

REVELATIONS OF A MOVIE THEATRE USHER

“45 CENTS/HOUR AND ALL THE POPCORN YOU CAN EAT”

by Bill Lee

~ Introduction ~

In 1952, the Paramount Theatre (theatre, not theater, as I was often reminded, until it sunk in) was the largest and self-proclaimed finest movie house in Newport News.



Late that August, or early September, before school started, I somehow learned through the teenage grapevine that the theatre was hiring ushers. It struck me that going to the movies and being paid to do so was something almost too good to be true.

It was.

I soon found out, the hard way, that the exalted position of theatre usher wasn't all that grand, and entailed far more than just taking up tickets and helping people find seats. Nevertheless, I had just turned 16, the minimum age for working, and-more importantly-I had discovered girls.

I needed money.

Although I knew my Father was a good friend of the theatre manager, I didn't dare ask him to intercede on my behalf. But, I cleverly (or so I thought) mentioned whose son I was during what, in retrospect, was a very short, superficial and successful interview.

And then, the revelations started coming...

I wasn't going to get rich ushering

The beginning wage was 45 cents per hour; minuscule, even by 1952 standards. In addition, child labor laws limited the number of hours that I could work. Notwithstanding those disappointments, I 'signed on'. A few days later, armed with a newly issued Social Security card and a City of Newport News work permit, I reported for training.

Theatre management, back then, was quite...well, let's just say...frugal

I was not paid to take the training, but fortunately, it didn't take long. It mostly consisted of being told by the assistant manager what not to do, and to ask another usher if I had any questions. I learned that I had to supply my own black dress shoes and dark socks, and a flashlight. The theatre management supplied batteries as long as you didn't ask too often for replacements. As for new bulbs, if you dropped your flashlight, forget it!

They neglected to tell me *that* when I hired on to that outfit.

Speaking of outfits, the next step was to acquire a uniform.

The Paramount's usher uniforms would not pass a Mother's inspection

The senior usher, who was probably less than a year older than I, led me to the usher's locker room. Blue woolen jackets of varying sizes and condition hung on a rack along with heavy wool black trousers. I think the clothing was older than any of us who wore it!

There were no shirts, just some one-size-fits-all stiff, white cardboard collars with false shirtfronts. On a table were some black clip-on bow ties, and several pairs of suspenders. Everything smelled-shall we say-used.

I was told to try some on, until I found a combination that fit. Fit being a relative thing; alterations by a tailor were not in the realm of possibility. The wool itched, the cardboard collar chafed and, as I was soon to learn, standing for hours in the theatre was hard on the feet and the back of even a teenager.

Cleanliness sometimes requires a little deliberate carelessness



I'm long on memories, but short on actual pictures of my ushering adventures. But this image, found on the Internet, is representative of the uniform we wore. The guy helping me said that jackets and trousers were seldom dry cleaned, and that the best way to get a clean outfit was to spill something really noticeable, then ignore any recriminations. Given the dark coloring of the clothing, that wasn't all that easy to accomplish. Nevertheless, his helpful hint did start me off on the devious path that all movie ushers, at least at the Paramount, learned to navigate.

Then, the senior usher gave me some idea of the full range of an usher's responsibilities.

There was a hellava lot more to ushering at the Paramount than ushering

A fairly complete list, reconstructed from memory, follows:

- Provide ushering services in the auditorium
- Periodically patrol the auditorium to make sure all was in order
- Discourage improper behavior (mostly front rows and balconies)
- Take up tickets at the entrance
- Assist in departing crowd control between performances
- Pass out and try to recover 3-D glasses, when those ‘high-tech’ shows played
- Help restock and/or sell refreshments between movie performances
- Take soft drinks and/or popcorn to the projectionist, upon request
- Make sure all patrons exit the building and lock doors after the last show
- Shut down heating or air conditioning system, as appropriate
- “Flip seats” throughout the auditorium
- Move supplies to popcorn-making machine room and make popcorn
- Fill cans with popcorn and distribute (internally and externally)
- Change marquee lettering and change out posters when a movie run has ended
- Miscellaneous touch-up painting and mix ‘poster-paste’
- Replace burned-out light bulbs throughout the building, including the marquee
- Periodically clean chewing gum from seat bottoms and carpets
- Patch holes in the curtains that hid the screen between performances



I'll elaborate on these duties; especially the ones that produced even further revelations.

