Mankato (Ute)	1205	1037	-13.9%
Kiowa County	4046	3660	-9.5%
Greensburg (Twilight)	1885	1792	-4.9%
Lincoln County	4145	3653	-11.9%
Lincoln (Bud Finch Mem. Com. Thea.)	1599	1362	-14.8%
Norton County	6689	5947	-11.1%
Norton (Norton)	3400	3017	-11.3%
Rawlins County	4105	3404	-17.1%
Atwood (Jayhawk)	1665	1388	-16.6%
Reno County	64,983	62,389	-4.0%
Hutchinson (Fox)	40,284	39,308	-2.4%
Pretty Prairie (Civic)	n.a.	601	
Stafford County	5694	5365	-5.8%
Stafford (Ritz)	1425	1344	-5.7%

Source: United States Census Bureau.

¹Theater names in parentheses.

Small town, single screen movie theaters are especially vulnerable. A series of technological developments—television, cable, VCRs, home satellite dishes, and the Internet—have combined to keep potential audiences at home and isolated. Movie theaters that survive or prosper are the multi-screen complexes in the new malls built on the outskirts of town.

For towns too small or too poor to attract a mall, the closure of a downtown theater can be a major blow to a town's economic vitality and sense of community. A large building is vacant, nearby cafes and restaurants lose a magnet, and an informal social gathering point and recreation center disappears. Local residents who would like to watch an occasional film are forced to drive long distances. Those too young to drive do without.

Residents of thirteen Kansas towns have taken action to alter this script. Faced with a vacant or soon-to-be bankrupt theater, townspeople moved to save it. Some cities and towns, such as Oakland, California (the Paramount), Eagle Pass, Texas (the Aztec), Traverse City, Michigan (the State), and Great Bend, Kansas (the Crest), have rescued old cinemas from demolition by converting them into performance theaters for plays, community activities, and musical productions. The movie houses discussed here, however, continue to serve their original purpose, the screening of films.

The premise investigated in this paper is that community owned movie theaters provide at least two important benefits for a small town. First, the theater improves the town's economy, both by employment and by aiding the surrounding businesses, such as restaurants and stores, with spillover activity. Second, a community theater generates a feeling of common purpose during the acquisition and restoration process, and a sense of community pride once the theater is screening films again.

Methods

Data Collection. The aim of this research was to evaluate the economic and social importance of renovating a local, rural movie house. The economic aspects were easiest to measure, using ticket receipts, employee payrolls, visits generated from surrounding areas, and revenues to area business. The "sense of community" is more nebulous and so it was more difficult to quantify. I used a questionnaire for information on the theater and on community response.

The questionnaire contained items about the theater, such as seating capacity and number of screens, and questions on the change from private ownership to community ownership, such as funding sources and title

holders. Other questions dealt with day-to-day theater management, number of employees, decisions on movie selection, and the type of patrons attracted to the theater. Approximate figures on ticket and concession sales were requested. Respondents were also asked for their evaluation of the role of the theater in the community and the positive and negative aspects of the theater acquisition.

Completed questionnaires were received from all thirteen towns in twelve counties in Kansas that have community owned movie theaters. Reno County has two community owned theaters. "Community owned" was defined as owned by the town itself, the Chamber of Commerce, or a community-centered group of investors. Telephone calls, personal interviews, and theater visits by the author supplemented the questionnaire responses.

The respondents were people in the communities identified as knowledgeable about the theater and its operation. Respondents included city clerks, theater managers, or community leaders who played a role in saving the theater.

The towns. Kansas, contrary to the view of many outsiders, is not one undifferentiated flat field. However, the western part of the state is sparsely populated, since most of the population resides in the eastern one-third. The majority of Kansas counties lost population between 1980 and 1990 (Fig. 1). All twelve counties in which either a public agency or a community group has taken over the local movie house lost population between 1980 and 1990 (Fig. 2). Eleven of the thirteen towns in which a theater was located also lost population in that period (Table 1). The 1980 figures for Pretty Prairie and Coldwater were probably lower as well, but census data were not available.

These are *small* towns. With the exception of Hutchinson, with almost 40,000 people, all of the towns had fewer than 3,100 people. The surrounding counties also had small populations. Excluding Reno County, the home of Hutchinson, each of the eleven remaining counties was under 6,000 in population.

