

GOING TO THE MOVIES! THE STRAND AND THE PLAZA

The teenaged girl sat transfixed as she watched Clark Gable shelter Jeanette MacDonald in his arms. Walls of buildings were falling all around them. A hail of bricks crashed to earth behind them as they fought the human tide of panicked San Franciscans in the dust-choked street. Everyone was frantically seeking safety from the wrath of the earthquake. Plate glass windows yielded to the pressure of bending walls and exploded, propelling shards of glass through the air like razors. The roar of collapsing masonry was the loudest noise they had ever heard. The whole world seemed to be shaking.

Nearby, a woman screamed.

The teenager blinked. She tore her eyes from the Strand's big screen and searched the dark theater for the source of the scream. That scream was real. It came from inside the theater. The shaking walls were real too. High winds were buffeting the theater building. From somewhere in the dark she could hear a loud banging. She turned in her seat and looked back toward the auditorium's entrance. Something alarming was happening right here in Brownsville.

The exterior doors to the lobby of the Strand Theater were wood-framed with a large central panel of ruby glass embossed with a golden "S." As driving rain and tornado-like winds ripped into Brownsville's Neck, there was a sudden frightening crash, and a cascade of shattered ruby glass showered the theater's lobby. For sixteen minutes the deafening howl of the storm besieging Brownsville merged with the roar of the San Francisco earthquake emanating from the Strand's speakers.

"They chained us in," remembered Olga Toth Gazalie of Brownsville, a teenager at the time. She will not forget her visit to the Strand on that July 27, 1936 afternoon to watch Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald star in *San Francisco*.

"They wouldn't let anyone out of those doors for fear of injury from falling debris and downed electrical wires," said Ray Christner of Brownsville.

“It was said,” added Rinard Hart, another Brownsville teenager at the time, “that the patrons inside the theater thought all of the commotion from the tornado was coming from the screen and the theater’s sound system!”

Needless to say, no more movies were shown that evening at the Strand or the Plaza, although the undaunted Bison was open for business later that night! The day of the Big Storm of 1936 was probably the most memorable day in the 45-year history of the Strand Theater.

Where exactly was the Strand Theater? Market Street has a dogleg in it midway through Brownsville’s Neck. In 1915 the western (river) side of that bend was occupied by the Opera House. By then the deteriorating Opera House was no longer attracting crowds, and the first floor of the building was remodeled to house the G. C. Murphy Company 5 & 10 Cent Store.

The Strand Theater was built on the opposite side of that same bend, directly across the street from the Opera House. In 1913, the Bison



The aging Opera House, which was losing business to the silent movies that were featured at South Brownsville’s Bison Theater and Brownsville’s Arcade and Strand Theater, burned in February 1919. It was promptly replaced in 1920 by two buildings that later housed an expanded G. C. Murphy Co. store and Solomon’s Market.

Theater had been built in South Brownsville Borough, and the aging Arcade was still operating at the north end of the Neck.

James Laskey believed Brownsville Borough needed its own modern theater for presenting the silent movies of the day. In 1915 he constructed the Strand Theater, designed to hold 600 persons. Four years later, the Opera House burned and was quickly replaced by the two buildings that are still there today, the vacant G. C. Murphy building and the former Solomon's meat market.

In the same year that those two buildings were erected (1920), James Laskey died. His wife Mary took over the theater for her late husband, and for the next seventeen years, she operated the Strand Theater.

Mary had help running the business. According to Rinard Hart, there were three Laskey boys. Ted was the oldest and George was the middle son. Youngest son John was a star football player at Brownsville High School, and he, John Adams Springer, and Rinard were the best of friends.

"The Laskeys," Rinard explained, "lived up on Brownsville hill along with the Troths, Howard Taylor, and others. There was an uncle George, who died in the early 30s, who helped Mary run the theater for a while. After George's death, Mary ran it for some time with the help of her oldest son Ted."

Around 1937, Mary leased the theater to another operator, but she maintained ownership of the building until its demolition in 1960. The 1937 date is supported by a display advertisement placed by the Strand Theater in the 1937 Brownsville High School yearbook, in which the Strand calls itself "the town's best." The following year, the yearbook included a single display advertisement featuring all three theaters (Strand, Plaza and Bison), implying that they may have been under common management by 1938.

The Strand had a reputation as a well-run theater. "When it's hot outside, it's cool in the Strand," boasted a 1929 newspaper ad. "Best Sound in Town!"

Many top films were featured there. In a conversation a few weeks ago, I asked former theater employees Ruby Baker, Peg Bowden, and Don Davison what they remembered about the Strand.

"I know the Bison didn't have a balcony," I said to them. "What about the Strand?"

There was an immediate clash of opinion.

"I don't remember a balcony in the Strand," said Peg, who worked at the Bison and the Plaza.

"I don't either," echoed Don.

Ruby, who worked in all three theaters but primarily at the Strand as a cashier, disagreed.

“Yes, the Strand did have a small balcony. I remember that many times when kids didn’t have money, one would pay, go up and come down those steps and let the rest of the kids in that balcony door.”

With that dispute unresolved, I asked Ruby “What was your work like at the Strand?”

“We got paid two dollars a day,” said Ruby, “ten dollars a week, working about five days a week. We split the shifts. I would start at one o’clock and work ’til four o’clock, then off until seven, then work until nine selling tickets. We would quit at nine, but the usher had to stay until the movie was over.”

“There was always at least one cashier and one usher,” said Peg, who began as an usher at the other two theaters. “The most important job we had to do as ushers was to keep the kids quiet. We had to go up and down the aisles all the time.”

“Did you ever have to kick anybody out?”

Neither Ruby nor Peg had. “You were allowed to tell them that if they were asked to leave, they wouldn’t be allowed back in the theater,” said Ruby, “and that usually did the trick. But really, kids seemed to respect authority more then.”