We were an elite group; often left improbably in charge

Paramount Theatre ushers had to be white, male youths, between the ages of 16 and 18 who lived within walking or easy commuting distance of Newport News' main drag. There were, at any one time, about ten to twelve of us on the payroll. However, we usually worked in pairs on weekday evenings. One of us took tickets and then guarded the entrance after the last show started and the ticket booth was shut down. The other performed ushering and roving patrol duties. On weekends, or when a very popular show was playing, we might have as many as four or five guys on duty.

On weekdays, either the assistant manager or a high school student that was in a program that allowed him to work in the afternoons took up tickets. There were no ushering services provided except for the 7 and 9 PM performances. On weekends, and especially on Sundays, ushers did help people find seats for the 3 and 5 o'clock shows.

Typically, I'd work two or three evenings a week, sometimes doing distinctly non-usher things on Saturday mornings, and I usually ushered on Sunday evenings.

But regardless of the day of the week, after all the tickets were sold for the 9 PM performance and the show started, the assistant manager, ticket-taker and concession attendant left. The manager was only around during the daytime hours, so that two ushers would be left in charge. If someone got sick (too much purloined popcorn, perhaps?) only one usher would be in the building until closing time.

Oh, an elderly projectionist was always there, but he was restricted to his immediate work area. He had to change and rewind reels on a fairly frequent basis, and synchronize two projectors when one reel ended and the next one began. Plus, there was always the threat of a 35 MM projector bulb burning out, in which case he had to move pretty fast. The heat thrown off by those big bulbs was fierce, so he often was shirtless and would not have been as imposing (or as imperious) as we thought we were in our uniforms.



If absolutely necessary, we could always call one of the managers at home. But interestingly enough, their office was locked, making the telephones in there inaccessible to us. We would have had to invest a dime in the sole public pay phone available to make such a call. I never felt any situation required *that* extreme action.

Sometimes the best show was not on the silver screen

Well, to be truthful, I was already aware of this fact of life. But as an usher, I had the delicate, diplomatic task, on more than one occasion, of dissuading the more amorous of couples. They usually migrated to the remote reaches of the Paramount's upper balcony, and I was told that such activities could best be observed from the vantage place of the projectionist, just above. I, of course, never did that...

I also was told by my peers that the best deterrence to such activities was to spotlight them! Now, management maintained that we should never shine a flashlight upwards, but to always direct it downwards, along the pathway when we were leading patrons to their seats.



However, ignoring that directive in such situations usually worked fine...or so I was told. I, of course, never did that... I was also led to understand that being prepared to flee the scene if some big fella took extreme umbrage with such an intrusion was always a prudent precaution.

Ticket taking, a pretty boring task, did have nefarious advantages

I never understood why we had to tear tickets in two, giving one-half to the customer and depositing the other half in a little square, glass-enclosed box that formed the top of an ornate, chest-high stand. If anyone ever demanded their money back, they never had to produce a stub to get some consideration (after all, they were inside the establishment). By the way, in most cases, consideration is all they got...



I also don't know why the tickets had serial numbers on them. When a plain old bucket, hidden inside the stand filled up, we'd just dump the contents in a trashcan behind the concession stand. Nevertheless, we did as told, and ceremoniously tore each ticket in half and shared the mutilated results with people who-more often than not-just dropped their half on the floor.

However, if no one in authority was looking, and if the patron wasn't paying attention, it was quite easy to take the entire ticket and pocket it. Since the tickets were not dated, they could be, shall we say, 'reused at a later date' by grateful friends. Maybe even sold; I don't know. I, of course, never did that...

The price of a ticket, back then, was 55 cents for adults at nights, 45 cents in the afternoon, before 6 PM; 14 cents for children under twelve years of age. Kids were the worst, when it came to not waiting for a stub, and a lot of whole 14-cent tickets, or so I was told, later magically re-appeared in the hands of older and wiser juveniles.

