CHAPTER 5

PEANUT SHELLS AND CLIFFHANGERS:
BROWNSVILLE'S EARLY THEATERS

The Lyceum, the Opera House, and the Arcade are names from Brownsville's distant past. These were downtown entertainment centers that laid the foundation for more familiar later theaters such as the Strand and the Plaza.

The first theatrical venue in Brownsville about which anecdotes may be found was the Lyceum. Its exact nineteenth century construction date is unknown, but its site is certain. It was located on the spot now occupied by the Snowdon building, which stands to the left of Union Station. McCready Huston, Brownsville native, author, and longtime columnist for the Brownsville *Telegraph*, once stated that while he had never seen the Lyceum himself (Huston was born in 1891), he had heard about it.

The theater's name was not unique. During the late 1800s, many communities boasted large capacity rooms of this type, and they were frequently called "The Lyceum." These spacious halls were places where, in Huston's words, programs were presented "of educational and moral entertainment quality along the lines of Chautauqua."

The seating capacity of Brownsville's Lyceum proved inadequate to hold the crowd that came to see its greatest attraction, whose nickname was "The Plumed Knight." What kind of show business star could draw such a throng?

The "Plumed Knight" was not an entertainer at all. He was a politician and West Brownsville's most famous native son. His name was James G. Blaine, the unsuccessful 1884 Republican presidential candidate who lost by a whisker to Grover Cleveland.

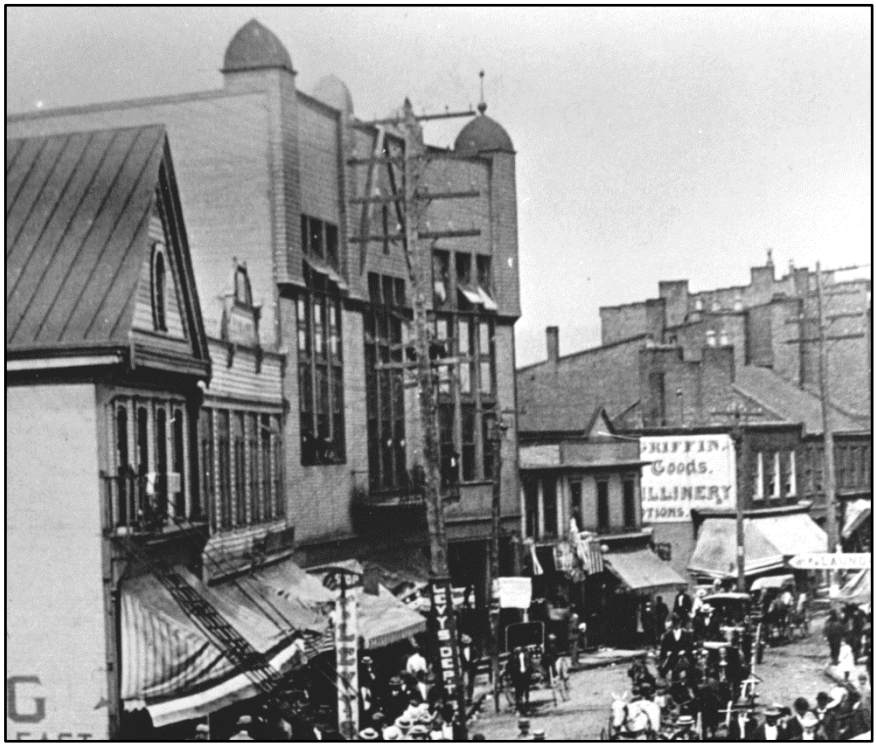
Blaine came home to visit his birthplace one last time. At the age of thirteen, he had left West Brownsville to attend school at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania, and he had rarely returned after that. He moved to Maine at the age of twenty-four and rose to prominence during the late 1800s as a United States Senator, a national political figure, and a statesman.

His return to Brownsville, which turned out to be his farewell

appearance here, lured a far bigger crowd than the Lyceum could handle. His address to the populace was moved outdoors in order to accommodate the overflow audience.

Sometime in the late 1880s or early 1890s, the Lyceum met a fate that was to become eerily common for Brownsville's theaters. It went up in flames. No building replaced it for over a decade. The vacant site remained a blemish on the western side of Market Street until 1906, when the Snowdon building was constructed in that location.

The conflagration that consumed the Lyceum sparked a fellow named George Thompson to build the Opera House in the southern end of the Neck. That new theater went up in 1896 on the western side of Market Street, three doors north of the cast-iron bridge (later the site of G. C. Murphy Co. 5 & 10 Cent Store). It was a three-story building with storefronts at street level and the theater upstairs.



The largest building in this 1898 photograph (left center) was the Opera House, which had been opened just two years earlier. Home of vaudeville and other live entertainment, it stood for twenty-four years on a site later occupied by the G. C. Murphy Co. 5 & 10 Cent Store.

