

BEHIND THE SCENES:  
CORPORATIONS, THE MOVIEGOING EXPERIENCE, AND THE PRESERVATION  
OF TENNESSEE'S SMALL-TOWN THEATERS

by

Cassandra Bennett

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Thesis Committee:

Dr. Carroll Van West, Chair

Dr. Susan Myers-Shirk

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## ABSTRACT

Historical scholarship about twentieth century movies and America is rich but narrow. Scholars have looked at urban movie palaces at length but neglected small-town theaters, except for those “new cinema history” scholars who have looked some to the moviegoing experience in the United States. The Crescent Amusement Company’s network of 132 mostly small-town southern theaters provides a valuable case study to help remedy these scholarly gaps. Centered in Tennessee, the regional chain monopolized small-town exhibition sites. About two-thirds of the chain’s theaters were located in towns with fewer than 10,000 people; these numbers mirror national trends. By 1930, Crescent’s network was the largest unaffiliated chain in the nation. Therefore, Crescent serves as a microcosm of the national film and exhibition industry. Within the regional chain, the Park Theatre, in McKenzie, Tennessee, provides a more focused study of mid-twentieth century small-town theaters. An examination of this theater yields insights into the industry, the moviegoing experience, and the promise of historic preservation today. By examining the Crescent network’s history alongside the critical preservation issues presented by small-town theaters, this study illuminates the role these buildings played and can still play in the economic and social wellbeing of their towns.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Memories of going to the picture show last a lifetime. It does not matter if the downtown theater was in the heart of Nashville or a small farming town like McKenzie, Tennessee. When a small-town theater opened in the early to mid-twentieth century, it made front-page news in the months leading up to the big day. Similarly, as historic preservation efforts in small towns bring new life to long-shuttered theaters, reports cover the front pages of local newspapers.

In the southeastern United States, the Crescent Amusement Company (CAC) provides a useful case study for teasing out the moviegoing experience and the role of large companies in that experience. CAC and its numerous subsidiaries owned and operated 85 theaters in Tennessee, as well as an additional 50 in western Kentucky, eastern Arkansas, western North Carolina, northern Alabama, and north-central Mississippi.<sup>1</sup> Anthony Sudekum began CAC in 1907 when he opened a handful of Nashville theaters.<sup>2</sup> Over the next 30 years, the regional circuit grew to 132 theaters that monopolized exhibition in the six-state region. In 1938, the network was charged with

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<sup>1</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, box 12, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, (hereafter cited as William Waller Collection); “New Saturday Policy at Princess,” *Florence (AL) Times*, November 30, 1936; “Sunday Pictures in Sheffield and Tuscumbia,” *Florence (AL) Times*, November 30, 1936; “History of Muscle Shoals Theatres Recounted; Movie Advances Depicted: Picture House Is Modernized for Florence,” *Florence (AL) Times*, November 30, 1936; “One of Alabama’s Most Beautiful Theaters,” *Florence Times-News and Tri-City Daily (AL)*, October 1937, TVA Dedicatory edition.

<sup>2</sup> “Crescent Brief Denies Illegal Use Buying Power Advantage,” *Boxoffice Magazine*, October 25, 1941, 101.

violating antitrust legislation and in 1944, the Supreme Court decided in *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al* that the Crescent circuit used its monopoly to prevent all competitors from purchasing the films needed to conduct business.<sup>3</sup>

In its management, business growth, and standardizations, CAC was a microcosm of the national film industry. Within the Crescent chain, the history of theaters in McKenzie, Tennessee provides a window into how the regional network operated from the mid-1920s to the 1950s. To enter this West Tennessee market in 1939, Rockwood Amusement Company, an important Crescent subsidiary, utilized coercive and war-like tactics to force the local theater owner, Y. D. Moore, out of business or to sell out. Before selling to Rockwood, Moore owned and operated the McKenzie Theatre on the ground floor of the Caledonia Masonic Lodge Building, a building owned by the Masons. Beginning in 1937, Rockwood used a “run-zone-clearance” structure in its film contracts for the Court Theatre, located twelve miles away. By doing so, the large chain limited Moore’s access to desirable films.<sup>4</sup> By 1939, these tactics and rumors that the company

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<sup>3</sup> The Crescent’s corporate structure and its relationship with its subsidiaries is complex: (a) Crescent Amusement Company (CAC) refers to the parent company and its 51 theaters; (b) “Crescent” or “the Crescent network/chain/circuit” indicates all 15 theater companies and their 132 theaters; (d) within the Crescent network, there were two tiers of subsidiaries: (1) in the first tier, there were the six *Crescent et al* Supreme Court Case defendants and Strand (the Court dismissed charges against this company but operated similarly to the defendants); (2) the remaining seven exhibitors were small regional companies that owned an average of three theaters and were not involved in the Crescent case.

<sup>4</sup> When Hollywood studios released a film, each exhibitor’s contract determined the theater’s position in the film’s “run” and the length of its stay at the theater. The earlier in a film’s run a theater was positioned, the more money an exhibitor stood to make. After the film completed its run at a theater, the exhibitor’s contract stipulated how long competing theaters in a specific “zone” had to wait before they could show it. The

purchased property in McKenzie forced Moore to sell out. Throughout its chain, Crescent used similar tactics to intrude into small towns.<sup>5</sup> In 1941, Rockwood opened the Park Theatre and closed the McKenzie Theatre. Both McKenzie theaters and numerous similar small-town theaters illustrate the standardized moviegoing experience introduced to small towns by corporations. Despite corporate management and standardization, however, small-town theaters also fostered uniquely local experiences for their moviegoers and generated much excitement when they opened.

By the 1990s, the Park Theatre lost its novelty and no longer showed movies, but today, McKenzie residents are in the early planning stages of bringing their Park Theatre back to its prime.<sup>6</sup> Placing McKenzie's theaters at the center of the historical narrative emphasizes the link between the past of small-town moviegoing and the present effort to preserve these same theaters. Current historic preservation projects in McKenzie illustrate the important role downtown movie theaters play in rural preservation and downtown revitalization efforts. These buildings and small towns present distinct historic

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length of wait within a zone was the "clearance." The longer the clearance, the more likely audience members were to attend earlier runs – even if it required traveling to the next town – and, thus, the less likely to attend a subsequent-run theater, Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History Of Movie Presentation In The United States*, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 67. Also see; Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis*, Bureau of Business and Economic Research (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> All theater reports in collection, particularly McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, and Court Theatre (Rockwood) report, Huntingdon, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>6</sup> Carroll Van West, "Park Theatre, McKenzie, Tennessee," photograph, ca. 1992, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, TN.

preservation challenges, benefits, and outcomes that are worth exploring. Historic theaters, including picture palaces and movie theaters, unite diverse stakeholders because of the shared experiences at the local theater. As significant public entertainment venues for small towns, both past and present, theaters often provide cornerstone projects for towns as they begin the preservation planning process. By examining the Crescent network's history alongside the critical preservation issues presented by small-town theaters, this study illuminates the role these buildings played and can still play in the economic and social wellbeing of their towns.

Historians and preservationists have left gaps in the literature relevant to moviegoing history in the Southeast and the preservation of these small-town entertainment venues. While historians have extensively studied moviegoing and exhibitors in both North Carolina and Kentucky, Tennessee and the exhibitor chains under CAC's direction have been neglected.<sup>7</sup> This thesis attempts to fill these historiographical gaps.

Tennessee's exhibition history between the 1920s and 1950s is important to discuss for at least three reasons. First, both the Kentucky and North Carolina studies came to an end in the late 1930s. But in the CAC circuit, small-town cinemas continued

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<sup>7</sup> Robert C. Allen, "Getting to Going to the Show," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 8, no. 3 (2010): 264–276; Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History: The 'Problem' of the Empirical," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 2006): 48–88; Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Gregory A. Waller, "Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater," *Society for Cinema & Media Studies* 44, no. 3 (2005): 3–19; Robert C. Allen, "Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina," *Going to the Show*, accessed February 26, 2013, [www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts](http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts).

to be important social institutions for their local audiences into the late 1960s.<sup>8</sup> Second, Tennessee's contribution to cinema history is significant because the Crescent network controlled most of the state's rural theaters and all but one of Nashville's six uptown theaters, limiting the large national and studio chains to approximately thirty theaters in the larger cities, like Chattanooga, Jackson, Memphis, and Knoxville, where Crescent did not operate.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Crescent established its monopoly over the Tennessee market by the late 1920s, and in 1930, it was the largest independent circuit in the country not owned by one of the five major Hollywood exhibitors, known collectively as the "Big Five."<sup>10</sup> The chain used its monopoly status to good advantage throughout the decade and developed tactics similar to those of the industry leaders when competing with independent exhibitors and forced the hands of national distributors for generous film contracts. These activities ultimately drew the attention of the Department of Justice's antitrust lawyers. Crescent's 1944 Supreme Court case played an important role in developing the legal background for the 1948 *Paramount* decision, a case that is described as central in

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<sup>8</sup> Waller, *Main Street Amusements*; Waller, "Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater"; Allen, "Getting to Going to the Show"; Allen, "Going to the Show."

<sup>9</sup> All Nashville, TN, reports (Crescent), William Waller Collection; Jack Alicoate, ed., "Theater Circuits In the United States and Canada Operating Four or More Houses," in *The 1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, N.J.: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1945), 947–992.

<sup>10</sup> "Warners Reported after Largest Indie Circuit," *The Film Daily*, June 15, 1930, 1.



shaping cinema history for the following thirty years.<sup>11</sup> Thus, to fully understand moviegoing in the Southeast, CAC's contribution must be examined.

Though research regarding Crescent's network of theaters is a part of film studies, exhibitor and moviegoing histories do not fit perfectly into the field's research model – looking at and theorizing cinema. Instead, this research fits within the “historical turn” that has occurred in film studies in the last twenty years.<sup>12</sup> Better yet, it fits most comfortably among the works of new film historians, film exhibitor historians, and cinema studies historians such as Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Robert C. Allen, Gregory Waller, and Douglas Gomery who focus on local theatergoing.<sup>13</sup> These scholars hail from diverse academic backgrounds such as American Studies, film studies, and communication and address topics such as segregation, geographical location, architecture, corporate intrusions and standardizations in small towns, and the impacts of monopolization. Richard Abel wrote in the *Cinema Journal*'s 2004 special issue

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<sup>11</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944); and *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 131 (1948).

<sup>12</sup> Sumiko Higashi, “In Focus: Film History, or a Baedeker Guide to the Historical Turn,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (October 1, 2004): 94–100; Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*; Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1996); Allen, “Relocating American Film History”; Richard Maltby, Melvyn Stokes, and Robert C. Allen, eds., *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of the Cinema*, Exeter Studies in Film History (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Waller, *Main Street Amusements*; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*.

dedicated to the “historical turn” of film studies that the work of “Allen and his supporters...generally succeeds as social or cultural history more than cinema history.”<sup>14</sup>

Allen’s work on early twentieth-century cinema in North Carolina and Gomery’s research on the development of theater chains and exhibition provide research models applicable to a study of the Crescent network. In focusing on the social and physical experience of theatergoing, Allen’s model emphasizes geography, building design features, and racialized spaces. Each of these contributes to the standardized experience of attending a theater owned by a chain. These social and cultural trends identified by scholars such as Allen and Gomery are crucial for preservationists to understand and incorporate into their interpretation and preservation planning when working with historic chain theaters because the larger contexts are often forgotten at the local level.

Robert Sklar, in his *Movie-Made America* (1975, 1994), developed the historiographical background Allen and Gomery built upon.<sup>15</sup> Sklar was one of the first film historians to ask historical questions of Hollywood and the products it produced. Though he attempted to establish the social, cultural, and economic influences that surrounded the text of a film, his treatment of the audience, exhibitors, and local experiences fell short.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Abel, “History Can Work for You, You Know How to Use It,” *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (October 1, 2004): 108.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974, 1994).

Building on Sklar's work, Gomery and Allen published *Film History: Theory and Practice* (1985).<sup>16</sup> At the time, as the authors noted, few other film historians attempted to focus their study of cinema within historical contexts. This book provided students of film history with brief case studies in various aspects of the industry, from economics to local moviegoing, and instruction regarding how to conduct film research. Since then, both have published a daunting list of books and articles as well as led the charge for further research in "new cinema studies." Other prominent authors include Fuller-Seeley, Richard Maltby, Waller, Richard Abel, and Tino Balio.<sup>17</sup>

Allen pioneered the study of small-town moviegoing and exhibition sites. In a brief case study, he compared big city (New York) and small-town theaters (Durham, North Carolina) and found that while the big city example mirrored those in other large cities, smaller southern town theaters were dramatically different. This difference illustrated the need for research specific to small-town southern theaters.<sup>18</sup> Fuller-Seeley, like Allen, noted the impact of demographics, class structure, and culture on making

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Clyde Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*; Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*; Richard Maltby, Daniel Biltereyst, and Philippe Meers, eds., *Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Maltby, Stokes, and Allen, *Going to the Movies*; Waller, *Main Street Amusements*; Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002); Abel, "History Can Work for You"; Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*, vol. 5, *History of the American Cinema* (New York: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Allen and Gomery, *Film History*, 202–207.

moviegoing in these places distinct. Her first work focused on early moviegoing culture in small towns. With *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (1996), she established herself as one of the first to specifically address the small-town moviegoing in a book-length treatment.<sup>19</sup> Fuller-Seeley's second book to deal with exhibition history, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (2003), is a collection of case studies that question the validity of the "modernity thesis" in understanding movie theater development in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> She and a majority of the book's twelve contributors contribute greatly to discrediting generalizations made about early moviegoing and illustrate the value of local or regional moviegoing histories.

A critical aspect to this research is that the Crescent network represents a regional microcosm of the national film industry. Gomery, the expert on the industry's corporate and economic history, details the national industry and its impact on the social experience in numerous books, but *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (1992) is his seminal work; it built on his previously published journal articles.<sup>21</sup> As Gomery illustrates, the film industry behaved as did any large industry: mechanisms that maximized profits, limited access for newcomers, and only a few controlled all aspects of production, distribution, and exhibition. By also looking at sites of exhibition

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<sup>19</sup> Fuller, *At the Picture Show*.

<sup>20</sup> Fuller-Seeley, *Hollywood in the Neighborhood*.

<sup>21</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*; Douglas Gomery, "The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy," *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2, Economic and Technological History (1979): 26–40.

and their operations, Gomery explores the point at which film reaches its audience. These sociocultural aspects of the industry, he argues, cannot be separated from the interconnectedness of business, exhibition, and technology that made movie theaters what they were.

The national film industry was organized around maximizing profits at exhibition sites. To do this, the industry functioned on the studio system. Gomery defines the studio system as an industry-wide operational practice that vertically integrated the movie industry. Within this structure, there were the majors and minors, affiliated exhibitors, and independent exhibitors. The five majors, also known as the Big Five, controlled their studios, the distribution system, and three quarters of all first-run theaters (which were the most profitable but accounted for less than a fifth of all theaters). These companies – Twentieth Century-Fox, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), Paramount, Warner Bros., and Lowe’s Inc. (MGM) – also made a majority of most profitable, class-A, or first-run, films. Three minors, often referred to as the Little Three, produced and/or distributed the less profitable class-B films needed to fill subsequent-run theaters’ bills. These studios – Columbia, United Artists, and Universal – were forced to work with the Big Five to promote and distribute their films for exhibition. All other production, distribution, and exhibition companies either made significantly less profit or went out of business.

The studio system mass-produced movies in a factory system. This production and distribution system relied on effective exhibition. The most profitable theaters were those owned by the Big Five in large cities; they were the affiliated theaters. All other exhibitors were independent theater owners. Large independent circuits like Crescent

enjoyed privileged status through regional monopolies. Crescent, when negotiating film contracts with national distributors, could and did demand preferential treatment over competing smaller independents that operated between one and five theaters. If distributors did not comply, the monopoly threatened to stop showing a distributor's product in "closed towns," towns where the Crescent network operated the only theater.<sup>22</sup>

Frequently small independents were forced to sell out completely, sell partial interests, or close if circuits like Crescent desired entry into a market. When a small independent theater owner sold a portion of its interest to Crescent, the former's buying power was combined with Crescent's when making film contracts. This was desirable because the Big Five's distributors always gave preference to Crescent and its associated theaters when making contracts for the year's film products throughout the region. Though officially unaffiliated with the Big Five, preferential contracts allowed these large independent exhibitors to operate lucrative circuits. The tactics – later described as "warfare" against locally owned theaters – used by the regional chain to control competition mimicked those of the Big Five.<sup>23</sup>

These tactics are described in Michael Conant's *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis* (1960), the first in-depth examination into the

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<sup>22</sup> Of the 78 towns *Crescent* defendants operated in, exhibitors only faced competition in five. *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944); Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 49–51, 74; *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 US 131 (1948).

<sup>23</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

antitrust Supreme Court cases of the 1940s.<sup>24</sup> All subsequent examinations and references to antitrust and the economics of the film industry refer to the Conant study. Conant examined the court records for the *Paramount* decision and those of previous cases that established legal precedents. The *Crescent* decision of 1944 was one of those legal precedents. Conant later updated his examination in 1981 with a focus on how the *Paramount* decrees had impacted the industry.<sup>25</sup>

As the work of Allen, Gomery, and Fuller-Seeley illustrate, what is true about moviegoing in a small Midwestern town may or may not be true for a similar small town in Tennessee. It is for this reason, moviegoing historians frequently call for research into new locales hoping that trends can be further established or unique instances explored. To conduct research on local cinema, the use of sources outside the purview of typical cinema archives is required. Allen and Gomery recognize relevant sources in maps, advertisements, newspapers, and photographs.<sup>26</sup> These are all available to study the Crescent network and the experiences of those who attended this network's theaters. Film and architecture industry journals are also valuable sources. Additionally, two extensive manuscript collections directly pertain to the Crescent Amusement Company and its subsidiaries. The Tennessee State Library and Archives holds The William Waller

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<sup>24</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Conant, "Antitrust Today: The Paramount Decrees Reconsidered" (1981), in Balio, *The American Film Industry*, 537–573.

<sup>26</sup> Abel, "History Can Work for You," 109; Allen and Gomery, *Film History*; Allen, "Getting to Going to the Show," 266–267.

Collection and the Crescent Amusement Company Minute Books (1911-1958). Though created for different purposes, both collections trace the network's history.<sup>27</sup>

The William Waller Collection contains the files of the Nashville lawyer who represented the Crescent network throughout its antitrust litigation. Of the twelve boxes, nine specifically follow the proceedings of the *United States v. Crescent Amusement Company et al.* (1944), while the others deal more widely with general company operations. These include charters, bylaws, taxes, and stock.<sup>28</sup> Kermit C. Stengel, Rockwood's president and an important stockholder in numerous Crescent subsidiaries, donated the company's four volumes of minutes. These books document the monthly developments of the CAC. The scope is limited to CAC and does not detail the development of its subsidiaries. Examined together, the collections give dates of new theater acquisitions and construction, document the rapid growth and spread of the entire network, and show how the company dealt with its antitrust lawsuit internally.

Industry journals and magazines like the *Film Daily Year Book*, *Box Office*, *The Motion Picture Herald*, and the *Theatre Catalog* provide information about industry trends and developments, the context within which the Crescent network is best understood. The *Film Daily* and *Box Office* frequently covered the Justice Department's trust-busting efforts and the numerous cases working their way through the legal system.

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<sup>27</sup> William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee; and Crescent Amusement Company Minute Books, Nashville, 1911-1958, Tennessee State Library and Archive.

<sup>28</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al.*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).



In contrast, the annually published *Theatre Catalog* addressed issues specific to the operation, management, and the design of theaters.

Both TSLA collections and the *Film Daily* include quantifiable information.<sup>29</sup> A folder in the William Waller Collection contains 137 theater-specific histories written in late 1939. These histories detail the seating capacity, managers, ticket prices for both “white” and “colored” moviegoers, and whether the theater was acquired or built new. Often each history has a specific purchase price and date of acquisition but frequently this is either left out or is an estimate. When cross-referenced with local newspapers, more details can be teased out of the chain’s history. Together, these sources can help historians paint a complex and detailed portrait of moviegoing within the Crescent network and throughout the Southeast.

For example, Rockwood’s report for the Court Theatre in Huntingdon, Tennessee, provides a business and management history of the theater, but it does not provide specific information about renovations or the town’s excitement. Instead, the report provides the dates needed to locate relevant newspaper articles. Between 1937 and 1940, Huntington newspapers document the type of sound equipment, seats, wall treatment, and air conditioning units installed over these years. In addition, the newspaper articles provide personal details about the architects, contractors, and managers associated with the Court Theatre, as well as local perceptions of corporate intrusion and a projection of the company’s image through press releases. Frequently these articles include

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<sup>29</sup> *The 1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures* (New York: Wid’s Films and Film Folks, Inc., 1945).

photographs and relate the importance of each new theater to its downtown business district. The Huntington example is reflective of nearly all newspapers and their coverage of the town's new or remodeled theater. Taken together, these sources build a more complete history of a theater.

Without the use of spreadsheets and mapping software to aid in analysis, this wealth of information easily becomes overwhelming. Using Google Earth to geographically visualize the chain's development and spreadsheets to sort the data, geographical and quantitative analyses can provide insights into the network's development. See Appendix A for information on accessing these two datasets.<sup>30</sup>

In the fall of 2011, the city of McKenzie contacted the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University asking for assistance with nominating the Park Theatre to the National Register of Historic Places. A nomination was written, but because the Park Theatre has limited architectural integrity as determined by Tennessee's State Review Board and State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the state charged the Center for Historic Preservation with digging deeper to into the building's social and cultural significance in McKenzie. As a result of this charge, the Park Theatre's association with the *Crescent* case came to light.

Despite architectural integrity issues, the historic Park Theatre building remains an important preservation opportunity for the small town. McKenzie's preservation project is only one of many that happen to be focused on the small-town theaters

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<sup>30</sup> The datasets are currently available for download but as this project develops further, their status may change.

previously owned by the Crescent network. As these projects move forward, a challenge for preservationists is the limited literature treating this resource type. If scholars discuss theater preservation at all, they typically limit themselves to urban theaters with large economic and population bases or exhibit a bias towards picture palaces (a distinctly different architectural type), leaving rural preservationists without recommendations relevant to their communities.<sup>31</sup>

In *Great American Movie Theaters* (1987), one of the earliest theater architectural history and preservation books, David Naylor, an architectural historian, notes that since the early 1970s, individuals and groups have saved historic theaters to reopen as performing art centers. His book focuses on the first-run theaters of big cities, primarily built before the Depression. It is likely his 1930 cutoff is due to the “50 year rule,” which would have biased him against those built in the mid-1930s and ruled out those built in the 1940s. What is not explicable is his disregard for small-town theaters. He notes that many a small town was home to at least one, if not two or three, movie theaters. Naylor recognizes a slow trend, begun in the 1970s and 1980s, toward preservation of old palaces. Architectural heritage is one motivation but he also notes that the economic

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<sup>31</sup> David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, First Edition (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1987); Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Robert Stroddard, *Preservation of Concert Halls, Opera Houses and Movie Palaces*, Information Sheet (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1981); John Ashby Wilburn, “Showstoppers,” *Historic Preservation* (April 1983), 26–33; Grey Hautaluoma and Mary Margaret Schoefeld, *Curtain Up: New Life for Historic Theaters*, Information Series No. 72 (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1993); Kennedy Smith, “Rescuing and Rehabilitating Historic Main Street Theaters,” *MainStreet News* 232 (September 2006): 2–11.

value of an already existing performance venue is high since it is less expensive than building new. He concedes the importance of balancing the need to maintain the theater's architectural integrity with the need to develop a preservation plan that is economically feasible.<sup>32</sup>

The story begins with an introduction to CAC along with a close examination of Rockwood's entry into the West Tennessee market. This case study illustrates that CAC was a microcosm of the national industry, an argument further proven by the chain's involvement in antitrust litigation in the 1930s and 1940s. Guiding research questions for the second chapter include: How did company grow from a few Nashville theaters to monopolizing the Southeast, particularly Tennessee? Why does this growth reflect the development of national chains? Why did the chain develop the way it did? How does the *Crescent* decision impact subsequent antitrust cases brought against the film industry? How did automobile or train transportation impact the chain's development? And finally, why did Crescent and affiliated amusement companies locate most of their theaters in small towns? The Park Theatre in McKenzie provides an ideal case study with which to answer these questions.