Some wise guys learned to keep their stubs, and hand them over at a later date to their usher-friend, who would pretend to tear the fragment in half. No wonder so many theatres went out of business in the second half of the twentieth century!

Movie theatre popcorn isn't always all that it's cracked up to be



Of all the stories I can relate about my short-lived career as an usher, this one will undoubtedly be the most startling to casual movie-goers of the 50s. Popcorn was produced in large amounts at the Paramount under appalling health conditions. It was not made, fresh, every day. Usually a huge batch was cooked up by a couple of ushers on Saturday mornings.

We wore street clothes (and for teenage boys, that didn't always mean clean clothing). No gloves, hairnets or other rudimentary health precautions. A huge, gas-fired caldron that had decades of burnt grease staining it, inside and out was given a cursory wipe-down after use. Stirring and scooping utensils were left unwashed and out in the open.

Unpopped corn was delivered in hundred-pound sacks at the rear of the building. We had to manhandle them up a flight of stairs at the rear of the building, along with big, unwieldy containers of oil, salt and cartons of folded-up individual popcorn boxes.

I don't recall how we measured out the ingredients for each batch, but I'm confident that it was wildly inconsistent. The volume of each batch's popped results would stagger the imagination. You had to work quickly, or you'd find yourself scooping up the overflowing popcorn from the floor. The heat produced in that relatively small space, especially during the summertime, led us to work shirtless. Nevertheless, we often sweated prodigiously over the task of making batch after batch, with some emphasis on the word 'over'. I, of course, never did that...

We didn't put popcorn in the boxes right then. Instead, it was scooped into a large number of lightweight tin cans (about the size of a five gallon bucket), with a press-tight lid. Some of the ushers distained the use of scoops and just dipped the tin cans in the mass of popcorn threatening to overflow the cauldron; removing the excess or filling any void with unwashed handfuls. I, of course, never did that...

Those greasy tin cans were then carried to a small closet in the sunken lounge area of the theatre that was located just behind the concession stand. From time to time, when asked to do so by the always-elderly female concession stand attendant, we would retrieve a can and dump its cold contents into the heated, glass-enclosed centerpiece of the concession stand. That device did not make fresh popcorn, as was widely assumed, but only warmed days'-old stale popcorn.

"Fresh, hot and delicious" popcorn was then scooped into individual boxes by the attendant and sold for ten cents a box. Buttered popcorn was extra, and I leave it to the reader's imagination as to how the butter got into its heated dispenser.



Another charming little bit of info about popcorn: A lot of it was carried off in those tin cans to be re-warmed and sold, days later, at the James and Village Theatres. From time to time, when the James Theatre ran out, we would walk two blocks down Washington Avenue, sometimes in uniform, swinging four of those tin cans, two in each hand by grasping their flimsy handles. I don't know how emergency supplies made their way to Hilton's Village Theatre.

You'd think, with all this information, that I would have avoided eating popcorn at the Paramount. Oh, contraire – remember, I was a teenager, with a cast iron stomach, and a head to match. Importantly, to a kid making mere pennies an hour, the popcorn was not only abundant; it was free. Maybe not officially, but it was! We kept a tin secreted away in the usher's locker room, which was located directly above where the popcorn was produced. Our personal tin was never empty for long.

While making rounds of the theatre to make sure everything was ok, some ushers had the habit of ducking into the closet where tins awaited their calling, and scooping up handfuls of cold corn to gobble. I, of course, never did that...

Enough! All this talk about popcorn has made me hungry.

Helping out at the concession stand for fun and profit

During highly attended performances, ushers were often pressed into service before the 7 and 9 PM shows to help out at the concession stand. Sometimes, this merely involved filling popcorn boxes so the attendant would not have to stop and do so at busy times. Some ushers were allowed to sell our previously popped product, and even the candy and drinks; served soda fountain style. That was a privilege that had to be earned, under the watchful eye of the concessionaire. The busier she was, the quicker that happened.