The decline in the towns of the Plains states is well documented. Nancy Burns (1982) noted that some small towns disappeared before 1900. She also points out that the reasons for the decline have been varied. The causes range from the obvious, such as changes in agricultural technology and railroad routes, to the little noted, such as the move from post office boxes to Rural Free Delivery. Mail delivery meant farmers no longer had to come to town to pick up the mail (Burns 1982). The Interstate highway system has also taken its toll on towns located away from the exits. Regional shopping malls are among the latest blows to small town viability.

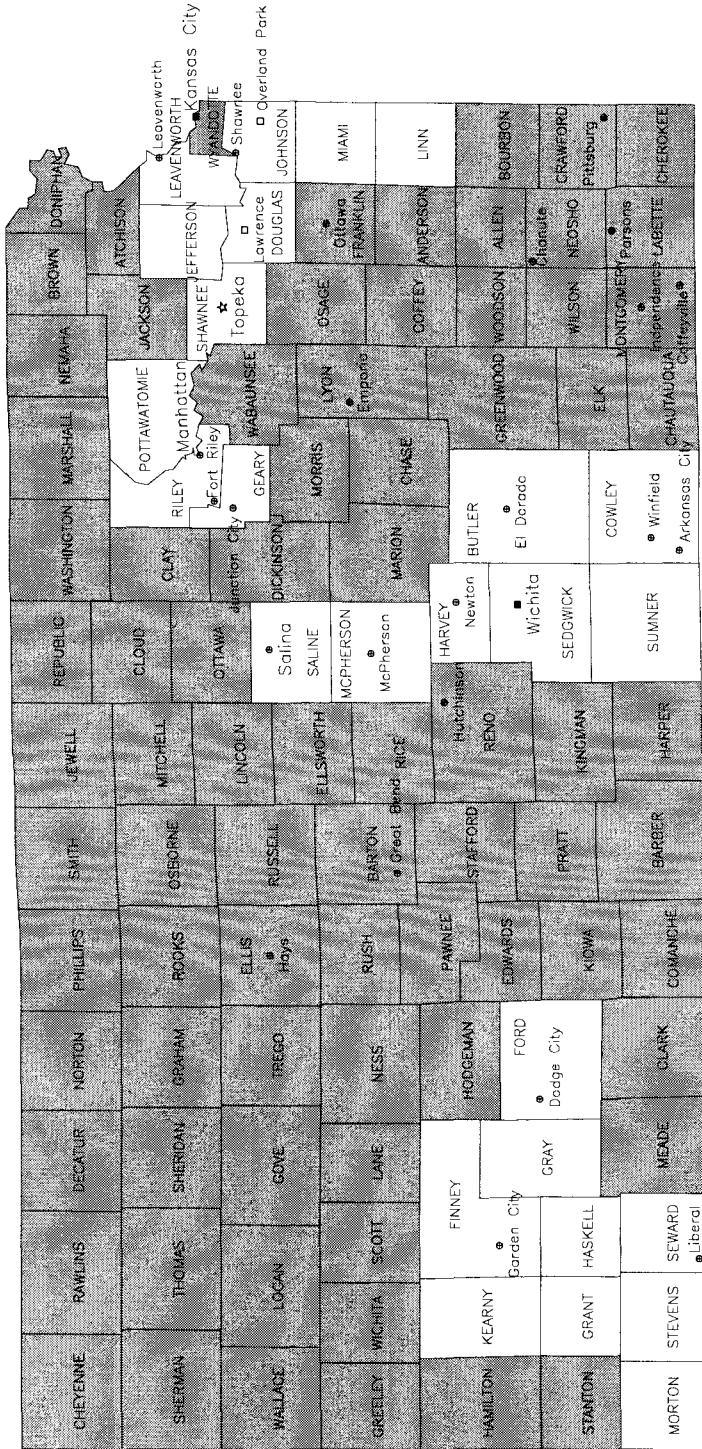


Figure 1. Kansas counties that lost population between 1980 and 1990.

Residents of a number of Plains towns are locked in a struggle between existence and disappearance. Although the headline (Heath 1995): "Once Thriving Small Towns on Plains Face Extinction" is alarmist, it has a factual basis. Some towns do manage to attract industry (Quintanilla and Rose 1996) and are prospering, but many are stagnant. Re-opening of a closed downtown theater will not be the catalyst for economic development and growth for an entire region. The social and cultural trends leading to economic decline in small towns in the Plains are deeply rooted. Nevertheless, an operating downtown movie house indicates that the town is alive, that economic activity continues. A theater with a broken marquee and plywood on the windows suggests stagnation.