The third chapter illustrates CAC's efforts to standardize moviegoing in rural Tennessee through management techniques as well the tension between the Big Five's standardizations and local management. It also explores how the moviegoing was an experience that fostered localized memories. The fourth chapter addresses the way in which architecture likewise created standardized experiences. The built environment

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<sup>32</sup> Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, 11, 27, 31–33.

created by Crescent-associated theaters in Tennessee standardized the moviegoing experience in terms of location, modernization, and segregation. Newspapers, photographs, and interviews illustrate each theater's important role within their community. Research questions guiding chapters three and four include: How and why did the Crescent Amusement Company standardize and modernize the architecture of its movie theaters? How do small-town moviegoers remember their local theater and are memories similar to those in other towns? And, how do local newspapers, Sanborn fire insurance maps, and interviews reflect this standardization?

The final chapter examines a theater preservation project in McKenzie and its role in the town's downtown revitalization. By analyzing this West Tennessee case study, the chapter assesses the impact of preservation practice at the theater in McKenzie and how it is related to national trends in movie theater preservation. The research explores aspects of theater preservation including: the economics of restoration, renovation, and rehabilitation; the role of theaters in downtown revitalization projects and within the context of the National Trust's Main Street Program; theaters' ability to unite a diverse group of supporters, from local preservationists to city planners and developers; and the material and discursive preservation of segregated architecture in these pre-Civil Rights buildings. Guiding questions for the final chapter include: How do preservationists work with small towns with limited funds to restore their historic theater? Why are historic movie theaters ideal cornerstone projects to initiate downtown revitalization? How do preservationists and theater enthusiasts address corporate ownership?

## CHAPTER 2: CRESCENT AMUSEMENT COMPANY, A MICROCOSM OF THE NATIONAL FILM INDUSTRY IN TENNESSEE

The Crescent network of theaters represents a southern microcosm of the entire American cinema industry.<sup>1</sup> With “marvelous business acumen,” Anthony Sudekum built the Crescent Amusement Company (CAC) from a single small theater in Nashville, Tennessee, to a network of approximately 132 small-town theaters in Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, North Carolina, Alabama, and Mississippi.<sup>2</sup> As president of the chain, Sudekum monopolized and controlled moviegoing in Tennessee and the areas bordering the state line (see fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, CAC drew the ire of Department of Justices for the “coercive” and “warfare” business actions at the end of the 1930s and early 1940s.

The amusement industry followed a model established by other chain-based businesses like car dealerships, department and grocery stores, and gas stations. Chain

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<sup>1</sup> Of the 93 cities and town Crescent operated in, 86 had a population below 10,000. Here, the company served 52.2% of their audience, managed 77.7% of their theaters, and maintained 69.9% of their 74,476 seats. All Crescent reports for Nashville theaters, William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, box 12, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, (hereafter cited as William Waller Collection).

<sup>2</sup> “History of Muscle Shoals Theatres Recounted; Movie Advances Depicted: Picture House Is Modernized for Florence,” *Florence (AL) Times*, November 30, 1936, 8.

<sup>3</sup> “Tony Sudekum, of Nashville, Is South’s Theatre Pioneer: Had His First Show in 1907; Now Heads Many Enterprises in Entertainment Field,” *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941; Will Thomas Hale and Dixon L. Merritt, *A History of Tennessee and Tennesseans: The Leaders and Representative Men in Commerce, Industry and Modern Activities*, vol. 5 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1913), 1492.

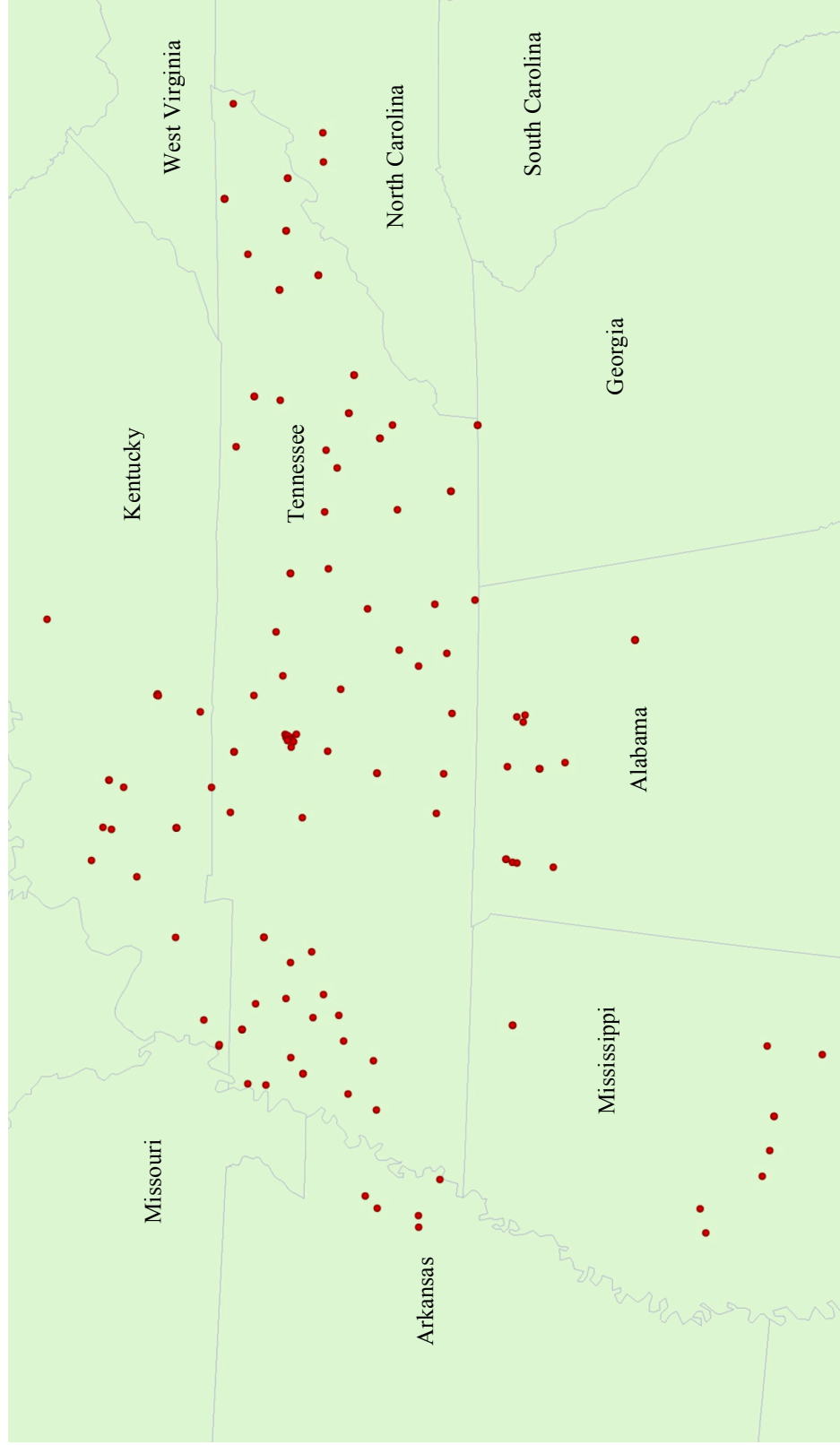


Figure 1. Crescent Amusement Company's theaters operating in 1939. *Sources:* William Waller Collection and newspapers from the Muscle Shoals District in Alabama, these articles are cited in the bibliography. Map created using Google Earth.

stores provided more products at prices lower than local businesses. Sudekum applied this business model to his chain in the hopes of increasing profitability, gaining a monopoly on the Southeastern market by buying out or driving off the owners of local theaters. In addition to higher quality of film products, Crescent's theaters provided a environment superior to that of many of the locally owned theaters because of their modern architecture, air-conditioning, sound equipment, and cushioned seats. Frequently, the exhibitor chain followed grocery chains, which the cinemas were imitating, into small towns. For example, McKenzie already had a Kroger and U-Tote-Ems as well as Ford and "Chevolet [sic]" car dealerships. Like chain stores, exhibitor chains managed their expanding networks from centralized headquarters. The Crescent circuit was no different.

As the regional chain grew, it needed a centralized space in which to manage its sprawling assets. In 1927, Crescent began planning for an office at Sixth and Church Streets in downtown Nashville, Tennessee's capital.<sup>4</sup> The chain intended to house "the paint shops, booking offices, in fact, all departments of the Crescent company ... in the new offices." In a contemporary newspaper, the company's officers explain that the larger space "will facilitate the handling of the business and booking [needs] of the steadily growing organization."<sup>5</sup> A centralized office was intended to allow the emerging

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<sup>4</sup> Crescent would later tear down the Capitol Theatre to build the Sudekum Building and Tennessee Theatre at the prominent downtown intersection.

<sup>5</sup> "Crescent Amusement Company Moves to Its New Offices," *Florence (AL) Times-News*, March 2, 1927, 4.



regional power to consolidate operations and economically manage the expanding company.<sup>6</sup>

As Douglas Gomery has argued, the development of theater chains, particularly in urban centers, began “furiously,” trying to catch up to department store chains in the early 1920s.<sup>7</sup> At the time, the era was called the “chain store age” and small towns were key to the success of chains. For example half of J. C. Penny’s stores operated in towns of 5,000 or less people.<sup>8</sup> National theater chains, also known as the Big Five, developed as a result. At the beginning of the decade, the Big Five, which included Warner Bros., Loew’s/MGM, Fox, RKO, and Publix/Paramount, operated regional chains. By the middle of the decade, the Big Five were able to control the entire industry. Part of their power stemmed from being vertically integrated companies, which meant they produced films in Hollywood, distributed their product to independent, unaffiliated, and affiliated theaters throughout the nation, and owned a network of prime exhibition sites in urban centers.

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<sup>6</sup> “Warners Reported after Largest Indie Circuit,” *The Film Daily*, June 15, 1930, 12; “Warners Get 61 Crescent Theaters, Deal for Appel Circuit of 12 Houses Also Confirmed,” *The Film Daily*, June 18, 1930, 1, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Gomery, “The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy,” *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2, Economic and Technological History (1979): 38; Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal*, Center Books on American Places (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 24–29; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History Of Movie Presentation In The United States*, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 33–36.

<sup>8</sup> Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, 25, 26.

Unlike the Big Five in the early 1920s, CAC operated as a regional business from its inception. The company never outgrew its regionalism because it remained a large independent exhibitor, also known as an unaffiliated company, and was not purchased by one of the Big Five. The Crescent chain survived the Big Five's national consolidation push made in the early 1920s because the Southeast represented such a small percent of national film rentals. Because the region was characterized by predominantly rural population, it offered little promise for immediate growth. For example, in 1922 and 1923, Tennessee and Kentucky represented only 1% to 4% of the several distribution companies' business.<sup>9</sup> While both states had large urban centers like Memphis, Nashville, Chattanooga, Knoxville, Louisville, and Lexington, rural towns like McKenzie, Tennessee and Guthrie, Kentucky, were where most of the Crescent network's customers lived. Though theaters in these small towns outnumbered their urban counterparts, they only accounted for 25% of ticket receipts and were not considered to be of prime importance for members of the Big Five.<sup>10</sup> Instead, these less lucrative, but still profitable markets were left for large independent exhibitors until the end of the decade.

By 1927 and 1928, CAC had a monopoly over the Tennessee market and in 1930, it was the largest independent circuit remaining in the country.<sup>11</sup> Leading up to 1930, the

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<sup>9</sup> J. C. Barnstyn, "American and Foreign Distribution Percentages" in Joseph Dannenberg and John W. Alicoate, eds., *Film Year Book: 1922-1923* (New York: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1923), 173. This percentage is on par with other hinterland markets.

<sup>10</sup> See table 2 in Appendix D for statistics based on Crescent's theaters operating in 1939.

<sup>11</sup> "Warners Reported after Largest Indie Circuit," 12.

Big Five aggressively acquired the largest theaters – 1,000 seats or more – throughout the country because of their profitability, and these purchases allowed Hollywood to manipulate moviegoing throughout the nation.<sup>12</sup> This second consolidation and national buyout trend coincided with the transition from vaudeville and silent movies to talkies. By 1929 and 1930, three of the Big Five – Warner Bros., RKO, and Paramount/Publix – began to target the Nashville market, a city with a population over 100,000. To acquire and control the capital city, the affiliated theater chains had to strike a merger with Crescent, which owned seven of the city’s eight theaters. Two of Crescent’s Nashville theaters sat over a 1,000 moviegoers. Warner ultimately secured a contract for Crescent’s 61 theaters and announced plans to modernize the theaters and equip them with sound.<sup>13</sup> When *The Film Daily*, an industry newspaper dedicated to needs of exhibitors, announced the 1930 Crescent-Warner merger, the publishers also noted Warner’s other acquisitions.

Early in 1931, as the Great Depression took hold, the Crescent-Warner merger fell apart; the two companies agreed to give Warner a four-year option to purchase Crescent

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<sup>12</sup> Because the film industry made all of its money at exhibition sites, the Big Five manipulated access to the most profitable the film product – which they produced – in ways that funneled 45% of the total revenue through 17% of the nation’s theaters—which they owned. Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis*, Bureau of Business and Economic Research (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 49–51, 74; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59–60.

<sup>13</sup> “Warners Reported after Largest Indie Circuit,” 1, 12; “Warners Get 61 Crescent Theaters,” 1, 6; “One of Big Circuits to Get Crescent Houses in South,” *The Film Daily*, June 8, 1930, 1; Nashville reports (Crescent), William Waller Collection.

for \$1,000,000 if economic conditions improved.<sup>14</sup> As the financial downturn continued, Warner began to jettison its holding and by the mid-1930s, it controlled or leased 400 theaters, a 70% decrease from 1929.<sup>15</sup> After Warner's option expired in January 1935, it appears that affiliated companies left Crescent to grow and gain a regional monopoly. The two exceptions to this are the Paramount Theatre and the Loew's Vendome in Nashville. Crescent subleased and managed the Paramount, while Loew's is noted as the company's only Nashville competition in 1939.<sup>16</sup> In 1934, while Warner and other Big Five exhibitors were still mired in debt, Crescent began growing exponentially.

The Big Five's failure to absorb CAC and its network of theaters into one of their national circuits meant that as the decade progressed, the chain's control over the region strengthened. In 1930, the Crescent circuit operated in 22 cities and towns in three states. By 1934, this had grown to 33, and by 1939 the chain operated in 78 cities and towns across six states. In these 78 markets, Crescent-associated theaters only faced competition in six.<sup>17</sup> As a monopoly, the Crescent network could demand privileged film contracts in places where it faced competition by threatening to stop purchasing a studio's film for places without competition.

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<sup>14</sup> "Warners Extend Option on Crescent Circuit," *The Film Daily*, January 27, 1933, 1–2.

<sup>15</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 59–66.

<sup>16</sup> All Crescent reports for Nashville theaters, William Waller Collection.

<sup>17</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection; *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

One reason the Crescent network thrived during the Great Depression is because, like the Big Five and Little Three, the regional chain enjoyed temporary but legal exemption from anti-trust legislation under FDR's National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA), passed in 1933. The act was intended to allow the nation's biggest industries to operate without federal interference or regulation in hopes that the exemptions would create jobs and lead to economic recovery. Faced with receivership and collapsing profits, the Big Five accepted the NRA's rules of "fair competition" in exchange for exemption from anti-trust legislation. Despite the so-called "fair competition" for independent exhibitors, the film industry codified the extremely profitable business structure of the 1920s. The film industry's NRA codes were designed such that only the Big Five and Little Three benefited from FDR's attempt at economic recovery. While the codes all but annihilated small independent exhibitors' profits, the large independent exhibitors like the Crescent network were allowed to continue making profits.<sup>18</sup>

Crescent's regional monopoly, large size, and ownership of mostly small-town theaters and a few large first-run theaters protected the network from these otherwise damaging codes for independent and unaffiliated exhibitors. As Michael Conant noted, the Big Five

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<sup>18</sup> Douglas Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business," in *The American Film Industry*, ed. Tino Balio, rev. ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 226–227; Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939*, Cinema and Society (New York: Routledge, 1996), chap. The Blue Eagle: March 1933 to November 1936; Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 32.

only needed to own the largest first- and second-run theaters to exercise its monopolistic control over profits.<sup>19</sup>

In 1935, after the Supreme Court ruled the NRA unconstitutional and the act failed to achieve the President's goal of economic recovery, FDR slowly began his trust-busting efforts. The film industry's trade practices and vertical integration made it a prime target. Though federal leniency disappeared by 1937 and 1938, the Department of Justice could not effectively curb the monopolistic practices until 1948, when the Supreme Court decided the *United States v. Paramount Pictures* case.<sup>20</sup>

Few checks to the Big Five's power existed prior to the United States Supreme Court's *Paramount* decision. The *Paramount* case involved five industry majors and three industry minors as defendants. The Big Five, were vertically integrated while the Little Three only distributed and produced films. Findings from the case show that the entire industry was set up to make the most profit for the defendants by placing independent and unaffiliated exhibitors at a disadvantage. For the exhibitors in the Crescent circuit, interactions with the industry's leaders occurred while negotiating film contracts with the region's several distribution and exchange centers, which were owned by either the Big Five or Little Three.

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<sup>19</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business," 226–227; Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis*, chap. The Blue Eagle: March 1933 to November 1936; Balio, *Grand Design*, 5:18–21, 66–67; Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 32.

After filing the *Paramount* case in 1938, the Department of Justice targeted the nation's three largest independent exhibitor chains, one of which was Crescent.<sup>21</sup> Though filed a year later, the Supreme Court of the United States decided these three cases before deciding the *Paramount* case, ultimately providing the legal background for the case against the industry's national leaders.<sup>22</sup> Conant summarized the independent exhibitors' cases this way:

The bargaining power gained by owning some complete local theater monopolies (closed towns) was used to force distributors to grant the circuits preferential access to films in towns where there were competitive theaters.<sup>23</sup>

In each of the cases, the Court determined that defendant-exhibitors' monopolistic use of their bargaining power was unconstitutional and violated antitrust legislation.

For small independent exhibitors, the most damaging tactics used by industry leaders and large independent exhibitors were the franchise agreements and a system of runs, zones, and clearances. Contracts between an exhibitor and the numerous distributors determined the extent of these tactics and helped circuit exhibitors satisfy their theaters' demand for films. In the *Crescent* case, the Court determined that the defendants-exhibitors used these tactics to eliminate competition.

Crescent and its subsidiaries used franchise agreements to force their competition out of business or to sell out. National distributors worked out franchise agreements with

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<sup>21</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944); *United States v. Griffith*, 334 US 100 (1948); *Schine Chain Theatres, Inc. v. United States*, 334 US 110 (1948).

<sup>22</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 88–94.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

independent exhibitors, like those in the Crescent network, to guarantee that a distributor supplied only the exhibitor under contract with its studio's films. These agreements lasted at least one film season but frequently spanned several years. For example, if a Rockwood theater had a franchise agreement with the Paramount distributor, the distributor could not license its products to any other exhibitors within a specified competition zone. Though Paramount had to deal exclusively with the Rockwood theater, the theater could license films and sign additional franchise agreements with other distributors. License agreements gave exhibitors permission to show a studio's copyrighted film.<sup>24</sup> Franchise agreements between the industry's leaders and members of the Crescent circuit effectively eliminated all competition because these distributors supplied the most profitable class-A feature films and class-B films.

The system of preferential runs, clearances, and zones further crippled small independent exhibitors as they competed with the Crescent network. When Hollywood studios released a film, each exhibitor's contract determined the theater's position in the film's "run" and the length of its stay at the theater. A film's run began at the most profitable theaters and progressively traveled to the least profitable. The earlier in a film's run a theater was positioned, the more money an exhibitor stood to make because of film's perishability. After the film completed its run at a theater, the exhibitor's contract stipulated how long competing theaters in a specific "zone" had to wait before they could show it. The length of wait within a zone was the "clearance." The longer the clearance,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 64; Victor J. Tremblay and Carol Horton Tremblay, eds., *Industry and Firm Studies*, 4th ed. (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2007), 186–187.



the more likely audience members were to attend earlier runs, even if it required traveling to the next town.<sup>25</sup> Without licensing privileges or access to films when audiences wanted to see them, Crescent's competitors could not attract enough patrons and quickly went out of business or sold out to the monopoly.

Crescent also used its bargaining power to force the *Paramount* defendant-distributors to give the regional monopoly privileged buying options – like franchise agreements or preferential runs, zones, and clearances – in towns where they had competition. The regional circuit had enough “closed towns,” markets where the chain operated the sole theater, to do this. Conant, in discussing local monopolies, suggests that in 67% of towns, or 238 of the 355, with two or more theaters and a population below 25,000, the Big Five blocked independents and unaffiliated theaters from the market.<sup>26</sup> Of the remaining 117 towns that meet this qualification, Crescent and its affiliates held the monopoly in 21%.<sup>27</sup> The theaters discussed here received the most lucrative films because of their earlier run positions compared to competing theaters, making them the most profitable exhibition sites in their markets. Historian Thomas Schatz noted that circuits like Crescent were a “privileged class” with the buying power to force cooperation from the industry's leaders. As a monopolistic force, Crescent and its

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<sup>25</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 67. Also see; Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*.

<sup>26</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection.

network eventually became a target of United States Justice Department for antitrust violations.<sup>28</sup>

This violation led to a federal antitrust lawsuit filed in 1939 and argued in the United States Supreme Court in 1944.<sup>29</sup> The case, *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, indicted seven amusement companies that operated in five southern states and specialized in small-town movie theaters for monopolistic activities.<sup>30</sup> CAC and six of its fourteen subsidiaries and affiliates were defendants in the *Crescent* case. The remaining eight companies, who only had one to three theaters, were purchased by members of the Crescent network in order to eliminate competition and further grow the circuit's collective buying power. As the circuit bought out competition and merged it into the network, the new Crescent-affiliated exhibitors relinquished 50% or more stock to one of the defendants in return for protection against competition.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, Justice William

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<sup>28</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944); Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s*, vol. 6, 1st ed., History of the American Cinema (New York: Charles Scribners & Sons, 1997), 17–18; Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 64, 88–90.

<sup>29</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> These seven companies include: Crescent Amusement Co.; Cumberland Amusement Co.; Lyric Amusement Co., Inc.; Cherokee Amusements, Inc.; Kentucky Amusement Co., Inc.; Muscle Shoals Theaters; and Rockwood Amusement Co. They operated in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The Court dismissed Strand Enterprises, Inc. as a defendant despite the fact that it operated much like the defendant-exhibitors in the case.

<sup>31</sup> All Chickasaw, Dickson, Hartselle, Lawrenceburg, Mid-State, Newport, Nu-Strand, and Ruffin reports, William Waller Collection. Though not a part of the previously discussed national consolidations of the early and late 1920s, CAC's goals were similar to the vertically integrated companies: to control the most profitable exhibition sites and consolidate power.

Douglas described the level of officer and stockholder overlap seen in these seven companies like this:

Crescent, the principal exhibitor, owns 50% of the stock of Cumberland and Lyric. The majority of Crescent's stock is owned by defendant Sudekum, by certain of his relatives, and by defendants Stengel and Baulch. Prior to 1937 Crescent owned almost two-thirds of the stock of Muscle Shoals; since that time Muscle Shoals was run as a partnership in which Sudekum's wife had a half-interest. Defendant Stengel, Sudekum's son-in-law, is the record holder of all of Rockwood's stock. Rockwood owns 50% of the stock of Cherokee and Kentucky and of five other theatre corporations. Rockwood was operated as a 'virtual branch' of the Crescent business under the immediate supervision of Stengel. Sudekum is president of Crescent, Cumberland, and Lyric; Stengel is an officer and director of Kentucky and Cherokee. Sudekum was paid \$200 a week by Cherokee 'for his advice and assistance in running the business.'<sup>32</sup>

Justice Douglas noted that Crescent built its monopoly by either merging with or purchasing cooperative exhibitors or prohibiting profitable film contracts to competing exhibitors.