Sometimes, a customer who thought he knew something about popcorn, insisted on having a box filled, fresh, from the warming enclosure; refusing a 'stale' box already filled. We always cheerfully complied, suppressing our knowledge that all the popcorn available had been made days before and that there was no real difference.

That was the fun part. As for profit, some ushers would short-change customers; usually picking on guys trying to impress their dates. Such self-important people usually didn't protest, if, in fact, they even looked at their change. If caught, all an usher had to do was smile ruefully and hand over the correct change. I, of course, never did that...

If management ever knew about that little subterfuge, they never let on. But they also never let us handle the fairly large amounts of money that was periodically collected from the ticket booth and placed in a safe in the manager's office.

The Paramount's ticket booth cashiers were all ladies. But even the youngest of them was totally disinterested in ushers. About the only time a cashier paid us any attention at all was the times she cracked open the door in the back of the booth to ask the ticker-taking usher to fetch a few rolls of coins from the office.

One of the few vintage images of the Paramount that I did find on the Internet was this obviously posed photo. I never saw anyone as attractive as the young lady on the right buy her own ticket!



Marquee change outs and bulb replacements could be hazardous

Each time a movie had run its course, a couple of ushers would change that massive marquee's messages after the last 9 PM performance started. It was the job of the assistant manager to create the verbiage, but after suggesting some improvements a few times, he usually deferred to me. I would sketch out what I planned to say, paying careful attention to the spacing and the differing widths of various letters. Just like my Father did, when creating newspaper headlines, so I guess it was somewhat of an inherited skill.

The back lighted billboards on the ends of the marquee were a challenge. Not much space for lengthy messages, so I loved it when movies had short titles, like STALAG 17. But when THE WAR OF THE WORLDS came to town, it took two (of a total of three lines available) just to spell out the title.

All of the letters we used were upper case and made of cast metal, painted dark red (as I recall). Consequently, they were fairly heavy; especially the 'M's' and the 'W's'. There were tiny slots on the backs of the letters, open at the bottom. That facilitated hanging them on little rails that ran horizontally in front of the back lighted billboard sections of the marquee.



If you dropped one, it would, more often than not, break. And the cost would be deducted from your pay. If you reported it. I, of course, never did that...

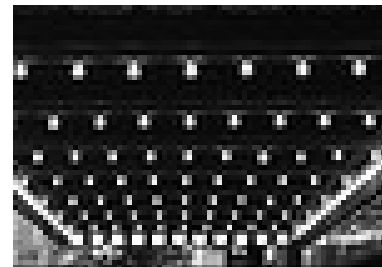
Ushers quickly learned, instead, to make cardboard copies, and paint them the same color as the metallic ones. Some long-departed usher had thoughtfully hidden a can of matching paint in the usher's locker room. Those substitutes were held in place with paper clips, but wind and/or rain would sometimes be an usher's undoing. If there was not time enough to make a particular letter, we usually could borrow one from a fellow usher at the nearby Warwick Theatre. Or vice-versa, inventory permitting.

We had to use a heavy, wood A-frame ladder, which was all two boys could do to move and set up. Prudence indicated that one of us should steady the ladder, and the other take up a box of pre-planned letters, along with a sketch, and create the planned message. No one wanted to be the one steadying the ladder, for a dropped metal letter could hurt.

Hanging letters on the marquee ends went pretty fast, but on the long side facing Washington Avenue there was lots of room for lots of words. So we often climbed up both sides of the ladder and worked haphazardly. On one memorable occasion, I dropped a letter, narrowly missing an inebriated fellow. Brushing my most sincere apologies aside, he started up my side of the ladder to, I guess, confront me...or worse.

I went right over the top of the A-frame to escape, chasing my fellow usher down the other side in hasty retreat. Why the ladder didn't topple, with three people on it, is a minor miracle. The box full of letters didn't even fall! We ran into the theatre and waited until the frustrated fellow descended, then cautiously went back and completed our interrupted task. He could have wreaked considerable economic revenge, if he had only known enough to toss down all those fairly fragile letters.