A Brownsville resident of that era, Walter Rathmell, was a collector of theater memorabilia. The new Opera House was enticing to out-of-town entertainers, Rathmell once observed, because "the stage room and overhead equipment in the Opera House invited bookings. The depth and width of the stage and mechanical means of 'hanging' traveling shows gave managers something to offer" to potential acts.

Just as was the case with the Lyceum, the most memorable event in the history of the Opera House did not involve vaudeville entertainers or the movies. The attraction that night was literally home-grown. It was the graduation of the Bridgeport High School class of 1908. As proud parents, friends, and relatives of the graduating seniors took their seats that evening, they could not have known that there would be an unexpected addition to the program – a spectacular fire.

Bridgeport High School, a three-story structure with a tall bell tower, overlooked the river valley from the spot where the Prospect Street School later stood. One of the 1908 Bridgeport High School graduates, Leta McAlpine Lang of Pittsburgh, wrote down her recollections of the most dramatic high school graduation ceremony in the history of Brownsville or Bridgeport. She sent her tale to McCready Huston, who shared it with Brownsville *Telegraph* readers thirty years ago.

"Our borough was called Bridgeport then," remembered Leta. "There were fourteen happy girls and boys in our graduating class."

Under the watchful eye of their senior teachers, Miss Effie Lindsey and Professor Clinton Sheely, the fourteen students had spent most of the day at the Opera House. They decorated the place in the school colors of amethyst and gold. They rehearsed the program they would present that evening, for it was customary then for each graduating senior to perform for the assembled friends and relatives. The graduation ceremony began at 7:45 p.m.

"Boys wore their best suits," recalled Leta Lang, "and the girls were in their homemade lawn dresses, with much lace and embroidery added. Shortly after the program began, there came a report of a fire in the Opera House. Folks started to leave, but there were a few calm souls in the audience who managed to assure us that the fire was not in the Opera House. But then came a second report that our schoolhouse was burning! It was decided, however, that the program should go on regardless."

With the distracted crowd's excitement at a fever pitch, it was poor Leta's turn to recite.

"To the rendition of 'Hearts and Flowers' by Jane Marshall at the

piano, I recited the poem 'King Robert of Sicily.' I really had the feeling," she wrote, "that no one was listening."

Unfortunately the rumor that their school was ablaze was all too true. Bridgeport High School was a total loss, replaced the following year by the brick Prospect Street School that current residents can remember.

"It was a tragic experience," Leta concluded. "The usual pride and happiness following such ceremonies was quite dampened as we were saddened to learn that our dear old schoolhouse had left with us!"

It was truly a night at the Opera House that no one would ever forget.

In the twenty-four years of its existence, the Opera House operated under several different managers. The manager who may be best remembered was Elson Hommell, who for many years resided with his wife Carrie at 100 Broadway on Brownsville's North Side.

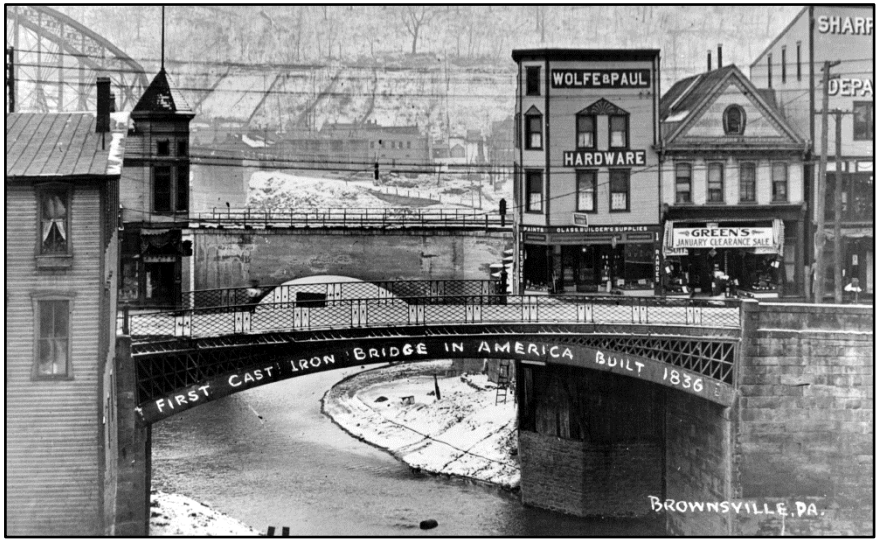
Mr. Hommell came to Brownsville in 1906 when he was thirty-five years old. By then, he was quite experienced in the managerial aspects of show business. Born in Iowa in 1871, he became associated with H. Walter Van Dyke, a master showman, and was a business manager and booker of show business acts. Speaking to a reporter on his eighty-eighth birthday in 1959, Mr. Hommell noted that when he and his wife arrived in Brownsville in 1906, the town was "rather dismal appearing. The Opera House had but one small electric light at the entrance and few of the stores downtown had more than one light in their display windows."