Additionally, after crushing independent exhibitors, Crescent's associated companies frequently required sellers to sign noncompetition agreements. At least eleven of the theaters purchased by the network between 1935 and 1939 included such an agreement. Noncompetition agreements prevented sellers from reentering the town or region's entertainment market for a specified period. Typical contracts lasted five to ten years and varied in scope. Some simply prohibited the seller from operating a theater in a specific town or county. In an extreme example from Union City, Tennessee, the seller was forbidden to conduct business in any of the five surrounding states or "in towns where the Crescent or its associates are now engaged in...business" for a 25-year period.

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<sup>32</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

This latter example eliminated access to the 95 markets Crescent monopolized.<sup>33</sup> The Supreme Court determined that the long terms included in these contracts violated antitrust legislation. In the *Crescent* decision, Justice Douglas quoted the Middle Tennessee District Court's ruling and noted:

Each of these agreements not to compete with Crescent or its affiliates in other towns extended far beyond the protection of the business being sold, and demonstrated a clear intention to monopolize theatre operation wherever they or their affiliates secured a foothold.<sup>34</sup>

The Justice Department's case against Crescent and its subsidiaries had merit, as a Carroll County, a rural West Tennessee county, case study illustrates. A report on the old McKenzie Theatre, prepared in 1939 by Rockwood for the trial, demonstrates the type of coercion described in Justice Douglas' opinion for the Court. By 1934, Crescent had begun using franchise agreements and contracts for its smaller markets that mimicked run, clearance, and zoning contracts for large urban theaters. As previously discussed, Crescent and its network leveraged their buying power in markets where they faced local competition. If Crescent's theaters did not receive preferential film contracts from distributors, the chain threatened to prevent the exhibition of a studio's product in places where Crescent operated the sole theater.<sup>35</sup> The predatory film contracts used in Carroll County and the desperate need to remodel the McKenzie Theatre contributed to

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<sup>33</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection. See especially the reports from Spruce Pine, NC (Cherokee); Benton, KY (Chickasaw); Brownsville, TN, Cleveland, TN, Gadsden, AL, Earlington, KY, Union City, TN (Crescent); Copperhill, TN (Newport); Providence, KY (Rockwood); and Newbern, TN (Ruffin).

<sup>34</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

dissatisfaction on the part of McKenzie's citizens and made them more willing to welcome the Crescent network as a replacement for Moore's theater.

When Rockwood entered the Carroll County market in 1936, it was as a corporate courtesy to a fellow CAC subsidiary, Strand Enterprises, Inc. Though Strand had purchased the Court Theatre from Linnie Carter, a Huntingdon woman, just a few months earlier, it lay outside their geographical region (see fig. 2). Rockwood stepped in to assume the lease and pay Strand's purchasing price.<sup>36</sup> At the time, Huntingdon and McKenzie were the only Carroll County towns large and busy enough to support theaters; they were also rivals.<sup>37</sup> Y. D. Moore had purchased the McKenzie Theatre in April 1930 while Linnie Carter had opened the Court Theatre in Huntingdon on October 9, 1929.<sup>38</sup> Carter operated her theater in a building she owned and Moore leased theater space on ground floor of the Caledonia Masonic Lodge building.

In 1936, L. N. Dunlap, the "Worshipful Master" of the McKenzie Masonic Lodge, wrote to Crescent and Rockwood at the Nashville headquarters. Dunlap indicated

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<sup>36</sup> McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, and Court Theatre (Rockwood) report, Huntingdon, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>37</sup> This statement is based on the fact that no other Carroll County towns have Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, which made maps for substantial cities and towns. Both towns were railroading hubs and served as commercial centers of their communities, which provided enough local traffic to support a locally owned theater in each town.

<sup>38</sup> Moore purchased the business, operating under "Capitol" in the Spring. Sometime between 1930 and 1939, the name changed to McKenzie Theatre but remained in the same location. "Film Boards of Trade Report Additional Theater Changes: Tennessee," *The Film Daily*, April 25, 1930, 13; Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., McKenzie, Tennessee [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1910); Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., McKenzie, Tennessee [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926); Angie Bartholomew, "Court Theatre" National Register nomination (2001), 10.

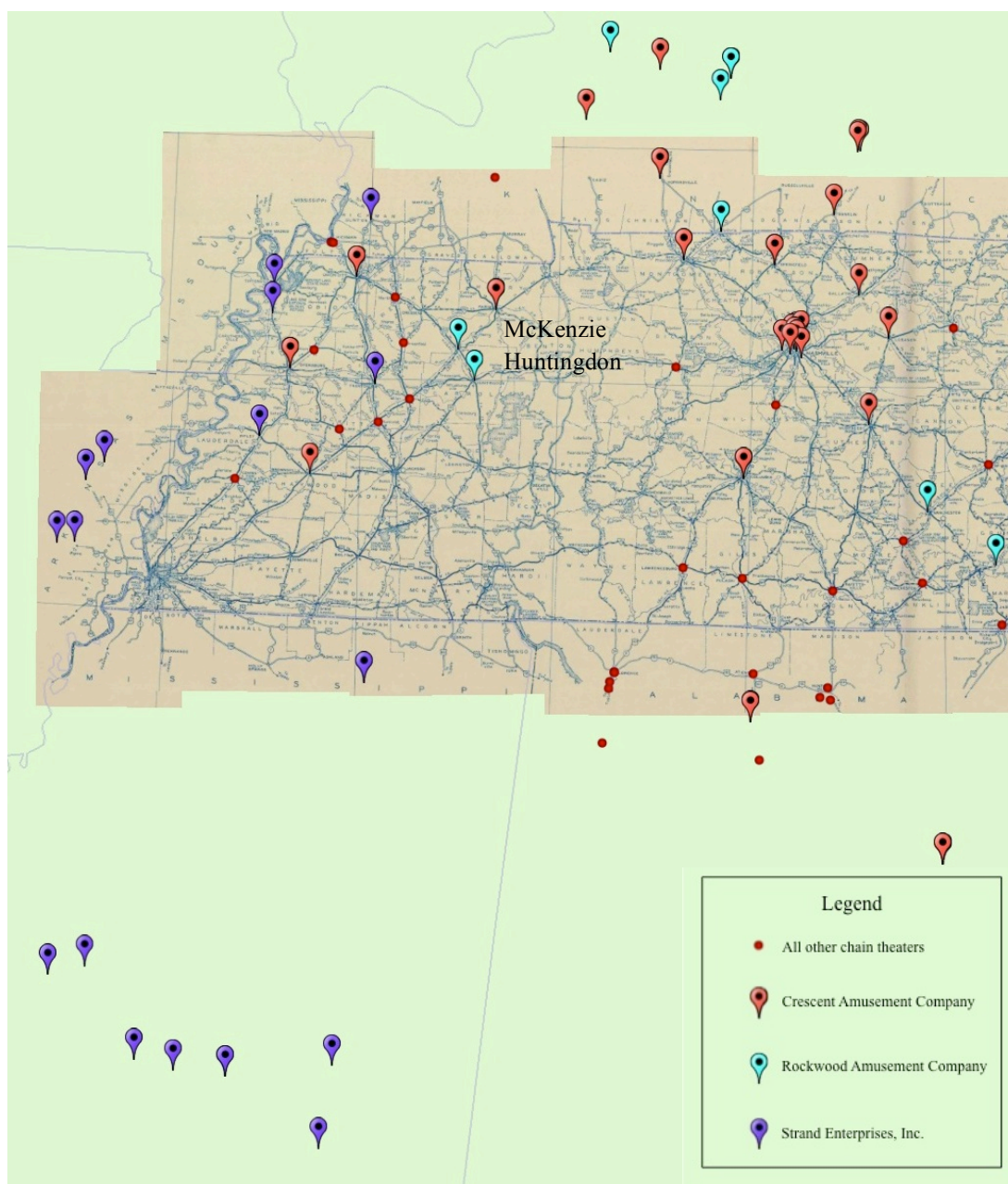


Figure 2. As the map shows, Huntingdon and McKenzie are east of Strand's concentration of theaters. Unlike Strand, Rockwood's theaters did not have a specific geographical dispersion except that they were in small towns – less than 4,300 but typically less than 3,000 – and on good transportation routes. This geographic region is much like Crescent Amusement's, which spanned Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Because Rockwood acted as a virtual branch of Crescent, the subsidiary appears to have owned theaters wherever was necessary but outside the purview of Crescent Amusement, which operated in cities with a population of 3,000 or higher. *Sources:* William Waller Collection and *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944). Map created using Google Earth.

that the Masons were interested in leasing the theater space to Crescent, Rockwood, or any of the circuit's associated amusement companies. When none of the amusement companies expressed interest in the space, the Masonic Lodge decided to auction the building. At that time, Moore contacted Rockwood's president and asked that the company not to purchase the building; he planned to update the theater after he signed a new lease or purchased the building. The company agreed, even though Dunlap and numerous citizens hoped the company would come to McKenzie and open a "nice theatre."<sup>39</sup>

According to the Rockwood report, the company did not open a theater in McKenzie at that time because it had recently purchased the Court Theatre in Huntingdon and "was unfamiliar with the possibilities of that particular section of Tennessee."<sup>40</sup> Such caution was uncommon for Rockwood or amusement companies associated with Crescent who, in the mid- to late 1930s were busy expanding their theater circuits to monopolize the region.<sup>41</sup> While it is not clear why Rockwood indicated it was "unfamiliar" with the market, it is more likely that Rockwood was not interested in purchasing the Masonic Lodge building, was preoccupied with the recently purchased Court Theatre, and was waiting for Moore to go out of business.

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<sup>39</sup> McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection; *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

As independent exhibitors and not part of a chain, the twelve-mile separation between Moore and Carter allowed each to draw sufficient audience and engage in healthy competition. For example, the Crescent network frequently spaced theaters less than fifteen miles apart.<sup>42</sup> Once the Court Theater was back by Rockwood's bargaining power, the McKenzie Theatre could no longer compete on equal footing. In 1937, Rockwood entered into a five-year predatory film contract, which functioned similarly to a franchise agreement, with Paramount for its new theater. Rockwood's contract with Paramount included a predatory clearance over the McKenzie Theatre, prohibiting Moore from showing Paramount movies before, concurrently, or after the film was shown at Huntingdon's Court Theater. As part of Crescent's expansive network, Rockwood held an advantage over local independent exhibitors in negotiating prime contracts.

Though it is unclear how long Huntingdon's clearance over McKenzie was, some clearances lasted as long as sixty days, preventing a distributor's films from showing within a determined region.<sup>43</sup> Such lengthy clearances encouraged the region's moviegoers, including McKenzie residents, to attend the better-supplied theater in Huntingdon. Clearly at a disadvantage, Moore tried negotiating a better contract with

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<sup>42</sup> In 1939, there were at least nineteen instances (meaning at least 38 theaters), whose the closest competition was less than fifteen miles away. This count only includes single-theater towns and does not include the theaters outside the Crescent network or instances where there are multiple theaters in the same town like in Nashville, Union City, or Bowling Green. In contrast, the author's count has at least ten instances (at least 20 theaters) of a theater's closest competition being between fifteen and twenty miles away, nine instances with the closest competition being as far as twenty to 35 miles away, and only four instances with the nearest competition being over 35 miles away.

<sup>43</sup> Palace Theatre (Rockwood) report, Greenville, KY, William Waller Collection.



Paramount but to no avail.<sup>44</sup> At his McKenzie Theatre, Moore struggled to show the films his customers wanted to see. As a former mayor and a board member of Motion Picture Theatre Owners of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Tennessee, Moore held influential roles in the local and business community, but he could not compete with the weight and momentum of the Crescent network.<sup>45</sup>

Between 1936 and 1939, McKenzie citizens grew increasingly dissatisfied with their local theater, according to the Rockwood report. Moore failed to refurbish the theater extensively, though he made “some changes in [the] equipment,” and his customers were traveling to Rockwood’s theater in Huntingdon.<sup>46</sup> Part of this dissatisfaction likely stemmed from Rockwood’s predatory contract with Paramount.

In early 1939, Moore learned that Rockwood decided to lease a building “in the heart of the best business block” in McKenzie. McKenzie was Carroll County’s largest

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<sup>44</sup> McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>45</sup> Clella Mae Carter and Julian Devault, *McKenzie’s History, 1869-1969: Hub of the Tri-counties Carroll, Henry and Weakley*, (1969) 137; Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], (1926); Joe F. Williams interview, December 5, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; McKenzie Banner, Friday, December 6, 1940, page 1; Terry Ramsaye and Ernest A. Rovelstad, eds., *International Motion Picture Almanac: 1937-38* (New York: Quigley Publishing Company, 1938), 1011.

<sup>46</sup> Crescent and its subsidiaries produced reports for each of the 137 theaters associated with the Crescent network while preparing for the 1939 Middle Tennessee Supreme Court case (William Waller Collection, TSLA). The McKenzie report details Rockwood’s presence in Carroll County and how the company came to buyout the McKenzie Theatre. The unknown author also discusses the “intense rivalry” between Carter and Moore. Though this is a biased source, the author notes three times the moviegoers’ dissatisfaction with their theater and the venue’s inferiority. Because of these circumstances, Stengel felt McKenzie would be a profitable market.

city with a population of 1,858 and home to Bethel College, a small Christian school. This was large enough to convince Rockwood that the market could sustain a larger and more modern theater. Moore was in danger of losing his business again. Not only had Rockwood chipped away at his business by limiting the quality of his shows from a distance, the company planned to force him under or to sell out. On April 4, Kermit Stengel of Rockwood offered to purchase Moore's theater for \$9,000. Defeated, Moore accepted the offer. The price Rockwood paid for the McKenzie Theatre was actually a good and fair price compared to other Crescent buyouts. Though prices ranged from simply taking over a lease to \$15,000 for similar situations, the inflated figures are best understood as an attempt to purchase the good will of the seller who was being forced to sellout.<sup>47</sup>

After operating the McKenzie Theatre for two years, Rockwood opened the Park Theatre to much fanfare and extensive coverage in the *McKenzie Banner*, the local newspaper, on July 3, 1941. With construction costs of "well above \$30,000," this 600-seat theater would be "the largest and most modernly equipped in any West Tennessee town of McKenzie's size."<sup>48</sup> The Park Theatre sat 256 more moviegoers than Moore's

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<sup>47</sup> All theater reports in collection, especially McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>48</sup> "McKenzie's New Movie Theater to Open July 3," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, June 27, 1941; "Work on New Movie House Begins Jan. 1: Company President Tells the Banner McKenzie Will Have One of Finest Theatres in West Tennessee," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, December 6, 1940. At the time the theater opened, McKenzie had a population of 1,858 people. See Charles Spurgeon Johnson and Lewis Wade Jones, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties: Listing and Analysis of Socio-Economic Indices of 1104 Southern Counties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

McKenzie Theatre and was similar to theaters throughout the Crescent chain. In 1939, theaters in the Crescent network sat an average of 586 moviegoers (see table 1).<sup>49</sup> Though the size and architecture of the Park Theatre made it a local landmark, the new theater simply brought McKenzie up to the company's standards in size and location.

Rockwood, though a subsidiary of CAC, functioned as a "virtual branch" of the parent company.<sup>50</sup> Representatives from Rockwood and CAC, along with their architectural firm, attended the opening in McKenzie, just as they had other openings across the region.<sup>51</sup> Though the new Park Theater was owned by Rockwood, contemporary accounts incorrectly indicate it was to be managed by CAC. This confusion stems from Rockwood's "virtual branch" status within Crescent, which was, as contemporary newspapers indicated, the region's biggest and best-known theater company.

At the Park Theatre's opening, the *McKenzie Banner* discussed the town's largest and most recent business owners. The paper describes Tony Sudekum, the Crescent network's owner, as "the South's premier entertainment capitalist" and comments that no one "in the industry is better known or better loved by the managers of not only his own

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<sup>49</sup> Towns with a similar population to McKenzie, between 1,000 and 2,000 citizens, sat an average of 553 moviegoers. The national average seating capacity in 1945 was 647 while the average for movie theaters in Tennessee in 1944 was 539; see All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection; Jack Alicoate, ed., *The 1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, N.J.: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1945), 47, 49.

<sup>50</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

<sup>51</sup> "Opens This Week: The 'Park' Is Built of Best Materials and Latest Design," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, July 4, 1941.

group of theatres, but by managers of opposition houses, film exchanges, producers and theatre employees from the operator to the door man.”<sup>52</sup> Though the paper expresses admiration for Sudekum, the United States Supreme Court’s description of his business tactics differs entirely.

As the Carroll County case study shows, Crescent’s predatory and coercive practices were appropriately described as “warfare” in the Supreme Court’s decision.<sup>53</sup> The Court found the Crescent-associated exhibitors to be unreasonably restraining “interstate trade and commerce in motion-picture films and to monopolize the exhibition of films in this area.” Included in the violation was “coercing or attempting to coerce independent operators into selling out to it.”<sup>54</sup> The exhibitor-defendants in the *Crescent* case were ultimately enjoined to divest themselves of stock and interest in the fellow defendant and seek permission from the court before building new theaters.<sup>55</sup> As Conant notes, the Court’s decrees met limited success because they were not fully enforced and exhibitor-defendants retained their eight subsidiaries not indicted in the case.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> “Tony Sudekum, of Nashville, Is South’s Theatre Pioneer: Had His First Show in 1907; Now Heads Many Enterprises in Entertainment Field,” *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941.

<sup>53</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> The exhibitor-defendants in the *Crescent* case included Crescent Amusement Co.; Cumberland Amusement Co.; Lyric Amusement Co., Inc.; Cherokee Amusements, Inc.; Kentucky Amusement Co., Inc.; Muscle Shoals Theaters; and Rockwood Amusement Co.

<sup>56</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 89–90.

The federal lawsuit against Crescent and its subsidiaries was one of the first in a series of national antitrust cases challenging the distribution of films. In 1945, the editor of *The Film Daily* noted, “the year was marked by several other highly important anti-trust developments. The U. S. Supreme Court by a 5-1 division upheld the findings against the Crescent Amusement Co. The sweeping decision went beyond that of the local court.”<sup>57</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al.* decision laid the legal background for the Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Paramount Pictures et al.* (1948), a case seen as critical in the revolutionary changes in the film industry.<sup>58</sup> These cases, in addition to competition from drive-in theaters and the growing popularity of television, contributed to the industry's decline in the next decade.

As southern microcosm of the Big Five's operational practices, the Crescent network also implemented standardizations throughout its 132 theaters. These standardizations, as well as those imposed by the industry's leaders, are discussed in the following chapter. McKenzie's theaters continue to serve as a case study for the circuit's management and business tactics.

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<sup>57</sup> Chester B. Bahn, “1944 News Highlights,” in *1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, ed. Jack Alicoate, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, NJ: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1945), 37.

<sup>58</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 88–90, 107.

### CHAPTER 3: CRESCENT AMUSEMENT COMPANY STANDARDIZATIONS AND MOVIEGOING IN WEST TENNESSEE

Going to a movie in a typical mid-twentieth century Tennessee town was not just a shared experience within the theater. It also was a shared experience on the outside – for what happened in McKenzie was similar to what happened in Union City or Huntingdon or Covington or Dyersburg. As a result of the corporate control exercised by Crescent, standard management, film contracts, advertising, and architectural elements contributed to a regional moviegoing experience. For example, accounts of attending the Park Theatre in McKenzie are very similar to those of the Capitol Theatre in Union City. Moviegoers at both recall similar experiences of theater managers wielding flashlights to keep youngsters in line, the desire to see Saturday’s serial to know how the hero “got out of the fix they were in the week before,” and popcorn boxes. Two young moviegoers, separated by 40 miles, remember children flattening their popcorn boxes to send them sailing towards the screen.<sup>1</sup> Across the Southeast, Crescent’s style of management and the corporate structure established by industry leaders provided the region with a uniquely standard yet local moviegoing experience.

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers: The History of Theatre in Union City* (Union City, TN: Masquerade Theatre, 1997), 49, 57, 63, 88 Nola Hobbs interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; Robbie Story interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; Jennifer Waldrick interview, September 29, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

The standardization of the moviegoing experience resulted from the influence of the Big Five, who controlled or manipulated each aspect of the industry. Their control affected the national, regional, and local moviegoing environments through industry structure, product and service standardizations, and the advice given in industry journals. The extent of the Big Five's control cannot be exaggerated.<sup>2</sup>

During the first ten years of business, the Crescent Amusement Company limited its growth to a triangular area between Nashville and Clarksville, Tennessee and Bowling Green, Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> This "string of about twenty houses" was positioned along the major transportation corridors (see fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> Before quality automobile routes dominated the landscape, it is likely the Crescent officials traveled by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad to conduct their business. Within the Crescent network, direct access to railroad transportation was a requirement of their markets because railroads facilitated the distribution of films and indicated a town's economic prospects and population.

In 1923, the Crescent chain received films from distribution centers in St. Louis and Atlanta, but the Southeast's exchanges were located in Memphis and Louisville.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis*, Bureau of Business and Economic Research (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, box 12, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, (hereafter cited as William Waller).

<sup>4</sup> J. L. Ray, "Knoxville Theater Picketed," *Moving Picture World* 29, no. 14 (September 30, 1916): 2144.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Dannenberg and John W. Alicoate, eds., *Film Year Book: 1922-1923* (New York: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1923, 177, 185, 187-196).

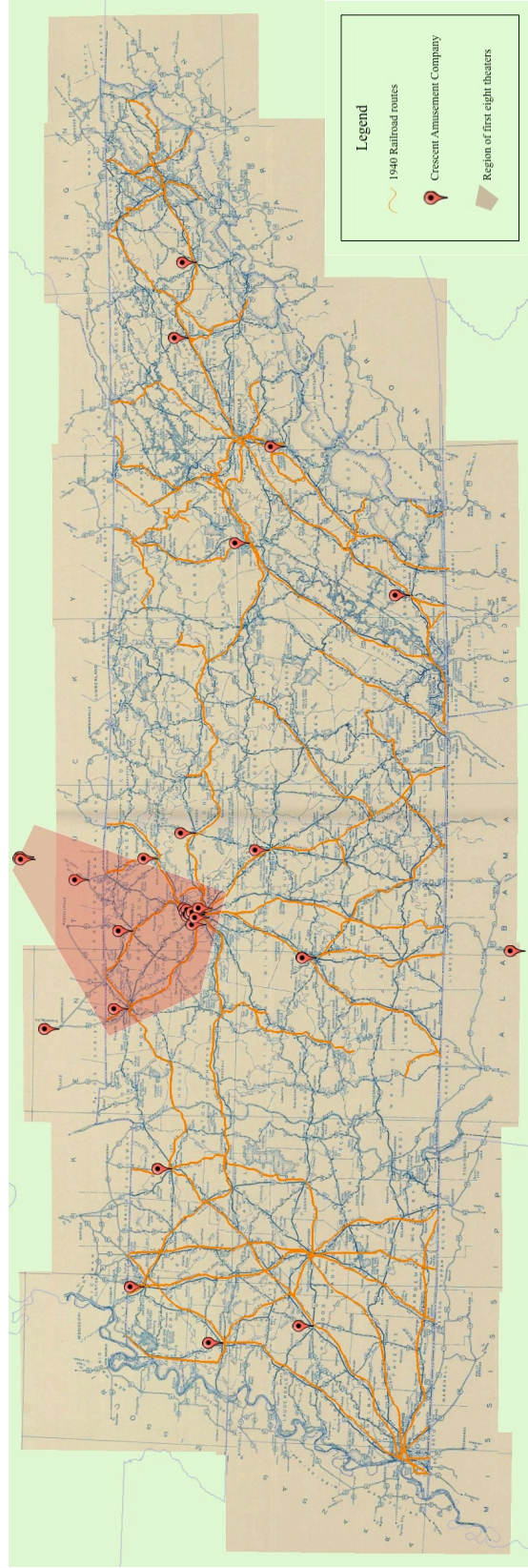


Figure 3. This map shows all of Crescent Amusement Company's theaters in 1939 while the shaded polygon indicates region the company limited itself to in its early years. Note the ample transportation routes. *Sources:* William Waller Collection and "General Highway Map, State of Tennessee," Tennessee State Highway Department, 1940. Map created using Google Earth; the orange railroad lines trace those on the "General Highway Map."