Occasionally Ruby would fill in as an usher at the Strand instead of being cashier.

“There was one thing that I hated when I was an usher at the Strand,” she said, “and I think this took place at all the theaters. We had to separate the white customers and the black customers, and tell the black people that they had to go up to the balcony. And I wouldn’t tell them. I would turn my head and not notice where they were sitting, because I never thought it was right.”

Brownsville High School students occasionally visited the Strand on school days without having to play hooky. DuWayne Swoger of Brownsville recalls, “I belonged to the drama class and the thespians at the Brownsville High School in the late 1930s. From time to time, Jean Donahey would arrange for the Thespian Club to see movies at the Strand. I can remember seeing *A Tale of Two Cities* there. We went down, saw the film, then we had to write a critique of the film. I think we also saw *How Green Was My Valley* there.”

When the final credits would roll on the last movie each evening, it would be time for the cashier to turn in the day’s receipts.

“After we closed up, we would always take the night’s ticket money from the Strand over to the office on the second floor at the Plaza Theater,” said Ruby Baker. “We never had an escort, but we never had

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any trouble while taking that bag of money over there.”

Some of that cash came from the pocket of Janet Klingensmith Underwood, who remembers spending it at the theater’s refreshment stand.

“The Strand, if I recall correctly, was the only theater that charged a tax on everything,” she told me, “so I never had enough money to pay for all of my snacks. Instead of popcorn being a nickel, it would be six cents.”

Janet added, “You know, I may be wrong, but it seems to me that the Strand closed for a while, then reopened.”



This photograph was taken inside the Strand Theater on May 19, 1952. The Brownsville Lions Club was storing brooms, mats, and other fundraising items in the building. Shown left to right are Charles Sargent Jr., Joe Birkle, William C. “Red” Giles, Lloyd “Dolly” Baker, Chris Lochinger, and Carl Monschein.

Janet’s memory is accurate. In the late 1940s, the Strand closed for renovations. In 1950, the theater reopened as the “New Strand.” Unfortunately it was a textbook example of bad timing, because television was already battering at the walls of the movie theater

business. Within two or three years of its rebirth, the remodeled Strand Theater was out of business.

Only one theater in town was still operating after 1953. It was the town's most upscale movie house, the Plaza Theatre. Next, we will leave the Strand and stroll down Market Street to the entrance to Brownsville Avenue. There we will turn right, stroll beneath the iron arch bearing the lighted name "Snowdon Place," buy our movie ticket, and enter the elegant Plaza Theatre.

THE PLAZA THEATRE: BROWNSVILLE'S GRANDEST SHOWPLACE

In 1907, Charles Snowdon completed construction of the Snowdon Building in the Neck. That same year, the ambitious president of the Monongahela Bank purchased Krepps Bottom, the portion of the Dunlap Creek flood plain that lay directly behind the buildings on the east side of Market Street in the Neck.

In 1916, Snowdon raised the ground level of the "bottom" with enormous amounts of fill. Then he set about creating a new commercial district called Snowdon Place, parallel to the overcrowded Neck. He laid out the street grid himself and had electrical, gas, water, and sewage lines installed.

The first building went up in 1919 at the southeast corner of Brownsville Avenue and Charles Street. Now occupied by the State Liquor Store, the structure's original street-level tenant was the U. S. Post Office. Other buildings quickly followed, and in 1921, the crowning achievement of Snowdon's visionary project opened to the public – his quarter-million dollar showplace, the Plaza Theatre.

According to historian Norene Halvonik, who has chronicled the evolution of Snowdon Place, Charles Snowdon built the theater in 1921 and immediately sold it to the Wright Amusement Company. Halvonik suggests that Snowdon may have "had the theater built for Wright but retained ownership until its completion, in order to ensure that the most prominent building in the square that bore his name also reflected his aesthetic standards."

A Brownsville *Telegraph* article pegged the cost of the Plaza Theater at \$259,000. The building contained a two-floor auditorium, offices above it, a top floor ballroom, and a basement billiard parlor and bowling alley. Larger and more plush than the six-year-old Strand or the

eight-year-old Bison, it was Brownsville's grandest theater. The Wright Amusement Company operated the Plaza for nearly a decade. Then the theater was sold to Anthony Jin of Oil City, Pa.



In this postcard image of Snowdon Place in the 1920s, the marquee of the Plaza Theater can be seen on the right. At the far end of Brownsville Avenue, an arch with the words “Snowdon Place” spans the street. The building with the cupola, which was the Monongahela National Bank from 1900-1924, is still standing but no longer sports the cupola. The Brownsville Post Office occupied the corner just beyond the sign for Dr. Huston’s dentist office. The post office building later housed the Square Tavern and more recently the State Liquor Store.

Eighty-eight-year-old Ted Lascaris, whose family owned the Strand Theater, provided me with some background about the Plaza’s conversion to “talkies” and some insight into the business practices of Charles Snowdon, who created Snowdon Square.

“The Wright brothers, who originally operated the Plaza, sold it to a Mr. Jin,” he explained. “I was just sixteen years old then. My mother bought it from Mr. Jin in 1928 or 1929, which was around the time that talkies first appeared.

“I was there when we installed the first sound in the Plaza. It was called ‘100% Sound.’ In the early days, they had ‘10% Sound’ or ‘20% Sound’ in some of the pictures. We installed the new equipment in the Plaza Theater in 1929, shortly after we took it over. The first picture we showed that was ‘100% Sound’ was Warner Baxter in *Old Arizona*.

“As I think about Snowdon Square in its early years, I recall that my father, who died in 1920, built a candy store right on the corner where you enter Snowdon Square. It was called Laskey’s Confectionery. My father had a twenty-year lease with the Reagans in Uniontown. The lease allowed my father to build a building on their property, so he had one storefront on Market Street and he had three other stores in there facing on Brownsville Avenue.