The theaters. The Bud Finch Memorial Community Theater in Lincoln is still under construction. The Cheyenne in St. Francis was built in 1949 and the Sunflower in Oberlin was built in the late Forties. The remaining ten theaters were built before World War II, during the heyday of American theater building (Valentine 1994).

Except for the palatial Fox in Hutchinson (Fig. 3), which has a capacity for 1250 patrons, none of the theaters holds more than 400. Most have 200 to 300 seats. All of the theaters, like the Chief in Coldwater, Comanche Country (Fig. 4), are single screen theaters except for the Norton, which has two. The original theater in Norton had a single screen and a seating capacity of approximately 700.

Results and Discussion

Acquisition and Renovation. A number of paths were used by community groups to acquire a vacant or struggling theater. Norton appears to be the only town that used public funds exclusively. A number of towns owned the theater building before a community group began renovations. Approximately half of the theaters were acquired with private funds. In Mankato, funds were raised by selling one dollar shares. In Sedan the shares were \$200 each. St. Francis raised the money from local residents after a block grant application was denied. In Greensburg, the Twilight paid off its mortgage by using a fund raising drive among the local citizenry.

Lincoln has had amazing success for a small town. A campaign raised over \$83,000 as of 1996, including over \$24,000 in corporate donations, \$14,000 in grants, and about \$40,000 in the sale of 400 charter memberships in a theater group. The Lincoln plan for a community theater was developed



Figure 3. The Fox Theater in Hutchinson (Reno County, Kansas), the largest of the community-owned theaters in this study.

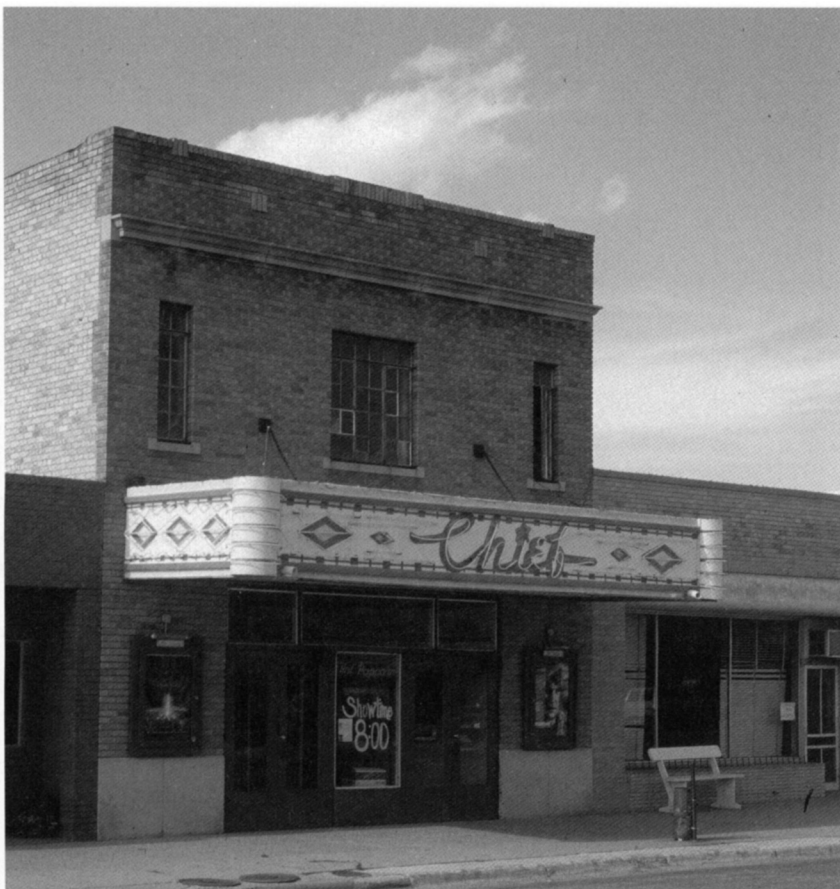


Figure 4. The Chief Theater in Coldwater (Comanche County, Kansas), one of the smaller community-owned theaters in this study.

with the help of a “K-State Summer team” made available through a community service grant from Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

In at least six of the communities, local banks helped, providing loans and other assistance with purchase and renovation expenses. After years of trying to find a buyer for the theater building, the First National Bank of Sedan finally sold it to a community group for one dollar.