The reporter wrote of Mr. Hommell, "He knew the Opera House needed brightening up and he soon installed a series of sixteen lights in the entrance arch. The renovation was the talk of the town, and many businessmen predicted such flagrant waste of electricity would soon put the new opera house owner into bankruptcy. But Mr. Hommell said the greater use of electricity and judicious use of newspaper advertising paid off and patronage at the Opera House grew steadily."

Elson Hommell operated the Opera House for three years until 1909, when he left town. But he returned to Brownsville a year later and made his indelible mark at a nickelodeon called the Arcade Theater.

Opera House regulars were treated to a wide range of entertainment. Motion pictures and news reels were shown, and the occasional "illustrated song" was presented in which a singer would croon as the audience watched projected slides. There were frequent vaudeville acts and live minstrel shows, the latter often featuring local performers in fund-raising benefit events.

Brownsville's Opera House lasted only twenty-four years. On its



The last surviving wooden structures in the Neck were destroyed by fire in 1922. They are shown in this post card image as the area appeared sometime between 1914 (when the intercounty bridge, seen in the distance, officially opened) and 1922, the year of the fire. Wolfe and Paul Hardware, Harry Levy clothing (with the "Green's" sign), and the Sharpnack and Conelly Department Store were all consumed in the blaze.

fateful final night, an all-too-familiar Brownsville scenario was reprised. On that night, February 19, 1919, fire destroyed the wooden building.

When the Opera House burned in 1919, all was not lost for townspeople who yearned for entertainment. At the northern end of the Neck was the Arcade. On High Street, just across Dunlap Creek in South Brownsville borough, stood the recently opened Bison Theater.

THE ARCADE AND BISON THEATERS ENTERTAINED AUDIENCES AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF TOWN

Brownsville's Opera House, also called the Richie Theater, burned in February 1919, but its site was not vacant for long. Historian Norene Halvonik has produced an excellent history of the structures in Brownsville's business district. Her 1991 Master of Arts thesis for George Washington University is entitled *The Commercial and*

Architectural Development of Brownsville, Pennsylvania. It is a treasury of information about the town.

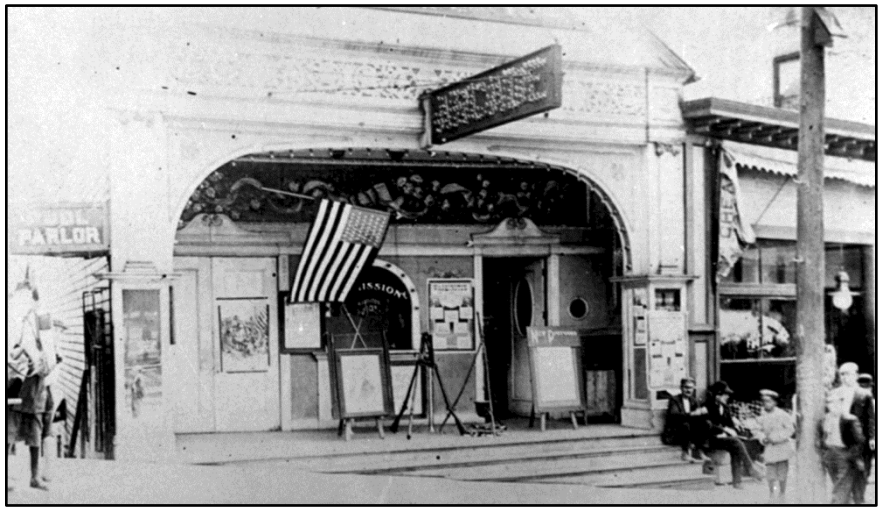
What replaced the Opera House? Within a year of the fire, two brick buildings had been erected on the site, and both are still standing today.

"The larger of the two buildings was occupied by the G. C. Murphy Company," wrote Halvonik, "and the smaller by Gottesman's (later Solomon's) meat and produce market on the ground floor and doctors' offices on the second."

Fate was not quite finished with its downtown Brownsville urban renewal project. Three years after the Opera House's demise, flames again illuminated the Neck.

"Another fire in 1922 swept through three of the last remaining wooden structures in the district," wrote Halvonik, "destroying the Wolfe and Paul (hardware), the Harry Levy (clothing) and the Sharpnack and Conelly (furniture and hardware) buildings."

The loss of the Opera House left the community with two theaters. South Brownsville boasted the Bison Theater on High Street, and at the north end of Brownsville's Neck, the Arcade Theater was thriving.



The signboard propped in front of the Arcade's right-hand door says "New Pictures." To the left of the theater, a stairway led down to a pool parlor. The photo is undated, but the 45-star flag places it between the 1896 admission of Utah (the 45th state) and the 1907 admission of Oklahoma (the 46th state).

The Arcade was the older of the two, its origin probably dating back into the late nineteenth century. Sometimes called a 'nickelodeon,' it stood directly across the street from the old Union Station.

The Arcade's best known operator was Elson Hommell, who had run the Opera House from 1906 to 1909 before moving to Homestead for a year to operate an opera house there. He returned in 1910 and purchased the Arcade Theater from Armstrong and Markel.