Theaters received film deliveries through the United States Postal Service and the American Railway Express Company. Both methods used the nation's railroads to transport films from the New York headquarters to distribution centers. Films moved throughout the region by way of exchanges. After a theater finished showing a film, the manager returned it to the regional exchange where it was sent to the next theater.<sup>6</sup> Between 1934 and 1939, theaters in the Crescent network showed films delivered from the regional distribution centers and exchanges. The nation's eight largest distributors, which were affiliated with the largest Hollywood production companies, provided these films.<sup>7</sup> Figure shows Crescent's 132 theaters in relation to the distribution centers that supplied the circuit's films in 1939. These distribution centers were similar to those from the 1920s and into the 1940s.

The transportation network necessary for efficient distribution limited the location of the chains' theaters to cities and towns on railroad lines. As figure 5 shows, in 1940 every Crescent theater in Tennessee was located on a railroad line. The need for transportation explains why the region east of Jackson, west of Lawrenceburg, and southwest of Dickson did not have a single Crescent theater in 1939. Similarly, the towns north of Crossville, Cookeville, and Carthage to the Tennessee-Kentucky state line did not have rail lines or single a Crescent theater.

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Kann and John W. Alicoate, eds., *The 1927 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 9th ed., *Filmdom's Encyclopedia and Book of Reference* (New York: The Film Daily, 1927), 461–464.

<sup>7</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al*, 323 U.S. 173 (1944).

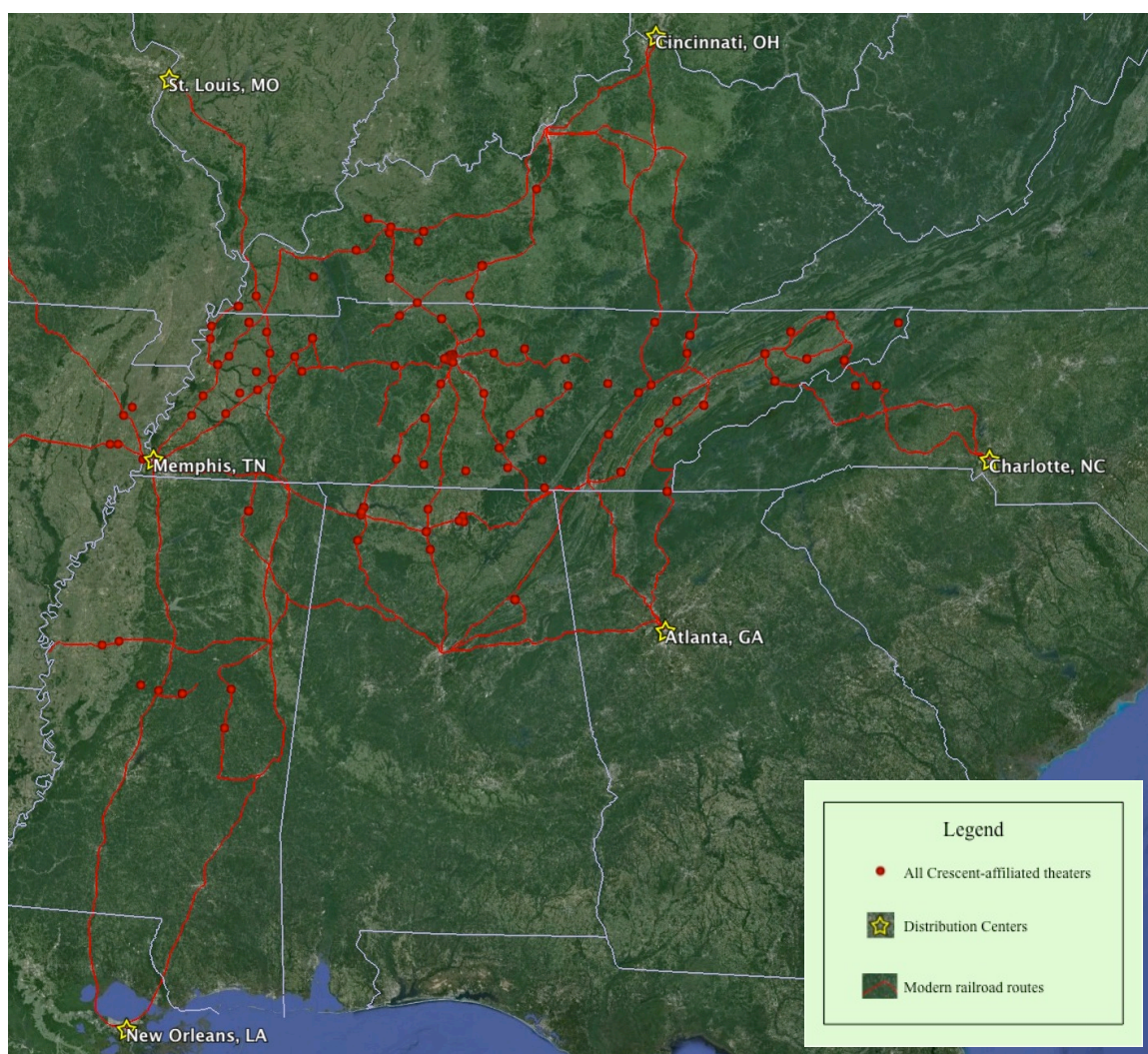


Figure 4. Crescent theaters in relation to distribution centers in 1939. *Sources:* William Waller Collection and Terry Ramsaye and Ernest A. Rovelstad, eds., “Distribution: Exchanges and Bookers,” in *International Motion Picture Almanac: 1937-38* (New York: Quigley Publishing Company, 1938), 989–1000. Map created using Google Earth.

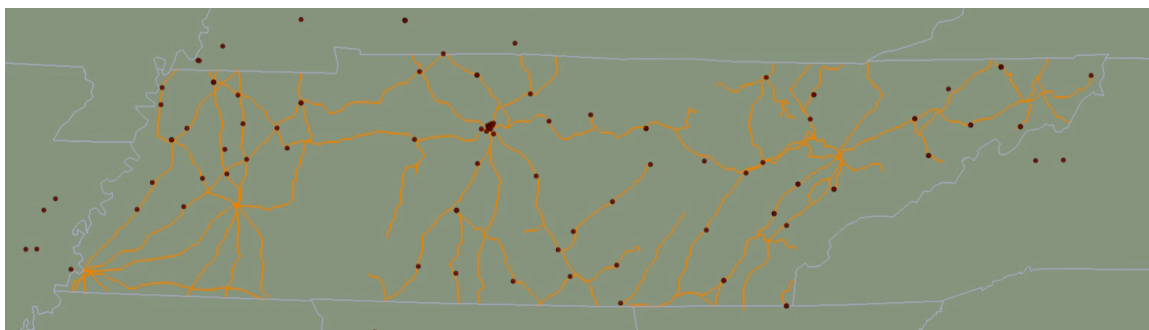


Figure 5. Crescent affiliated theaters in Tennessee and active railroad lines in the state. *Sources:* William Waller Collection and “General Highway Map, State of Tennessee,” Tennessee State Highway Department, 1940. Map created using Google Earth.

For small-town exhibitors, the Big Five effectively controlled the moviegoing experience. They limited local ability to make money by controlling access to the very film products needed to succeed. The monopoly used various methods, some of which were discussed in the previous chapter. These include film exchange centers and contracts that defined runs, clearances, and zones. Additional methods included fixed admission prices, required block booking contracts for small independent exhibitors, and industry-controlled censor boards. Like runs, clearances, and zones, film contracts between distributors and exhibitors established a theater's ticket prices. Distributors used block booking to force small independent exhibitors to lease all the company's film product, no matter the profitability of the films or if exhibitor needed that many films. Because block booking over supplied an exhibitor with low quality films, the exhibitor had to work with additional distributors for enough A- or B-class films. Frequently these contracts were also block booking contracts. While the industry's leaders used these methods to maximize their profits, regional and local variations occurred as exhibitors developed ways to meet their financial needs and consumer demands.

The Big Five and large firms controlled content shown locally by instituting self-censorship through the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Inc. (MPPDA). In working to appease the public and counter efforts for stiffer censorship rules from local and state boards, the MPPDA's Production Code Administration (PCA) effectively dictated which films made it to first-, second-, and subsequent-run theaters. The Big Five agreed to show only approved films in their theaters, essentially requiring approval for all financially successful films.<sup>8</sup> The PCA came after numerous state and city censor boards made it difficult for Hollywood to release films that met the regional mores across the nation.

The City of Memphis further censored films shown in the Southeast through its municipal censorship board. Memphis' city manager appointed the board's members who reviewed films to ensure that their content matched moral and political leanings of the South. Because the majority of the region's films were exhibited in Memphis before passing through the city's exchanges, the Memphis board censored films for the entire region.<sup>9</sup> While an industry journal notes that the board was active, it rarely needed to cut scenes from films since it received "very few complaints" and its "members work[ed] well with local exhibitors." In addition to the PCA's censoring, the board's cooperation with exhibitors, the cuts it made to films, and lack of additional complaints explains why

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<sup>8</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 40–42.

<sup>9</sup> Knoxville, Tennessee, also operated a censor board that served to "either endorse or prohibit pictures." Because the Knoxville board did not cut films, it did not affect the region's films as significantly. Jack Alicoate, ed., "Censor Boards," in *1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, NJ: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1945), 754.

Tennessee did not have a statewide board and additional municipal boards throughout the state.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that if the Memphis censorship board cut scenes from a film reel, all theaters with subsequent runs exhibited the censored film.<sup>11</sup>

Like censorship boards that affected entire regions, individual theaters found ways to vary the implementation of the corporate standardizations. Although Hollywood chains used film contracts to dictate most aspects of exhibition throughout the nation, the Great Depression forced theater owners and managers to develop ways of enticing cash-strapped patrons to the theater. These included double features, giveaway or bank nights, and concessions.

Even though distributors fixed nonnegotiable base admission prices for the films an exhibitor showed, double features allowed an exhibitor to offer patrons a “two-for-the-price-of-one” discount while still technically following their film contracts. Film contracts did not allow the theater manager or owner to lower their prices because it would lower the prices across the board, inevitably costing the distributors and producers profit. By not charging for one of the films, exhibitors did not violate their contracts. Conant notes that in 1944, first-run evening shows ranged from sixty cents to a dollar, while later runs could only go as low as ten cents.<sup>12</sup> Admission prices within the Crescent network reflect this standardized pricing structure. The majority of the Crescent-affiliated

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<sup>10</sup> Terry Ramsaye and Ernest A. Rovelstad, eds., “Exhibition: Local Censor Boards,” in *International Motion Picture Almanac: 1937-38* (New York: Quigley Publishing Company, 1938), 1031.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915-1981* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 69.

theaters listed their 1939 ticket prices as “.10, .20 and .25,” and only eleven theaters in the circuit charged thirty or more cents.<sup>13</sup> These low prices point to the volume of Westerns, which did not carry high admission prices, typically shown in small Southern movie theaters and the industry’s realization that the theaters’ clientele could only afford so much.

During the Depression, small-town and subsequent-run theaters worked around these fixed prices by staging double features. Double features served two purposes. They attracted moviegoers and allowed exhibitors to squeeze some income from the excess of films resulting from block booking. Although national distributors did not force Crescent circuit theaters into block booking contracts, at least one theater had regular Saturday double features.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection. Of the 137 theaters listed in this collection, 89 had ticket prices below thirty cents and only a few going over twenty-five cents. The only way to determine allowed prices for each show presented at Crescent’s theaters is to examine film and franchise contracts or to study every issue of a town’s newspaper for any indication of advertised prices. The locations of the numerous contracts are currently unknown and from the examined newspapers, there is no indication of pricing. Theater histories located in the William Waller collection are, at present, the only means of determining prices.

<sup>14</sup> The Court Theatre in Huntingdon hosted regular double features while the McKenzie Theatre (McKenzie) and Ritz Theatre (Bruceton) hosted at least one double feature. It is likely that most of the circuit’s small-town theaters had double features but current research does not allow for such conclusions. Advertisement, *Tennessee Republican (Huntington, TN)*, August 18, 1939; Advertisement, *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, August 2, 1940; Advertisement, *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, August 16, 1940; Advertisement, *Tennessee Republican (Huntington, TN)*, August 30, 1940; Advertisement, *Tennessee Republican (Huntington, TN)*, August 30, 1940; Advertisement, *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, September 4, 1940; Advertisement, *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, June 13, 1941; Advertisement, *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, January 3, 1941.

Independent exhibitors paired a feature film with a B- or C-class movie while first-run picture palaces in big cities never accepted the use of double features because of their respectability and access to profitable films. Instead, the palaces relied on stage shows to fill out a bill and enhance profits. The combination of an A-class movie with a popular stage show allowed exhibitors to charge premium prices.<sup>15</sup>

Like double features, independents and small-town exhibitors pioneered the use of giveaways, prizes, and bank nights to attract patrons during and after the Great Depression. Eventually, the studio-owned theaters followed suite. Bicycles, chinaware, and groceries were common prizes while giveaways included free tickets. For example, the Court Theatre in Huntingdon gave moviegoers a free ticket for every tenth bag of popcorn purchased, while the McKenzie Theatre had a “Men’s Night” where “every lady paying admission ... [could] take her escort in free!”<sup>16</sup>

Bank nights, which started in 1932 and were widespread by 1937, were the most successful of these stunts.<sup>17</sup> On these nights moviegoers registered for a chance to win the weekly cash-prize. If no one won the weekly bank, it was added to the following week’s winnings until a patron won. In Oneida, Tennessee, the Gem Theatre’s “Draw Night” occurred every Thursday with the bank starting at five dollars. In the Crescent network,

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 75–76.

<sup>16</sup> Another Court Theatre example is an advertisement that announced “FREE-Groceries and Turkey!” at a Thursday late movie; see Advertisement, *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, November 22, 1940. Advertisement, *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, August 9, 1940; “‘Men’s Night’ at the McKenzie Theatre,” *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, November 1, 1940.

<sup>17</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 76–77.

bank nights were fairly standard. Of the network's 137 theaters, 117 had bank nights at some point before 1939 and of the eight newspapers sampled between 1936 and 1941, five published theater advertisements that promoted a bank night. Managers scheduled the weekly giveaways and bank nights for their least profitable nights, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Crescent-affiliated theaters copied this trend.<sup>18</sup>

Independent and small-town theaters further challenged the Big Five's standardizations when they began selling popcorn, candy, and cokes, allowing them to keep this income for themselves. Concessions were initially excluded from movie theaters because they were associated with lower class entertainment like fairs and carnivals. Before the Depression, privately owned carts or shops sold concessions to moviegoers to bring into theaters. Once theaters took over this business, it was often the only real profit many of the independent exhibitors made because, unlike revenue from ticket sales, distributors and production studios did not receive a cut of the concession stand income.<sup>19</sup> At ten cents a bag, the same price for many matinee tickets, popcorn provided easy income for exhibitors.

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<sup>18</sup> Theaters in Huntingdon, Tullahoma, Manchester, and Oneida, Tennessee advertised their "Opportunity Nights," "Bank Night," "Special Opportunity Matinee," and "Draw Night" on a weekly basis between 1936 and 1941. Advertisement, *Manchester (TN) Times*, January 30, 1936; Advertisement, *Manchester (TN) Times*, February 6, 1936; Advertisement, *Manchester (TN) Times*, May 29, 1936; Advertisement, *Manchester (TN) Times*, June 26, 1936; Advertisement, *Coffee County (TN) News*, June 11, 1936; Advertisement, *Coffee County (TN) News*, July 2, 1936; Advertisement, *Coffee County (TN) News*, July 9, 1936; Advertisement, *Coffee County (TN) News*, July 14, 1936; Advertisement, *Scott County (TN) News*, March 14, 1937; Advertisement, November 22, 1940; Advertisement, *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, August 1, 1941; Advertisement, January 3, 1941; All reports, William Waller Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System*, 77–78.



Despite corporate limitations, Crescent-associated theaters often retained and fostered a very local feel. Crescent's franchise agreements with the Big Five did not brand the network with recognizable characteristics – like a certain appearance or logo – and they did not limit a Crescent-associated theater to a single product or distributor. For example, the McKenzie Theatre's contracts for 1938 and 1939 films included agreements with Fox, Paramount, and RKO in addition to United Artists, Metro, Republic, Monogram, and Grand National.<sup>20</sup> None of these companies, including Crescent, imprinted a certain image on the theater. The main requirement, in accordance with industry standards for pricing and film contracts, was the theater's cleanliness and equipment.<sup>21</sup>

When comparing Crescent and its affiliates to national exhibition companies, the regional circuit did not brand their theaters with a common name. An example is the Publix chain, which named its theaters "Paramount."<sup>22</sup> While Crescent did not participate in this trend, the most common theater names within the chain were "Capitol" and "Princess," both of which were given to two of CAC's most important Nashville

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<sup>20</sup> McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion about names given to small-town nickelodeon theaters, see Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1996), 51–54; Kevin J. Corbett, "The Big Picture: Theatrical Moviegoing, Digital Television, and beyond the Substitution Effect," *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 20–21.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Gomery, "The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy," *Cinema Journal* 18, no. 2, Economic and Technological History (1979): 26–40.

venues.<sup>23</sup> The only subsidiary to brand their company was Strand Enterprise, which gave half of their twenty theaters an eponymous name.<sup>24</sup> A majority of the remaining theaters had names like “Dixie,” “Lyric,” “Palace,” “Ritz,” and “Roxy” or names that referenced the locale and conveyed a sense of opulence.<sup>25</sup> The Park Theatre in McKenzie and the Court Theatre in Huntingdon, both owned by Rockwood, are examples of location-based names. In McKenzie, the Downtown Veterans Memorial Park was across the street from the theater and in Huntingdon, the theater was on the courthouse square. This lack of branding is one reason why so many local communities are surprised to learn that their local movie theater was once part of a chain.

While the chain’s officers did not attempt to give the Crescent circuit a standardized brand, they did apply the chain-store business model to booking films. From the Nashville headquarters, upper management and officers managed all bookings for the network. Douglas Gomery describes a typical Big Five method of booking, noting that the booking department drafted a planned schedule in the national headquarters and then sent it to several lower-level managers. Each manager oversaw a progressively smaller area and was able to add a “‘local’ touch” and eliminate “regionally offensive films” before bookings were finalized.<sup>26</sup> For chains to successfully operate in small towns,

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<sup>23</sup> All Crescent reports, William Waller Collection.

<sup>24</sup> All Strand Enterprise reports, William Waller Collection.

<sup>25</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection.

<sup>26</sup> Gomery, “The Movies Become Big Business,” 34.

managers had to book movies and shorts their audience wanted to see.<sup>27</sup> For example, small-town theaters in the South operated like specialty houses, showing primarily westerns, while large theaters, like first-run and A-class theaters did not show this genre.<sup>28</sup> A sampling of Crescent network theaters confirms this generalization. A vast majority of newspaper advertisements published between 1936 and 1941 list shorts and features in the Western genre with frequent comedies, cartoons, and newsreels.

Despite the difficult economic conditions of the Depression years, the Crescent circuit maintained steady growth. Part of this growth required implementing company-wide standardizations and modernizations on the local level. These standardizations included Sunday shows, segregation, and ticket prices while the modernizations include technological and architectural updates.

While transitioning a theater from local to corporate ownership, Crescent and its associated exhibitors had to strike a balance between companywide standards and allowing a theater to serve as a community-gathering place. To accomplish this, Crescent retained local low-level employees but brought in corporate upper management guide the transition. According to Joe Williams, a longtime McKenzie resident who worked at both theaters, Rockwood hired the projectionists, ticket seller, ticket taker, and the popcorn

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory A. Waller, "Imagining and Promoting the Small-Town Theater" in Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, ed., *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 177.

<sup>28</sup> Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry*, 44; Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History Of Movie Presentation In The United States*, Wisconsin Studies in Film (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 138.

maker (himself) from the “Old” McKenzie Theatre to work at the Park Theatre.<sup>29</sup> The company brought Roy Johnson from Nashville to manage the old theater while Rockwood remodeled the future Park Theatre building and transitioned its McKenzie operation into the new theater. By the mid-1940s, Johnson established corporate standards in McKenzie and had trained a projectionist to replace him as the theater’s permanent manager, “Mr. Eddie” Clericuzio. It appears that Johnson began or continued serving as an intermediary between the region’s theaters, Rockwood, and distributors, reflecting a common practice in chain-store business models.<sup>30</sup>

Early in his time in McKenzie, Johnson appeared in the *McKenzie Banner* three times. The first was after completing his first year as the theater head. The other stories featured his efforts to bring corporate standards to McKenzie by offering Sunday shows and increasing ticket prices.<sup>31</sup>

Nationwide, the cinematic industry consistently emphasized the critical role theaters played in communities. The local theaters were supposed to be a safe and wholesome place to relax – even on Sundays – and during World War II, supposed to

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<sup>29</sup> Joe F. Williams interview, December 5, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>30</sup> Gabe Clericuzio, Mr. Eddie’s son, notes that Johnson oversaw at least three other theaters in the area: the Court Theatre in Huntingdon, a drive-in between Huntingdon and McKenzie, and a drive-in thirty miles away in Humbolt. Williams interview, CHP Files; Gabe Clericuzio interview, May 30, 2012, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>31</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 194, 1; *McKenzie Banner*, August 30, 1940, 1; and McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection.

maintain national morale.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the movies shown in the local theater were supposed to provide acceptable representations of America's culture and promote appropriate social mores. Many industry publications noted the extent of Blue Laws in different states and towns throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

The State of Tennessee repealed its blue laws in 1935, allowing municipalities to determine for themselves whether to permit or prohibit Sunday shows.<sup>33</sup> In 1939, one year after Rockwood purchased the small theater in McKenzie, Johnson petitioned the city council to allow the chain's theater to operate on Sundays, indicating the company's attempt to make the McKenzie cinematic atmosphere compatible with companywide standards. Arguments to gain city council approval included, "Sunday movies have been showing all around McKenzie but people residing here had to leave town in order to see them" and "many of the younger set were going away to other places on Sunday."<sup>34</sup> The theater manager assured the council and the public that his schedule of Sunday shows would not interfere with church services. On August 26, 1940, the McKenzie City Council decided to allow Sunday showings, but resolved that "no such theatrical and

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<sup>32</sup> Dedication in *The Theatre Catalog: 1942*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, Inc., 1942), front matter.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Ramsaye and Ernest A. Rovelstad, eds., "Exhibition: Sunday Show Legislation," in *International Motion Picture Almanac: 1937-38* (New York: Quigley Publishing Company, 1938), 1033; Jack Alicoate, ed., "Sunday Closing Regulations," in *1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, NJ: Wid's Films and Film Folk, Inc., 1945), 756.

<sup>34</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, August 30, 1940, 1.

motion picture entertainment shall be had on Sundays at or during the time that regular church or religious services are held.”<sup>35</sup>

Kenneth Harder, a Park Theatre employee in the mid-1950s, remembers the theater having an early matinee at two o’clock, then being closed at four for church services, and opening around eight o’clock for a night show. He does not recall any problems between the theater and local churches.<sup>36</sup> The five to one vote at the city council meeting allowed the McKenzie Theatre, and later the Park Theatre, to operate seven days a week and brought the town up to company-wide standards.

Although faraway corporations dictated the moviegoing experience on screen, local theaters, such as McKenzie’s Park Theatre, were still the setting of entertainment magic, in the eyes of local residents. Nola Hobbs, described the weekly trips to the theater as “that’s what you did” as a kid on Saturday afternoons, while Robbie Story noted Saturdays were a big day for him because he was able to get his quarter and go to the theater.<sup>37</sup> Robbie paid ten cents for a child’s ticket and another few cents for popcorn and a soft drink, and used the remaining change to purchase bags of BBs from the Western Auto located diagonal to the theater. He also recalls getting out of the movie and playing on the cannon in the Downtown Veterans Memorial Park across from the theater

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<sup>35</sup> Minutes of the Meeting of the Mayor and City Council, McKenzie, Tennessee, 26 August 1940, McKenzie, Tennessee City Hall.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Harder interview, December 5, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files. Gabe Clericuzio confirms this noting that the two Sunday shows did not start until after church was over; at two and seven o’clock; Clericuzio, interview, CHP Files.