In some cases extensive renovations were required. Seven of the theaters were vacant when acquired by the community. The Ritz in Stafford had been unused for approximately ten years when a community group took

control in 1990. Organizers turned to students and local townspeople for help. Respondents were proud of the volunteers. The Cheyenne in St. Francis keeps a list of volunteers who helped on the restoration on display at the front of the theater. Volunteer skills were impressive. In response to the question, "could you describe what they did?" Roger Floyd of Sedan wrote "Everything—painting, roofing, electrical, plumbing." In St. Francis the work included "painting, wiring, cleaning, all of the stage construction, plumbing, and roof repairs." In Oberlin, volunteers painted the lobby mural of the Sunflower. In Lincoln, where the theater is being constructed in an existing building, volunteers gutted that building, installed a sloped floor, a stage, a projection area, and bathrooms. The Ritz in Stafford provides dramatic evidence of volunteer abilities. Before renovation the roof was caved in and broken seats were scattered about. All the repairs have been made by volunteer help. The Fox in Hutchinson made use of a special kind of volunteer. "Approximately 50,000 hours have been donated by Hutchinson Correctional Facility inmate crews for demolition, painting, clean-up, and general labor," according to Fox's Director, Andrea Springer.

Although there was support in Hutchinson for the restoration of the Fox, there was an ambivalence about using public funds. A referendum in 1996 rejected the use of public funds for the theater. Fox Director Andrea Springer explained:

It wasn't until many of the seats for the theatre were lost in a fire that the community as a whole stood up for the restoration of the property. There is a strong desire to see the restoration completed . . . without any tax dollars whatsoever.

She also noted that the public needed to be educated on the positive impact of theater restoration. Hutchinson has more residents than the combined total of the other twelve towns, and it has other newer multi-screen theaters. For smaller towns multiple respondents stated that a saved theater represents success in the midst of adversity

Ownership and management of the theater. The most common ownership pattern was the formation of a non-profit corporation that hires professional managers or projectionists. However, alternative methods were used. Five depend on volunteer management. The Civic in Pretty Prairie is privately managed by Darrell Albright, who characterized himself as an "interested native who loves old movies." The Ute in Mankato (Fig. 5) is governed by a



Figure 5. The Ute Theater in Mankato (Jewell County, Kansas), the community-owned theater with the longest-running community support.

for-profit corporation. Roderick E. Weltmer, the corporation president, noted, "It had to be incorporated as a 'for profit' corporation, but there is never any profit."

Selection of films and hours. None of the communities show NC17 films. All of the theaters do run R-rated films except the Civic in Pretty Prairie and the Ritz in Stafford. The Civic screens film classics, and the Ritz in Stafford will go up to PG13. One manager noted that while she would like to avoid the R rating, experience taught her that the R-rated movies drew large audiences. Sam Brown, a local for-profit investor who acquired the Palace in Kinsley from the community in late 1997, agreed. He believes that the refusal to show R-rated movies was one of the reasons why the community group was unable to continue operations. He said that that any theater that will not screen R-rated movies will automatically lose the better paying adult audience.

Limited show times lessen both the economic impact and the community building aspect of the theaters. None of the operating theaters is open every night year round. Some show films only on weekends. Some close during the summer. One is open four nights a week.

The theater as a business. Employee costs in community theaters were low. No theater had more than one full time employee. Most of the theaters relied heavily on volunteers. The Norton has eight volunteer projectionists and about 250 people on the volunteer list. Part time high school and college student employees are also common; the Ute in Mankato employs eleven high school students.

Ticket sales were the main source of income, with concessions averaging about one-third of the door receipts. Popular films brought in customers. A number of managers eagerly awaited the arrival of "The Titanic," with its reported repeat audiences. Only one of the theaters, the Norton, reported a profit. On the other hand, only one reported a loss. The Palace in Kinsley, which was losing money, is no longer operating as a community owned theater. All others were close to breaking even.

In one effort to increase ticket sales, the Northrup manager, Sandy Dikeman, organized a phone bank of seven people to call everybody in Syracuse, Kansas. Callers asked two questions: (1) have you been to the theater in the last three months; and (2) what can we do to make the theater better? More comfortable seats and better sound were among the suggestions. The phone bank also increased awareness, and patronage increased after the calls.

The economic impact on the town. Based on the judgement of the theater managers, all but the Civic Theater in Pretty Prairie drew the bulk of their patrons from the local community. The Civic relies on a regional customer base for over half of its patrons, including visits from groups who arrive in chartered buses. Other than the Civic, the highest estimate of customers from outside the town was thirty percent. The Fox in Hutchinson, however, plans to target its promotions to attract a regional audience when it opens 29 January 1999.