Initially his only competition in town was the Opera House, as the Bison Theater was not built until 1913. Hommell enlarged the 100-seat Arcade to a capacity of 499, keeping the number under 500, he said, to avoid a higher license fee. To remind downtown shoppers of the Arcade's presence, Hommell placed a phonograph in the theater's lobby and its blaring music echoed throughout the Neck.

McCready Huston, in his nostalgia-themed *Telegraph* newspaper column 'And That Was Brownsville,' once described what he could remember of the Arcade Theater before the advent of silent movies.

"It was the day of the illustrated song," he wrote. "To pictures thrown on the screen, the performer supplied the verse and refrain, either to accompaniment of his own or that of another pianist."

One performer who came to Brownsville was a New Yorker named Joe Eyster, who was featured at the Arcade.

The Arcade Theater phonograph is now on display in the Flatiron Building Heritage Center, across the street from the former site of the theater.

"He put his all into it," marveled Huston. "When he did 'Sunbonnet Sue' to the crude colored slides of the day, he blasted the ear drums not only inside the narrow bandbox but rivaled the lobby phonograph which to me, a passenger ticket clerk in the Union Station across the street, seemed to be aiming decibels as far away as the Iron Bridge day and night. Between shows, Joe liked to lounge among the privileged loafers who filled chairs in the recessed entrance. Joe's seat provided him with a showcase and a view of the Neck."

In 1922, the Arcade met the same fate as the Lyceum and the Opera House. Elson Hommell was fifty-one years old when his theater burned down. He went to work for the Brownsville *Telegraph* as advertising manager for the next two years, then spent seven years with the White Line Taxi company. He also sold real estate and was in on the development of Blainesburg, Knoxville Addition, Hiller, and the Woodward Plan.

"I remember when those places were cow pastures," he once said.

When Elson Hommell was seventy-two years old, he could still be found working in Brownsville's theaters. Ruby Baker, now of Sixth Boulevard, Blainesburg, was a teenaged ticket seller at the Strand Theater in 1943. She remembers the diminutive Mr. Hommell very well.

"Old Mr. Hommell was a 'checker' at that time," Ruby remembers. "He was a little man, very short. A checker was a person hired by the movie companies to count the customers to be sure that the studios were getting paid the proper amount. He would count the people as they went in."

Ruby told me that some cashiers, feeling sorry for kids who could not afford a ticket, would look the other way so they could sneak into the theater. I wondered how this affected Mr. Hommell's customer count.

"How did you get around that, if you were letting kids in free?"

"We got around that because when he would go to lunch, you would get some tickets that weren't on the roll. If Mr. Hommell would go somewhere, when he returned he would check the number on your ticket roll."

Ruby realizes now that her kind-hearted actions could have backfired. "I didn't know it at the time, but I could have gone to jail for that!"

In his later years, Elson Hommell and his wife Carrie lived a quiet life at 100 Broadway in Brownsville. Carrie was herself an accomplished pianist and organist, having studied at the John Crouse College of Syracuse University. Despite her talent, she spurned a concert career, confining her musical performances to church activities.

Margaret and Bill Johnson remember the Hommells as an elderly couple who eagerly anticipated Margaret's visits to deliver their medicine from Central Pharmacy.

"They were two very kind and special friends to us," Margaret remembers. "Mr. Hommell would often tell us stories of his early days in Brownsville. Mrs. Hommell must have been a very beautiful and well educated young lady, as she played the piano so well, even with her crippled, doubled over fingers. I can see her yet, seated at her piano, playing for me while other patients were waiting for their medicine to be

delivered."

The destruction of Elson Hommell's Arcade Theater back in 1922 had cost Brownsville its oldest theater, but by then there were three others in town. The Bison, the Strand, and the Plaza were all built within a span of eight years (1913-1921), and it is these three movie houses that many longtime residents remember. The first of that trio of theaters to open was the Bison.

The Battle of Gettysburg **played inside the Bison Theater in 1914. This photograph shows High Street just outside the theater in that same year. Streetcar tracks had been installed in the brick-paved street but were never used. Barely discernible among the banners and bunting on the left is the sign for the Bison Theater.**

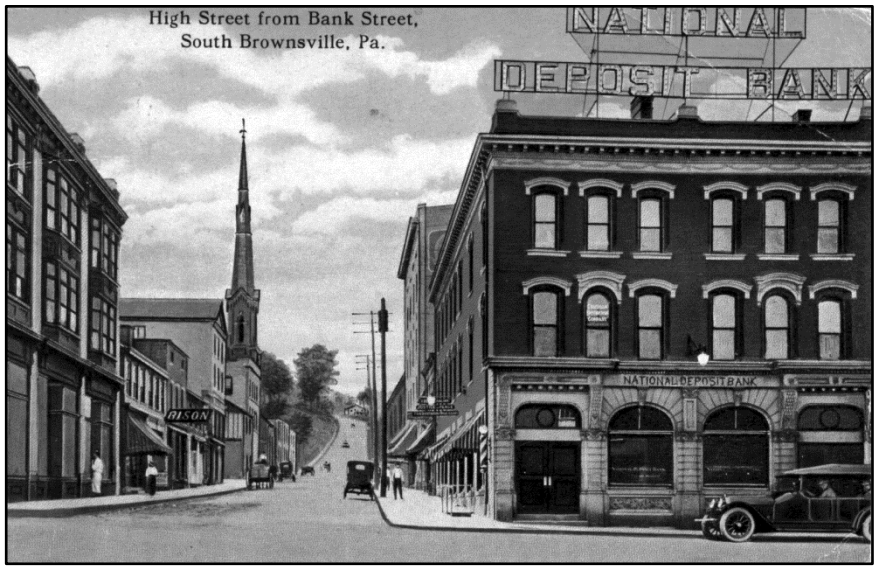
BROWNSVILLE SAYS FAREWELL TO SILENT PICTURES, HELLO TO "TALKIES"