<sup>37</sup> Hobbs interview, CHP Files; and Story interview, CHP Files.

(see fig. 6).<sup>38</sup> Whether they lived in town or the outlying area, McKenzie youth were sure to get cleaned up and head to the Park Theatre where they could purchase a ticket, popcorn, and a coke for under twenty-five cents.<sup>39</sup>



Figure 6. Cannon in the Downtown Veterans Memorial Park that Robbie Story and his friends played on after the movie ended, c. 1943. *Source: McKenzie (TN) Banner.*

The Park Theatre served as a place of collective childhood and young-adult experiences for longtime McKenzie residents. Most common of these memories is of

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<sup>38</sup> Robbie Story interview, August 9, 2012, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that the ticket prices in the newspaper and interview accounts do not match because the interviewees are remembering the children's ticket prices. The *McKenzie Banner* is referencing adult ticket prices.

Mr. Eddie and his flashlight. He began working as a projectionist in 1946 and eventually took over the management of the theater for Rockwood. Mr. Eddie maintained this position until 1973.<sup>40</sup> Once the movie started, Mr. Eddie regularly walked up and down the aisles with his flashlight, ready to shine it on any young moviegoer caught misbehaving. Robert McDonald remembers, “A lot of the time, you got to kiss your girlfriend and he’d shine his flashlight and cut that stuff out.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, being hit with the beam of his flashlight served as a universally understood warning that the next time Mr. Eddie caught someone misbehaving, the offender would be taken outside.<sup>42</sup> Memories of Crescent’s theater managers using flashlights are common; moviegoers at Union City’s Capitol Theatre recall similar experiences.<sup>43</sup>

Even though the Park Theatre was built with double-seats designed for two people, Mr. Eddie regularly interrupted any moviegoers who got too cozy. The manager’s watchful eye could be avoided only at the drive-in theater built between Huntingdon, the county seat, and McKenzie in the 1950s.<sup>44</sup> Linda Bolton sums up Mr. Eddie’s lasting influence on McKenzie through the Park Theatre: “Mr. Eddie was everybody’s parent, to

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<sup>40</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>41</sup> Robert McDonald interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>42</sup> Waldrick interview, CHP Files; Harder interview, CHP Files.

<sup>43</sup> Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers*, 63.

<sup>44</sup> Rosalinda Winston and Robbie Story interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; and Clericuzio interview, CHP Files. This drive-in was also owned by Rockwood and was under Roy Johnson supervision, a regional manager.



keep you straight.”<sup>45</sup> Mr. Eddie’s parental role over all McKenzie youth sometimes made his son, Gabe, unpopular at school, but as his classmates grew up, they came to love the man with the flashlight and retained fond memories of him. When Mr. Eddie passed away, he was buried with a flashlight.<sup>46</sup>

While Mr. Eddie was theater manager, the entire Clericuzio family was involved in theater operations.<sup>47</sup> In the mid-1950s, Marjorie Thompson Clericuzio, Mr. Eddie’s wife, sold and collected tickets while their son, Gabe, could be found on site.<sup>48</sup> Marjorie had previously sold tickets in the early 1940s. She was doing so when she and her future husband first met. Marjorie’s parents were also involved in the theater’s operations. Her mother made the curtain that covered the screen, while her father worked there as well. Gabe observed about his time at the theater that he spent half of his life there. When he was a small child, he often curled up in one of the double seats and took a nap, sleeping through the movie. Once a teenager, he began working alongside his parents, grandparents, local people, and Bethel College students. The only thing Gabe did not do while working at the Park Theatre was ticket sales. He did everything else, including making and selling concessions and changing marquee letters. The last job was a task he hated to do. The left side of the marquee was difficult to change because the sidewalk and

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<sup>45</sup> Linda Bolton interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>46</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Hobbs interview, CHP Files; Harder interview, CHP Files.

street there were not level and perching a ladder there was precarious. Gabe recalls falling once.<sup>49</sup>

As manager, Mr. Eddie was responsible for regularly reporting to Rockwood and maintaining his theater's accounts. Though one of the least public aspects of his job, the paperwork and accounting took considerable time, both had to be completed before leaving the theater each night. On weekends, Gabe remembers his father coming home late, often hours after the nine o'clock movie ended on Saturday night.<sup>50</sup> While Mr. Eddie maintained the theater's budget and paperwork, he also prepared the reports regularly mailed to Rockwood. He attended annual meetings at Rockwood's headquarters in Nashville, while W. R. Holder, the company's president in 1951, came to McKenzie to meet and go fishing with him. Gabe recalls that this was typical of Holder, who did quite a bit of traveling for Rockwood to meet with the managers and discuss company business.<sup>51</sup> Both the regular reporting and meetings, whether formal or informal, helped Rockwood maintain company standards throughout its chain.

In some cases, however, Mr. Eddie's role at the theater deviated from standard management. He served as the theater's handyman and tried to purchase and hire, locally.

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<sup>49</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>50</sup> The nine o'clock Saturday night movie was the latest show all week at the Park Theatre. Friday and Sunday night movies began at seven o'clock. On Mondays, both the manager and his wife went to the theater to count the money made over the weekend. All of the theater's weekend income had to be held in the safe in Mr. Eddie's office, the center office on the second floor above the lobby, because the banks were closed on Saturdays and Sundays.

<sup>51</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files; Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 100, Page 323-326, November 3, 1951.

Gabe described his father's tendency to repair what he could himself rather than wait for the Rockwood repair service to come. One year around the time of the Christmas holiday, the projector head stripped shortly before the scheduled start of a show. Mr. Eddie did not want to wait for the repair service to come, so he called the regional manager, Johnson, to ask if he could borrow the head from a drive-in closed at the time. The manager was able to get the part, install it, and start the show only thirty minutes late. He then returned the part before the drive-in needed it.<sup>52</sup>

While the Mr. Eddie took care of all major operations at the theater, he employed numerous local high school and Bethel College students.<sup>53</sup> The high school students tended to have a higher turnover than did Bethel students. Because the college students stayed around longer and remained in town during holidays, especially those from far away, Mr. Eddie hired Bethel students to run the projector. High school students and locals worked the concessions and tickets.<sup>54</sup> In the mid-1950s, Kenneth Harder was a junior in high school and worked part-time at the theater. He remembers earning \$16 working seven days a week. During the week, the theater opened at five or six for a night showing. On weekends, Harder worked two additional matinees. Typical of local employees, his duties included working at the concession stand and keeping the marquee

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<sup>52</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy Holland interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>54</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files; Gabe Clericuzio, e-mail message to author, July 19, 2012.

updated, which required attention every two or three days because of the constant movie rotation.<sup>55</sup>

During the years Harder worked there, the Park Theatre typically showed a new movie on Monday, Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday.<sup>56</sup> Gabe remembers that the local manager had no control over the length of a movie's run time. Instead, Rockwood's film contracts determined it. Popular movies like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Ten Commandments* ran for two to three weeks.<sup>57</sup> As one resident remembered, everyone regularly went to the movies, so they constantly showed new pictures; none stayed for long.<sup>58</sup> McKenzie resident Ramona Washburn illustrates this regular attendance. She went to theater and saw every new movie while her husband worked the night shift at the *McKenzie Banner*.<sup>59</sup>

While management style, concessions, and the rotation of shows shaped the local moviegoing experience and memories of it, the effects of segregation cannot be understated. In theaters, segregation was one of the few policies the industry and chains ceded to local practices and specific markets. Each community dictated how their theater implemented segregation. A 1927 treatise dedicated to attracting theater patrons notes,

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<sup>55</sup> Harder interview, CHP Files.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>58</sup> Hobbs interview, CHP Files.

<sup>59</sup> Ramona Washburn interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

The matter of segregating negro patrons and others to certain parts of the house is one that should be settled according to local conditions. The matter is mentioned here because it is advisable not to act until you know what the local regulations are.<sup>60</sup>

Of the hundred Crescent theaters that listed prices on their 1939 report prepared for the Supreme Court case, 63 indicated ticket prices for white moviegoers while only 37 also listed prices for the area's "colored" moviegoers. In the 1930s, the vast majority of child tickets were priced at a dime, while the average adult ticket was fifteen cents. Generally, adult tickets ranged in price from a dime to a quarter.<sup>61</sup> At the Park Theatre, ca. 1945-1952, management posted segregated ticket prices above segregated ticket windows. The prices were as follows: white adults paid 38 cents while African-American adults paid 25 cents; children of both races paid fourteen cents (see fig. 7). In this image, the prices listed on the left, nearest the lobby entrance, are for white moviegoers while those listed on the right, nearest the stairs for the segregated balcony, are for African Americans.<sup>62</sup>

It is interesting to note that some companies were more likely to have segregated movie theaters. Examples include Rockwood, Ruffin, and Chickasaw; these companies operated in central and northern portions of West Tennessee, East Tennessee, and west Kentucky. In contrast, Strand Enterprises segregated each of its nineteen theaters by

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<sup>60</sup> John F. Barry and Epes W. Sargent, *Building Theatre Patronage: Management and Merchandising*, 1st ed. (New York: Chalmers Publishing Company, 1927), 429.

<sup>61</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection. After examining the data sets, it is safe to assume that if a theater does not note a ticket price for African-American moviegoers, they likely did not allow these customers in at all.

<sup>62</sup> "Park Theatre ticket window with Mrs. Clericuzio," ca. 1945-1952, Gabe Clericuzio, Photograph Albums, Private Collection. Also see figure 19, which shows the entire Park Theatre storefront and figure 30, which is a sketch of the storefront layout.



Figure 7. "Park Theatre ticket window with Mrs. Clericuzio, ca. 1945-1952." *Source:* Gabe Clericuzio, Photograph Albums, Private Collection.

excluding African-American moviegoers entirely. Strand managed theaters in middle and west Mississippi, western Tennessee and Kentucky, and eastern Arkansas. At present, it is difficult to determine why specific theaters were closed or open to African- American moviegoers. Population appears to have had no bearing except in cases where there were multiple theaters in a town. In those cases, there was sometimes a theater for blacks only.<sup>63</sup> See table 1 for a detailed breakdown of segregation in Crescent-affiliated theaters.

The architecture of the Crescent-network theaters and society as a whole standardized the segregated moviegoing experience until 1965. Segregation's effect on the regional, as well as national, moviegoing experience, cannot be discounted. Equally significant is the company's chain-store model of business and the Big Five's control over the industry. Even with the limitations put on local managers, these company employees created and fostered a local moviegoing experience that was unique to each theater.

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<sup>63</sup> All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection. After examining the data sets, it is safe to assume that if a theater did not note a ticket price for African-American moviegoers, they likely did not allow these customers in at all. To determine more specific reasons, an examination of each market's racial demographics and tensions is required.

Table 1. Segregation in Crescent Amusement Company affiliated theaters. *Source:* William Waller Collection.

Company	Open Theaters	Ticket Prices Listed				% of Segregated Theaters per Company			Population			Geographical region
		AA price listed	no AA price	no prices listed		% AA	% allowed AA	% not allowed AA	Min pop	Max pop	Average pop	
Cherokee	11	4	7			36%	64%		1,800	2,800	2,302	east TN & west NC
Chickasaw	4	2	1	1		50%	25%	25%	4,775	15,593	9,637	west TN & KY
Crescent	51	15	17	19		29%	33%	37%	900	25,000	5,677	TN, KY, & AL
Cumberland	10		7	3			70%	30%	3,000	8,725	4,930	middle TN
Dickson	1			1				100%	1,429	1,429	1,429	middle TN
Hartselle	2		1	1			50%	50%	1,250	4,600	3,450	north AL
Kentucky	1	1				100%			25,000	25,000	25,000	middle KY
Lawrenceburg	1	1				100%			25,000	25,000	25,000	middle TN
Lyric	3		3				100%		3,500	25,000	10,667	north AL
Mid-State	3	1	1	1		33%	33%	33%	1,100	4,650	2,917	middle TN
Newport	3		3				100%		1,000	4,200	2,133	east TN
Rockwood	12	9	3			75%	25%		1,000	153,000	78,812	TN & west KY
Ruffin	6	4		2		67%		33%	153,000	153,000	153,000	west TN & KY
Strand	19		19				100%		960	8,175	3,621	central MS, west TN and KY, & east AR
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>28</b>		<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>900</b>	<b>153,000</b>	<b>23,470</b>	
<b>Percent</b>		<b>29%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>22%</b>								



## CHAPTER 4: THE AESTHETICS OF THE CRESCENT AMUSEMENT COMPANY THEATERS: MCKENZIE, TENNESSEE, AS A CASE STUDY

The architecture of all movie theaters built or remodeled after the 1920s was the product of thoughtful design and execution. For small-town movie theaters, their designers attempted to create places for moviegoers to escape from the life experienced every day in small-towns or on the farm. Though small-town theaters were some of the most modern and flamboyant buildings on the town square, they were modest in comparison to their urban counterparts. Through the construction of theaters, amusement companies and regional architects often introduced the Art Deco and Streamline Moderne architecture to small towns. As a result, the theater building also became home to the most modern technology and provided the same comforts – such as air conditioning – found in the big cities. Here small-town moviegoers could experience these luxuries, if only for a few hours. From the neon and flashing lights of the marquee to the air conditioned environment and engineered seat cushions, the movie theater was an escape from the average and everyday.

There were numerous features and trends common among small-town movie theaters. These commonalities included their location in preexisting buildings in the heart of downtown, storefront arrangement and treatment, construction or renovation to incorporate the most modern technological innovations, and segregated spaces. Local contractors and regional architects used local and national building supplies to complete construction work.

The Park Theatre in McKenzie is a representative example of how the Crescent Amusement Company imparted their aesthetic vision to the small-town South (see fig. 8). The Park Theatre (1941) replaced the original McKenzie Theatre, which was in operation before 1926. During the early period of theater history, Southern small-town theaters were fully integrated into their community's civic and social activities. Because of this, it was common for the town's sole commercial entertainment enterprise to be housed in civic buildings – like the firehouse, courthouse, and city hall – or, if the theater was located in a privately owned building, for the theater owner to host civic, social, and cultural activities and events. The multipurpose function of early theater buildings was often because they were the town's largest and only secular building designed for an audience.<sup>1</sup> The first motion picture theater in McKenzie illustrates this trend. The theater space was located in the Caledonia Masonic Lodge at the end of Broadway Street.<sup>2</sup> Another west Tennessee example is in Newbern. Here, similar to the McKenzie Theatre, the Palace Theatre shared space with the Masonic lodge, and later, the Odd Fellows. See figure 9 and figure 10 for maps of the McKenzie and Newbern examples.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Allen, "Relocating American Film History: The 'Problem' of the Empirical," *Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 2006): 67–69; Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1996), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926).

<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], (1926); Sanborn Map & Publishing Co. *Newbern, Tennessee* [map] scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1929); Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *Newbern, Tennessee* [map] scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1929, revised 1940).



Figure 8. The Park Theatre ca. 1949 in McKenzie, Tennessee. *Source:* Gabe Clericuzio, Photograph Albums, Private Collection.

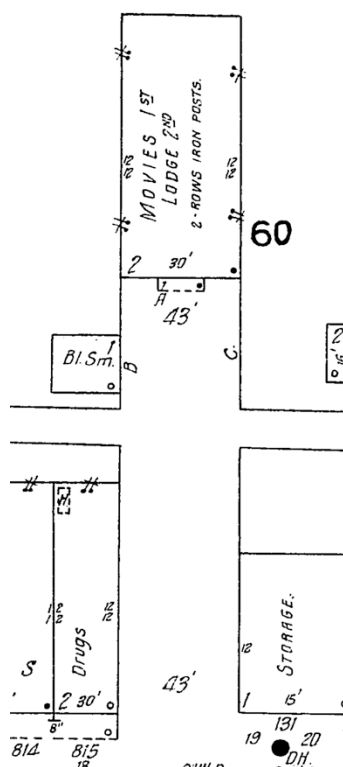


Figure 9. The McKenzie Theatre shown operating on the first floor of the Masonic Lodge in 1926. *Sources:* Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926).

From April 1930 to April 1939, Y.D. Moore owned and operated the McKenzie Theatre, but his business was in poor physical condition.<sup>4</sup> For this reason L. N. Dunlap of the Caledonia Masonic Lodge contacted Rockwood Amusement Company in 1936. Dunlap hoped to lease the theater portion of the lodge to the amusement company because Moore had not “spent any money on [theater] equipment and the people of McKenzie were desirous of having better theatre facilities.” This quote is in the words of Rockwood employees but illustrates the perceived desires of the McKenzie residents.

<sup>4</sup> “Film Boards of Trade Report Additional Theater Changes: Tennessee,” *The Film Daily*, April 25, 1930, 13.

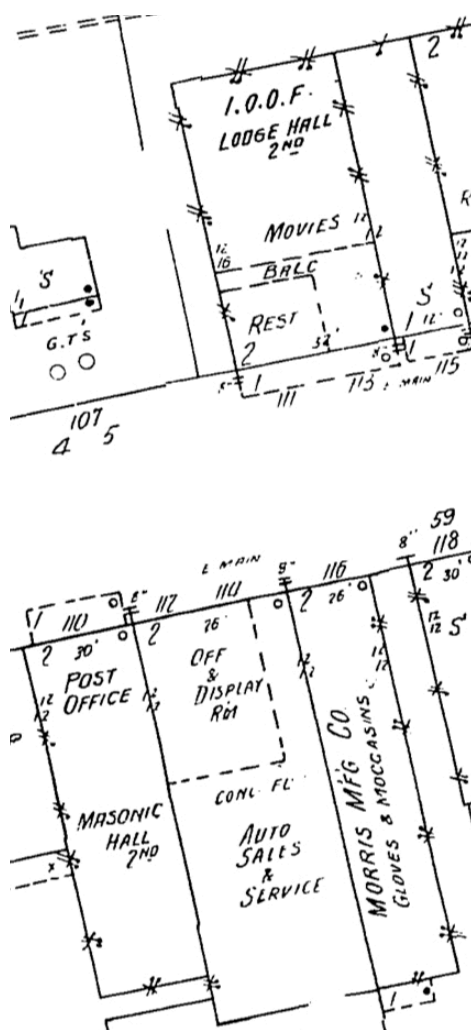


Figure 10. This 1940 Newbern, Tennessee Sanborn Fire Insurance Map shows the Palace Theatre after its relocation. In 1929, the theater was on the ground floor of the Masonic Lodge but this map shows that the theater shared space with the Odd Fellows. *Source:* Sanborn Map & Publishing Co. *Newbern, Tennessee*. Map. 9 sheets. Scale: 50 feet to an inch. New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1929 and Sanborn Map & Publishing Co. *Newbern, Tennessee*. Map. 9 sheets. Scale: 50 feet to an inch. New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1929, revised 1940.

Three years later, Rockwood began planning a new theater “in the heart of [McKenzie’s] best business block,” prompting Moore to sell out to the monopoly.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Report of McKenzie, William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, box 12, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, (hereafter cited as William

The new Park Theatre's location reflects a common trend in Southern small-town theater placement. Instead of being located in or near neighborhoods, these theaters were primarily found in the commercial district, near the commercial, social, and municipal buildings.<sup>6</sup> When Rockwood ultimately purchased a building in 1940, the company opted to move the town's movie theater out of the two-story masonic lodge to a more desirable location. As figure 11 shows, both the Masonic building and the new Park Theatre had a similar square footage and required extensive renovations before being feasible as a modern theater.

The Park Theatre's location capitalized on automobile traffic and was at a prominent location in the downtown layout near the hotel, auto repair shop, and the new post office. In contrast, the old McKenzie Theatre/Masonic Lodge was near a feed mill and blacksmith shop (see fig. 11 and fig. 12). Though the planners did not provide the Park Theatre with a dedicated parking lot, the town offered enough street parking and open lots on which moviegoers could park. A likely parking location for McKenzie moviegoers and downtown shoppers was in the lot beside the Masonic Lodge. Interviews with local residents indicate that many moviegoers parked in a lot off the square. In the July 4, 1941 issue of the *McKenzie Manner*, an issue dedicated to the Park Theatre's grand opening, a full-page advertisement doubling as a promotional map for the commercial district claimed that the opening of the theater at the intersection of Main and

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Waller Collection); "Roy Johnson Completes Year as Theatre Manager," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, April 5, 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 66.

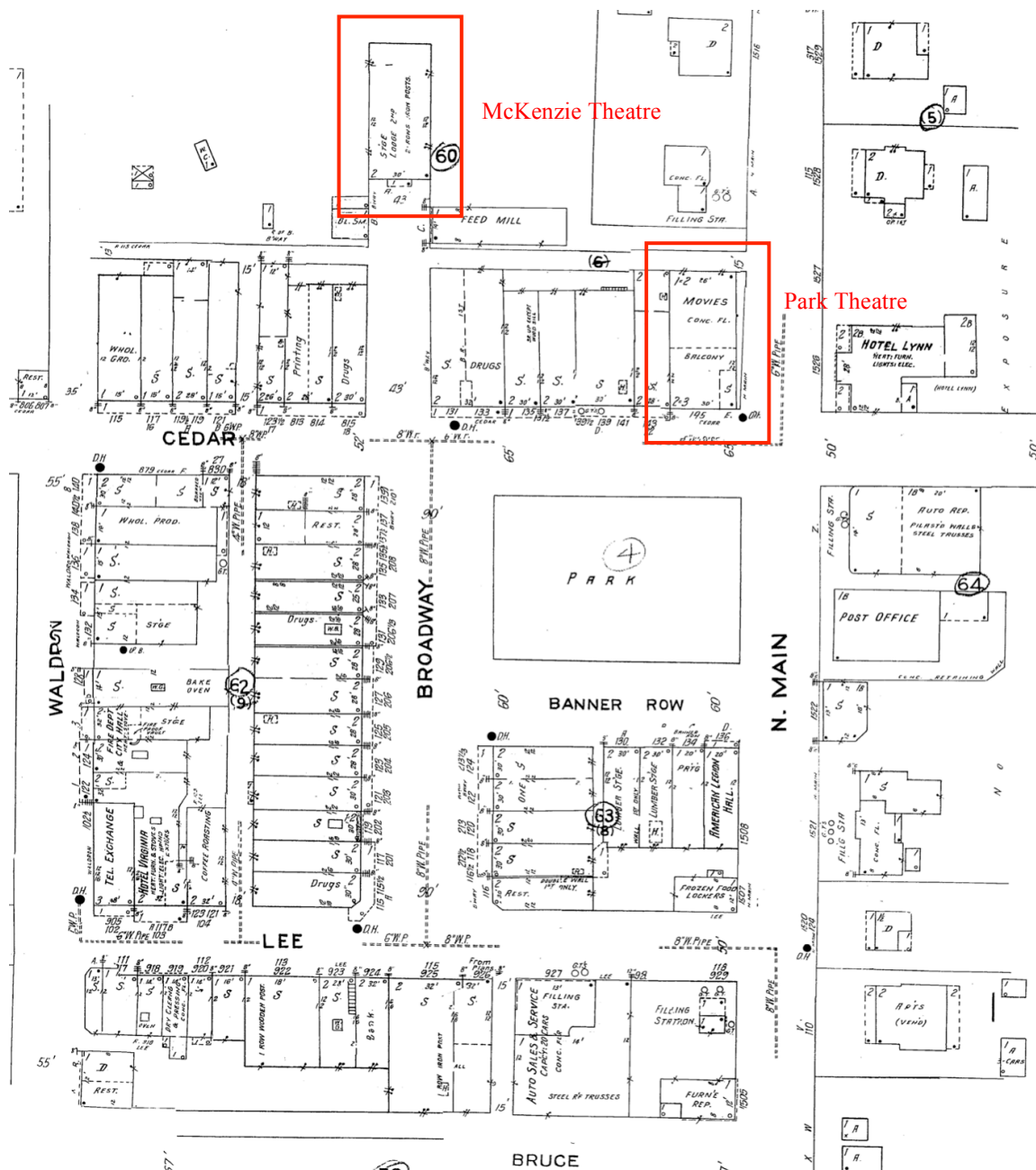


Figure 11. This 1944 map of McKenzie, Tennessee, illustrates the McKenzie and Park theatres' locations as well as the new theater's prominent location in the downtown  
*Source:* Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1944).