Another some times hazardous duty was replacing burned out bulbs in the frenetic light display that surrounded the billboards, additional ones that spelled out P-A-R-A-M-O-U-N-T and still more that blanketed the underside of the marquee. There were hundreds of those bulbs, in various colors.



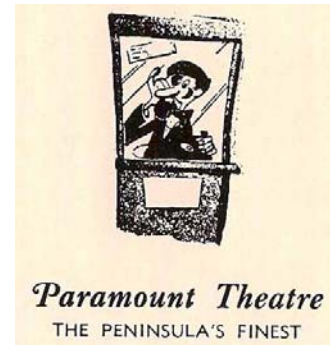
Some burned steady and others flashed on and off in a repeated pattern that was dictated by a mechanical device that I learned was called a variable speed chaser. The bulbs were of the garden-variety, screw-in kind; probably rated at 25 watts, each. Ladders had to be utilized to reach them, and the power had to be on to tell which bulbs needed replacing.

The hazardous part came when a very old bulb, rusted in place, broke off in someone's bare hand. Having a hand cut, in that manner, and/or getting an electrical shock – however brief – while perched atop a swaying ladder was not an enjoyable experience.

Poster paste is easy to make, but hard to remove



Before reels of film for any movie arrived, they were preceded well in advance by promotional and advertising materials for use in creating newspaper copy. The manager worked with the advertising staff of the local newspapers to translate this material into ads that would appeal to the people of the Peninsula.



In addition, there were always two kinds of posters provided.

Heavy stock paper posters came in a standard size, and it was the ushers' job to remove the old ones from locked, glass frames that were located both outside and inside the theatre, and replace with the new ones. That was easy; the posters would pretty much stay in place on their own long enough to shut the frames' glass doors. The old ones just got thrown away! I often think about how much money I could make today on EBay, if only I had saved some of those vintage advertisements.

A larger version of those posters came rolled up, printed on fairly flimsy paper. On the 33rd street side of the building, at the CRT bus stop, there was a huge open frame where those posters were placed. As I recall, the thing was about five or six feet tall, and two or three feet wide. Those paper posters had to be pasted in place, much like wallpaper is hung.



But harder. Much harder.

We had an odd assortment of ill-suited tools. A big-but too shallow-rectangular trough that rivaled the corn cauldron when it came to encrustations. A wide, brush on a long handle that was almost too stiff to use because of lots of dried paste. We mixed water and dry paste in the trough at the rear of the theatre, paying scant attention to the portions. We paid even less attention to any drips or droppings that resulted because of our efforts.

Outside, we'd slop paste on the previous movie's ad, using the brush. Then, we'd position, as best we could, the new one in place and try to smooth it down flat...with our bare hands. This was a two-boy job. I tried to do it alone one time. One time was enough! Sometimes, the mixture turned out to be too thin and we had to start all over. Other times, big lumps of dry or unmixed paste stuck to the back side of the poster, which had to be removed by peeling back a portion of the poster and removing the sticky lumps as best we could...with our bare hands.

The net results could hardly be called works of art.

At infrequent intervals, one of us would be detailed to use a heavy pole-mounted scraper to remove months of bulletin board build-up. That side of the building faced in a westwardly direction, and the sun pretty much cooked our pasted products firmly in place. The task was akin to removing wallpaper that had not been properly sized, except that we left the stubborn patches of old posters to add 'depth' to the next ones.

Flipping seats and breaking bread

After the show ended, and after we locked up and shut down the heating or air conditioning (which sounds dangerously complicated for a teenager, but only consisted of moving a huge switch in the theatre's machinery room to *OFF*); we had to 'flip seats'. Let me explain.



A cheerful black man arrived to perform janitorial duties, after hours. He'd bang on one of the fire exit doors in the rear, and we'd open it up to let him in. While he set up a couple of huge floodlights, our final job before we could go home was to flip up the seat bottoms. That allowed him to move freely between the rows, using a large-mouthed vacuum-like device to swallow up all manner of debris. It could easily devour discarded candy wrappers, empty and not-so-empty popcorn boxes, and other debris best left undescribed. Tim-the-Toolman Taylor would have been quite envious.