The memory of his slain buddies' mangled bodies drawing flies as they lay on the blood-drenched Gettysburg battlefield overwhelmed the Union soldier. His emotions got the best of him, and he swore loudly at the Confederate veteran who stood just an arm's length away. He took a wild swing at the reb's head, and in seconds, fists began to fly.

Pent-up hatred powered both men's punches. Neither man had experienced such physical exertion in years, and their frail bodies immediately protested. Cheering onlookers, many of them laughing, egged them on as they breathlessly flailed at each other. Ushers mercifully stepped between the adversaries, and friends of the two old men escorted each to a seat to catch his wind. The embarrassed combatants eventually regained their composure and were convinced to shake hands.

The fight happened in 1914 in the front row of seats inside the Bison Theater. The epic silent movie, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, had just finished playing. Two of the many Civil War veterans whom the Bison had invited as special guests had gotten their dander up as they watched the bloody battle recreated on the silent screen. No matter that the actual battle had taken place half a century earlier in 1863. As these aged veterans watched it on film, they were living it all over again.

Local photographer W. C. "Red" Giles remembered watching that particular movie, because he was an assistant projectionist at the Bison Theater when it opened in 1913. In April 1962, Giles told Brownsville



The Bison Theater, whose sign is visible on the left, opened in 1913. This undated post card depicts South Brownsville sometime between 1913 and 1923, when the National Deposit Bank building shown here was replaced by the five-story bank building that occupies the site today. The photograph was taken from the intersection of High Street and Bank Street, looking toward High Street hill in the distance.

Telegraph reporter John Bogorae about the fist fight.

Bogorae identified other projectionists at the Bison as George Cooper, James Woods, Johnny Carroll, Robert Hardwick, and Nick Petrosky. Giles also told Bogorae that the theater had been opened in 1913 by the Wright Brothers – Harry, Moses, Tom, and Charles. They had operated the theater for many years, explained Giles, and the last of the family to run it was Charles. Giles also mentioned that the 450-seat theater got its name from the old Miller Brothers Wild West movies.

Nancy Campbell Bender, granddaughter of Harry Wright, dates the origin of the building in which the Bison was located to the late nineteenth century.

"The Bison Theater building," she explained to me, "had been in my family since 1882. A deed search revealed this information. It had belonged to my relative, Melissa Scott, who was a milliner and had a little shop there."

The building had apartments on the second floor. Located on High Street opposite the National Deposit (later Gallatin) Bank, it stood to the right of the Crawford building, which currently houses the Antique Grill.

The Bison Theater was opened in March of 1913 by the Wright Amusement Company, but within weeks it was taken over by C. D. Wright, who became its owner. It was a small theater with two aisles separating narrow seating areas on each side from a wider center section. There was no balcony.

In its early years, the Bison specialized in silent western films. By July 1929, the theater reached a milestone. A Brownsville *Telegraph* article proclaimed, "Imagine one million children cheering wildly as Tom Mix dashed down the rough side of the rugged Rockies on his faithful horse, Tony, to the rescue of a golden-haired girl, and you have somewhat of a conception of the number of children who passed through the doors of the Bison Theater since its opening some sixteen years ago."

Having served over a million children, the theater's management boasted, "While establishing a reputation for its super-silent films, the Bison compiled a unique record in that during the entire 16 years of its operation here, not one child has ever been injured in any manner in the theater."

Silent pictures were anything but quiet. Action on the screen was accompanied by music from a pianist, an organist, gramophone discs, or in some major theaters, a full orchestra. Some silent films came with complete musical scores, and their themes ranged from romance and drama to slapstick and comedy.

Brownsville moviegoers enjoyed the antics of Mack Sennett's

Keystone Kops, starring Fatty Arbuckle and Mabel Normand. They flocked to see stone-faced comedian Buster Keaton or the unforgettable Charlie Chaplin, who became a star in 1921 with release of *The Kid*, featuring child prodigy Jackie Coogan. In 1923 they watched as Lon Chaney starred in the earliest version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and two years later in *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Rinard Hart is a retired physician and native of Brownsville who now lives in the state of California.