“Well, Charles Snowdon and the Reagans had a disagreement. In retaliation, Snowdon, who owned Brownsville Avenue as part of his Snowdon Square property, built a wall in front of the three Brownsville Avenue storefronts and closed them off! That made them useless. The cause of the dispute was the building on the opposite corner (the former Mon-Vali Grill). Snowdon wanted to buy that building so that he could make a bigger entrance into Snowdon Square, and the Reagans, who owned the buildings on both sides of the street, wouldn’t sell it to him.”

“You know,” I told Ted, “they just tore that Mon Vali Grill building down a few years ago.”

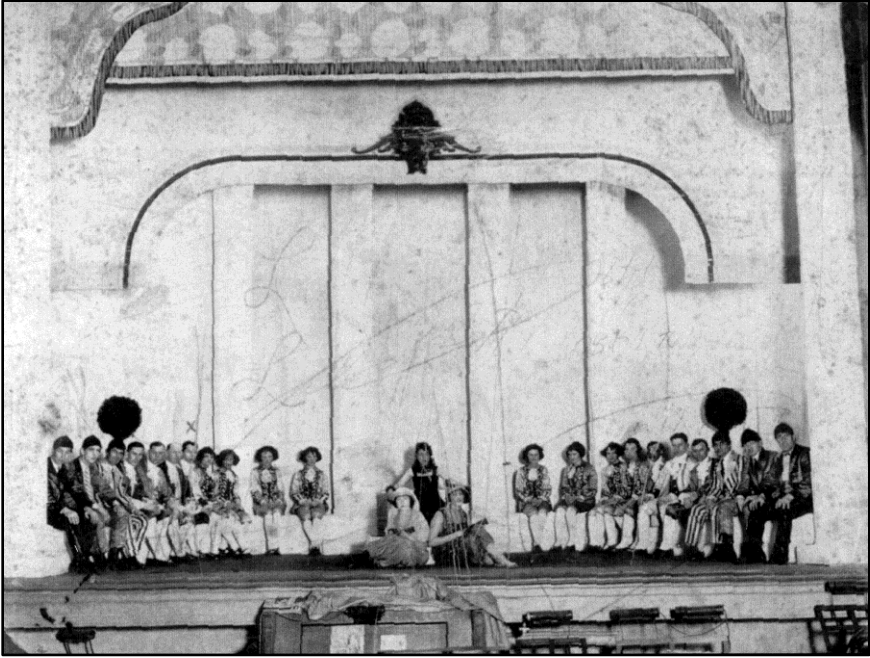
“Is that right? Do you know how many years that building was a point of contention? I don’t know how many generations fought over that place.”

Just a decade after it opened, the Plaza suffered a near death blow. Early on the morning of April 6, 1931, a major fire did \$85,000 damage to the Plaza’s interior. Water from the firefighters’ efforts inflicted \$15,000 damage upon Casper’s Bowling Alley and Poolroom below.

Two Brownsville firemen, W. A. ‘Red’ Giles and Audley Hardwick, suffered smoke inhalation while battling the blaze. Ironically, volunteer firefighter Giles was the Plaza’s projectionist. The Brownsville *Telegraph’s* report of the fire revealed that the equipment and the furnishings of the Plaza Theatre company were owned by Mrs. Mary Laskey of Brownsville and had an estimated worth of \$70,000.

On that same fateful Monday morning, just around the corner from the Plaza, Charles Snowdon’s Monongahela National Bank did not open its doors on schedule for the first time since 1812, succumbing to the national epidemic of bank failures. It was a disastrous day for the aging Snowdon, who saw the crown jewel of his Snowdon Place suffer heavy damage and his banking fortunes take a permanent nosedive.

But unlike earlier Brownsville theaters including the Lyceum, the Opera House and the Arcade, all of which were destroyed by fire, the blaze did not put the Plaza Theatre down for the count. Perhaps it should have been renamed the Phoenix Theater, because at 12:05 a.m. on Monday, October 30, 1933, after sitting idle for nearly eighteen months, a restored Plaza Theatre reopened with a special midnight show. The



This rare 1925 photograph shows the original stage of the Plaza Theatre before the building was badly damaged by a 1931 fire. The showplace had opened just four years before this photo was taken. On stage is the cast of the Brownsville Firemen’s Minstrel show.

featured presentation was *The Bowery* starring Wallace Beery, Jackie Cooper, George Raft, Fay Wray, and Pert Kelton.

Everyone agreed that the “new” Plaza looked more magnificent than ever, and the *Telegraph* was filled with congratulatory ads from happy merchants. “For two years,” editorialized the *Telegraph*, “since the Plaza was badly damaged by fire, this theater has been idle. For the last few months only one theater has been operating here, and every business house here has been suffering recently because of the restricted entertainment offered here.” The businessmen of the town “rejoice at the news that the Plaza theater, this community’s largest playhouse, is operating again.”

Three years later America was still in the grip of an economic depression, so the managers of the ‘New Plaza and Bison’ theatres decided to cut prices. A 1929 newspaper ad had advertised the Plaza’s prices as 40 cents for adults and 15 cents for children. The new 1936 prices were 25 cents for adults (15 cents for matinees) and 10 cents for children. The Bison, operated by the same owners, was even cheaper.

PLAZA THEATRE

NEW ADMISSION PRICES

Adults, Matinee 15c (Except Saturdays and Holidays) Evenings 25c
Children 10c

SUNDAY MIDNIGHT, MARCH 1
MON., TUES. and WED., MARCH 2, 3 and 4

He Slept in a Bath Tub
On His First Night in New
York...But In Five Years
The Big Town Crowned
Him King of "Little Italy"
and Married Him Off To
a \$60,000,000 Heiress.