We learned to rapidly walk bent over, between the rows, flipping up seats with one hand, and leaning over to flip seats in an adjacent row with the other hand. That cut the time in half, but did nothing for backs already aching. When we were done, and only when we were done, our reward was as unusual as it was delightful.

The janitor also worked evenings at Beck's Bakery and he always brought us one or two loaves of unsliced, just-baked bread that emanated those same delicious aromas that once permeated the atmosphere of 25th street.



We'd just tear off chunks of that sweet-smelling stuff and wolf them down, using purloined fluids from the concession stand's drink machine as a chaser. Sometimes the janitor would bring something like home-made jelly to put on the bread.

Imagine the improbable scene that resulted around 11:30 at night in an unnaturally brightly lighted theatre; two white boys and a black man sitting together and sharing a secret snack in the then strictly segregated South.

Gladys Lyle didn't live in the organ pit, after all

Unfortunately, when I became an usher, Gladys Lyle was no longer playing the Paramount's pipe organ. However, like most people who lived in Newport News between 1934 and 1949, I fondly and vividly remember her many performances. Let me briefly take you back to those days, when the 'Tiny Mistress of Melody' captivated the audience.

On weekends, before the start of the late afternoon and evening movie showings, the curtain would close and the theatre darkened even more than usual. Suddenly, a spotlight operated by the projectionist would beam down on a pre-selected location in front of and slightly to left of center of the first row of seats. People started to applaud, knowing full well what they were about to experience. Then, dramatically, as the spotlight changed hue, Gladys Lyle and that magnificent organ console slowly and majestically rose from a pit as she played a lively tune that rattled the organ pipes on both sides of the stage area.

A message, announcing "*Gladys Lyle at the Organ*" would flash on the curtain, and then seemingly 'come alive', as the curtains parted and the message would brightly appear on the screen. In synch with the next projected image, after the applause died down, Gladys would cheerfully invite every one to 'follow the bouncing ball' and sing along. And sing along we did!

She was a petite, dark-haired lady who usually wore an ankle-length evening dress. As the brilliants of her dress sparkled, she'd demonstrate her mastery of that monstrous art deco console. There were two keyboards, three rows of stops and a row of foot pedals. At the climax of each performance, she would literally pull out all the stops and make that organ shake, rattle and roll long before that phase entered our lexicon.



After becoming a theatre insider, I soon investigated the workings of the organ when the theatre was deserted. I was a bit disappointed to find that the organ console was positioned on a hydraulically operated platform, and that Gladys Lyle simply walked a few steps in the darkened theatre from stage left to get into playing position.

But what did impress me was seeing, up close, the number of keys, stops, pedals and other gadgets that she so adroitly manipulated for years. The part-time mechanic who had once maintained that complex equipment for her kindly took the time one Saturday morn to show me how her fast-fingered commands were mechanically and electrically translated into the booming sounds that emanated from the pipes that dominated the sides of the stage and screen area.

He removed the console's protective cover, turned on the power and let me press a few keys. My selection of mostly deep bass notes quickly got the assistant manager's attention. When he stormed into the auditorium, my organ solo ended very abruptly.

A theatre's auditorium area should never see the light of day

If you ever had the chance to view a theatre's interior under bright light, you probably would never again wear good clothing to sit in such places. As might be expected, in a place where food and drink had been spilled and not cleaned up, an exterminator who sprayed for bugs and set traps for larger game was a fairly frequent visitor. We 'insiders' had a standing joke about that; we used to tell kids new to our profession that the guy had to bring his own bait, 'cause the pests wouldn't touch the popcorn!

I also had the dubious pleasure to closely inspect the Paramount's carpets and seating surfaces on a few occasions, when offered 'overtime' to help do some cleaning. I assume that violated the child labor laws, since we got paid on the spot, in cash, for services rendered at such times. Otherwise, we got a weekly pay envelope that had hours recorded on it in appropriate pre-printed places. But it only contained cash-never checks.