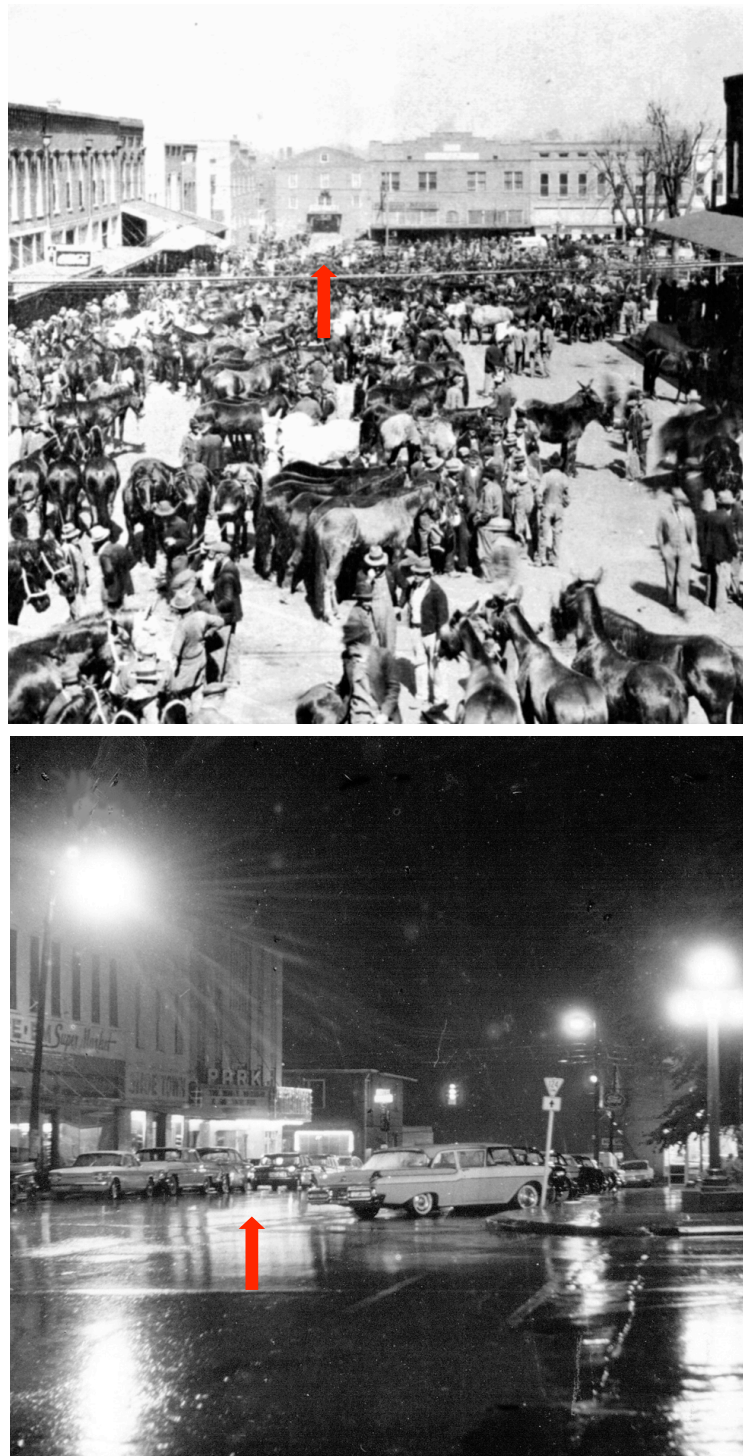


Figure 12. These images show the different strategic locations of theaters in McKenzie. The top photograph is looking down Broadway toward the Caledonia Masonic Lodge on Mule Day, ca. 1930. The bottom photograph is looking down Cedar toward the Park Theatre and the Lynn Hotel, ca. 1960. *Sources: McKenzie (TN) Banner.*



Cedar Streets transformed it into “the most important business and transportation cross-roads” in the Tri-County area (see fig. 13).<sup>7</sup>

In describing small-town or neighborhood theaters site locations, Ben Schlanger writes that as the popularity and profitability of motion pictures increased, locating on more expensive land became a more necessary and potentially more affordable option. Because of this, theater locations like the old McKenzie Theatre became less desirable and were abandoned. The new Park Theatre location was more attractive to automobile traffic and promised a higher gross income. Despite this, its more expensive acquisition costs, annual taxes, and monthly rent initially endangered Rockwood’s potential net income.

To compensate for these operational costs, many architects of small-town theaters included small shops at one or both corners of the building.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, theaters rented second-story office space or apartments between the ground-floor lobby and the balcony.<sup>9</sup> Numerous Tennessee towns exemplify this, including McKenzie (see fig. 8 and fig. 11), Huntingdon, Pulaski, Newbern (see fig. 10), Manchester, Ripley, Tiptonville, Milan (see

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<sup>7</sup> Advertisement, “The Crossroads of the Tri-Counties,” *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, July 4, 1941.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Schlanger, “Motion Picture Theaters,” *Architectural Record* 81 (February 1937), 17-20, republished in Gregory A. Waller, ed., *Moviegoin in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 222.

<sup>9</sup> Milan Theatre (Chickasaw) report, Milan, TN, William Waller Collection; Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *Newbern, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1945).

fig. 14), and Erwin (see fig. 15 and fig. 16). Typical businesses operating in these shops include optometrists, restaurants, and jewelry stores.

# MAIN AND CEDAR STREETS --- IN MCKENZIE

## The Crossroads of the Tri-Counties

With the opening this week of McKenzie's new \$30,000 theatre, the corner of Main and Cedar Streets in McKenzie becomes the most important business and transportation crossroads in Carroll, Henry and Weakley Counties.

The Austin Peay Highway, linking the north and south—Henry, Paris, Clarksville and Tressavant, Milan, Humboldt, Brownsville, Memphis, and Highway 22—crossing from east to west—Nashville, Waverly, Huntington and Gleason, Dresden, Martin, Union City, Fulton—meet at this intersection.

<b>National Stores Corp.</b> DRY GOODS, SHOES, CLOTHING, LAMPS, HEADPHONES, ETC.	<b>C. W. Covington Company</b> "Where Old Friends Meet" DRUGS "The Old Ladies' Beauty Salon" ON BALCONY	<b>KROGER GROCERY</b> Don't Forget! The U. S. O. and the Boys in Camp Won't Forget The Folks Back Home. ★	<b>J. A. Marshall Grocery</b> ★ UTOPE-EM ★ PUMPA FEEDS	<b>Palmer's Service Station</b> PAN-AM GASOLINE AND MOTOR OIL Opposite Hotel Lynn	<b>NEW PARK THEATER</b> GRAND OPENING JULY 3 AND 4 Newest Showhouse in West Tennessee
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TO PARIS, CLARKSVILLE, GLEASONVILLE, DAN

TO HUNTINGTON, NASHVILLE, WEAVER, TRACE PARK

TO MILAN, WOLF CREEK, HUNTSFORD, MEMPHIS

### Business Goes Where Traffic Flows

Grouped at this corner, where flows a constant stream of Tri-County traffic in all directions, is a modern and thriving business community, every building either entirely new or remodelled within the last few years. Adding the new theatre on Main Street is the remodelled Palmer Service Station, handling Pan-Am gasoline and motor oil products. Across the street is the New Lynn Hotel, one of the best hotels in any small town in Tennessee.

On the southeast corner of the intersection is the Tri-County Motor Co., J. W. Atkins, manager, which distributes Ford cars and trucks, Esso gasoline and Goodrich tires in this vicinity. South on Main Street is the new postoffice building and next door is a modern clinic, operated by Dr. J. I. Holmes, and Dr. R. J. Caldwell.

Extending west on Cedar Street, the route to Martin, Dresden, Union City and Reelfoot

### Trade in McKenzie -- The Best Town in West Tennessee

#### --- OPENING PROGRAMS AT THE NEW PARK THEATRE ---

THURSDAY, JULY 3	FRIDAY, JULY 4	SATURDAY, JULY 5
GALA OPENING—ONE DAY ONLY MERLE OBERON - DENNIS MORGAN - RITA HAYWORTH in <b>'AFFECTIONATELY YOURS'</b> ADMISSION—15 AND 18 CENTS	SPECIAL HOLIDAY ATTRACTION—ONE DAY ONLY JUDY CANYON in <b>'SIS HOPKINS'</b> WITH BOB CROSBY AND HIS BAND MATINEE 3 O'CLOCK ADMISSION—15 AND 18 CENTS	BIG DOUBLE FEATURE FRANK MORGAN - VIRGINIA GREY - DONALD MEER in <b>'HULLABALOO'</b> AND <b>Tim Holt in 'Along the Rio Grande'</b> ADMISSION—15 AND 18 CENTS

**The New HOTEL LYNN**  
HOTEL OF HOSPITALITY  
EXCELLENT FOOD

**Service**  
ESSE MOTOR OIL  
GOODRICH SAFETY TIRES  
TRI-COUNTY MOTOR COMPANY

U. S. POSTOFFICE

Clinic  
R. J. CALDWELL, DENTIST  
J. T. HOLMES, M. D.

Figure 13. July 4, 1941 advertisement and promotional map in the McKenzie Banner. Source: McKenzie (TN) Banner.

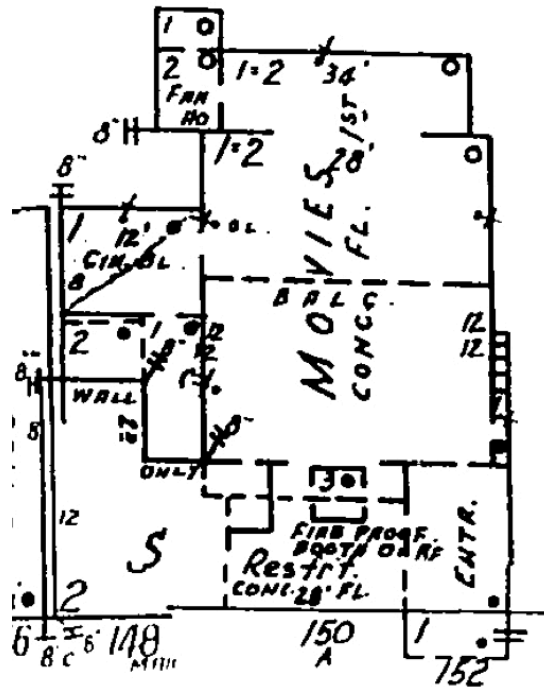


Figure 14. The Milan Theatre's floor plan in 1945 includes a store, restaurant, theater entrance, segregated stairs, balcony, a fan room, and office space. *Source:* Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *Milan, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1945).

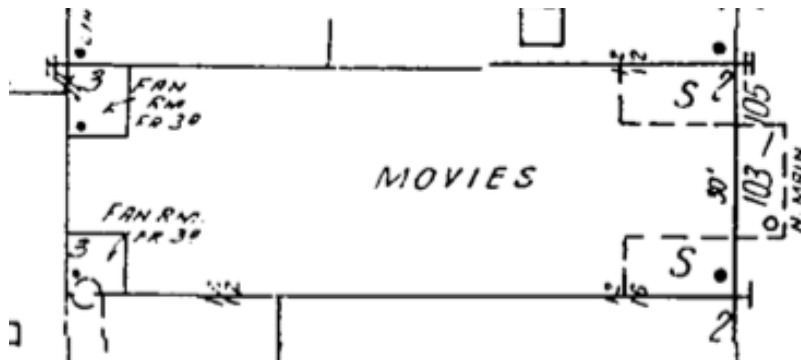


Figure 15. Erwin, Tennessee's Capitol Theatre in 1948 had two small corner shops and two "fan" units at the rear of the building. *Source:* Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *Erwin, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1931, revised 1948).

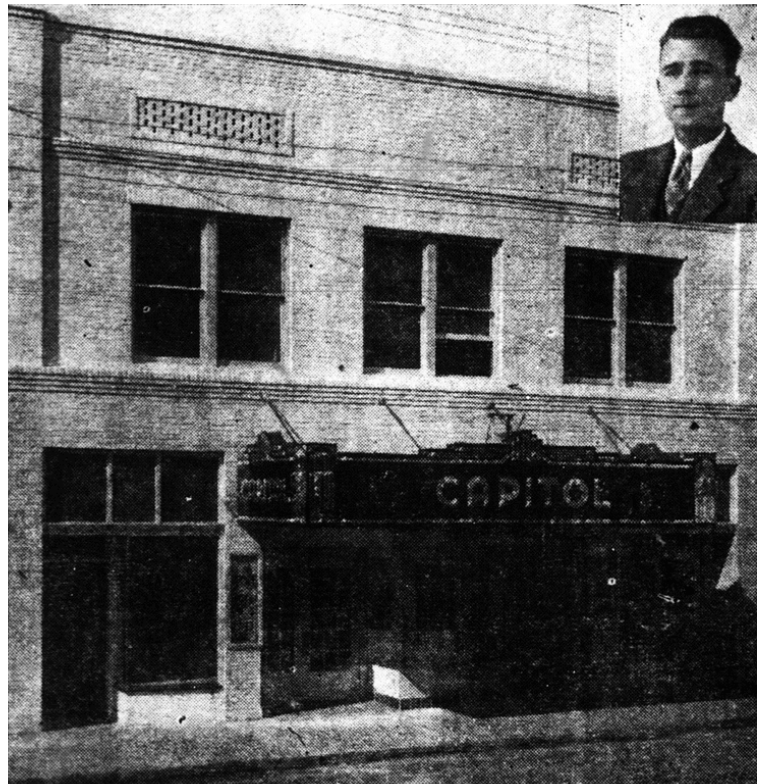


Figure 16. This photograph, published on the Capitol Theatre's 1935 opening shows the two corner shops. *Source: Erwin (TN) Record*

When Rockwood opened its new or remodeled theaters in McKenzie and Huntingdon, both had optometrists operating out of their corner shops.<sup>10</sup> These shops always complemented the modern architectural styles of the rest of the building, often incorporating structural glass and moldings. This incorporation is seen at the Park Theatre; here, the black Carrara glass wraps around the corner and down a portion of the

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<sup>10</sup> "Contractor Begins Work on Theater: City's New Showplace Will Be Completed About May 1," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, February 7, 1941; "Preview of McKenzie's New Theater," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, February 14, 1941; "New Theatre Building on Corner of Main and Cedar," *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, February 21, 1941; Advertisement, *Tennessee Republican (Huntington, TN)*, August 30, 1940.

side elevation. See figure 17 for a photograph that shows the front and side elevations and see figure 8 for a detailed image of the storefront.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 17. Ca. 1949 side elevation of the Park Theatre in McKenzie, Tennessee. *Source: McKenzie Banner*

Like many rural and small-town theaters, the Park Theatre illustrates the architectural design and cost considerations required of a small-town theater attempting to also provide theatergoers with “the largest and most modernly equipped in any West Tennessee town of McKenzie’s size.”<sup>12</sup> Clarence Speight, of the Speight and Hibbs architectural firm, directed the design and remodeling of the Park Theatre. Both he and

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<sup>11</sup> “Contractor Begins Work on Theater”; “Preview of McKenzie’s New Theater”; “New Theatre Building on Corner of Main and Cedar.”

<sup>12</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, December 6, 1940, 1. At the time the theater opened, McKenzie had a population of 1,858 people. See Charles Spurgeon Johnson, and Lewis Wade Jones, *Statistical Atlas of Southern Counties; Listing and Analysis of Socio-Economic Indices of 1104 Southern Counties*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

the firm specialized in theater design and construction, having designed fifty movie theaters in the South by 1941. In 1945, Speight and Hibbs' Clarksville firm was one of three Tennessee architectural firms listed in *The 1945 Film Daily Year Book*; the other two were based in Memphis.<sup>13</sup> Over the next twenty years, the number of Speight and Hibbs projects grew to at least 200, as the firm remodeled or designed movie theaters for some of Crescent's subsidiaries like the Ruffin Amusement Company of Covington, Cumberland Amusement Company of McMinnville, and the Park Theatre's owner, Rockwood Amusements Company of Nashville.<sup>14</sup>

The architectural firm's renovations in McKenzie transformed a downtown grocery into a minimalist Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne movie house, illustrating national trends common in small towns at the end of the Great Depression and prior to the United States' entry into World War II. At the end of the 1930s and early 1940s, entrepreneurs often could not afford to construct new buildings, opting to give buildings a practical and artful update that made use of inexpensive, "mass-produced and easy-to-install components" like brick and glass.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Theater Architects," in *The 1945 Film Daily Year Book of Motion Pictures*, ed. Jack Alicoate, 27th ed. (Fort Lee, NJ: The Film Daily, 1945), 697-699.

<sup>14</sup> Kimberley Murphy, "Ritz Theatre and Hoskins Rexall Drug Store No. 2" National Register nomination (1998), 15; and Vicki Smith, "Varsity Theater" National Register nomination (2010), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A Guide to American Commercial Architecture*, in the Building Watchers Series (Washington, D. C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 49; and David Gebhard, *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (New York: Preservation Press, 1996), 9-10.

Federal New Deal programs like the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), detailed in Gabrielle Esperdy's book *Modernizing Main Street*, encouraged and funded theater modernizations.<sup>16</sup> In 1936, the American Seating Company published an advertisement in the *Film Daily*, a daily industry newspaper, illustrating the FHA's and industry's view on theater upgrades (see fig. 18). The advertisement shows a shuttered picture palace covered in cobwebs while moviegoers stampede an Art Deco theater across the street. As the advertisement implies, discerning moviegoers preferred comfortable seats and a modern theater. In addition to new seats, updated marques, storefronts with structural glass, and box offices embodied the new, modern style. The text in the advertisement emphasizes that in order to survive, theater owners must transform their picture palace theater of the 1920s to the Art Deco or Streamline Moderne style of the 1930s and 1940s. One way to do this is by installing "harmoniously designed, COMFORTABLE" seating, which "has proved its box office punch" repeatedly.<sup>17</sup> Remodels like those promoted in the advertisement were part of the standard moviegoing experience in small towns. Regional architects, national industry journals, and local newspapers all promoted the importance of bringing a theater up to modern standards, emphasizing the negative effects of an out-of-date building. Crescent took this advice and commenced an extensive remodeling plan in the 1930s.

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<sup>16</sup> Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street: Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Deal*, Center Books on American Places (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 69, 163–164.

<sup>17</sup> "American Seating Company," advertisement in *The Film Daily*, March 30, 1936.





**ONE HOUSE RESEATED  
• • THE OTHER DID NOT**

There is no hoey about harmoniously designed, COMFORTABLE chairs "packing them in." RESEATING has proved its box office punch time and again.

Ask Us,  
"How can I reseat and pay for new chairs conveniently?"

**American Seating Company**

**COMFORT**  
The Greatest Star of Them All!



Makers of Dependable Seating for  
Theatres and Auditoriums

General Offices: Grand Rapids, Michigan

BRANCHES IN ALL PRINCIPAL CITIES

Figure 18. 1936 American Seating Company advertisement. *Source*: "American Seating Company," advertisement in *The Film Daily*, March 30, 1936.



Structural glass on the storefront and neon lights flashing on the marquee were exterior architectural features that marked the small-town movie theater as a modern entertainment venue. Interior features – like air-wash and heating plants, fire-proof projection rooms, air-cushion seats arranged so all moviegoers had clear sightlines, and lighting – contributed to the modern setting. These elements were comparable to those in urban theater; often newspapers announced that no expense was spared in the construction of the local theater. In Huntingdon, the *Tennessee Republican* wrote on August 30, 1940 that the Court Theatre “has taken on the appearance of theatres in much larger cities.” The *Union City Daily Messenger* took this sentiment further, making a direct comparison of the new Roxy Theatre’s neon-equipped marquee to two theaters in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>18</sup> While Crescent equipped all its theaters with features found at big-city theaters, the small-town versions were modest in comparison. Nashville’s Belle Meade Theatre (1940), designed by Joseph W. Holman, and the Park Theatre (1941), designed by Clarence Speight, illustrate the difference between urban and small-town theaters (see fig. 19 and fig. 17).

In the early stages of the remodel, the *McKenzie Banner* boasted of the new Park Theatres features that would make it “a modern plant in every respect.” These included a “washed air ventilation system,” a “modern fireproof projection room,” “modern cushioned seats,” and the best sound equipment.<sup>19</sup> Air washers were used in commercial

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<sup>18</sup> “Roxy Theatre Is Nearing Completion,” *Union City (TN) Daily Messenger*, February 22, 1939.

<sup>19</sup> “Contractor Begins Work on Theater”; “Work on New Movie House Begins Jan. 1.”



Figure 19. Belle Meade Theatre (1940) in Nashville, Tennessee. *Source:* Joseph W. Holman, in *The Theatre Catalog: 1942*.

air conditioning systems. They cleansed the air of smoke, dust, and particles by sending air through a mist of cold water. This system reduced humidity and lowered the temperature of the air, creating an artificially controlled environment for customer

comfort.<sup>20</sup> The systems referenced were frequently installed at the rear of the building. Figure shows two “fan” rooms at the rear Erwin’s Capitol Theatre while figure 20 shows cooling units installed at the Park Theatre in McKenzie.

Even though health laws required movie theaters to install and maintain adequate ventilation systems, theater owners and managers saw the financial benefits of air conditioning and humidity control. Until the late 1930s and early 1940s, air-conditioning was not widely popular in the residential market. Movie theaters, public buildings, and schools were among the few places that conditioned air. As a result, theaters nationwide promoted their “healthfully cool” interiors and the comfort of air-conditioned theaters. Their installation became an integral part of the luxurious moviegoing experience and contributed to the illusion of perfect order designed by architects and promoted by managers. In doing so, the technology transformed theatergoing from a seasonal to a year-round activity. While movie theaters provided the ideal market for comfort air-conditioning systems, they also served to convince the American public of the benefits and comforts of conditioned air. Through theater attendance, the residential and home market for air-conditioning units expanded, particularly after the Great Depression. By 1941, 92% of all theaters in the nation had some form of air treatment.<sup>21</sup> Since FHA

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<sup>20</sup> Gail Cooper, *Air-Conditioning America: Engineers and the Controlled Environment, 1900-1960* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 27–2, 55, 113.

<sup>21</sup> The Homewood Theatre of Birmingham, Alabama boasted “It’s Cool” and “Healthfully Cool” under their marquee. Cooper, *Air-Conditioning America*, 80-82, 108, 112; “A Summary of Modern Fronts: Designed in 1941,” in *The Theatre Catalog: 1942*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, Inc., 1942), 209, 212; and Advertisement, *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941.



Figure 20. Rear elevation of the Park Theatre, ca. 1997-2002. *Source:* McKenzie Industrial Board.

modernization loans covered upgrades like air-conditioning units, it is likely that this contributed to this statistic.