George RAFT - Rosalind RUSSELL

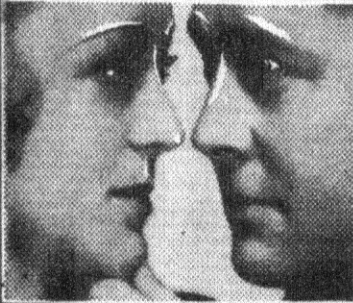
— in —
"IT HAD TO HAPPEN"

— with —
LEO CARRILLO · ARLINE JUDGE

THURS., FRI. and SAT., MARCH 5, 6 and 7
2 — SPLENDID FIRST RUN FEATURES — 2

THE "BAD GIRL" TEAM

JAMES SALLY
DUNN · EILERS



In
Don't GET
PERSONAL

with
"PINKY" TOMLIN

also Ben Lyon - Joan Marsh in "DANCING FEET"

Clip (Don't Tear) and properly sign the coupon on opposite side of
this page before presenting at the Box Office. The Plaza offers this FREE
TREAT (EVENINGS ONLY) on February 28 and March 6 and the Bison
(EVENINGS ONLY) on February 27 and March 5.

"Further Adventures of Frank Merriwell"—Thurs., Fri. and Sat.

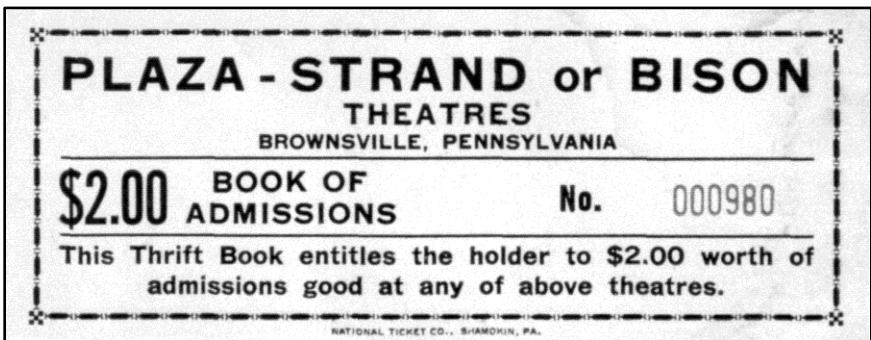
Adults were admitted there for 15 cents for evening shows and 10 cents for matinees, and children paid only a dime at all times (plus tax).

1939 brought the epic *Gone With The Wind* to town. As it did everywhere, the movie created a sensation in Brownsville. Muriel Pearson Elias of Race Street was working as a cashier at the Plaza when *Gone With The Wind* played there. “We all had to wear gowns,” Muriel told me, “with big hoops!”

William Pascarell Jr., Mary Ann Pascarell Lucca, and Josephine Pascarell Zupic are Brownsville natives who remember the Plaza. They recently got together at Mary Ann’s home in Ridgewood, New Jersey, to reminisce about Brownsville’s theaters. A letter from Mary Ann detailed some of their favorite memories.

“The Plaza had been completely refurbished in time for the initial showing of *Gone With The Wind*,” wrote Mary Ann. “It had all new plush seats, and at the end of every other row there was a ‘love seat’ one-and-a-half times the width of regular seats so that young couples could use them. There was a special showing of *Gone With The Wind* for students at a reduced rate.

“It was during a school day, and the teachers marched us down to the theater by classes. The whole high school went and everyone behaved. Since it was the first time a movie was that long, it had an intermission and we were told to pack ourselves a lunch to be eaten then. When it was over, we marched back to the high school and were dismissed.”



The dawn of the 1940s found the three Brownsville theaters thriving under the common management of Moody-Dickinson, a partnership. In my conversation with Peg Bowden, Ruby Baker, and Don Davison, all former employees of the partnership, I asked, “Do you know when Moody-Dickinson became involved in the theaters here?”

“I don’t know,” Peg replied. “I don’t even remember Mr. Moody

ever being around, and I started in 1942 as an usher. I don't even know what Mr. Moody looked like."

"I started working in all three theaters [Bison, Strand, and Plaza] in 1943," said Ruby. "I was relief. I would go wherever they needed me, but I worked most often as cashier in the Strand. I know the theaters were called Moody-Dickinson, but I don't think Moody was there at that time."

An educated guess is that Moody-Dickinson was operating all three theaters by 1938. That was the first year that a single common ad for all three movie houses appeared in the Brownsville High School yearbook.

As a teenager, Don Davison of Green Street worked part-time for Moody-Dickinson, putting up movie posters throughout the community. He would carry a long brush, a container of paste, and the billboard posters he was to put up. He wore out plenty of shoe leather making his rounds in Brownsville and West Brownsville.

Don's territory ranged from Brownsville Township, where he posted ads at a small grocery store near the intersection of Union Street and Lynn Road, all the way to West Brownsville, where he fastened ads to a signboard along the National Pike hill that leads out of West Brownsville toward the Knob.

"You walked everywhere carrying all of your equipment?" I asked.

"Sometimes Fred Fetty and Jimmy Constantine would help me carry that stuff," laughed Don. "They were schoolmates of mine. In addition to the billboards, I would also carry card posters that were about 15 by 24 inches. Those were posted in glass display cases, and I had a key to open each one. I would take out the old card and put in the new one."

Don showed me his W-2 statement from 1945. He earned a grand total of \$213.85 that year.

"And free passes to the movies," he chuckled, "that I shared with my family and friends."

I asked Muriel Elias if she got free movie passes when she worked as a cashier at the Plaza.

"No passes for us," she said. "but we worked hard for everything we got."

"How long did you work at the Plaza?"

"About twenty years!"

In fact, she admitted sheepishly, she once found herself embroiled in a labor dispute at the Plaza.

"We had a strike at the Plaza!" she said. "We had to carry signs. My sign said, 'How Would You Like To Work For \$10 A Week, Mr. C. W. Dickinson?' The sign was bigger than me! You could only see my head. I would keep moving around so that the people would not notice



Plaza Lunch, located in the American Legion building across the street from the Plaza Theatre, was a popular eatery in Snowdon Place.

me.”