Periodically, and early in the morning, a cleaning service would come in to steam clean carpets and seat cushions, and scrape all the sticky stuff from the uncarpeted area between the rows of seats. Several of us teen-age employees preceding them, literally crawling down the aisles, cleaning off chewing gum and God only knows what else, using putty knives and rags soaked with-I think-undiluted naphtha or something similar that wouldn't be allowed today. Barehanded, of course.

Bubblegum was the easiest to spot, since kids chewed and then discarded large wads of the stuff. And the closer we moved towards the screen, the more of it we found. But bubblegum was also the hardest to remove; I suspect that something in its ingredients undoubtedly later became the main component of super glue.



Once that was done and taking further advantage of the brightly lit surroundings, we'd scrape the gum from the seat cushions, and from the undersides of the seats. Our nocturnal black friend would be there too, and follow along behind us, using his awesome machine to scoop up our droppings.

I don't recall doing so, but it's not inconceivable that we then went and made popcorn.

~ *Postscript* ~

After nearly a year of such evening adventures, I had advanced to the position of senior usher, earning the magnificent sum of 60 cents an hour. No wonder there was such a high turnover ratio in the ushering profession.

However, in spite of my apparent financial success, I'd had my fill of the working conditions, the late hours, the shabby and chafing uniforms, and the stale popcorn that often served as my supper. The summer of 1953, which preceded my senior year of high school, lured me back to spending idle hours in and on the James River.

Thus ended my short-lived career as a Theatre Usher for the Paramount organization. I assume it was mere coincidence that their fortunes declined significantly thereafter. Or, perhaps the onslaught of TV might have had something to do with it.



Jobless, and wearing only a bathing suit most of the time, I swam, crabbed, rowed and sailed that idyllic summer to my heart's delight. I also earned money by helping care for the small boats that local fishermen used to keep tied to pound poles near the Fish Shack pier at the end of 73rd street. They were far more generous than theatre managers.

On numerous occasions, I did go back to the Paramount as a customer. I always tried to sit in the seldom-used seats on the extreme sides of the theatre, proper, and I always carefully counted my change whenever I purchased something (not popcorn) from the concession stand.

Former associates occasionally offered to palm a ticket for me.

I, of course, never did that...

HISTORICAL APPENDIX

The Paramount was constructed in 1930 on the corner of Washington Avenue and 33rd Street in downtown Newport News. The architectural style of the building was Spanish Baroque, and the seating capacity was 1,170. There was a single screen, and the crown jewel of the establishment was a 1931 Barton theatre organ.

The movie viewing area had a large, gently sloping lower level, with three aisles between four seating sections, accessible from the rear. Three sets of wide, carpeted steps led upwards from that same area to two balconies; separated by a low brass railing and a dark green curtain.



Access to the uppermost balcony was limited by velvet ropes stretched across the aisles, except when near-capacity crowds were present. Portable brass stanchions and velvet ropes were used to separate departing patrons from those impatiently waiting to see the next show.

The inaugural presentation at the Paramount took place on October 2, 1931. Each showing of the movie *Personal Maid*, starring Nancy Carroll was preceded by “Bob Hess at the Organ” and a Laurel & Hardy comedy routine, plus a cartoon, previews (called trailers) of coming shows and a short filmed feature of news from around the world.

Although it was considered a premier ‘first-run’ movie house, the Paramount closed its doors for the last time in the late 1970s. No suitable use for the building was found thereafter, and it was demolished around 1990. Today, a modern building housing the Newport News Fire Department’s headquarters stands on the site.

Fortunately, the iconic symbol of that era of movie-going at the Paramount Theatre, its massive pipe organ, has been improbably saved. After the Paramount was shuttered, the organ was moved to a theatre in Alexandria, Virginia. Some years later, it was installed in the Granada Theatre in Kansas City.

After that venue closed in 1997, this irreplaceable treasure was purchased by a wealthy collector of movie artifacts and memorabilia. After being totally restored to playable condition, it was installed in his home’s Music Room in Las Vegas.



All that's missing is Gladys...