"Not to date myself," Rinard wrote to me, "but I remember seeing Lon Chaney in *Phantom of the Opera* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in a Brownsville theater. I do recall a rapid walk up the hill one night after seeing Bela Lugosi in *Dracula*!"

Silent pictures were wildly popular in Brownsville. Then in 1926 came big news from Hollywood. Warner Brothers had developed a revolutionary synchronized sound system called Vitaphone. This disk process allowed sound to be recorded on a phonograph record that was electronically linked and synchronized with the film projector.

The following year, Warner Brothers produced the first feature-length talkie with sound effects, music, and dialogue. It was *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, and although it was mostly silent (only 350 spoken words), it included six songs and Jolson's immortal words, "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet!"

Jolson's words were prophetic. The days of silent movies in Brownsville were numbered.

In that same year (1927), Fox Studios developed its Movietone system, which added a soundtrack directly onto the strip of film. The rush to produce sound pictures was on. In 1928, the first cartoon talkie (Disney's *Steamboat Willie*) introduced Mickey Mouse, and in 1929, the Academy Award for the best motion picture went to MGM's sound picture, *The Broadway Melody*.

By mid-1929, the Bison Theater was still resisting the trend toward sound pictures and advertising itself as a place where customers could still see the latest first-run silent movies.

"Although the talking pictures within recent months have gained considerable popularity," the Bison announced, "the silent picture which leaves free play to imagination of the audience has not lost its drawing power. The decision of Mr. Wright to bring only the best of the silent pictures to the Bison is being greeted enthusiastically by persons residing in this district."

The Bison placed a display ad in the July 1, 1929 issue of the Brownsville *Telegraph*. It read, "Big Pictures Are Coming To This Theatre Soon! In order to give the people of Brownsville and vicinity

the latest and best in the moving picture field, this prominent theater will soon be remodeled and the latest and best pictures run. Many high grade silent pictures have been made this year and have never been run because of the newness of the sound picture. It will be the policy of this house to show these high grade pictures."

But who would want to watch silent pictures when 'talkies' were the rage? The showing of sound pictures required a considerable investment in equipment by the theaters, but survival in the business demanded it. By 1930, the production of silent movies had practically stopped, and with the Strand and Plaza theaters already showing 'talkies,' the Bison installed sound equipment too. Next, we will go inside the Bison to catch the latest adventure of *The Durango Kid*; then it's up the street for a soda and some dancing!

IN THE THIRTIES AND FORTIES, THE BISON WAS AS POPULAR AS EVER

After finally converting to talkies, the oldest of the town's three theaters remained a favorite with the younger generation. Youngsters still flocked to the Bison for a steady diet of westerns and serials.

Ruby Baker of Blainesburg, Peg Bowden of Brownsville, Don Davison of Brownsville, and I spent a pleasant hour discussing Brownsville's theaters. Ruby worked as a cashier in all three of the town's theaters during the early forties, because the three movie houses had a unified ownership (Moody-Dickinson) for many years. Peg Bowden began working in 1942 as an usher at the Bison and the Plaza. Don Davison worked part-time in the forties posting advertisements for the Plaza's coming attractions.

"The Bison was the cheapest in town," said Ruby. "In the early forties, I think it cost ten or fifteen cents to get into the Bison, twenty-five cents to get into the Strand, and thirty-five cents to get into the Plaza. It was cheaper for kids."

"Did people eat in the theaters?"

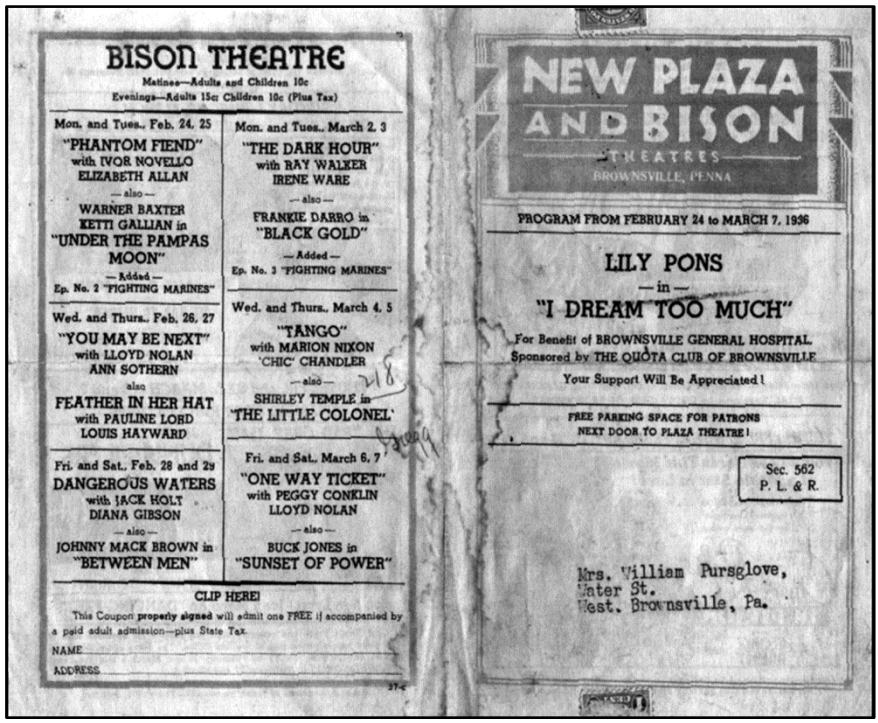
"Not like they do now," said Ruby. "They might bring candy or peanuts from the five and ten."