“This was after you went to Mr. Dickinson’s house for dinner?” I said.

“Yeah,” she laughed. Muriel had told me earlier that Mr. Dickinson and his two sons, Don and Johnny, had previously entertained some of the workers at the Dickinson home in West Alexander.

“My sister Norma, who also worked there, was sick, and she couldn’t even walk, so my dad made me go and carry this sign. After the strike, there was a big meeting with the boss, and they kept a few of us and got rid of the rest. They kept my sister Norma and they kept me, but they got rid of the troublemakers.”

Picket lines and strikes at the Plaza were rare, but there was always plenty of action on the Plaza’s big screen. However, movies were not its only attractions. Next, we will join the standing room-only crowds for cooking schools, Saturday morning kids’ shows, minstrel shows, special Christmas parties – and a real life off-screen holdup!



MOVIES WERE NOT THE ONLY ATTRACTIONS AT THE PLAZA

Movies at Brownsville's Plaza Theater often featured cops chasing robbers, but who knew that a real stickup would happen at the theater's ticket booth? Muriel Elias, a Plaza cashier for twenty years, couldn't believe it either.

Until she saw the gun.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"Well, it was a real dark night, and it was raining. Someone from Square Tavern across the street came over and said, 'This is a good night for a holdup, Muriel.' And I laughed and said, 'Yeah!' Little did I know that I was actually going to be held up!"

"By that man?"

"No. Business was slow. This guy came up wearing a droopy hat and a coat. He said 'Give me all of your money,' and I said, 'Oh, sure!' Then he pulled a gun out from his coat.

"You know, in that ticket booth there is a little space behind you. He kept coming closer, and I kept backing up. I couldn't go back too far. I grabbed a fifty-cent piece and knocked on the glass real loud. He ran. The girls came out and said, 'What's the matter?' and I told them."

"Did he get anything?"

"No. He ran down past the A & P and over the tracks. Everybody was looking for him, but they never did find him. They did bring four guys for me to look at, but I couldn't be sure, and I didn't want to accuse the wrong person."

Muriel laughed, "I was so worked up and nervous that they took me over to Square Tavern and gave me a couple shots of whiskey!"

Slow nights like that were rare at the Plaza in the late thirties and forties.

"We had bank nights on Friday night," said Muriel. "People would



be lined up out on the sidewalks. You couldn't get in; we were packed. We would keep saying, 'Standing Room Only, Standing Room Only.'"

Brownsville native Mary Ann Pascarell Lucca of Ridgewood, New Jersey, remembered visiting the Plaza during World War II.

"During those years," she recalled, "the theater would open and close with an American flag on the screen and *The Star-Spangled Banner* playing. Everyone would be standing, many with misty eyes, since nearly every family in Brownsville had someone in the service overseas."

Some Plaza attractions did not involve a movie. Live minstrel shows with prominent citizens taking part were periodically staged to benefit local organizations.

Ruby Baker of Blainesburg told of another type of attraction that she enjoyed.

"A fortune teller would often come to the Plaza," she said. "Mr. Silvers was his name. I can still see his black straight hair, because he wore nothing on his head. He had a crystal ball, and after you talked to him, he told you what your future was. I believe he was in a side room where you would meet with him."

"Did you ever see the Plaza's top floor ballroom?" I asked Ruby.

"They used to take us up to the ballroom," said Ruby, who worked at all three of the Moody-Dickinson operated theaters in town. "Dick Dickinson, the owner, would play the piano for us on special occasions or after work."

"Do you remember the ballroom being used for anything else?"

"Not that I remember."

Muriel Elias does recall some festivities up there.

"We used to have parties upstairs in the ballroom," she said. "A fellow named Maynard would play the piano, but I don't remember his last name."

Rosemary Battaglini called to remind me about the Plaza's popular cooking schools.

"In the 1940s and early 1950s," she told me, "both the gas company and West Penn had big offices in Brownsville, and each employed a home economist. Each company would present free cooking schools in the Plaza Theatre early in the morning. You had to be there around 8:30 or 9:00. Someone would always be left out because they were so crowded. There was never an empty seat.

"The companies would show off their appliances. Back in those days, gas-powered refrigerators were common too. They would do a cooking demonstration, and they would hand out as door prizes cookware, kitchen items, and even the food that had been prepared in the

demonstration. These were on weekdays, after the housewives got the kids off to school. Sometimes they would get people out of the audience to help in the demonstrations, which lasted about two hours in all.”

One gas company employee who installed the appliances for those cooking schools knew the Plaza Theatre like the back of his hand.

“I helped to install those appliances onstage,” said Green Street’s Don Davison, whose long career with the gas company followed his younger days of posting billboard ads heralding the Plaza’s coming attractions. “Bob Hickey, Frank Murphy, and I installed them. We would bring in the appliances on Fred Combs’ truck and we’d hook them up on the stage. Fred was the appliance service man for Columbia Gas.”

Although the Plaza’s feature films, minstrel shows, cooking schools, and fortune teller appealed to an adult audience, the theater could also draw a young crowd.

“We used to have morning movies on Saturdays, cartoons and things,” said Muriel Elias. “I remember Porky Pig shows, because we gave Porky Pig banks away, and I played Porky Pig! I went on the stage dressed up like Porky Pig. Tommy Florence worked for Moody-Dickinson, who operated the theater. He used the theater’s station wagon to take the reels back and forth from the Plaza to the Moody-Dickinson theaters in other towns like Fredericktown. To advertise those Saturday morning shows, Tommy took me, dressed as Porky Pig, to all of the elementary schools. We were so packed that we had to have two shows!”