The recollections of a Capitol Theatre moviegoer in Union City provides some insight into the modern comforts of air-conditioning. This moviegoer observed that the theater had “the first large fan system” in town. When Crescent remodeled the theater, it reopened with the newest and most modern air treatment systems. He described this as, “and then, wonder of wonders, it was cooled by refrigeration. Gosh, it felt good!”<sup>22</sup> Like the Capitol, theaters with modern washed air ventilation systems and heating plants could

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<sup>22</sup> R. C. Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers: The History of Theatre in Union City* (Union City, TN: Masquerade Theatre, 1997), 49.

serve as a year round source of entertainment for moviegoers and revenue for their owners. As this recollection shows, a theater's upgrades, whether a minor touch up or major renovation, contributed to modern experience of "the show."<sup>23</sup>

Unlike air conditioning, fire-safety precautions had been standard throughout the industry since 1906. Despite this longstanding practice, newspaper articles advertising new or remodeled theaters emphasized and touted this engineered feature. The projection room's fireproof qualities and the local fire marshal's approval of the entire theater appear to have been nearly as important to newspaper columnists as the modern technology and designs. In 1916 Arthur Meloy, a New York architect, published a "practical treatise" on theater planning and construction. In his book he outlined the need for ample exits in case of fire or panic, the use of fireproof construction material everywhere possible, and the importance of a projection booth "made of fireproof materials."<sup>24</sup>

In addition, Meloy recommended that all projection rooms have a ventilation tube to which a "14 in. electric fan" was "always kept in motion while the operator is at work" to circulate outside air from the roof or front of the building.<sup>25</sup> The Park Theatre had two of these vents, one for in-take and the other for out-take. These features are clearly visible in historic and modern photographs of the theater like (see fig. 8). Adequate ventilation

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 70, 72, 78, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Arthur S. Meloy, *Theatres and Motion Picture Houses: A Practical Treatise on the Proper Planning and Construction of Such Buildings, and Containing Useful Suggestions, Rules and Data for the Benefit of Architects, Prospective Owners, Etc.* (New York: Architects' Supply and Publishing Company, 1916), 8, 24, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 58.

systems continued to receive attention in industry literature into the late 1940s. After conducting an eleven-year study, Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole describe requirements for the hot, enclosed spaces that projectionists worked in to provide entertainment to moviegoers. The architects wrote:

[I]t is necessary to cool the booth even in the winter time. Despite the safety requirement that all lamp houses be ventilated direct to outside, the lamp house picks up and re-radiates enough heat to make the booths an exceedingly uncomfortable place.<sup>26</sup>

The recollections of Gabe Clericuzio and Mary Kate Penn Ridgeway, children of managers at the Park Theatre and the Capitol Theatre respectively, provide perspective on how the architectural design of projection rooms helped determine who could work there. Ridgeway categorized the projectionists' task as a "man's job" while Clericuzio noted that the job was largely the province of men. He recalled, "I only remember guys applying for that job. There was no [A/C] in the projection booth. It was warm in there during the summer."<sup>27</sup> While these recollections stem from projectionists' working conditions, the task was also a skilled job that required training, further limiting women's opportunity. Like the projection room, theater planners and their audience used architecture to dictate segregated spaces.

The Park Theatre's original light fixtures, still in place, reflect national ideals for theater interiors in the early 1940s. In the *Theatre Catalog*, a prominent Nashville

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<sup>26</sup> Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, *Theatres & Auditoriums* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1949), 169.

<sup>27</sup> Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers*, 99; Cassandra Bennett to Gabe Clericuzio, email, "Park Theater," July 19, 2012.

architect, stockholder in the Crescent Amusement Company, and theater designer for the chain, Joseph W. Holman, wrote about the benefits of indirect lighting for the patron claiming, “a proper lighting scheme for the interior of a theatre should provide a gradual transition from the brilliancy of the marquee to the darkness of the auditorium.” He also argued “A light source should never be visible to the eyes of patrons in the modern motion picture theatre,” because the theaters sell their product in “semi-darkness” and must maintain the proper atmosphere.<sup>28</sup> Architect, Clarence Speight of Speight & Hibbs was aware of these design recommendations and expressed these ideas in the *McKenzie Banner* newspaper article, commenting, “soft lights flow from indirect fixtures giving the atmosphere a warm, exotic pleasantry.”<sup>29</sup> The Park Theatre’s original indirect lighting fixtures remain in the historic theater (see fig. 21 and fig. 22).

Despite the technological progress represented in theater innovations, these places of public accommodation were rooted in the past. Since the beginning of movie theater history in the early 1900s until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial segregation influenced the conception, design, and function of theaters, making a discussion of race central to architectural studies of small-town movie theaters in the South. By the time motion pictures began operating out of permanent buildings in the early 1900s, the tradition of segregated architecture was long established in laws, court decisions, and social norms throughout the Jim Crow south. Segregation laws passed in the 1880s and 1890s, as well

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph W. Holman, “The Theatrical Possibilities of Indirect Lighting,” in *The Theatre Catalog: 1942*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jay Emanuel Publications, Inc., 1942), 19.

<sup>29</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941.





Figure 21. Art Deco color scheme and Streamline Modern influenced curves. Notice the rounded corner of the stage at the far right. *Source:* MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP), Fall 2011.



Figure 22. Photograph show detail shots of the light fixtures. *Source:* MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.



as the United States Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), provided the basis for segregating public accommodation such as railroad cars, hotels, restaurants, and places of general amusement, which included theaters of all kinds.<sup>30</sup>

Robert Weyeneth notes that racial segregation created a “distinctive architectural form” that separated the races in two ways—isolation and partitioning. Most of the Crescent theaters in this architectural study were used by both races simultaneously. Their architects utilized partitioning to limit or manage contact between white and African-American patrons. Partitions do not necessarily mean a physical partition, but in the case of small-town movie theaters, this was the most common form of segregation. Because Weyeneth’s study is a nation-wide assessment of segregated architecture and not specifically focused on theaters, he acknowledges the limitations of his building-type specific treatments. As a result, his theater findings do not match those found in this Tennessee sampling. Despite this, his descriptions are worth discussing. Weyeneth argues that it was less common for a balcony to be partitioned. The most typical arrangement was to have a balcony only for African-American moviegoers.<sup>31</sup> But in the Park Theatre in McKenzie or the Capitol Theatre in Union City, the balcony was partitioned.

Weyeneth argues, further that in many cases African-American patrons accessed the theater through a segregated entrance on one side of the ticket box. Many African-

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth W. Mack, “Law, Society, Identity, and the Making of the Jim Crow South: Travel and Segregation on Tennessee Railroads, 1875-1905,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 24, no. Spring (1999): 379; Allen, “Relocating American Film History,” 71.

<sup>31</sup> Robert R. Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (2005): 11–12, 19–20.

American moviegoers used the same ticket box as white patrons, but were served at dedicated windows, much like the segregated railroad station waiting rooms, each with their own ticket window operated by the same attendant (see fig. 7). Weyeneth notes that frequently the segregated balcony entrance was a set of metal stairs on the exterior of the building.<sup>32</sup> In this case, at least one Tennessee theater seems to confirm Weyeneth's description of black access to moviegoing. The theater in Milan, Tennessee provided an exterior staircase for its black patrons on the right side of the building (see fig. 14).

The balcony arrangement at the Park and Capitol theaters differed somewhat from what Weyeneth described as typical of balcony architecture, although he did acknowledge the existence of partitioned balconies. Both the Park and the Capitol were built with a fixed wall that divided the two races with white patrons accessing their side of the space by stairs located in the interior lobby.<sup>33</sup> One recollection of the Capitol Theatre describes the arrangement like this: "Blacks would enter via the stairs to the left of the ticket booth. Whites would enter through a small but elegant lobby to the right" (see fig. 23). This same moviegoer, in describing the preferred or assigned seating location of patrons, described the balcony as the ideal spot for "those with dates" where a "high wooden partition" divided the space down the middle with "whites on one side and blacks on the other" (see fig. 24).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 19–20; Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 73.

<sup>33</sup> Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation," 11–12, 19–20.

<sup>34</sup> Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers*, 54–55. Many of the recollections of theaters in Union City, Tennessee, come from this source. Over half of *Footlights & Flickers* are narratives by the "Friends of the Capitol" in a chapter entitled, "Capitol Memories."

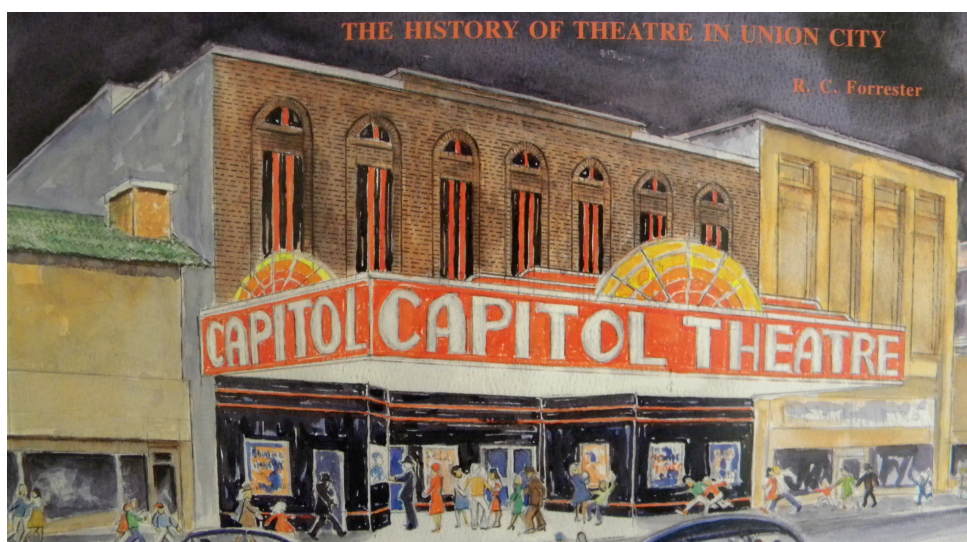


Figure 23. Watercolor by Thel Taylor, featured on the cover of *Footlights & Flickers: The History of Theatre in Union City* by R. C. Forrester (1997). Source: *Footlights & Flickers*.



Figure 24. The partition is seen in this 1954 photograph of Union City's Capitol Theatre. It is visible just below and to the right of the projection beam.<sup>35</sup> Source: *Footlights & Flickers*.

<sup>35</sup> "Capitol Interior, 1954," *ibid.*, 36.

The partition at the Park Theatre did not extend all the way to the rear wall of the balcony. Instead, segregated stairwells served as a physical partition while the aisle served as a mentally understood divider (see fig. 25, fig. 26, fig. 27). Harder, a white Park Theatre moviegoer, remembers the balcony's partition physically dominating the space. He recollects that a low wall that ran from the bottom of the first seat to the top of the balcony; this wall divided the African-American corner from the white portion. Despite his incorrect memory, the partition's permeability allowed African-Americans to use the whole balcony if no white patrons were sitting in the white balcony, which was normally closed until the main floor filled.<sup>36</sup>

The Park Theatre's interior segregated stairway, no longer extant, led to a platform where African-Americans had separate toilet facilities then continued up to their corner of the balcony (see fig. 26). If these patrons wished to buy concessions, they were required to purchase them from the woman selling tickets in the box office rather than from concessions stands inside.<sup>37</sup> Theater employees brought the concessions outside to African-American moviegoers.<sup>38</sup> Because of partitions like these, many white moviegoers have limited memories of African-Americans attending their local theater. In recalling balcony seating, Margaret True Duncan recalls that "no one was allowed in

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<sup>36</sup> Kenneth Harder interview, December 5, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; Robbie Story interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Waldrick and Jill Holland interview, September 29, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>38</sup> Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.



Figure 25. These photographs show the African-American section of the Park Theatre balcony. Photograph by MTSU CHP, Fall 2011 after seats were removed from the theater. *Source:* MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.





Figure 26. During segregation, African-American moviegoers used this stairwell and extant platform with bathrooms to the left and right. Changes to the building in 2002 terminated this stairwell at the platform. *Source*: MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.

the balcony unless there was an overflow” from an unusually large audience.<sup>39</sup> In this statement, she not only negated the existence of segregation, but also fellow moviegoers who were relegated to worst seats in the house. A former theater manager and a fellow Capitol Theatre patron confirmed this idea. The patron wrote, “The people in the balcony were the ones who probably weren’t watching the movie.”<sup>40</sup> Another Capitol Theatre moviegoer recalls:

The balcony was rarely open except for the left (north) side where blacks were required to sit. A partition separated the two sides of the balcony. Blacks entered behind the ticket office where there was a separate ticket window. Their fares were lower than ours. (It never occurred to me before, but there were probably no restrooms or water fountains for them to use.) There was one small men’s room

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<sup>39</sup> Forrester, *Footlights & Flickers*, 70.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 104, 95.

and one small ladies' room at the back of the downstairs seating section for whites only.<sup>41</sup>

As this observer notes, African-American ticket prices were lower but this was likely because of the poor quality of seats. The African-American section was always the furthest from the screen in the least desirable location, often in the balcony or simply a portion of the balcony.<sup>42</sup> Here, the noise of the projection room impeded the quality of the black moviegoer's experience as well. The purpose of racial segregation was twofold: to isolate African-American customers from white moviegoers and to limit the viewing and "social moviegoing environment as experienced by white patrons."<sup>43</sup>

Despite limited written accounts of segregated spaces, particularly in newspaper articles describing a new theater or one created by remodeling an existing building, racial separation was requisite in Southern movie theaters no matter their location as evidenced by the 1939 theater histories found in the William Waller Collection at TLSA. This collection of histories, written by Crescent-associated exhibitors for the *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et al* Supreme Court Case, provides little written description of segregation, but lists the differing ticket prices for white and African-American moviegoers, indicating that nearly all of the theaters in operation at the time had some means of segregation in place, whether it was architecturally implemented or exclusion

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>42</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18–19; Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation," 19.

<sup>43</sup> Allen, "Relocating American Film History," 74.

from the theater as a whole.<sup>44</sup> There are four instances where local papers addressed segregated architecture. All of these instances occurred in three Carroll County newspapers—the *McKenzie Banner*, *Tennessee Republican*, and *Carroll County Democrat*.<sup>45</sup>

As the *McKenzie Banner* began publishing articles on the proposed Park Theatre and construction progress, authors unapologetically noted the segregated layout of the future theater. As described in the newspaper, the theater's storefront, from right to left, had a small office at the corner of Cedar and Main Street, a "stairway leading to the negro balcony," "double box office" next to main entrance "built so as to serve both white and colored patrons," double doors to the lobby, and a stairway leading to three second floor offices.<sup>46</sup> See figure 27 for a sketch of this layout and figure 8 for a photograph.

This examination of McKenzie, and especially its Park Theatre, illustrates the transition from picture palaces to movie theaters in the Crescent Amusement Company system. From the segregated architecture to a newspaper's proud announcement of their town's new theater, these places of escapism and modernity captured the imagination of small-town and rural residents, were a source of income for local businesses who

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 73; All theater reports in collection, William Waller Collection.

<sup>45</sup> "McKenzie Starts 1941 with High Building Score: New Theater Contract Let This Week in Nashville," *McKenzie (TN) Banner*, January 31, 1941; "Preview of McKenzie's New Theater"; "Local Theatre Enlarges Space," *Tennessee Republican (Huntington, TN)*, September 17, 1940, Bruceton News Section edition; "A \$4000 Dollar Improvement for the New Ritz," *Carroll County (TN) Democrat*, February 21, 1941, The Bruceton Reporter edition.

<sup>46</sup> "Preview of McKenzie's New Theater"; "McKenzie Starts 1941 with High Building Score."



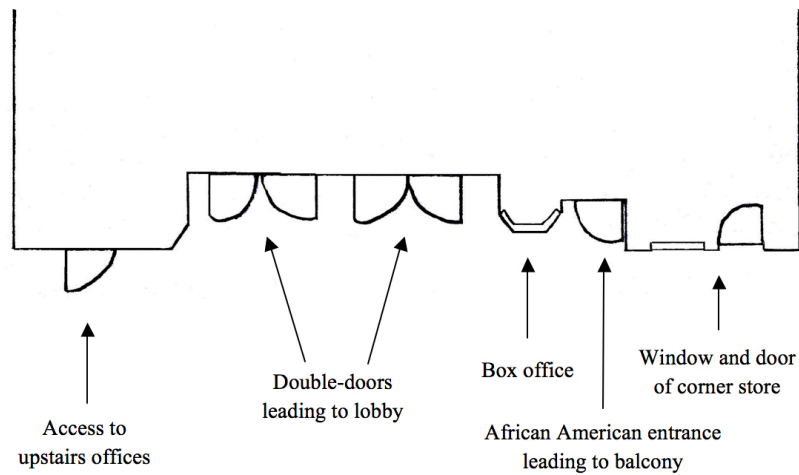


Figure 27. This sketch was drawn pulling information from all available photographs of the Park Theatre. Though it is not exact, it illustrates the layout of the Park Theatre's storefront. *Source:* Author.

benefited from the show's draw, and were one in many that the amusement company managed to provide the ideal moviegoing experience. The small-town movie theater's architecture, though more modest than its urban counterparts, brought the same comforts and technologies to its rural audiences who came to see the show.

Today, these attributes remain valid as small towns consider returning their historic movie theater to its former glory. Whether rehabilitating the building to host live theatre (Union City), show movies (Manchester), or operate a fitness center (Martin), these historic assets provide their communities with important gather places and connections to the recent past. Despite the potential enthusiasm surrounding a theater's revitalization, its location in a small town presents significant challenges. These are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: PRESERVATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE PARK THEATRE IN MCKENZIE, TENNESSEE

Historic downtown movie theaters in rural communities present distinct historic preservation challenges, benefits, and outcomes that are worth exploring. These theaters represent significant public entertainment venues in small towns, both past and present. By analyzing a West Tennessee case study, this research will assess the impact of preservation practice at the theater in McKenzie and relate that local story to national trends in movie theater preservation. The research will also explore numerous aspects of theater preservation; the economics of restorations, renovations, and rehabilitation; their role in downtown revitalization projects and within the context of the National Trust's Main Street Program; theaters' ability to unite a diverse group of supporters, from local preservationists to city planners and developers; and the material and discursive preservation of segregated architecture in these pre-Civil Rights buildings.

Historic picture palaces and movie theaters provide excellent cornerstone projects for a community's early efforts to revitalize the downtown because they garner diverse supporters. These places are full of childhood and young adult memories, providing a project that many can see themselves supporting. Longtime residents have emotional attachments to the place they had their first kiss, saw iconic films like *Gone With the Wind*, or where they were captivated by Will Rogers and the week's serial. Theater preservationist and former director of the National Main Street Center, Kennedy Smith

writes, “more than most buildings, theatres are the places where lifetime memories are made.”<sup>1</sup>

Like many historic buildings, the local theater is a source of great pride and links a community’s past, present, and future. An example of this is found in Union City. Phyllis Rauchle, the director of Main Street Union City, and Sacchi Doss, a board member of a local theater organization, expressed both of these ideas in a recent conversation. When asked why activists worked renovate the Capitol Theatre (1927) for theatrical productions, Doss observed that it “is you and always will be a part of us.” She also noted that in its early years, the organization had plans drawn for a new theater building to be located near the Wal-Mart. The board decided against this plan because a new building would not have been “a part of our past,” it “wasn’t our town.” Doss felt that a new building by the supermarket would not have connected the community’s past to the future as the organization wanted.<sup>2</sup>

The preservation, rehabilitation, and adaptive reuse of historic movie theaters mirrors the larger preservation movement nationwide. Since the mid-1960s, numerous American preservation organizations have turned their attention to the special circumstances, needs, and benefits that surround theater preservation projects, marking

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<sup>1</sup> Kennedy Smith, “Rescuing and Rehabilitating Historic Main Street Theaters,” *MainStreet News* 232 (September 2006): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Sacchi Doss and Phyllis Rauchle, interview by author, Union City, TN, November 20, 2012.

the beginning of a “vibrant theater-restoration movement.”<sup>3</sup> These groups include the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the League of Historic American Theatres (LHAT), and the Theater Historical Society of America. Many of these groups’ early efforts focused on the opera houses and picture palaces where vaudeville and motion pictures were exhibited from the same building. More recently, in 2000, Cinema Treasures was established as an online database and resource for theaters worldwide. Each of these organizations demonstrates the growing interest and developing maturity of the theater preservation movement, eventually incorporating small-town movie theaters by the 1990s, as it has continued into the twenty-first century.

One of the earliest widely read National Trust publications related to theater preservation is a brief 1983 article on picture palaces in *Historic Preservation*. This article, entitled “Showstoppers,” by John Ashby Wilburn, focuses on the preservation and adaptive reuse of three West Coast picture palaces with seating capacities and opulence far exceeding that seen in small-town movie theaters. While Wilburn does not address the preservation of rural theaters, many of the arguments made for large urban projects remain relevant to small-town projects today. His most compelling observations are those related to economical and community improvement. Wilburn notes that in the three cases presented, it proved cheaper to renovate the existing theater than build new, active

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Stoddard, *Preservation of Concert Halls, Opera Houses and Movie Palaces*, Information Sheet No. 16 (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1978, 1981), 1; John Ashby Wilburn, “Showstoppers,” in *Historic Preservation*, 35 (March/April 1983): 26–30.

theaters helped increased the sales at nearby businesses by 100%, and the theaters had the ability to improve the quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Each of these points continues to be true today.

In 1987, the National Trust published a guide entitled, *Great American Movie Theaters* by David Naylor. Throughout the book, Naylor focuses primarily on pre-1940 picture palaces. This focus illustrates the field's disinterest in small-town movie theaters at the time of publication but by 1993, the National Trust's *Information Series* includes a section of case studies dedicated to the "Movie Houses." These places of entertainment were single-purpose buildings designed by local architects who used modest decorations on theaters seating less than 1,000 moviegoers.<sup>5</sup> The National Trust's inclusion of this theater type illustrates a shift in the theater preservation movement.

Since 1993, the National Trust has continued to increase its recognition of smaller movie theaters and put "Historic American Movie Theaters" on its 2001 "11 Most Endangered Historic Places" list. The listing noted deterioration and neglect as the major threats to their future.<sup>6</sup> While director of the National Main Street Center and board member of LHAT, Kennedy Smith wrote an article for *Main Street News* that supplemented the listing; in this article, Smith outlined the financial challenges facing these single-screen movie theaters in urban historic downtowns but did not directly

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<sup>4</sup> Wilburn, "Showstoppers," 26–30.

<sup>5</sup> Grey Hautaluoma and Mary Margaret Schoefeld, *Curtain Up: New Life for Historic Theaters*, Information Series No. 72 (Washington, D.C.: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1993), 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> National Trust for Historic Preservation, "11 Most Endangered Historic Places (2001): Historic American Movie Theaters," *National Trust for Historic Preservation*, 2001, <http://www.preservationnation.org/issues/11-most-endangered/locations/historic-american-movie-theaters.html#.UL6E9Y5xuX8> (accessed October 5, 2012).

address those located in small-towns.<sup>7</sup> Smith's association with Main Street and LHAT in 2001 and help demonstrate the connection between downtown revitalization and theater preservation.

In 1976, activists established the LHAT as an organization dedicated to the preservation of historic theaters whose stages played an important role in theatre history and continue to provide a venue for the performing arts today. By the end of the 1980s, the nonprofit "was an established and important asset in the national preservation movement," with the National Trust for Historic Preservation deferring technical theater preservation questions to the League.<sup>8</sup> The organization's 2006 publication of *Historic Theatre Rescue, Restoration, Rehabilitation and Adaptive Reuse Manual* provides a free 42-page guide full of short essays dedicated to saving a historic theater and making it a sustainable part of a community. Though the focus is on historic opera houses and picture palaces, the planning, fundraising, and community engagement guides are relevant to small-town movie theaters.

Today, Cinema Treasures uses social media and crowdsourcing to provide quick and fairly reliable information about the current status and history of the 26,087 American theaters listed. Though the Cinema Treasures website has listings for theaters

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<sup>7</sup> Kennedy Smith, "The Last Picture Show," *Main Street News*, June 2001, <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/main-street-news/2001/06/the-last-picture-show.html> (accessed October 6, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Judith E Daykin, "A Historical Synopsis of the League of Historic American Theatres," League of Historic American Theatres, <http://lhat.org/about/history.aspx> (accessed November 28, 2012).

worldwide, 75% are located in the United States.<sup>9</sup> The website also serves as a blog with postings relevant to recent openings and closings, preservation updates, renovations, and restorations, just to name a few. Founders and volunteers monitor Cinema Treasures to help keep discussions on topic and relevant. Ross Melnick, a co-founder, has a Ph.D. in Cinema and Media Studies and contributes to the website's credibility.<sup>10</sup>

The following case study explores the historic Park Theatre in McKenzie and how Park's late-twentieth century history reflects larger regional and national preservation trends. The Park Theatre (1941) is located in McKenzie, Tennessee; the city is currently working to preserve and restore the building as a multiuse facility for community plays, movies, and meeting space.