"Was there a place to purchase refreshments inside the Bison?"

"No, not inside the Bison," Peg said.

Sylvia Martin of Republic never went hungry at the Bison though.

"They had hot popcorn," Sylvia told me, "which they popped outside the Bison. Before you went and bought your ticket, on the



BISON THEATRE

Matinee—Adults and Children 10c
Evenings—Adults 15c Children 10c (Plus Tax)

Mon. and Tues., Feb. 24, 25
"PHANTOM FIEND"
with IVOR NOVELLO
ELIZABETH ALLAN
— also —
WARNER BAXTER
KETTI GALLIAN in
"UNDER THE PAMPAS MOON"
— Added —
Ep. No. 2 "FIGHTING MARINES"

Wed. and Thurs., Feb. 26, 27
"YOU MAY BE NEXT"
with LLOYD NOLAN
ANN SOTHERN
also
FEATHER IN HER HAT
with PAULINE LORD
LOUIS HAYWARD

Fri. and Sat., Feb. 28 and 29
DANGEROUS WATERS
with JACK HOLT
DIANA GIBSON
— also —
JOHNNY MACK BROWN in
"BETWEEN MEN"

Mon. and Tues., March 2, 3
"THE DARK HOUR"
with RAY WALKER
IRENE WARE
— also —
FRANKIE DARRO in
"BLACK GOLD"
— Added —
Ep. No. 3 "FIGHTING MARINES"

Wed. and Thurs., March 4, 5
"TANGO"
with MARION NIXON
'CHIC' CHANDLER
— also —
SHIRLEY TEMPLE in
'THE LITTLE COLONEL'

Fri. and Sat., March 6, 7
"ONE WAY TICKET"
with PEGGY CONKLIN
LLOYD NOLAN
— also —
BUCK JONES in
"SUNSET OF POWER"

CLIP HERE!

This Coupon **properly signed** will admit one FREE if accompanied by a paid adult admission—plus State Tax.

NAME

ADDRESS

37-c

NEW PLAZA AND BISON THEATRES
BROWNSVILLE, PENNA.

PROGRAM FROM FEBRUARY 24 to MARCH 7, 1936

LILY PONS
— in —
"I DREAM TOO MUCH"

For Benefit of BROWNSVILLE GENERAL HOSPITAL
Sponsored by THE QUOTA CLUB OF BROWNSVILLE
Your Support Will Be Appreciated!

FREE PARKING SPACE FOR PATRONS
NEXT DOOR TO PLAZA THEATRE!

Sec. 562
P. L. & R.

Mrs. William Pursglove,
Water St.
West. Brownsville, Pa.

This 1936 advertisement for the Plaza and Bison theaters (under common ownership) was mailed to residents of the area. Note the Bison ticket prices at the top of the left page. Adult price at the Plaza was twenty-five cents.

outside they had a great big popcorn machine. It was ten cents for a large box of popcorn. The girl would pop it and pack it in these square boxes.

"You would pay her for your popcorn, then walk behind that machine, buy your ticket for ten or fifteen cents and go into the movie to watch *The Durango Kid* or *The Masked Marvel*. At Saturday matinees, they would show serials that would leave you hanging until next Saturday! So most of the kids would go to the Bison on Saturday; then on Sunday, it was the Strand or the Plaza."

A reader from Texas wrote me about her own memories of the Bison.

"My uncle, Lester Tracey, was the manager of the Bison," wrote former Brownsville resident Janet Klingensmith Underwood, "and I frequently had free passes. My mother always gave each of us (my brother, sister, and me) a quarter to spend. That meant ten cents for the movie, five cents for popcorn, and ten cents for drinks."

Another reader called me and laughed as he told me how he spent childhood days on which he had no chores on his agenda.

"As a boy with a dollar and a half in my pocket and a day to kill," he said, "I would start at the Plaza at around one o'clock. The Plaza was the most expensive, so I got there for the matinee prices. Then I'd go over to the Strand, and it was still matinee prices. After watching the movies there, I would head over to the Bison. By that time it was evening prices, but the Bison was cheapest. I would also buy food during the day. So from one o'clock in the afternoon until eleven at night, I spent the whole time watching movies and eating for a dollar and a half!"

I said to Ruby, Peg, and Don, "Was the Bison more popular with young people?"

"Yes," Don Davison said. "I think the kids liked the westerns, and that's where they were shown. And of course, it cost less at the Bison."

"Did a lot of people go to the movies in Brownsville on week nights?"