Fresh-roasted peanuts in the window of the Nut Shop is what Vickie Terreta Taylor of Atlantic Beach, Florida remembers about going to the movies. Saturday mornings at the Plaza watching school-sponsored classics on the screen would be followed by a stop at the Nut Shop. “They would display all of the types of freshly roasted nuts in the front window,” she wrote, “and they were still warm when you bought them.”

Amateur hours at the Plaza have stuck in the mind of Phyllis Barreca Grossi. “I was only about five or six years old at the time,” she wrote. “There was tap dancing, piano playing, singing, and accordion playing. At the magician shows, they had a huge round wheel that turned and they awarded gifts and theater tickets. There was a clown dressed up, and he would be handing out little treats to the kids. We would walk from the 1400 block of Second Street in Brownsville to the Bison, then on to the Plaza, and walk back home or take the city bus.”

Janet Klingensmith Underwood, a youngster then, recalled, “I saw *The Wizard of Oz* there when our entire elementary class was taken by our teacher. And on Saturdays, during a movie intermission at the Plaza, the owners would hold a drawing. Kids were asked to write their names

on the labels of their popcorn boxes, then deposit them in a big drum in the lobby. The theater's manager would pull the drum onto the stage and pull out a box top.

"The lucky kid would get to go on stage, stick his hand into a fish bowl, and was allowed to keep as many pennies as his hands would hold. I was one of the lucky ones, but I remember the manager had a hard time reading my name, because 'Klingensmith' was a little long to fit on one side of the box.

"The Plaza always had a double feature on Saturday afternoons, and if a kid wanted to, he could stay there for rerun after rerun. There was no such thing as clearing the theater between showings. I think parents saw the theater as a great babysitter. It was rare to see an adult there on Saturday. It was just full of kids."

Christmas Eve brought a special theater treat for the children of the community. Sylvia Martin of Republic told me, "I believe it was at the Plaza that every Christmas Eve at about one o'clock in the afternoon, the theater would present a free movie, such as Shirley Temple, as a gift to the children of the Brownsville area. Then as you came out of the theater, they would have at the door great big boxes of candy bars, licorice, etc. Everybody got a treat. We all looked forward to it every Christmas Eve day."

DuWayne Swoger of Brownsville added, "The Lions Club sponsored a Christmas party for the kids each year in the early 1950s, and the attendance would range from 500 to nearly 1,000 kids. Lloyd 'Dolly' Baker was manager of the Plaza at that time, and he made the facility available to the club. The Plaza furnished a free movie, and Santa Claus made an appearance. It was a significant contribution by the theater's ownership."

When the last happy child had departed the theater, it was time to clean up the discarded candy boxes, spilled popcorn, empty drink cups, and other debris scattered among the rows of seats. Don Davison's mother, Frances Davison, cleaned the entire Plaza Theater for years. She did so with the assistance of "my boys," as she called them, young boys who lived "around the Creek" and would help her.

"The Plaza Theater had a carpeted ramp up to the balcony," Don said, "which Mom vacuumed. She would clean the whole place, and they had a lot of brass to be polished in the Plaza."

"She was a hard worker," echoed Muriel Elias, who remembers her well. "We all loved her. She kept everything spotless, and everything had to be perfect. She shined that place like it was her own house."

After the daily efforts of Frances Davison and her boys, the Plaza Theater would be sparkling clean again and ready to entertain another

enthusiastic audience of local residents. But the size of those audiences had dwindled sharply by the early fifties, and one by one Brownsville's three theaters, filled with so many wonderful memories, closed forever. Next – the final days of the Strand and Plaza theaters.

THE STRAND THEATRE MADE A DRAMATIC EXIT

As a black cloud of smoke began rising above the Neck, the perspiring demolition worker took one last worried glance at the smoldering tar paper, then set his cutting torch down and clambered down the ladder to the sidewalk. He hurried to the corner of the old building. There on the theater's wall was a fire alarm box he had noticed before. A large "41" was imprinted on it. He grasped the alarm lever with



Firemen enter a narrow alley between the burning Strand Theater and the Mardave Building on the right. A similar alley separated the theater from the building on the left.

a filthy hand, pulled it down hard, then backed slowly away and looked up at the burning roof of the Strand Theater.

Inside the Brownsville borough building on High Street, a dispatcher received the signal from Box 41 and hurried to a nearby storage cabinet. There he selected one of several notched wheels. He placed the “4 – 1” wheel onto the fire alarm mechanism and activated the town’s fire signal, an air horn located a few blocks away on the lock wall.

Lock Five’s powerful air compressors were normally used to operate the huge gates of the lock chambers. Now as the “4 – 1” wheel turned, each time a notch made contact the lock’s compressor forced another charge of air through the fire horn. The river valley echoed with four long blasts, a pause, then another single blast. Men throughout the town dropped what they were doing and rushed to their fire stations. They knew that the 4 - 1 sequence meant there was a “general alarm” fire in Brownsville’s Neck.

South Side volunteers, stationed just a few blocks away in the municipal building, reached the fire scene first. Within three minutes they were playing water on the burning Strand Theater. North Side firemen soon arrived to assist. Workers had been demolishing the building when the blaze began at 5:10 pm. For the next ninety minutes, the firefighters labored successfully to prevent the flames from spreading to neighboring buildings.

As nightfall descended on the smoldering ruins, a crowd stood across the street on the sidewalk in front of the G. C. Murphy Company store, remembering many happy afternoons and evenings spent inside the Strand. A sudden cloudburst sent them scurrying for cover and doused the remaining hot spots. There would be no encore this time. The Strand Theater was gone.

The owner of the old movie house had been Mary Laskey, widow of its builder, James Laskey. Ted Laskey, the oldest of Mary’s three sons, is now 88 years old. He lives near Deep Creek, Maryland, and I spoke with him about the rise and fall of the Strand Theater.