Direct economic benefits to area stores from purchases—supplies, popcorn, services—were minimal. In St. Francis the grocery store sells supplies to the theater at cost and makes no money at all from theater business. In some towns the restoration of the theater brought economic benefits to local hardware stores and building suppliers, but that ended once the theater was refurbished. Direct employment benefits were also unimpressive. Employing part time students benefits the students, but the impact on the overall economy of the town appears to be marginal.

Of greater importance is the money spent by customers who patronize nearby businesses. Two respondents mentioned a probable increase in business at local video stores. Others noted an increase in convenience store, restaurant, and service station business. Andrea Springer, director of the soon to be opened Fox in Hutchinson, stated:

We expect the Fox Theatre to dramatically increase traffic in the downtown area during evening hours. Studies show that communities that restore their historic theatres see stabilized and increasing property values in the surrounding area as well as the generation of new ancillary businesses directly related to the facility.

It should be kept in mind, however, that the Fox will seat approximately five to six times the number of patrons as the other theaters in the study.

Although most respondents were not able to attribute large scale economic benefits to the theater, they did see major intangible benefits to the community.

Downtown theaters and the maintenance of community. The idea of “downtown” as a special place persists. Neither malls nor suburbs provide the feeling of a focal center to a community. A movie theater is an integral part of the downtown ideal. Of the towns discussed in this study, only Hutchinson has more than one theater. In the other towns a resident would need to drive between 20-45 miles to the next closest cinema, with the average about 30

miles. For parents, that is a long way. Five respondents specifically mentioned that the theater was a nearby place for children, teens, and families to go for entertainment.

None of the respondents thought the decision to save the theater was a bad one, although it should be noted the sample is obviously biased. One respondent wrote, "The only negative aspects are how to keep it going and all the hassles of seeing that the movies are booked and arrive on time, the employees show up, the equipment works, the pipes don't freeze, etc." Another respondent mentioned that the initial acquisition using tax funds generated some grumbling, but that dissipated with the success of the theater.

Of all the towns discussed in this study, the longest-running community support has been in Mankato. The Ute Theater there has been operated by the community since 1960. "That makes Ute the pioneer of town-owned cinemas in north-central Kansas" (Mowery-Denning 1994). The Ute managed to bounce back from a major fire in 1976 with volunteer effort. It continues to receive subsidies. Most of the assistance has been provided for the last twelve years by a "Bingo Benefit," supplemented more recently with an ice cream social. The bingo games and social, held at the High School Commons on the last weekend before school starts, garnered prizes from most merchants in Mankato and the events seemed to attract almost everybody in Jewell County (*Jewell County Post* 1995). Ironically, the Ute may also be the community theater at most risk. The bank that owns the building has put it up for sale. There is no assurance that the new owner will share the town's commitment to keeping the theater open.

"Our theater burned down years ago"—other towns in Kansas. Vacant movie theaters that are not preserved generally suffer one of two fates. First, some are converted into other uses. The old theater in Osborne is a laundromat; the theater in Johnson is an automotive repair shop. Second, others are lost forever. Some have burned (Washington, Ellsworth, Meade, Garnett, Dighton, Lyons), been torn down (LaCrosse), or collapsed (Hill City).

If a town does contain a vacant theater, community leaders now have successful models to follow for preservation. The evidence suggests that a community can rally support for the preservation of a downtown cinema if it is the only one within thirty or forty miles. If a town lacks any theater whatsoever, it has a model in Lincoln. This town showed that, with enough determination, townsfolk can build a community theater from scratch.

Conclusion

Kansas is not the only state in which small towns are saving movie theaters. Both Holly, Colorado, just four miles west of the Kansas-Colorado line, and Paullina, Iowa, have done it. And, movie theaters are not the only commercial activities getting public support. Residents of Scranton, North Dakota, own the Hometown Cafe, and a community group in Bonaparte, Iowa, sold shares to keep an entire downtown commercial block open (Perlman 1997).

The drive to keep theaters alive may be due in part to nostalgia. People generally associate movies with good times. Andrea Springer of the Fox Theater in Hutchinson pointed out that when the lights go down, the members of the audience have the same experience "no matter what their station in life." Movies are one of the great social levelers of a community. "No society can prosper without centers of civility and public sociability. This is the role that the cities and their amusement centers have always played" (Nasaw 1993). Saving movie theaters is one way local citizens band together to solve a problem, and build a stronger community.

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