"Oh, yes," Ruby and Peg Bowden said simultaneously. "When kids went out on dates," Ruby continued, "they usually went to the movies."

All three theaters drew large crowds on special nights called "Bank Nights."

"I remember them selling the tickets for a lottery," said Ruby. "They called it Bank Night. They would have a weekly drawing for a certain amount you would win. If you were in the theater for the drawing, you got the money. If you didn't think you would be in the theater that night, you could buy 'insurance' for fifteen cents, so that if you won, you'd get the money even if you weren't there."

After a few hours at the movies, teenagers would congregate at one of several gathering spots in town to eat, gossip, and dance.

"I know Grant Brown's drug store was to the left of the Bison," I said. "What was to the right of it?"

"The Market Street Dairy," said Ruby.

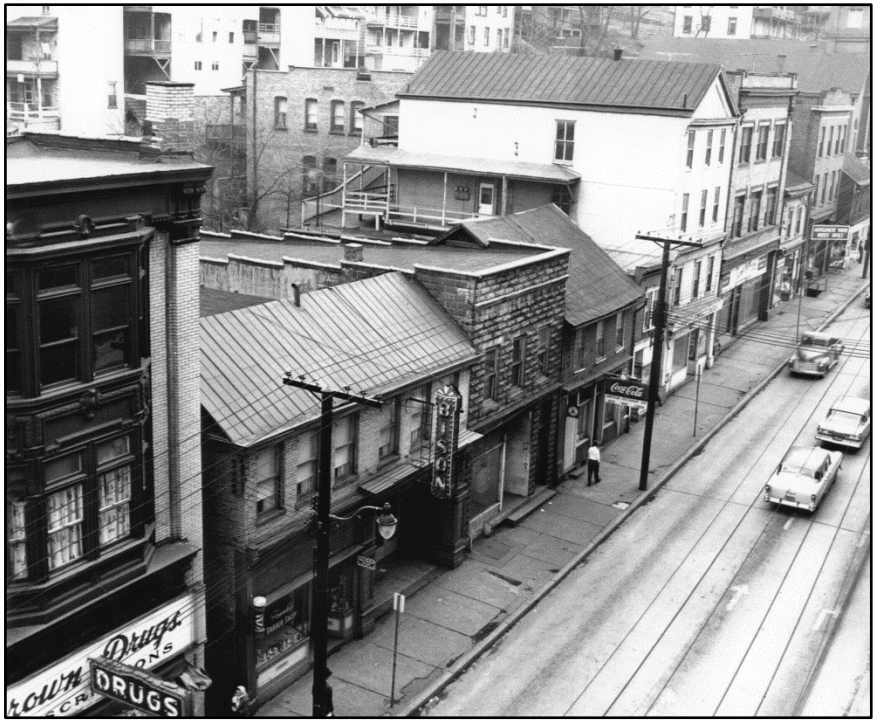
"It was called Asa's," Peg added. "Ki Asa owned it. It was a confectionery."

"All of the high school kids went there to eat and dance," Ruby recalled. "They had a jukebox."

"This was in the forties?"

"That's right," said Peg. "Upstairs over Asa's there was a dance floor. There were dances up there on Saturday nights."

"You could also dance right there inside Asa's," said Ruby. "They had a little floor. Asa's and Fiddle's were the two most popular places, plus Mary McCann's. It was between the entrance to Snowdon Square



This photo of the Bison Theater and nearby buildings was probably taken in the 1950s. In 1962, the building housing the Bison and several structures to the right of it were razed to make way for a parking lot to accommodate customers of Gallatin National Bank. That parking lot is still in use today.

and the New Club bowling alley, which was next to the bank."

"Do any of you remember the Bison hosting any activities other than movies?"

"I remember when Jack Munyon, that great radio evangelist, came to town, and he had a revival at the Bison Theater," Ruby said. "I used to listen to him all the time. Dorothy Granville and I went to hear him at the Bison. I even bought a record, "It Is No Secret," while we were there."

The birth of sound pictures in the late 1920s had made Brownsville's theaters more popular than ever. In the late 1940s, another technological advance came along, but unfortunately, it did not lure more customers to the theaters. Instead, the new invention drove many theaters out of business. The new technology?

Television.

"While I was in the service in late 1951 and early 1952," Walter

Buretz of Blainesburg told me, "I got a letter from my mother, and in it she told me that the Bison Theater had closed."

In late April 1962, the aged building housing the former Bison Theater was targeted for demolition as part of a redevelopment project. It was to be supplanted by a parking lot owned by Gallatin Bank.

When the Bison was torn down that summer, it became the first Brownsville theater to disappear from the town's streets without the occurrence of a fire. The Lyceum, Arcade, Opera House, and even the Strand had all gone up in flames. Within a few years, the Plaza's days as a movie house also came to an end.

The heyday of peanut shells and cliffhangers was over.

[*Note: The stories of the Strand and Plaza theaters can be found in Volume Two of this series,* LOOKING BACK: The Best of Glenn Tunney.]