“Your father built the Strand in 1915, but then he died in 1920,” I commented to Ted. “Did he die at a young age?”

“Thirty-three years old,” replied Ted, the tragedy of his father’s early death still evident in his voice after all these years. “He was a real dynamo. He had a brain tumor. When he died, I was seven years old, my brother John was six, and George was four.”

“I helped my mother as soon as I was able,” Ted explained. “Later I built several drive-in theaters. I built the Star-Lite Drive-In in Uniontown, the Route 19 Drive-In in Washington, Pa., and the drive-in

theater in Fairmont. When television came in, I sold all of them but Fairmont.”

“Maybe you can settle this question about the Strand,” I began to say.

“It had a balcony!” he interrupted with a laugh. “About fifty seats. There was a pair of steps leading up to it. The projection booth was right behind it, and there was an office up there also. Talking about that balcony brings an interesting story to mind.

“In 1922, a boy by the name of Moore sneaked into the theater. The theater was playing Harold Lloyd in *The Freshman*. Somehow he got up into the balcony. There were windows up there. He climbed up on the window, because the theater was crowded and he couldn’t see. He fell from that window clear down into the outside lobby. The ticket booth was outside, then there was a set of doors.

“He suffered permanent injuries. His family came to the Strand’s insurance company and said that they would be happy if the company paid the doctor and hospital bills. The amount they sought was \$10,000, and the insurance company refused to pay it!

“They said he was in the theater illegally, that the theater was not responsible, and they were not going to pay this claim. It went to court and the insurance company lost. The court ruled that no matter how he got into the theater, once he was in there he was the theater’s responsibility.”

“That would be a multi-million dollar lawsuit now,” I commented.

“Today, yes it would be,” he agreed.

“Did your family own the Strand Theater from the time your father built it in 1915 until it burned in 1960?”

“No,” he said, “control of the Strand Theater was lost by my mother for a period of ten years in a legal action that she had with her uncle in the twenties.”

“But your mom eventually got the Strand back.”

“Yes, she got the Strand back and she owned it until it was destroyed. We left Brownsville sometime around 1936 after my mother rented the theaters to Moody and Dickinson. They ran all three theaters. They had opened the Plaza after it was closed for a time.”

“I read a *Telegraph* editorial in 1933 when it reopened,” I told Ted. “The article said it had reopened under the care of two experienced theater men.”

“Well, only one experienced theater man,” Ted said. “Dickinson was in the film business. He sold pictures for Columbia Pictures. Moody was a butcher in Charleroi, but he was the financial backer. Dickinson didn’t have much money, but he had the experience.”

Moody-Dickinson operated the Strand until the late 1940s, when the Strand was closed, remodeled, and reopened again near the end of the decade. Moody-Dickinson continued operating the Bison and Plaza, but they were no longer associated with the Strand. When business slumped around 1952, the Strand closed for good.

In 1960, owner Mary Laskey told the *Brownsville Telegraph* that vandalism and neglect had caused the empty theater to fall into a dilapidated state. Ted Laskey gave me some new insight into the decision to tear down the Strand.

“One of the reasons the Strand Theater was torn down,” he told me, “is that when the theater closed, we had no income from it, yet the taxes remained the same. Our appeal to the taxing authority to adjust the assessment on the property fell on deaf ears. So we decided to tear it down, since taxes on an empty lot would be lower. The taxing authority’s reluctance to compromise contributed to the town’s loss of that building.”



A fireman plays water on the smoldering ruins of the Strand Theater. Built in 1915, it had been closed since 1952 when it caught fire on September 9, 1960 and was destroyed.

As Brownsville residents know, the lot where the Strand Theater once stood has remained vacant since it was destroyed in 1960.

John M. Faris of Uniontown was contracted to demolish the Strand. The work began on August 31, 1960. On September 9, a cutter's torch accidentally ignited lumber and tar paper, and the building burned down before it could be torn down. In the next day's *Brownsville Telegraph*, a photo of the fire appeared. The caption read, "The Strand Theater refuses to be torn down without a last attempt for the applause it once knew."

Before I ended my conversation with Ted Laskey, I wanted to ask him just one more question.

"Ted, you told me earlier that your last name is no longer Laskey. Tell me about that."

"In 1973," he said, "I had my name changed from Laskey back to Lascaris. That's Greek. My father came to this country when he was fourteen, and they put him on a push cart in New York City selling 'Short Sweet Celery 15 cents a bunch.' That was the only English he had learned. If anybody asked him any questions at all, he'd answer 'Short Sweet Celery 15 cents a bunch!'"

"He was told, if you're going to stay in this country, you've got to Anglicize your name. He didn't know any better, so he went to court and had it legally changed to Laskey. In 1973, I got tired of people asking me what kind of a name Laskey was, so I had it changed back to Lascaris. That's called finding your roots!"

"You have never really left your theater roots either, have you?"

"I'm still in the theater business in Fairmont, West Virginia. I made my manager a partner, because I couldn't handle it all any more. He and I own all of the theaters in Fairmont. I bought the Warner Theater downtown and converted it into three theaters. It was a big 3,000-seat house. And we own eight theaters at the mall. We call our company Fairmont Theaters.

"That's great. So you've been in the business all your life."

"Yes I have. My father was in it, and I grew up in it."

In a span of eight years in the early part of the century, three movie theaters had opened in bustling Brownsville – the Bison (1913), the Strand (1915) and the Plaza (1921). In 1960, the Strand became the first of the three to disappear from Brownsville forever. Next, we will chronicle the decline of the grandest showplace of the three, the Plaza Theatre.

AND THEN THERE WAS ONE: THE PLAZA THEATRE

Only the Plaza Theatre remains standing [as of 2003]. Now the pitiful shell of a once beautiful movie house, it sheds a masonry tear each time a chunk of white stucco unexpectedly parts company with the building's decaying facade. The plummeting cement crashes onto a makeshift wooden canopy placed over the sidewalk to protect pedestrians from injury. The roof of the building has caved in; the condition of the interior can only be imagined.