Since 1999, the City of McKenzie and the McKenzie Industrial Board have made efforts to reuse the building as a pizzeria, welcome center, and small-business incubator with hopes of opening a cinema.<sup>11</sup> Between these failed efforts and 2010, work at the theater ceased. This struggle to put a historic theater to long-term, successful use is

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<sup>9</sup> Cinema Treasures, "Movie Theaters in United States," <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/united-states> (assessed December 3, 2012); and Cinema Treasures, "Movie Theaters around the world," <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters?page=1> (assessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Cinema Treasures, "Team," <http://cinematreasures.org/team> (accessed December 3, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> "New Sign at Old Movie Theater," *McKenzie Banner*, June 20, 2001, Online archive, "Local News," [www.mckenziebanner.net/2001/2001news/news\\_June20\\_2001.htm](http://www.mckenziebanner.net/2001/2001news/news_June20_2001.htm) (accessed July 19, 2012); and Joel Washburn, "McKenzie Welcome Center is Under Construction," *McKenzie Banner*, November 20, 2002, Online archive, "Local News," [www.mckenziebanner.net/2002/2002\\_news/news\\_Nov20\\_02.htm](http://www.mckenziebanner.net/2002/2002_news/news_Nov20_02.htm) (accessed July 19, 2012).

reflected in small towns across the state. An example of this is in Greeneville with the Capitol Theatre (1934); the community, Main Street Greeneville, and several property owners have struggled on and off since the 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

In McKenzie, the election of Mayor Jill Holland reinvigorated the town's historic preservation and economic development efforts. In 2010, McKenzie applied for and received Tennessee Downtown designation, a program run by the Department of Economic and Community Development. The following summer, McKenzie's Tennessee Downtown program launched. Tennessee uses this competitive designation to teach selected towns and cities the National Trust's Main Street Program's four-point approach to economic development and historic preservation. The goal for a Tennessee Downtown community is Main Street status. There are currently 38 Tennessee Downtown communities and 27 Main Street communities in Tennessee.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Velma Southerland, "Capitol Theatre Once Again Appears Headed To Auction," *Greeneville (TN) Sun*, April 7, 2011, [http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local\\_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-Once-Again-Appears-Headed-To-Auction-id-314085](http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-Once-Again-Appears-Headed-To-Auction-id-314085); Velma Southerland, "Capitol Theatre For Sale Again," *Greeneville (TN) Sun*, June 24, 2010, [http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local\\_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-For-Sale-Again-id-310031](http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-For-Sale-Again-id-310031); Velma Southerland, "Capitol Theatre to Reopen Thurs. as Auction House," *Greeneville (TN) Sun*, November 5, 2011, [http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local\\_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-To-Reopen-Thurs-As-Auction-House-id-316856](http://www.greenevillesun.com/Local_News/article/Capitol-Theatre-To-Reopen-Thurs-As-Auction-House-id-316856); "Capitol Theatre in Greeneville, TN," *Cinema Treasures*, accessed November 24, 2013, <http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/28198>.

<sup>13</sup> "Twelve Communities Selected for Tennessee Downtowns," TN.gov Newsroom, press release posted December 7, 2010, <http://news.tn.gov/node/6440> (accessed December 1, 2012); Minutes of the McKenzie Historic Preservation Commission, August 25, 2011, McKenzie, Tennessee, <http://mckenzieta.gov/home/government/boards-a-commissions/historic-preservation-commission/agenda-a-minutes> (accessed August 14, 2012); "Tennessee Downtowns program launches in McKenzie," *McKenzie Banner* August 30, 2011; 1; "Tennessee



The Park Theatre is an important heritage asset to a community working to graduate from Tennessee Downtown status to a designated Main Street town. In 2001 and 2002, the McKenzie Industrial Development Board, which works closely with the City of McKenzie, completed major renovations to the building: these included, replacing the theater's second marquee (the original was removed ca. 1992), remodeling the entryway and exterior wall treatments, and significantly altering the lobby (see fig. 28, fig. 29, and fig. 30 for these alterations).<sup>14</sup> By making these changes, architectural features representative of the Jim Crow era segregation have largely been removed from the theater exterior but remain evident in the balcony and top half of the segregated stairwell (see fig. 31 and fig. 26). The theater's auditorium, balcony, and second-story offices maintain a much higher degree of integrity (fig. 32 and fig. 33).

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Main Street Program & Tennessee Downtowns," Tennessee Main Street Program, <http://www.tennesseeainstreet.org/> (accessed December 6, 2013); "Six Communities Selected for Third Round of Tennessee Downtowns: Downtown Revitalization Program Offers Selected Communities Technical Assistance, Training," TN.gov Newsroom, press release posted February 6, 2013, <http://news.tn.gov/node/10252> (accessed December 6, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> "New Sign at Old Movie Theater," *McKenzie Banner*, June 20, 2001; "McKenzie Welcome Center," *McKenzie Banner*, November 20, 2002; *McKenzie Banner*, "1986 homecoming86parade," ca. 1986, photograph, in "McKenzie Historic Photo Gallery," *SmugMug*, <http://banner.smugmug.com/History/McKenzie-Historic-Photo> (accessed February 5, 2013); Carroll Van West, "Park Theatre," ca. 1992, photograph, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, Tennessee; McKenzie Industrial Board, "Park Theatre," ca. 1999-2002, photograph, McKenzie Industrial Board, McKenzie, Tennessee; Gabe Clericuzio, e-mail message to author, July 26, 2012.



Figure 28. Park Theatre's storefront in 1986. Photograph suggests that the original marquee remained underneath the paneling. *Source: McKenzie Banner.*



Figure 29. Park Theatre's second marquee ca. 1992; it was replaced in 2001 by the McKenzie Industrial Development Board. *Source: Carroll Van West, MTSU CHP*



Figure 30. “Park Theatre, front” ca. 1999-2002. *Source:* McKenzie Industrial Board, McKenzie, Tennessee.



Figure 31. Park Theatre storefront in 2011. *Source:* MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.





Figure 32. Park Theatre auditorium in 2011. *Source:* MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.



Figure 33. An office space above the Park Theatre in 2011. *Source:* MTSU CHP, Fall 2011.

In the auditorium and balcony, many of the building's Streamline Moderne decorations and 1941 industry innovations are extant; much of the original celotex sound-absorbing wall treatment is present, original lamps that once provided indirect lighting remain, and the stage and decorative detailing remain. Two major alterations to the auditorium were required since 2011. These include the removal of ceiling tiles and carpeting, because of inadequate climate control, and the temporary relocation of the

original 1941 seats to an off-site storage-facility. These seats are available for possible restoration if the City decides to do so.

Currently, Park Theatre supporters do not feel it is cost effective to restore all of the original seats and only plans to restore several examples of each kind. Though it may not be practical for McKenzie to do, the Main Street program in Tiptonville, Tennessee, recently utilized an inexpensive labor from nearby state penitentiary to restore original theater seats. Prison crews from the Northwest Correctional Complex refinished and reupholstered the original theater seats of the Strand Theatre. This kind work saved Main Street \$50,000 to \$75,000.<sup>15</sup>

Built after the heyday of multipurpose vaudeville and movie palaces, the Park Theatre currently does not have a stage adequate for local theatrical productions like the community desires. Though Smith does not explicitly state that single-purpose theaters, like those designed for motion pictures exhibition, cannot be renovated to incorporate a larger stage, a stage house, and dressing rooms, this work must be conducted with the utmost care to comply with Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, particularly if hoping to eventually be listed on the National Register or to take advantage of tax credits.<sup>16</sup> Currently, the Park Theatre does not plan to use such federal historic

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<sup>15</sup> "Tiptonville theater making debut after renovation," *Dyersburg State Gazette* November 22, 2009, <http://www.stategazette.com/story/1589210.html> (accessed November 19, 2012); and Bob Elderkin with Sacchi Doss, interview with author, Union City, TN, November 20, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, "Rescuing and Rehabilitating Historic Main Street Theaters," 5.

rehabilitation tax credits because it is city owned but if the property owned by a nonprofit, these would be more easily available.

The director of the Carolina Theatre (1926) in Durham, North Carolina, has observed that frequently the vision that saved a historic theater does not match the vision needed to keep it financially sustainable.<sup>17</sup> In Union City, this has not been an issue for the Capitol Theatre; here, the theater's preservation leaders clearly assessed the building's stability and historic integrity with potentially prohibitive costs of the preservation guidelines established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Secretary of the Interior, and the Tennessee Preservation Trust (TPT). Emily Timm Elliston, a Union City resident involved in the early preservation efforts of the Capitol Theatre, notes that the Masquerade Theatre declined funds from the TPT because they did not want to follow prescribed preservation guidelines. She further notes that even if it is not true preservation project as defined by professionals, local residents regard it as such.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, the Capitol Theatre is an example of adaptive reuse; the community saved a historic building while altering it to meet both financial and physical needs.

If the City of McKenzie and preservation leaders decide that the building's proposed live theater function outweighs strict preservation guidelines, there are several recommendations they can follow as they make future alterations. These include the

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<sup>17</sup> Janna Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 202.

<sup>18</sup> Emily Timm Elliston, phone interview by author, Union City and Murfreesboro, TN, November 11, 2012.

preservation of the original seating area and properly scaling and massing any additions made. In early preservation planning conversations with Mayor Jill Holland, she indicated that the City had plans to extend the stage area out into original seating space. The Center for Historic Preservation is recommending that the original seating area remain intact and to expand the stage to the rear of the building. This will require the extensive adaptations to the rear elevation, potentially a complete rebuilding of the back stage area. If this addition has proper massing and does not overwhelm the original 1941 portion, this will be a more appropriate than removing seating area.

The local recognition Elliston observed is important when considering preservation projects in small-towns. The Capitol Theatre's 1998 listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the 1997 publication of *Footlights & Flickers: The History of Theatre in Union City* by R. C. Forrester, the county historian, helped further consolidate local support and fundraising efforts. As a central organizing project, the Capitol Theatre preservation sparked revitalization efforts throughout the downtown. By drawing the community back to the central business district, businesses had renewed motivation to invest in their building's appearance and attracted new companies downtown. For this reason, the Park Theatre's current lack of a National Register of Historic Places designation does not lessen the building's central role in McKenzie's preservation and downtown revitalization.

Movie theaters' segregated past presents a challenge when preserving these important buildings, including the Park Theatre and the Capitol Theatre. An issue that faces the preservation of segregated architectural features is their inherently controversial

nature. Robert Z. Melnick touches on this challenge in posing this question, “How do we reconcile my past with your past, even in the same landscape?” As Janna Jones argues in *The Southern Movie Palace: Rise, Fall, and Resurrection*, that even if the physical evidence of segregation have been erased in efforts to forget this past, the building still carries the scars caused by the Jim Crow era of American history. Simply removing traces of this painful and controversial past does not transform the building into a place that all members of the community feel connected to.<sup>19</sup>

Jones observes that mid-1970s preservation efforts at three large southern picture palaces did not receive the same nostalgic response from African-American residents as it did from white residents. The author notes that, “it is not surprising they did not actively involve themselves in the efforts to save the theaters” because their history in the space was largely ignored.<sup>20</sup>

Following up on the Capitol Theatre’s segregated history, preservationists there did not actively try to “erase” the past but they also did not consciously try to preserve and protect that aspect of the building’s architecture.<sup>21</sup> Because of this, the evidence of segregation at the Capitol Theatre has been completely erased from the publicly accessible portions of the building and almost entirely removed from the remainder of the building like the balcony, used for storage and sound and light tech. By erasing these features, preservationists ignore a key component of our philosophy, which is “to ensure

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, *The Southern Movie Palace*, 204–208.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>21</sup> Sacchi Doss, interview by author, Union City, TN, November 20, 2012.



that we do not forget what we did yesterday.”<sup>22</sup> In preserving such aspects of a building’s architecture, we are able to promote “public education, understanding about modern race relations, and social tolerance.”<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, small-town movie theaters, like all historic buildings, allow us to connect to and understand our past. By recognizing the economic benefits of these heritage assets, whether listed on the National Register or not, small-towns can use their theaters to stimulate downtown revitalization and improve their residents’ quality of life. As past and present venues for entertainment and socializing, theaters draw people to them. The flash of neon and the sparkle of old memories make movie theaters the ideal building blocks for economic development in sleepy downtowns.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Z. Melnick, “Are We There Yet? Travels and Tribulations in the Cultural Landscape,” in *Cultural Landscapes: Balancing Nature and Heritage in Preservation Practice*, ed. Richard Longstreth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 201.

<sup>23</sup> Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation,” 44.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A – CRESCENT THEATERS MAP AND DATABASE

It is impossible to convey all my findings through printed maps. Drawing inspiration from Robert Allen's online resource for North Carolina theaters, *Going to the Show*, I have made my work available online.<sup>1</sup> Though my website, *Crescent Amusement Company, the Southeast's Exhibitor: Tennessee's Moviegoing History & Theater Preservation*, will be an ongoing project, I want to make it available to moviegoing historians, preservationists, and those interested in Crescent's history. Access the Google Earth map here, <http://moviegoingtn.wordpress.com/map/>, and the Excel database here, <http://moviegoingtn.wordpress.com/analyze/>.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C. Allen, "Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina," *Going to the Show*, accessed February 26, 2013, [www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts](http://www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts).

## APPENDIX B – PARK THEATRE, MCKENZIE, TENNESSEE, TIMELINE

ca. 1920	Two story, concrete floor building with a composition roof built. There was one row of wooden posts. <sup>2</sup>
1926	Chevrolet Sales & Service operated in the building and had a fifteen-car capacity. No known changes between 1920 and 1926. <sup>3</sup>
ca. 1927 – 1940	Operated as Lovelace-Farmer & Company until March of 1940. It is unknown when it stopped operating as a car dealership and began operating as a grocer. <sup>4</sup>
1936 ca.	L. N. Dunlap, of the Caledonia Masonic Lodge, contacted Rockwood Amusement Co. and offered to lease the theater portion of the Lodge. Rockwood declined the offer. <sup>5</sup>
1939 April 4	Rockwood Amusement Co. purchased the McKenzie Theatre from Douglas Moore for \$9,000. Early in 1939, Rockwood “leased a storeroom in the heart of the best business block” with plans to remodel and open the building as a new movie theater; this was the motivation Moore needed to sell out to Rockwood. <sup>6</sup>
1940 March 21	Rockwood Amusement Co. purchased a parcel of land and its brick building in downtown McKenzie from C. H. and Nannie Bateman. <sup>7</sup>
1940 April 3	Roy Johnson appears in the <i>McKenzie Banner</i> celebrating the first anniversary of Rockwood’s presence in McKenzie.

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<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, “Real Estate Assessment Data,” under Carroll County, Cedar St 2312, <http://www.assessment.state.tn.us/> (accessed July 28, 2012); Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *Newbern, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1945).

<sup>3</sup> Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], (1926).

<sup>4</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, December 6, 1940, 1; and *McKenzie Banner*, March 29, 1940, 1.

<sup>5</sup> McKenzie Theatre (Rockwood) report, McKenzie, TN, William Waller Collection, 1927-1960, box 12, folder 7, Tennessee State Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee, (hereafter cited as William Waller Collection).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 77, Page 1, March 21, 1940; and *McKenzie Banner*, December 6, 1940, 1; and *McKenzie Banner*, March 29, 1940, 1.

- 1940 July – August Rockwood Amusement Co. brought Roy Johnson from Nashville to help set up and transition from the McKenzie Theatre to the new Park Theatre; Johnson appears in the *McKenzie Banner* in July 1940 announcing an increase in ticket prices and the following month, successfully petitioning the City Council to allow the showing of movies on Sunday.<sup>8</sup>
- 1941 Jan 31 – Feb 21 Construction began on February 7 with architects from Speight & Hibbs of Clarksville directing the design and a contractor from Jackson, Hubert Owen. Workers laid a new foundation, replaced the ceiling, and installed a heating plant under the stage.<sup>9</sup>
- 1941 July 3 Theater opened, fully transformed from a 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial building to a minimal Art Deco / Streamlined Moderne movie house.<sup>10</sup>
- 1944 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map show the theater with a concrete floor and a wood frame balcony. The front portion of the theater has two to three stories while the rear portion has one to two stories. The store located at the corner of Cedar and Main is separated from the rest of the building with a frame partition.<sup>11</sup>
- 1943 – 1944 Rockwood Amusement, Inc. is involved in a Supreme Court case that determines that this company and six other exhibitors in a five-state area violated the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890. The decision was first made by the Tennessee Supreme Court but was appealed and decided in favor of the United States.<sup>12</sup> Many of these companies were ultimately forced to divest themselves of stock and interest in the other involved exhibitors.
- 1946 “Mr. Eddie” Clericuzio began working at the Park Theatre as a projectionist. Sometime in the mid-1940s Roy Johnson of

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<sup>8</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 194, 1; and *McKenzie Banner*, August 30, 1940, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, January 31, 1941, 1; and *McKenzie Banner*, February 7, 1941, 1; and *McKenzie Banner*, February 21, 1941, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., *McKenzie, Tennessee* [map, sheet 2], scale: 50 feet to an inch (New York: The Sanborn Map Company, 1926, revised 1944).

<sup>12</sup> *United States v. Crescent Amusement Co. et. al.* (two cases). *Crescent Amusement Co. et. al. v. United States*. 323 U.S. 173. 1944; and Michael Conant, *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry: Economic and Legal Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960) 88.

	Rockwood Amusement, Inc. transferred the management of the theater to Mr. Eddie. <sup>13</sup>
1951 Nov 3	Rockwood Amusements, Inc. underwent liquidation and established Kermit C. Stengel as the sole stockholder for \$1.00; the company transferred this property and other parcels in five different cities, to Stengel on November 3. J. H. Carothers is listed as the company's secretary and W. R. Holder is listed as the president. <sup>14</sup>
1951 Nov 5	Rockwood Theatres, Inc. was incorporated in Tennessee and purchased all of the recently liquidated property from Stengel for \$1.00. <sup>15</sup> The Park Theatre property in McKenzie was one of these transferred tracts of land.
1963 – 1964	The Park Theatre desegregated before McKenzie schools did; this is remembered as occurring after President John F. Kennedy's 1963 announcement of a bill that would become the 1964 Civil Rights Act. <sup>16</sup>
1973	Mr. Eddie Clericuzio retired from managing the Park Theatre and each of the Clericuzios received free lifetime ticket vouchers to the theater. <sup>17</sup>
1984 Nov 26	Rockwood Theatres, Inc. transferred the tract of land and the "Park Theatre Building" to Rayburn A. and Brenda Kaye O'Brien for \$10 despite its appraised value of \$31,500. <sup>18</sup>
1986	A photograph from the 1986 Tennessee Homecoming Parade in McKenzie shows alterations to the marquee and major changes to the storefront. The former Art Deco design, with a dark and cream-colored structural glass, Chinese red double-doors, the corner office, segregated entrance, and ticket box have all been removed.

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<sup>13</sup> Gabe Clericuzio interview, May 30, 2012, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files.

<sup>14</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 100, Page 323-326, November 3, 1951.

<sup>15</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 100, Page 326-329, November 5, 1951.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalinda Winston interview, December 1, 2011, Park Theatre Heritage Development Plan Project, 2012, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation (CHP) Files; Clericuzio interview, CHP Files.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 216, Page 208, November 26, 1984.



	They have been replaced with stationary windows that are like a window wall. It looks like a gravel wall treatment covers panels of the storefront. The original 1941 door might remain for the upstairs offices. <sup>19</sup>
1991 Jan 29	Rayburn A. and Brenda Kaye O'Brien sold the theater to Leslie E. Curtis for \$10. <sup>20</sup>
1992	A ca. 1992 photograph shows the Park Theatre with its historic upper façade and an extended view of storefront alterations made before 1986. This image shows that the African-American entrance is covered. The marquee shown in 1986 is different, possibly remnants of the original but it is unclear. <sup>21</sup>
1999 Aug 13	The Industrial Development Board of the City of McKenzie, Tennessee purchased the parcel on which the Park Theatre stood for \$10 from Leslie E. Curtis. <sup>22</sup>
1999 – 2001	A series of photographs provided by the McKenzie Industrial Development Board shows the Park Theatre during the early stages of their renovation work. Figure shows the front after the marquee was removed and before installation of the new one in June 2001. The photograph also shows the theater before the gravel wall treatment and original 1941 door to the upstairs office were replaced. <b>Error! Reference source not found.</b> illustrates the rear elevation with its intact cooling units. It is possible that this was the original air wash system but might be a more recent upgrade. <sup>23</sup>
2001	Early in 2001, the Industrial Board installed a new roof and applied paint to the exterior. The roof was paid for by a grant. <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *McKenzie Banner*, "1986 homecoming86parade," in "McKenzie Historic Photo Gallery," *SmugMug*, <http://banner.smugmug.com/History/McKenzie-Historic-Photo> (accessed February 5, 2013); and *McKenzie Banner*, July 4, 1941, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 246, Page 088, January 29, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Carroll Van West, "Park Theatre," ca. 1992, MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

<sup>22</sup> Warranty Deed Filed for Rec. Deed Book 300, Page 225-227, August 13, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> McKenzie Industrial Board, "Park Theatre," ca. 1999-2002, McKenzie Industrial Board, McKenzie, Tennessee; and Gabe Clericuzio, e-mail message to author, July 26, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> "New Sign at Old Movie Theater," *McKenzie Banner*, June 20, 2001; and Washburn, "McKenzie Welcome Center," *McKenzie Banner*, November 20, 2002.

- 2001 June 13 – 20 A new marquee was installed by the Industrial Board, paid for by a grant.<sup>25</sup>
- 2002 Nov 20 McKenzie Welcome Center was under construction, transforming the lobby. A grant from the Tennessee Department of Transportation funded most of the construction. Work was done by a McKenzie contractor, Micah Beasley Construction Company. ADA restrooms were added while the concrete flooring was torn out for new plumbing and electrical conduits. The grant also provided funding for central heat and air, lighting, and wiring. At the time, the remnants of the African-American staircase was visible when looking up from the lobby. The McKenzie Industrial Board initiated the work.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> “New Sign at Old Movie Theater,” *McKenzie Banner*, June 20, 2001; and Washburn, “McKenzie Welcome Center,” *McKenzie Banner*, November 20, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Washburn, “McKenzie Welcome Center,” *McKenzie Banner*, November 20, 2002.

## APPENDIX C – TABLES

Table 2. Though the United States Census Bureau defined urban centers as having 2,500 or more people, these communities were still very rural communities. As the table shows, 72.3% of Crescent's theaters operated in towns with a population below 10,000; these small markets typically only had one theater and sat an average of 531 moviegoers.

*Source:* William Waller Collection.

RANGE	POPULATION			THEATERS			SEATING		
	Number of cities with a population	Population in this range	Percent of total population in this range	Number of theaters in this range	Average number of theaters per city in this range	Percent of total number of theaters in this range	Actual number of seats within this range	Average seating capacity for a theater in this range	Percent of total seats in this range
under 999	2	1,860	0.4	2	1	1.5	750	375	1
between 1,000-1,999	24	31,992	6	25	1	19.2	13,282	553	18.5
between 2,000-2,999	18	42,927	8.1	18	1	13.8	10,113	632	14.1
between 3,000-3,999	21	69,124	13.1	25	1	19.2	10,216	409	14.2
between 4,000-4,999	9	39,975	7.6	11	1	8.5	6,085	553	8.5
between 5,000-5,999	3	17,000	3.2	6	2	4.6	3,671	612	5.1
between 6,000-6,999	1	6,900	1.3	1	1	0.8	799	799	1.1
between 7,000-7,999	2	15,175	2.9	4	2	3.1	1,666	417	2.3
between 8,000-8,999	4	33,444	6.3	6	2	4.6	3,676	613	5.1
between 9,000-9,999	2	18,000	3.4	3	2	2.3	1,764	588	2.5
between 10,000-15,999	4	49,897	9.4	10	3	7.7	6,738	674	9.4
over 16,000	3	203,000	38.4	19	6	14.6	13,152	822	18.3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>529,294</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>71,912</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>100</b>
under 9,999	86	276,397	52.2	101	1	77.7	52,022	531	72.3
over 10,000	7	252,897	47.8	29	4	22.3	19,890	765	27.7