A few years ago its present owners, who have purchased over 100 properties in the borough over the past decade, outlined to me their master plan for Brownsville. The plan included resurrection of the Plaza as an entertainment venue. It was a bold and impressive plan, but years after it was devised, it has yet to bear fruit.

Unlike the Bison and Strand, which stopped showing movies in the early 1950s, the Plaza continued to do so into the 1960s. Moody-Dickinson operated the Plaza from the 1930s until 1950.

In 1950 ownership of the Plaza Theater changed. On May 1, 1950 a Brownsville *Telegraph* article stated, "The Moody-Dickinson theater management today announced dissolution of the partnership. The management here has been operating the Plaza and Bison theaters and the Ficks Drive-In theater on the National Pike.

"Under the dissolution, the Plaza theater will be operated by L. L. Baker and the Ficks Drive-In by I. J. Ficks and L. L. Baker. The Dickinson Enterprises, headed by C. W. Dickinson, will operate the Menlo theater in Charleroi; Grand theater, Fredericktown; American theater, Vestaburg; Bison theater, Brownsville; and the Nemacolin theater, Nemacolin."

Within a few years of the change in management, all other theaters in Brownsville had closed. When did the Plaza finally show its last movies? That answer is elusive. While doing research for this series, I examined various issues of the Brownsville *Telegraph*. I noticed that in the mid-1960s, the Plaza advertised weekend double features until April 1966. Then the Plaza's display ads stopped appearing in the newspaper. The last advertisement I saw was for the April 8, 1966 showing of *Blue Hawaii*, starring Elvis Presley, and *McClintock*, starring John Wayne. This approximate date for the Plaza's last movies may not stand up to scrutiny pending further investigation.

Michael A. Brown of South Hills Terrace, Brownsville, told me that he recalled seeing the movie *One Million Years B.C.* starring Racquel Welch at the Plaza.



The Plaza Theater (center) as it appeared in 1965 with its “Plaza” marquee still intact. The old theater apparently continued showing movies on weekends until the mid-1960s.

“When?” I asked him.

“My wife Velda and I got married in August 1966,” he said. “I believe we saw that movie in early 1967.”

“Were there many people in the theater?” I asked him, envisioning a dismal smattering of customers as the cavernous old theater lived out its last days as a movie house.

“It was packed!” said Michael to my surprise.

After the Plaza stopped showing movies, there were a few attempted comebacks as a venue for live stage shows. In 1969, an organization called Brownsville Summer Playhouse presented Broadway-type shows on the theater’s stage. That inaugural season was so successful that it led to a second one and encouraged the enterprise’s backers to improve the theater’s physical plant.

“The Brownsville Summer Theater,” reported the *Telegraph* on June 24, 1970, “is undergoing a face lift in preparation for Season ‘70, which begins June 24 with the Broadway musical *Mame*. The theater

itself, equipped with a new air-conditioning system, takes on a fresh look as the old proscenium stage has been extended with a thrust to form a larger playing area and also to bring the action closer to the audience. The theater lobby and box office are being refurbished.

“A fourth floor ballroom serves as a rehearsal hall as well as the headquarters of the recently established Fayette County Youth Theater. The basement accommodates storage of costumes, sets and properties, the theater’s design studio, and the office of the scenic designer and stage manager. Business and personnel offices are now on the second floor. They have been painted and decorated with colorful posters and photographs from last season’s shows.”

Initial optimism was eventually dashed by reality as the Brownsville Summer Playhouse proved to be economically unsustainable. A final attempt to bring live theater to the Plaza occurred in 1985, when a New York-based professional theater company gave it a try. Laurel Highlands Regional Theater (LHRT), which began its debut season in Pittsburgh in 1985, announced plans to open a second venue in the Plaza Theater in Brownsville.

Glen Z. Gress, artistic director of LHRT, described the LHRT as a “not-for-profit corporation with its home base at the 800-seat Plaza Theater in Brownsville.” However, Gress said that the Plaza was “not ready for occupancy and a major production as it stands. A lot of money and a lot more work are needed.” In an unguarded moment of candor, he said that seeing the Plaza’s interior for the first time “was like visiting a movie set for *The Phantom of the Opera*.”

The theatrical organization was counting on finding private and public funding to the tune of \$2 million. LHRT’s plan to restore the Plaza had gotten underway two years earlier in 1983. Gress had estimated that the restoration project would take another three years to get the building in shape.

The final line in a *Telegraph* article about LHRT read, “Although the public is glad to see the production is in Oakland, we anxiously await its arrival in the Brownsville Plaza Theatre.”

We are still waiting. The reality is that few theaters in downtown areas are operating any more. Major infusions of funds have restored a few movie palaces such as the State Theater in Uniontown, but those are exceptions. The restoration of a theater is a daunting task for any community.

With Brownsville’s best remembered movie theaters now either burned, demolished or decaying, area residents may have to be content with only memories of their favorite movie theaters. But what rich memories they are. I have enjoyed visiting each of these theaters via my

readers' rich anecdotes, theatrical memorabilia, and historic photographs.

I only wish I could have experienced these theaters in their glory days.



With large chunks of the Plaza's stucco façade falling occasionally onto the sidewalk below, the building's owners constructed a wooden enclosure to block pedestrian traffic in the danger zone. One year after this 2003 photo was taken, the entire L-shaped building was razed in February 2004. As of 2011, the site is a vacant lot.

Note to the reader . . .

What about the Bison Theater?

A separate series of articles telling the stories of the earlier theaters in Brownsville's history – the Lyceum, the Opera House, the Arcade, and finally the Bison (the first of the three movie houses to be built) – will be included in a subsequent volume of the *LOOKING BACK: The Best of Glenn Tunney* series.